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Ernst von Vegesack - a Swedish Officer in the Civil War

Roger Kvist*

Baron Ernst von Vegesack was born on the Swedish island of Gotland in the Baltic in 1820, the scion of a family which in the 15th Century had moved from Westphalia in Germany to the Baltic littoral. The family was enobled by the Swedish Crown in 1598 and was raised to the baronial class in 1802. Just as in the case of his father and grandfather, Vegesack became a military officer, at first in the National Guard of Gotland in 1840, and two years later in the Dal Regiment. In 1850 his penchant for adventure took over and he became gunnery officer on St. Barthélemy in the Caribbean. He remained on the Swedish island for six years. When he returned to Sweden he was commissioned company commander in the Dal Regiment, a position he held but a brief period before he accepted a position as chief traffic officer on the Gefle-Dala Railroad.

Staff Officer with Generals Wool and Butterfield

Receiving the necessary permission for a leave of absence, Ernst von Vegesack left Sweden in 1861 in order to travel to North America, where military hostilities recently had erupted between the South and the North. In September of that year he became a captain on the staff of General Daniel Butterfield, but already after a month he was transferred, as a newly appointed major, to the staff of General John Wool, the military commander in Virginia. Vegesack then served as an officer on General Wool's staff at Ft. Monroe in Virginia from the autumn of 1861 until the spring of 1862.

On 8 March 1862 Vegesack could view how the rebels with their rebuilt armoured vessel, the *Merrimac*, had rammed and sunk the *U.S.S. Cumberland* as well as driving the *U.S.S. Congress* aground. Vegesack was ordered to take two cannon and three companies of sharpshooters down to the beach in the attempt of driving the separatists from the *Congress*, which maneuver was successful. They were also able to wound the captain of the *Merrimac*, who, however, from a distance, was able to set fire to the *Congress*. (As is well-known, it was possible for John Ericsson the following day to neutralize the *Merrimac* with his *Monitor* at the naval battle of Hampton Roads).

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Later in the spring of 1862, Vegesack was ordered by General Wool to join the staff of Brigadier Butterfield and Vegesack took part in the pursuit of the rebel forces by the Army of the Potomac close to the environs of Richmond. On 27 May the Fifth Army Corps, of which Butterfield's brigade was a unit, encountered a brigade from North Carolina at Hanover Court House. The enemy was lined up on large open field, behind which was a ravine covered by undergrowth. Vegesack volunteered to reconnoiter the ravine.

Vegesack rode through a narrow forested belt beside the open field and arrived at a place where the ravine joined a marshy area. Here he could scout the grouping of the enemy forces and estimate its strength. On his return Vegesack discovered that the rebels had formed a firing line through the forest, thus brooking his passage. Vegesack then rode to the point, where the line of fire cut through the edge of the forest, gave his horse the spurs and rode through the enemy grouping. The entire line began firing at him, but he could reach his staff headquarters without injury. The Fifth Army Corps was then ordered to engage the rebel brigade, which had threatened the flank of the Union Army. In the battle, which lasted six hours, Vegesack led the attacking charge in the center.

The Battle of Gaines' Mill

The input which Vegesack had had in the reconnaissance at Hanover Court House resulted in his being given a permanent assignment as major on the staff of General Butterfield's brigade in the summer of 1862. The Fifth Army Corps, of which the brigade was a part, was stationed at Mechanicsville, separated from the main part of the Army of the Potomac by the Chickahominy River. On 26 June 1862 the rebels opened a counterattack against the corps, which was forced to retreat to Gaines' Mill, where they were attacked the following day. At 6 o'clock in the evening of 27 June, Vegesack was dispatched to scout the enemy forces. He rode together with an orderly, but a grenade killed the orderly as well as both horses and showered Vegesack with blood and soil. When he came to, he observed that the entire army corps was in flight toward the forest at the shore of Chickahominy River.

Vegesack ran toward the 83rd Pennsylvania Infantry, which was on the verge of fleeing. All the regimental officers had been put out of commission but Vegesack was able to stay the fleeing regiment and ordered the men to face the front. This maneuver so puzzled the enemy which was about 100 yards away, that they stopped and began signaling, finally sending forward parliamentarians and from their superior position to demand the surrender of the regiment. This was refused.

In the meanwhile Vegesack gathered together about 1,300 men and placed them in a favorable position in a copse of trees. The group was able to hold off the rebels for 2 1/2 hours but when it seemed as if the force would be surrounded Vegesack decided that the regiment should retreat toward the river. To cover the retreat he ordered four companies to hold off the enemy, a force which he himself commanded. He was thus able to protect the rear from the enemy artillery. Rafts made from bridge timbers were hastily constructed on which about 70 wounded could cross the Chickahominy River. The remainder of the men had to swim. About 250 men were lost to enemy fire during the crossing of the river.

