

*In 1917, Enoch A. Hoyt (1876-1954) served as the eighth Camp Commander of Elisha Dyer Camp 7, Sons of Veterans. In 1921, he was elected the thirty-third Rhode Island Department Commander. Enoch claimed lineal Membership in the Sons of Veterans through his father Edwin Hoyt.*

## The Shocking Story of Edwin Hoyt

written by Jamie McGuire, PDC

Edwin Hoyt was born in Sherman, CT, on 15 June 1842, one of five children to George and Emeline (Mead) Hoyt. While it can be certain that he was living on the family farm in 1850 as a child, it is less certain where the world had taken him by the time that he was 18, as he does not appear in the 1860 census, either at the farm or otherwise situated.

Edwin enlisted in Co. H, 8<sup>th</sup> CT Infantry on 14 September 1861 for a three-year hitch and was officially mustered in on 23 September at Stamford.

The 8<sup>th</sup> Connecticut Infantry was one to become one of Connecticut's most renowned "fighting regiments." It was one of the longest-serving Union units of the Civil War. Assigned to Burnside's Expeditionary Corps, the regiment took part in action at the battles of Roanoke Island and New Berne in February and March of 1862. Operations against Fort Macon in April led to additional skirmishing and, ultimately, the capture of the fort on April 26. The regiment was assigned to duty at New Berne until July, when it was transferred to the Army of the Potomac and took part in the Maryland Campaign.

At the Battle of South Mountain, 14 September 1862, the 8<sup>th</sup> was in Rodman's Division in the assault at Turner's Gap, but saw only light fighting, which allowed the regiment to stay fresh for the upcoming engagement at the Battle of Antietam.

On September 17, the 8<sup>th</sup> Connecticut had its reckoning with war. Assigned to the 5<sup>th</sup> Corps, 3<sup>rd</sup> Division, 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, "The 8th Connecticut Infantry Regiment... charged McIntosh's Confederate battery along the Harpers Ferry Road and forced the gunners to abandon their pieces, but the regiment was not supported and its advanced position exposed it to fire from both flanks."<sup>1</sup>

As noted on the monument to Harland's Brigade at the Antietam Battlefield: *On the morning of the 17th, Harland's Brigade moved from its position southeast of Burnside Bridge. The 11th Connecticut, deployed as skirmishers, preceded Crook's Brigade in its assault on the bridge and was repulsed with great loss. During the forenoon the remaining Regiments of the Brigade moved down the left bank of the Antietam, crossed at Snavelly's Ford and, moving up the right bank of the stream, formed line on the left of the Division,*

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<sup>1</sup> Civil War in the East. n.d. "8<sup>th</sup> Connecticut Volunteer Infantry."

*Ewing's Ohio Brigade in support. At about 3 P.M., the Brigade advanced in the direction of Sharpsburg. The 8th Connecticut passed to the west of this point and the 16th Connecticut and 4th Rhode Island were in the 40 acre cornfield east, when they were attacked in flank by the right of A.P. Hill's Division and compelled to retire to the cover of the high ground near the bridge.*

The 8<sup>th</sup> Connected had deployed 400 men into the battle, resulting in 34 killed 139 wounded, and 21 missing - over 50% of those engaged.

At Antietam they were subjected to such severe firing that they lost half the men they fielded, including Lt. Col. Appleman who lost his leg. Every sergeant and corporal of the color guard was shot down...

After Antietam, the regiment was moved to Falmouth, VA, and then on to Fredericksburg in December. The 8th was camped near Lacy House (later called Chatham House) on top of a hill overlooking the Rappahannock River. When Gen. Getty of the Engineer Corps asked for volunteers to help build a pontoon bridge across the Rappahannock, 90 men of the 8th volunteered. When the disastrous assault on Marye's Heights began, they were in the reserve component on Carolyn Street waiting for a call that never came.<sup>2</sup>

During 1863, after enduring Burnside's Mud March, "the 8th CVI took part in the occupation of Suffolk, and the successful resistance to the subsequent siege by Confederate General Longstreet. On April 19, the 8th was involved in the successful naval and infantry attack on nearby Ft. Huger. Because of the unfamiliar terrain, the Federals attacked during daytime and before the battle was over the 8th participated in the bayonet charge against the defenders."<sup>3</sup> The rest of 1863 was mainly duty at Portsmouth, VA.

