"The Last Full Measure of Devotion":
Vernon's Sacrifices in the Civil War
By Jean Luddy

To many, the Civil War seems to be a conflict that happened so long ago as to have little relevance to our world today. Yet our nation is again at war. As we send our sons and daughters away to fight in distant places for our ideals, we should pause to remember the sacrifices of an earlier generation, especially in this year, the 140th since the end of the Civil War in April 1865.

Unlike some towns, Vernon is unusual in that traces of the Civil War can be found by the careful observer. Our town hall, The Memorial Building, was built in 1889 as a memorial to those who served in that war. On the second floor, the Sons of Union Veterans, a fraternal organization, have their headquarters and museum in the original rooms used by the veterans of the Grand Army of the Republic. Every Memorial Day, employees of the town's cemeteries place flags by the graves of veterans from all wars. Civil War veterans have special metal stars to hold their flags.



While the significance of the Civil War in our nation's history is acknowledged, the impact of this war on a community should be recognized, for it is the accumulation of the contributions of many town, cities and villages that comprise the total amount of national service.

In his work, *Civil War: The Volunteer Sons of Connecticut*, Blaikie Hines compiled statistics and information about the experiences of the soldiers from Connecticut. The following statistics and information were taken from his research.

In 1860, the population of the town of Vernon was 3,838 including the village of Rockville. 336 men from Vernon served in a number of military units ranging from heavy artillery to cavalry to light batteries, but the bulk of the men were in the infantry. Some soldiers were fortunate enough at the war's end to return home unharmed, but a number were not.

Total Vernon Casualties

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| Died | 36 |
| Killed/Missing | 14 |
| Wounded | 72 |
| Captured | 39 |
| Deserted | 42 |

The worst day for Vernon's soldiers was September 17, 1862. The Battle of Antietam in Sharpsburg, Maryland is still considered one of the bloodiest battles on American soil. On that day, 4 men from Vernon were killed and 11 wounded with 2 of the wounded dying later. Union soldiers at the Battle of Antietam stopped the 1862 Confederate invasion of the North at a tremendous cost.

Of the 39 local soldiers captured, 11 died in prison. Of those men, 9 were at the infamous Andersonville Prison in Georgia. Of the 72 soldiers who were wounded, 13 died of their wounds during the war.

The men from Vernon served in a number of different regiments, each with their own history of marches and battles. The 14th regiment of the Connecticut Volunteer Infantry will be discussed here, because the largest number of Vernon residents served in this unit.

The 14th was assembled on August 23, 1862 with 1,966 recruits. Vernon with 113 men had the 3rd highest number of enlistees, following Waterbury and Middletown. A review of the regiment's record shows that Vernon's men saw action in many of the major battles in the war, such as Antietam, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, the Wilderness and Cold Harbor. The 14th was sent to fight in Antietam, their first battle, with minimal training which accounted for the high casualty rate. The Battle of Fredericksburg was followed by many losses from wounds or disability discharges. In Gettysburg, the 14th joined others in repelling the famous charge by General Pickett's men. A monument to the 14th now stands on the Gettysburg battlefield. The regiment also saw action during 1864-1865 in other battles in Virginia as part of the campaign to wear down Lee's army. Action at Cold Harbor, Petersburg, Ream's Station and Boynton Plank Road added more names to the casualty lists. After the war's end, the 14th later joined other units to march in the Grand Review of the Armies in Washington. Late in May the original members of the regiment were mustered out of service and began the long-awaited journey home.

Hines paid this tribute: "The 14th Connecticut was in the greatest number of battles of any Connecticut regiment and lost the largest percentage of men killed or died in service. They were in 34 battles and skirmishes with some of the battles ranked as the greatest of the war."

The numbers and the battles only tell part of the story. Personal accounts of those who served bring us a little closer to understanding the whole experience. The museum of the Sons of the Union Veterans in our town hall has an invaluable collection of letters written home to Rockville by a soldier from the 14th. In The Boys From Rockville the letters of Sgt. Benjamin Hirst have been arranged and annotated by Professor Robert Bee.

Hirst wrote about his experiences in battle, his friends from Rockville, his observations on the life of a solider and his concerns about situations at home. Hirst's letters put a human face on the statistics and battle names. Professor Bee provides background information on Hirst's pre-war life and suggests that Hirst's understating of the concepts of "courage" and "responsibility" influenced his conduct as a soldier.

Several decades after the war, Hirst used his letters as a source for a personal account of the war he wrote for a local paper. Professor Bee compares the later articles to the original letters to learn how time affected Sgt. Hirst's understanding of his war experience.



Along with many of his comrades from the 14th Connecticut Volunteers, Benjamin Hirst rests in Grove Hill Cemetery in Rockville. A symbol etched into Hirst's granite monument indicates the significance to him of his service in the 14th. Etched within a shamrock, the initials "BH" are followed by the abbreviations "Co. D. 14th C.V. " (Company D, 14th Connecticut Volunteers)

On this Memorial Day, visit one of our cemeteries and notice the flags on the graves of the veterans of all our wars. A sign on an American cemetery on Okinawa Island reminds us of those who paid the ultimate sacrifice. "We gave our todays in order that you might have your tomorrows."