

The Walking Artillery

vignette by Timothy Brookes

During the summer of 1862, after the failed Peninsula campaign, President Lincoln's call for 300,000 more volunteers was soon echoed by Pennsylvania Governor Andrew Curtin's call for 21 new regiments of infantry.

One of these new units was the 140th Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry, organized in the rural western counties of the state. The new recruits, like most volunteers of that time, were eager to be armed, equipped, and sent to the front.

On September 9th, 1862, the excitement of receiving their accoutrements was thoroughly dampened when the regiment's weapons were issued. Instead of the Springfield rifles which had been promised, the 140th was issued the .69 caliber "Vincennes" musket – a Belgian copy of an outdated French firearm. It was described by one recipient as "more dangerous to the man behind it than to the one in front." Even worse than the weapon's inferior qualities were the comments from men in other regiments carrying the more modern Springfield or Enfield. In an article later published in *The Beaver Radical* of Beaver County, Captain Alexander Acheson of Company C recounted the abuse heaped on the men of the 140th:

"The old Vincennes muskets, with their heavy, clanking scabbards were made of poor material, a poor pattern, and only fit to be joked at by those possessed of better. Wherever



Private David Whitehill, Company H, 140th Pennsylvania, with a piece of "shoulder artillery" and its lengthy bayonet and scabbard. Whitehill was taken prisoner in the Wheatfield at Gettysburg but was later exchanged; he was killed in action at Hatcher's Run in 1864. Carte-de-visite by Burnite & Weldon, Harrisburg, now in the collection of Ronn Palm.

our regiment went some one was sure to say ‘There goes the walking artillery.’ ‘Do you shoot solid shot or shell out of those pieces?’ ‘Where did you get your cavalry sabres?’ ‘Look at the twelve-pounders!’ ‘What’s the range of them field pieces’ or some other expression ridiculing the ‘big guns!’ The boys detested the old shooting irons.”

The long-suffering and unamused men of the 140th would

have to wait four long months guarding railroads and perfecting their drill, the regiment joined the Army of the Potomac in mid-december 1862 and was assigned to the Second Corps. During a review at Falmouth, the 140th’s new corps commander, General Edwin Sumner, noticed that one of his new regiments was armed with what he termed “shoulder artillery.” The Belgian muskets were then and there condemned,

to the considerable relief of the Keystone Staters. On January 18, 1863, they traded in the hated antiques for shiny new Springfields.

Now suitably armed, the 140th Pennsylvania earned an enviable fighting reputation, but sustained one of the heaviest casualty rates in the entire Army of the Potomac, losing 198 men killed in action or dead of wounds.