A Connecticut General Assembly flag conservation report provides a richly illustrated account of the 8<sup>th</sup> Connecticut's heavy engagements at Drewry's Bluff in May, 1864 after their transfer to the 18<sup>th</sup> Corps, Army of the James as follows:

During early 1864, President Lincoln promoted Gen. Ulysses Grant to General-in-Chief of the Union Army, and Gen. Benjamin Butler was given the assignment of commanding the Army of the James. Gen. Grant met with Gen. Butler at Ft. Monroe and gave him instructions to march to Richmond from the southwest side of the James River. Gen. Grant accompanied Gen. Meade's Army of the Potomac, which would attempt

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<sup>2</sup> Caughman, 1997

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

to reach Richmond from the northeast. The 8th was assigned to the 2nd Brigade, 1st Division, 18th Corps, Army of the James. May 4 (*sic*) landed at City Point and occupied Bermuda Hundred. Bermuda Hundred was a peninsula where at one time slaves who were brought to the United States through Bermuda, were held until they could be sent to their final destination. One of the first objectives assigned to the 8th and their brigade was to destroy the railroad and turnpike leading to Drewry's Bluff and Richmond. (Drewry's Bluff was 90 feet above the James River, a few miles south of Richmond.) On May 7, while serving as skirmishers, they ran into Confederates defending the railroad at Walthall Junction. The 8th was immediately ordered to form a battle line and advance across an open field while under fire from the Confederates who were behind an embankment... The 8th stayed in the fight until their ammunition ran out. The brigade commander, Gen. Hiram Burnham, wrote in his official report that "...the fighting of this day fell mostly upon the Eighth Connecticut, which sustained considerable loss, but behaved handsomely, driving the enemy in spirited manner wherever it met them." On May 9th, 10th and 12th, they were in a battle line advancing through swamps and woods toward Drewry's Bluff forcing the Confederates back toward their own entrenchments. On the 14th, along with the 118th New York Volunteers, they reached the outer works of the Confederate fort and held their position until May 16 when the Confederates countercharged. When the 8th was flanked on both sides, they were allowed to withdraw to nearby woods by Lt. Col. M. B. Smith. Thick fog and smoke complicated everyone's position. Later the same day the whole brigade was ordered to retreat back to their camp. Unfortunately, the brigade commander, Gen. Hiram Burnham did not believe that Col. Smith made a wise decision. In his report of the action of May 16 he said, "The attack now became more furious, when Lt. Col. M. B. Smith, commanding the Eighth Connecticut Volunteers, on the extreme right of my brigade, next to the pike, after making but feeble resistance abandoned the line of fortifications in a very discreditable manner, and ordered his regiment to fall back, which it did in considerable confusion." Gen. Butler ordered the Army of the James back to Bermuda Hundred where they entrenched.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

Following the Bermuda Hundred deployment, the regiment advanced against Petersburg on June 15. During the first few months of the siege the 8<sup>th</sup> was stationed on the right flank, where they witnessed the Battle of the Crater from a safe vantage point.

The next major engagement that the 8<sup>th</sup> would participate was the assault on Fort Harrison on 29 September 1864, a mere six days after the expiration of the enlistment of Pvt. Edwin Hoyt. He had attempted to reenlist with other veterans of the regiment in December, but was, to his surprise, denied. He was not informed on what grounds his reenlistment was denied – physical or mental.<sup>5</sup>

If Edwin's most notable post-war detail was that he had applied for a patent in Connecticut in 1865 for a type of tobacco pipe, that would have been an interested footnote to a rather ordinary life and admirable military service. Edwin's postwar story, however, was anything except ordinary.

According to contemporary accounts, on June 23, 1878, Edwin was despondent. His mother had died only 11 days earlier and he was apparently put out with his brother-in-law, Vanderberg Joyce (husband to Edwin's sister, Charlotte), who would not accompany him on a fishing trip. It was later suggested that Edwin was very angry that his father chose to live with Vanderberg and Charlotte instead of him, and that he feared Vanderberg was encroaching upon his inheritance. Whatever the reason, Edwin departed the Joyce residence and went to his own home where he retrieved a butcher knife. When asked by his wife Phoebe what he was about, he is said to have responded that he was going to kill his father. He returned to the Joyce residence and attested that "it would be better for him to die, but that there were two or three people he wanted to kill first."<sup>6</sup> George interceded and removed to the porch with his son, where the two had a conversation for several minutes. Not long into this conversation, Edwin erupted and stabbed his father several times with the butcher knife, inflicting a fatal slash to the neck.

