

FLAGS OF THE SECOND MI INFANTRY:

SC-16-90:

Volunteers for the Second Infantry were recruited for three months' service, but before the regiment could be mustered in orders came from the War Department to extend the period of service to three years. Those who did not wish to serve longer than three months were allowed to withdraw. But when the regiment finally mustered on May 25th, 1861, it became the first of Michigan's three-year regiments—and the only one to maintain its organization unbroken from the very beginning of the war to the very end.

Nearly every company was formed from a local militia unit. One example was the Berrien County Volunteers from Niles. When the Volunteers left Niles to join the Second, which was forming at Fort Wayne near Detroit, Niles gave their boys a grand sendoff.

On May 4th, 1861, nearly a thousand people crowded the village to see ladies of Niles present the Berrien County Volunteers with a magnificent national flag. Emblazoned on the flag was a gold eagle, and clutched in its beak was a scroll which read "At the Union's Sacred Call, Her Patriot Sons Will Peril All." The Niles Band played "Hail Columbia" and Miss Mary Penrose, exhorting the 88 members of the company to fight for the Union, presented the flag to their captain, Robert Bretschneider.

Captain Bretschneider accepted it and made this pledge: "Thank you ladies, for honoring us with this beautiful flag. May our names be forgotten if we ever desert it. If dying on the battle field, our last look shall be directed toward this beautiful emblem, and our last breath shall utter, if called upon to surrender it: never, never, never!"

The Volunteers took these words to heart. Carrying their flag to Fort Wayne to join the regiment, it caught the eye of the command. The Volunteers became Company E—the color company—charged with the difficult and dangerous job of carrying and defending the regimental colors in battle. And the colors they would carry were their own—their flag had been adopted as the official flag of the regiment.

Niles boys carried this flag through Blackburn's Ford, First Bull Run, the Yorktown siege, Williamsburg, Fair Oaks, Malvern Hill, Second Bull Run, Chantilly, and Fredericksburg. Then, pierced with 40 bullets and too tattered for further service, it was sent home to Niles. Eleven men had been killed or wounded carrying and defending it—they had truly "periled all."

SC-8-90

To replace their first flag, a new national was procured from the War Department. Many stories could be told about it, although only a tattered fragment survives today. It was carried in 33 engagements and under its folds 11 officers and 194 men were killed.

In November 1863, at the siege of Knoxville, the regiment charged the enemy's rifle pits. Of the 150 engaged, 84 were killed or wounded. Four officers and two color corporals were killed, and six sergeants each lost a leg. The flag staff was hit three times, but the colors were saved from capture. In February 1864, while home on furlough, Senior Color Corporal William Gundlach took the flag to a painter's to have all of the regiment's principal battles painted on it in gilt letters. "I felt very proud of that list of battles on our flag," wrote Gundlach to his daughter later, "and you remember how the citizens cheered us when we marched through the streets on our way to the railway station."

On June 18, 1864, at Petersburg, the color sergeant was wounded and the colors were carried that day by Color Corporal Alfred Rowe. In the last assault of the day, Rowe rushed ahead of the regimental line about 50 yards—and was shot through the head. Lieutenant Frederick Schneider went out under enemy fire to rescue the colors, which were still clasped in the arms of the dying Rowe. When he reached the colors and pried them from Rowe's grip, he heard a plea for help from a severely wounded young soldier lying nearby. Schneider staggered back under constant fire—burdened not only with the colors but the soldier. Although the entire color guard was either killed or wounded that day—the colors were saved.

Then came July 30, 1864—the terrible disaster at Petersburg known as "The Crater." In the face of the crippling loss of nearly 4,000 Union soldiers, completely overwhelmed, the Second's regimental commander killed, the entire color guard surrounded with no escape possible, Color Sergeant Jesse Gaines ran to the rear and hurled his flag toward Union lines, hoping to save it—at least—from capture. The effort failed, but it was noted that although it was true the flag had been captured—it was never surrendered. The regiment had made good the pledge made by the Niles boys. After the war, this flag was discovered in Richmond and was eventually returned to the state.

SC-1-90

To show that the regiment suffered no disgrace through the loss of its flag, a third national was issued to the Second in August or September 1864. All the names of the regiment's most important battles were supposed to be painted on it, but there was not room for them all. Joseph Richardson of Battle Creek's Company C became the acting color sergeant. At the capture of Petersburg on April 3, 1865, Richardson and members of the Second—singing "We'll Rally Round the Flag Boys"—had the honor of raising this flag over the U.S. Custom House. It signaled the end of ten months of the desperate siege of Petersburg—and the virtual end of the war.

It appears that the Second was the second to raise a Union flag over Petersburg—the First Michigan Sharpshooters beat them out by mere minutes.

Frederick Schneider became the Second's last commander. In 1905, he wrote:

Of the thousands of visitors who annually pass through the Military Museum of Michigan's state capitol, with but a perfunctory glance at the old Michigan battle flags, probably not more than

one in a thousand realizes what a vast amount of heroism, sacrifice of noble lives and treasure it cost to bear them to triumph during the great Civil War. Oh could they but speak, what touching scenes of heroism they could give—scenes that no tongue can now tell nor pen adequately describe.”