

Union Corps Histories -6th Corps

West Point; Gaines' Mill; Golding's Farm; Garnett's Farm; Savage Station; White Oak Swamp; Malvern Hill; Manassas; Crampton's Gap; Antietam; Fredericksburg; Marye's Heights; Salem Church; Banks' Ford; Gettysburg; Funkstown; Rappahannock Station; Mine Run; Wilderness; Spotsylvania; Cold Harbor; Petersburg; Monocacy; Fort Stevens; Island Ford; Strasburg; Winchester; Charlestown; Opequon; Fisher's Hill; Cedar Creek; Fall Of Petersburg; Sailor's Creek; Appomattox.

The Sixth Provisional Corps was organized May 18, 1862, by uniting Franklin's Division, which had just arrived on the Peninsula, with General W. F. Smith's Division, which was taken away from the Fourth Corps for this purpose. This provisional arrangement having been sanctioned by the War Department, the command received its permanent designation as the Sixth Army Corps. General William B. Franklin was appointed corps commander, and General H. W. Slocum succeeded to the command of Franklin's Division. On June 20, 1862, the corps numbered 24,911, present and absent, with 19,405 present for duty, equipped; the corps artillery numbered 40 guns.

At Gaines' Mill, Slocum's Division was sent to the support of General Porter, and became hotly engaged, losing 2,021 men out of less than 8,000 present. The Vermont brigade of Smith's (2nd) Division took a prominent part in the fight at Savage Station, the Fifth Vermont losing 209 men in that action. The corps fought at other points during the Seven Days Battle, but at Malvern Hill it was held in reserve. At Manassas (Second Bull Run) it was partially engaged, the Jersey Brigade of Slocum's (1st) Division having a sharp fight on August 27th, at Bull Run Bridge, in which it lost 339 in killed, wounded and missing, General Taylor, the brigade commander, receiving a mortal wound. While on McClellan's campaign, Slocum's Division made a gallant and successful charge up the mountain's side at Crampton's Gap, driving the enemy from a strong position; Slocum's loss was 113 killed, 418 wounded, and two missing; total, 533. The corps was under fire again at Antietam, but was only partially engaged; the third Brigade (Irwin's) of Smith's Division, took an active part, however, the Seventh Maine and Twentieth New York sustaining severe losses.

Important changes in the corps now took place. It received a valuable accession by the transfer of Couch's Division of the Fourth Corps, which now became the Third Division of the Sixth, with General John Newton in command. General Franklin was promoted to the command of the Left Grand Division, Sixth and First Corps, and General Smith succeeded to the command of the corps. General Slocum's able services were acknowledged by his promotion to the command of the Twelfth Corps, and General W. T. Brooks succeeded Slocum in command of the

First Division, while General A. P. Howe succeeded to the command of Smith's (2nd) Division.

The next battle occurred at Fredericksburg, Dec. 13, 1862, in which only a few regiments of the corps were engaged, although all were under a severe artillery fire. But the corps was engaged on the same field, May 3, 1863, in an action which made it famous on account of the brilliant display of dash and daring. When Hooker took the Army to Chancellorsville he left the Sixth Corps in front of Fredericksburg, which was still held by a strong force of the enemy. General Sedgwick, who had succeeded to the corps command, ordered an assault on Marye's Heights, and that strong position which had defied the assaults of the previous battle, was now carried by the Sixth Corps at the point of the bayonet. The divisions of Newton and Howe were the ones engaged; Brooks' (1st) Division was engaged later in the day, at Salem Church. The corps lost in this battle, 485 killed, 2,619 wounded, and 1,485 missing; total 4,589. The missing ones were, for the most part, lost in the action at Salem Church. On the day before this battle, the corps returns showed a strength of 23,730, "present for duty," of whom less than 20,000 were present in action.

The Gettysburg campaign came next, in which the divisions were commanded by Generals Wright, Howe, and Newton. The corps was held in reserve at Gettysburg, excepting Shaler's Brigade, which was sent into action as a support to the Twelfth Corps; several casualties, also, occurred in Eustis' and Wheaton's Brigades, of Newton's Division. During the pursuit of Lee's Army, after Gettysburg, the Vermont Brigade was engaged in a very creditable affair at Funkstown, Md., where this one brigade, drawn out in a skirmish line of over a mile in length, alone and unassisted, repelled a determined attack of a vastly superior force, which in massed columns charged this skirmish line repeatedly. The Vermonters sustained but slight loss, as they occupied a strong, natural position.

Having returned to Virginia, the corps participated, November 7, 1863, at Rappahannock Station in a successful assault on the enemy's entrenchment's. In this affair there was another display of that dash and gallantry which was so eminently characteristic of the Sixth Corps. The Sixth Maine and Fifth Wisconsin distinguished themselves particularly in this action, leading the storming party and carrying the works with the bayonet only. It was a brilliant success, resulting not only in a victory, but in the capture of a large number of prisoners, small arms, artillery and battle flags.

On the Mine Run campaign the divisions were commanded by Generals Wright, Howe, and H. D. Terry, but were not in action to any extent.

