

6-1-2006

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John E. Norton

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### Recommended Citation

Norton, John E. (2006) "From Stubborn Swede to General," *Swedish American Genealogist*: Vol. 26 : No. 2 , Article 13.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/swensonsag/vol26/iss2/13>

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# *From Stubborn Swede Railroad Inspector to Civil War General*

BY JOHN E. NORTON

*Ernst Mattias Peter von Vegesack* was born 18 June 1820 on the island of Gotland, scion of a Swedish military family with German roots. His parents were Eberhard Ferdinand Emil von Vegesack, a captain in the army and later customs officer, and his wife Ulrika Christina Sofia Lythberg. The family earned their Swedish nobility in 1664, and were granted baronial privileges in 1802.

Like many young noblemen, Ernst began his own military career at the age of 15, when he joined the Swedish Army's *jägare* (rifle) company at Visby. He rose through the enlisted ranks in the conscript Gotland Artillery. He was commissioned as brevet second lieutenant of the Dala Regiment in 1840, and promoted to first lieutenant in 1843. He worked as a licensed surveyor in Kopparberg province during the great land reform of 1844-1850. He also saw peacetime duty overseas as an artillery battery officer in the Swedish Caribbean colony of St. Barthélemy in 1852-1853 and in 1854. After returning to Sweden, he was promoted to captain and company commander in the Dala Regiment in 1857. In 1858 he became intrigued by the new technology of the railroad industry, and was named traffic chief/inspector for the new Gefle-Dala Railway between the Baltic seacoast town of Gävle and the inland province of Dalarna, a career change that brought unexpected results and later fame from an unlikely quarter.

It is said that his decision to head for America as the Civil War broke out was encouraged by an unfortunate 1860 confrontation with a prominent railroad passenger, over a shipment of Baltic herring. Swedish Member of Parliament Liss Lars Olsson had chosen to return home from Parliament to Dalarna via the Baltic

seacoast town of Gävle. Olsson had reached an agreement with his business friend and railroad executive director, Per Murén, that he could ship all personal baggage at no cost.

Olsson chose to interpret "baggage" liberally, and tried to load 20 cases of salted Åland Baltic herring in Gävle, as a speculative investment to be sold at home in Dalarna. von Vegesack refused to treat it as baggage, insisting it instead be shipped as revenue-producing freight, or not at all. As the train pulled out of Gävle, the herring boxes remained on the loading dock. Olsson made a shouted appeal, "My herring, my herring!" to Per Murén, standing at trackside. The executive director demanded an explanation of von Vegesack. A heated discussion followed, and von Vegesack resigned. He, along with other Swedish officers hoping to gain battlefield experience, then sought permission to come to America to fight for the Union. He left Sweden on 7 August 1861 with three other lieutenants and a young engineer.

Von Vegesack's entry into Union Army service was smoothed by American Secretary of State William H. Seward, whose intervention landed Ernst a commission in September 1861 as Captain in the 58<sup>th</sup> Ohio Volunteer Infantry Regiment, and assignment to staff duty at Newport News. In that capacity, he was privileged to witness, and report home to Sweden, the famous 9 March 1862 sea battle at Hampton Roads between Swedish engineer John Ericsson's ironclad *Monitor* and the Confederate *Merrimac*.

Von Vegesack tired of staff duties at Newport News, and requested reassignment to the field, asking to follow McClellan into battle during the ill-fated Peninsular Campaign

aimed at Richmond. He was refused, so resigned his commission to join McClellan's corps as a volunteer during the siege of Yorktown and battle of Williamsburg. For bravery shown during the battle of Hanover Courthouse, he was promoted to major and joined McClellan's general staff as adjutant. Though suffering from malaria, he later helped cover McClellan's retreat from Richmond to the James River, distinguishing himself in the battle of Gaines Mill.

For his services there, he was promoted to colonel, and given command of the 20<sup>th</sup> Regiment New York Volunteers, made up largely of German Turners, many who were refugees (or children of refugees) from the socialist revolutions of 1848. He soon became an acting brigade commander, and led the Third Brigade of Gen. Smith's Division in the disastrous battle of Bull Run, 30 August 1862. By the time of the bloody battle of Antietam, 16-17 September 1862, he was a regimental commander, and successfully stopped a Confederate breakthrough by reinforcing the Union center with his Swedes, Norwegians, Danes, and Germans. Shortly after, he was made brevet brigadier general. In that capacity, he participated in the bloody, unsuccessful battle of Fredericksburg 11-13 December 1862, and again on 3 May 1863, when Fredericksburg was finally taken. A day later, he and his unit participated in the disastrous battle of Chancellorsville, where he was nearly captured and his unit almost wiped out. His regiment had, by then, served out its enlistment, and on 10 May 1863, the unit was welcomed home to New York and mustered out.

Von Vegesack was then attached to General Meade's Army of the Poto-

mac, becoming Meade's adjutant in time to participate in the Battle of Gettysburg in July 1863.

He left Union service on 3 August 1863, and returned to his homeland as a national hero, receiving a saber and gold medal for "bravery in the field" from King Carl XV. In 1864 he was promoted directly from Swedish Army Captain to Lieutenant Colonel and made commander of the Västerbotten Rifle Corps. He became commander of the Hälsinge Regiment in 1868, and was military commander of Gotland 1874-84. He also served as M.P. and representative of Gotland in the Upper Chamber of Parliament from 1878 to 1887. He was promoted to Major General in 1884 and put in command of Sweden's 5<sup>th</sup> Military District. He retired in 1888.

His Civil War service was not forgotten by the United States. Following the Civil war, he was named a member of "The Union League," and was promoted to permanent brigadier general in the U.S. Army in 1865. On 26 August 1893, he was giv-

en the United States' highest military award, The Congressional Medal of Honor, for bravery during the battle of Gaines Mill, while covering McClellan's retreat. The citation was simple: "While voluntarily serving as aide de camp, successfully and advantageously charged the position of troops under fire."

He died on 12 January 1903 in Stockholm, a stubborn railroad inspector turned stubborn general, and a national hero on both sides of the Atlantic. He married in 1865 to Edla Amalia Sergel, daughter of the manor owner Johan Gustaf Sergel, and his wife Carolina Magdalena Dubois, but had no children.

### More reading

In 1904, the Augustana Synod periodical *Prärieblomman* published a biographical sketch of Major General Ernst von Vegesack, written by its editor, Anders Schön. Schön tells the delightful story of von Vegesack's short railroad career and the famous herring incident that apparently

hurried his decision to emigrate. Modern Swedish author and war historian Alf Åberg published a 1996 popular history, *Svenskarna under stjärnbaneret*, about the Swedes who fought in the Civil War, with frequent mention of von Vegesack. He cites von Vegesack's Civil War letters, now found in Sweden's *Krigsarkivet* (War Archives), of which Åberg served as director. For a general history of the Civil War, one can read Bruce Catton's masterful works *Mr. Lincoln's Army*, 1951, *Glory Road*, 1952, and *A Stillness at Appomattox*, 1953. Many state adjutants general published Civil War unit histories, giving rosters and insight into the operations of those commands, often down to company level.

John E. Norton

### Contact information

John E. Norton lives in Moline, Illinois. Email: <jnorton785@sbcglobal.net>



Ernst von Vegesack in the Battle of Antietam. From *Illustrerad Tidning* (Stockholm) 29 November 1862. Nr 48.