

[Studying Civil War Trauma through the 5th New Hampshire Volunteer Infantry](#)

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In this post for the H-CivWar Author's Blog, Hugh Dubrulle introduces his research on the 5th New Hampshire Volunteer Infantry and how individual soldiers in the regiment, along with the unit as a whole, dealt with trauma during the Civil War.

I suspect that I am the ugly duckling in this group of bloggers because my research interests have metamorphosed quite suddenly, and I find myself surveying unfamiliar ground. In graduate school, I was interested in British attitudes toward the American Civil War, and I studied as a historian of modern Britain (with the Civil War as one of my fields). I eventually wrote *Ambivalent Nation: How Britain Imagined the American Civil War* (LSU Press, 2018). As I reached the end of that project, I taught a class on the Civil War for the first time in years and hoped to craft a course research project that students would find appealing. I teach at a small, liberal arts college in New Hampshire, and I sought to find an interesting link between the state and the Civil War. That's how I stumbled upon the story of the 5th New Hampshire Volunteer Infantry.

This unit is notorious for having suffered 295 combat fatalities during the Civil War, more than any other regiment in the Union armies. These fatalities, to quote Lt. Col. William F. Fox's *Regimental Losses in the American Civil War, 1861-1865*, "occurred entirely in aggressive, hard, stand-up fighting" (p. 2). The regiment's story, however, is interesting for more than just this reason. The original colonel, Edward E. Cross, was a colorful and forceful personality. It is ironic that one of the toughest units in II Corps (which was widely considered the hardest fighting corps in the Army of the Potomac) was initially led for about 18 months by this idiosyncratic and vociferous Democrat who admired Franklin Pierce (Cross was mortally wounded at Gettysburg). The men were recruited from across all ten counties of New Hampshire, which meant that they reflected the profound political divisions that characterized the state. The company and field officers were riven by various disputes that found their way into courts-martial or courts of inquiry. By 1863, the enormous losses suffered by the regiment compelled it to draw the great majority of its recruits from among substitutes. Desertion skyrocketed. Although the regiment turned in a courageous performance at Cold Harbor, it suffered from numerous disciplinary problems as native-born Anglo-American officers (many of whom were original volunteers promoted from the ranks) struggled to command a unit consisting mainly of substitutes (a very large proportion of whom were foreign born). The 5th New Hampshire's story is eventful; the regiment confronted many difficulties and hardships, a number of which were of its own making. I found this tale compelling, and I wanted to share it with my students.

It soon became clear to me that if I wanted to do an adequate job of guiding student

research, I had to master the story of the regiment as well as relevant historiography. That task would prove impossible if I simultaneously sought to maintain a separate research agenda of my own. And so I started doing research on the regiment in earnest. I'm still at the stage where I'm collecting data about the soldiers in the unit, locating their letters (and transcribing them), looking for useful secondary works, and sorting out the primary sources that are probably so familiar to those scholars who study soldier life during the Civil War. In other words, I've just started.

If I had to explain in one sentence what I hope to accomplish with my research project, it would be a cross between what Susannah J. Ural did in *Hood's Texas Brigade* and Peter Carmichael's *The War for the Common Soldier*—but with a focus on trauma and the way in which the soldiers of the 5th New Hampshire dealt with it. How did men in this regiment keep body and soul together while undergoing the vicissitudes of service in a unit that suffered enormous losses? The answers lie far afield. They involve the attitudes of individual soldiers, the internal workings of the 5th New Hampshire, and experiences of soldiers both within and without the regiment. In studying how the regiment dealt with trauma, it makes sense to look at many dimensions of soldiers' experiences. These include: the different ways in which soldiers were recruited throughout the war (and the social background of the men thus yielded); camaraderie among soldiers; the exercise of leadership and imposition of discipline by officers; the nature of the soldier economy; soldiers' political opinions and the pervasive influence of politics in their lives; the ties that bound soldiers to the home front and their feelings toward folks back home; the encounter with combat and how the regiment fought on the battlefield; how soldiers experienced the roles of captor and captive during the war; the medical treatment they underwent for wounds and sickness; the motives and impetuses for desertion; and the reintegration of soldiers into civilian society, the lives led by veterans, and the ways in which they remembered the war.

I hope that readers of my finished work will learn much about the 5th New Hampshire and life in a Civil War regiment, but what I propose is not a traditional regimental history. Rather, this project will use the 5th New Hampshire as a case study about how one regiment and its men engaged with trauma. I recognize that while the example of a single regiment can be illustrative, none can bear the burden of being "typical" in this way or that. For example, it's clear to me that the 5th New Hampshire derived its strength and resilience from very different sources than, say, the Texas Brigade that Ural portrays. Clearly, there was more than one way to build an elite fighting unit that could absorb tremendous punishment.

Although I'm a newcomer to this aspect of the Civil War, I'm no stranger to blogging. For almost a year, I've maintained a blog (<https://5thnewhampshirevolunteerinfantry.home.blog/>). I see blog posts as a means of generating questions or provisional ideas while "thinking aloud" about various matters.

Blogging is also a means of eliciting useful suggestions or constructive criticism, so I look forward to hearing from you.

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