The corps went into winter-quarters at Brandy Station. Upon the reorganization of the Army, in March, 1864, several changes were made. The Third Division was broken up, Shaler's Brigade being transferred to Wright's (1st) Division, while the brigades of Eustis and Wheaton were placed in the Second Division, the command of which was given to General Geo. W. Getty, an able officer who had served as a division-general in the Ninth Corps, and, also, in the Seventh Corps at the Siege of Suffolk.

The place of the Third Division was filled by the Third Division of the Third Corps, that corps having been discontinued; the command of this division was given to General Ricketts.

The corps now contained 49 regiments of infantry, an artillery brigade composed of 8 batteries of light artillery (48 guns), and a battalion of heavy artillery acting as infantry; numbering in all, 24,163, "present for duty, equipped."

In the battles of the Wilderness and Spotsylvania it encountered the hardest contested fighting of its experience. At the Wilderness, the Vermont Brigade--Getty's Division--lost 1,232 men out of the 2,800 effectives that crossed the Rapidan on the previous day. At Spotsylvania, the Jersey Brigade of Wright's Division was engaged in a deadly struggle, the percentage of killed in the Fifteenth New Jersey being equaled in only one instance during the whole war. On May 10th--at Spotsylvania--General Upton led a storming party of twelve picked regiments selected from the Sixth Corps, which carried the Confederate works after a hand-to-hand fight in which bayonet wounds were freely given and received. On May 12th -- Spotsylvania -- the whole corps fought at the "Bloody Angle," where the fighting was the closest and deadliest of any recorded in the history of modern wars. General Sedgwick was killed at Spotsylvania, and General Wright succeeded to the command, General Russell succeeding Wright in the command of the First Division. The casualties of the corps at the Wilderness were, 719 killed, 3,660 wounded, 656 missing; total, 5,035; and at Spotsylvania, 688 killed, 2,820 wounded, 534 missing; total, 4,042.

In the assault at Cold Harbor, June 1st, 1864, the corps sustained another severe loss, 2,715 of its number falling, killed or wounded in that ill-advised attempt. Accompanying the Army to Petersburg it participated in the preliminary operations incidental to the investment of that stronghold. But its stay was of short duration, Early's invasion of Maryland necessitating a transfer of troops to confront him, and the heroes of Marye's Heights were selected for that duty. On July 6th, Ricketts' (3d) Division embarked at City Point, and, landing at Baltimore on the 8th, marched out to meet

Early. This division took part in the battle at Monocacy on the following day, and, although unable to defeat Early, checked his advance. The other two divisions embarked on the 10th and, landing at Washington, attacked Early, whose advance had reached Fort Stevens, within the city limits. The brunt of this fight fell to the lot of Bidwell's (3d) Brigade, of Getty's (2d) Division, every regimental commandant in this brigade, but one, being either killed or wounded.

The corps followed in pursuit of Early through Maryland, into Virginia, and up the Shenandoah Valley. Sheridan was placed in command of the Army of the Shenandoah, which was composed of the Sixth, Eighth, and Nineteenth Corps, and its campaign of 1864, in the Valley, was a memorable one by reason of the victories at Opequon, Fisher's Hill, and Cedar Creek. In the latter battle occurred the famous incident of Sheridan's Ride from Winchester; and, in justice to the Sixth Corps, it should be noted in connection with that affair, that General Wright had already given Early a successful check, had made the dispositions for a counter advance, and was about to move forward when Sheridan resumed command.

General Russell was killed at the Opequon, and the gallant Bidwell at Cedar Creek. The casualties of the corps at the Opequon aggregated 211 killed, 1,442 wounded, and 46 missing; total, 1,699. At Cedar Creek, it lost 298 killed, 1,628 wounded, and 200 missing; total, 2,126. Its total loss in the Shenandoah campaign, Aug. 22d to Oct. 20th, was 4,899, out of 12,615 "present for duty," in August. General Wheaton succeeded to the command of the lamented Russell, while General Truman Seymour was assigned to the command of the Third Division, in place of General Ricketts, who was seriously wounded at Cedar Creek.

In December, 1864, the Sixth Corps returned to the Petersburg trenches, built their winter-quarters, and went into position near the Weldon Railroad. On the 2d of April, 1865, occurred the grand, final, and successful assault on the fortifications of Petersburg, in which the corps was assigned a prominent and important part. Then came the hot pursuit of Lee's retreating veterans, during which the corps fought at Sailor's Creek. This, the last battle of the Sixth Corps, was marked by the same features which had so largely characterized all its battles,--dash, hard fighting--some of it with the bayonet, victory, and large captures of men, flags, guns, and material.

The history of the Sixth Corps, more than any other, is replete with fascinating interest. Its record is invested with more of the romance and brilliancy of war. There was the successful assault of Marye's Heights; the brilliant dash into the rifle pits at Rappahannock

Station; the deadly hand-to-hand fighting in the gloomy thickets of Spotsylvania; the breathless interest which attaches to their lone fight at Fort Stevens, where, under the eye of the President, they saved the National Capital from the hand of the invader; the victories in the Valley, with the dramatic incident at Cedar Creek; and the crowning success at the storming of Petersburg. Over all these scenes the Greek Cross waved proudly on the banners of the corps, while its veteran legions wrought deeds which linked that badge with an unfading glory and renown.

Source: "Regimental Losses in the American Civil War (1861-1865)" - William F. Fox