Hoyt was tried twice, the first time in October, 1878, and the second time in April, 1879. The State claimed that the motive for the killing was animosity toward his father, who had always exercised great severity toward him, and who, he believed, had decided to wholly disinherit him. The defense in both cases was that of insanity.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> "Varied Aspects of Crime." *New York Times*, 15 May 1880, p.2

<sup>6</sup> "The Death of a Parricide." *New York Times*, 14 May 1880, p.5

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

The prosecution in the case also argued a lifetime of ill temper and cruelty, with witnesses testifying that Edwin had been a moody youth, and “brooded over injustices.”<sup>8</sup> Newspaper coverage of the trial stated that Edwin,

In fact, had shown during his life a very ugly disposition. His wife, the mother of his five children, had experienced his temper in a manner which placed her life in danger, he having discharged a shot-gun at her and severely wounded her.<sup>9</sup>

For his part, Edwin took the stand in his own defense. He spoke of his family and of his father with kindness and of his 3 years of service in the army during the war. He spoke of falling “in a kind of fit before and since the war”,<sup>10</sup> and that his health had deteriorated since the end of his service. He also claimed to have no recollection of the murder or of the circumstances leading up to it.

Edwin didn’t do himself many favors while awaiting trial. He wrote a letter to his wife ordering her to deny that he had stated his intentions before leaving the house, to state that he had been acting strangely, and to swear that he had always been a kind and non-abusive husband. This letter, among others, was submitted into evidence at Edwin’s second trial.

A jury of his peers found him guilty of capital murder at the conclusion of both trials, and he was sentenced to be hanged. His last appeal to the Governor for a commutation of his death sentence was denied on May 10, 1880. Upon hearing the news, he had an hour-long private conversation with Charlotte, and no record of that conversation remains. Edwin’s wife Phoebe, on the other hand, visited him at the jail and spoke to him quite briefly. It was the first time she had seen him since his arrest and afterwards she asked for a tour of the gallows, remarking that “she was glad that he was to be hanged, and that she would like to see him hanging there then.”<sup>11</sup>

On May 13, 1880, Edwin Hoyt was hanged in Bridgeport in front of 400 ticketed spectators. It was the first execution in Fairfield County since 1809.

Edwin Hoyt’s story does not end just yet. It would enter the realm of the macabre and earns a unique place in New England history. Remarkably, the attending doctor at the hanging was Dr. George L. Porter, who had been the doctor that had overseen the bodies of Mrs. Surrat and the Lincoln assassination conspirators. Immediately taking possession of Edwin’s body, Porter proceeded to conduct scientific experiments on the corpse akin to

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> “Varied Aspects of Crime.” *New York Times*, 15 May 1880, p.2

<sup>11</sup> “To be Hanged on Thursday.” *New York Times*, 12 May 1880, p.8

those of Dr. Frankenstein: sending currents of electricity through the body, attempting to reanimate the man. “As the electricity surged through the corpse, Hoyt began to move. His arm raised and swung, his face shifted with expressions of joy and surprise, fright and even anger.”<sup>12</sup>

Porter’s ghoulish recollections were presented to the Bridgeport Medical Society. “This was the supreme moment, for could the central engine of organic life be once more set in motion ... many of the questions of theoretical physiology and many of the surmises of that ‘unknown country from whose bourn no traveler’ has before returned, might be answered.”<sup>13</sup>

He went on:

“The lungs dilate, with long breath drawing in the atmosphere air, then as the electrical current is interrupted the thoracic cavity is distinguished and the air is expanded and the act of respiration has been completely performed,” Porter recalled. A candle was even held to the dead man’s lips and blown away. But there was a limit to the effect of the experiment. “The muscles all, save one, obey the mysterious power of electricity,” Porter lamented, “but that one, the noblest of them all, upon whose action the nourishment of all so largely depends, rested motionless in the pericardium [membrane encasing the heart], like Achilles in his tent, and no Patrocollian death ... would arouse it from its stupor.”<sup>14</sup>

Porter and others long suspected that the dead man would have returned to life had his neck not been broken by the hangman’s noose.

Edwin Hoyt was only 38 years old when he was executed, but his hair was streaked with white, his face had become gaunt and old, and his eyes reflected a great and deep distance that he could not seem to see beyond. One wonders what those eyes had seen that may have aided in the sealing of his fate.

He is buried in Center Cemetery, Sherman, Connecticut.

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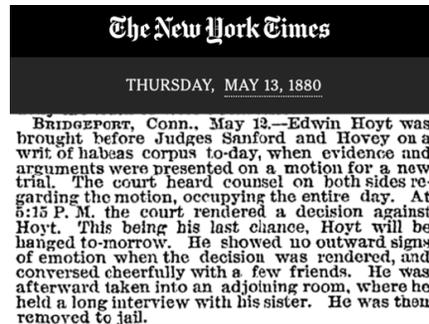
<sup>12</sup> Ofgang, 2016

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*



Photo source: <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/28085239/edwin-hoyt>



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