Cross Keys: Attack of the 8th New York

“They did not know what was in store for them”

“A Bengal Tiger Ready to Spring”

As they advanced to attack at Cross Keys on the morning of June 8, 1862, the members of the Union 8th New York Volunteer Infantry – the “First German Rifles” – were singing a German folk song, “Hinaus in die Ferne” (“Out Into the Distance”) and marching as if they were on parade.

One Confederate later recalled how the Federals advanced “across the clover field [on the target properties] in beautiful line.” Their commander, Col. Francis Wutschel, walked “backwards in front of them, seeing that they preserved a perfect alignment just as though they were drilling” as they descended into a hollow and briefly disappeared from view.

Unfortunately for the advancing Federals, “they did not know what was in store for them”; Col. Wutschel had failed to deploy a line of skirmishers to scout the way ahead.* They believed the Confederates were a half mile away... but as they emerged from the hollow they were only 50 yards from a fence line crowded with Confederate soldiers, their muskets leveled, laying like “a Bengal tiger when he crouches down ready to spring.”

Disaster was about to strike the 8th New York.

“Make a Stand at Port Republic”

During the closing stages of his 1862 Valley Campaign, Confederate Gen. Stonewall Jackson was being pursued south by two Union forces under Gen. John C. Fremont and Gen. James Shields. When Jackson reached the end of Massanutten Mountain near Harrisonburg on June 5, he was in danger of Fremont and Shields uniting against him. To prevent this, he turned southeast, taking his main force to “make a stand at Port Republic,” and leaving Gen. Richard Ewell’s force to block Fremont at Cross Keys.

“Anxious to Meet Them”

When Fremont approached Cross Keys on June 8, 1862, Ewell placed his men in a strong defensive position on a ridge along Mill Creek. But Confederate Gen. Isaac Trimble, on the right of Ewell’s line, was unhappy with his wooded location, which made it difficult to organize his men or spy Federal movement.

Trimble moved his force a half-mile north to a fence line [on the target properties] on “a wooded Hill running parallel to our line of battle.” At the new position, Trimble placed the 21st Georgia on his left, the 16th Mississippi in his center, and the 15th Alabama on his right, instructing the Mississippians to crawl the final distance to conceal their movement. Beyond the fence, there was 200 yards of open ground [on the target properties] before the next line of woods – a clear field of fire for the defenders. The Confederates crowded the fence line, guns ready, waiting to spring their trap.

*The 8th NY’s officers believed Col. Wutschel was drunk. On June 18, they drew up charges for a court-martial: for being constantly drunk and for disobeying orders and attacking prematurely. In the end, no court-martial was held, but Wutschel was dishonorably discharged two months later.
THEY WALKED RIGHT UP
(All of the action described below took place on the target properties.)

Fremont planned for his main attack to hit the Confederate right – not realizing just how close that right now was. Gen. Julius Stahel’s brigade (of Gen. Blenker’s division) undertook the assault. But of Stahel’s five regiments, only one – the 8th New York, largely made up of German immigrants – would make the actual attack.

When the 8th New York advanced into the open field north of the fenceline, they were blind to what lay ahead. The watching Confederates marveled that “They were so foolish as [to march] with no sharp shooters in front to locate our position.” The Federals descended into the hollow, headed directly towards the 21st Georgia. The 21st’s commander, Col. John T. Mercer, said if “any man fired before he gave orders to fire, he would have them shot.” The Federals emerged from the hollow only 50 yards from the Confederate line, walking “right up to the Twenty-first Georgia.”

The Confederates waited until the Federals were only 40 yards away, then “the thickets stirred suddenly...[and] southern riflemen rose swiftly on their feet. A sheet of fire ran along their line, followed by a crash that resounded through the woods.” One Georgian said that “When the order ‘Fire!’ rang out from [Col.] Mercer...a thousand bullets flew to their deadly work.” At point-blank range, the effect was horrific. “The poor Germans fell all across each other in piles,” recalled one Confederate. Ben Culpepper of the 15th Alabama said “I never saw men double up and fall so fast.”

THERE IN THE CLOVER
More than 250 New Yorkers became casualties, and the rest “seized with terror... immediately gave way.” A civilian said the Federals fell “like weeds before the cradler. It was not in men to stand such fire as that.”

Capt. James Nisbet of the 21st Georgia said simply, “There in the clover lay most of the 8th New York.”

REPULSED ON OUR RIGHT
“The Slaughter of the 8th New York” was the decisive action during the battle. Trimble followed up by advancing across the target properties (joined by the 25th and 13th Virginia under Col. James A. Walker, farther east). He ultimately moved another half-mile north, driving the northerners from high ground, and sent word to Ewell that “the enemy had been repulsed on our right.”

Trimble’s aggressiveness unnerved Fremont. Despite promising advances by Gen. Robert Milroy on the other side of the field, he ordered a withdrawal. Trimble pressed for a night attack, but Ewell declined, and the battle ended. Jackson defeated the Federals at Port Republic the next day – the closing battle of the campaign.

WHERE THEY MET THEIR DOOM
Charles Webb, a reporter for the New York Times, recorded the sobering scene the next day: “I am writing on the ground where so many of the Eighth New-York met their doom... The poor fellows lie around me in all postures and positions, some on the very spot where they fell, others propped up against the fences where they crawled to die...”