Commanding the Turner Rifles

As a reward for his achievements at Gaines' Mill, Vegesack was promoted to colonel 19 July 1862 and given the command of the 20th New York Volunteer Infantry Regiment. Originally recruited from German immigrants in New York, foremost men who had belonged to the New York Turnverein, a gymnastic society, the regiment was for this reason also called the United Turner Rifles. But Vegesack could not immediately assume command of his unit. Soon after Gaines' Mill he had fallen ill with dysentery and fever and was cared for in New York by the Swedish consul, Carl Edvard Habicht. It was not until 14 August that Vegesack could return to his command, even though he had not fully recovered. The illness was to affect him during the remainder of his tour in America and forced him repeatedly to take sick leave.

On 17 September 1862, about ten o'clock in the forenoon, the Sixth Army Corps, to which the Turner Rifles belonged, arrived at the battlefield of Antietam. Vegesack's regiment was the first unit of the army corps to engage the enemy. The army corps had taken a position approximately in the middle of the battle area, where early in the morning some of the bloodiest fighting had taken place. The Union forces, who now were being relieved, had lost a few hill tops to the enemy and the Third Brigade, to which Vegesack's unit belonged, was ordered to recapture these heights.

The attack was led by Vegesack's regiment. In a letter to a friend he describes the action: "I arrived from the flank, ordered 'close ranks' and as the regiment came abreast I ordered 'forward march', placing myself at the head with the lieutenant colonel behind heading the right wing and my adjutant behind with the left wing. And we were off, shouting hurrah! I captured the heights, threw back the enemy and held my position, so that everything was accomplished when the other sections of the brigade arrived." The man carrying the flag was killed at the first salvo of the enemy, but Vegesack seized the regimental colors and riding in

the front of his regiment led the charge of the heights which were captured by the use of bayonets.

The brigade grouped itself on the captured heights and held them for 26 hours under constant bombardment and fire from artillery and sharpshooters. Vegesack's 20th New York Infantry was exposed to the most furious fire along the entire line and he was praised by the brigade commander for the courage and composure of himself and his men. During the battles of the day Vegesack's regiment lost 38 killed in action, 96 wounded and 11 missing, totalling 145 men.

The bayonet attack led by Vegesack with the regimental colors in hand created quite a sensation. *Harpers Weekly* in New York published a wood cut of the affair as visualized by the artist and the subsequent capture of the enemy-held positions on the heights. In Sweden the news was received with elation because of the success of "Swedish military glory" and the wood cut illustration in *Harpers Weekly* was published in *Illustrerad Tidning* in Stockholm. Suddenly Vegesack's name became a household word in Sweden.

Return to Sweden

On 6 May 1863 the 20th New York Infantry Regiment had served its voluntary period of two years. The following day the journey turned north to the home city. The troops were received in Baltimore and Philadelphia by festive arrangements accompanied with flowers and wreaths. On 10 May the regiment arrived in New York and was received with an enthusiastic welcome punctuated by shouts of hurrah and flowers showered on the returning heroes. Accompanied by a mass of people, the regiment arrived at the *Turnerhalle*, the society's headquarters, where the soldiers and officers were honored at a gala dinner. On 1 June the regiment was officially mustered out of service, but Vegesack did not begin his homeward journey until September of that year.

In Sweden Vegesack was to encounter a brilliant career. King Charles XV presented Vegesack with an honorary sabre and bestowed on him the military decoration "For courage shown on the field of battle" in gold. He was also knighted with the Order of the Sword. The following year he was elected a member of the Royal Society of Military Science and was promoted from captain to lieutenant colonel and commanding officer of the Västerbotten Light Infantry Corps. The same year he was given the Norwegian decoration, the Order of St. Olav. Already in 1868 Vegesack was promoted to colonel and commander of the Hälsinge Regiment and in 1873 he was made military commandant of his home island of Gotland. During his tour of duty on Gotland he was elected by the Gotland County

Swedish American Genealogist

Government as a member of the First Chamber of the Swedish *Riksdag*, where he served the years 1879-1887. In 1884 Vegesack was promoted to major general and commanding officer of Sweden's Fifth Military District. He retired on a pension in 1888 and died in Stockholm 12 January 1903.

Vegesack also received several honors from the United States. Already before his departure for Sweden he had received the American medal, *Union League of Philadelphia*. By general order he was made brevet brigadier general, U.S.V. in 1867 with seniority dated back to 1 March 1865. Much later Vegesack was also decorated with the *Medal of Honor*. Upon a recommendation of Daniel Butterfield, the War Department in Washington, DC awarded Vegesack this honor 23 August 1893 accompanied by the citation "for distinguished gallantry at the Battle of Gaines' Mill."

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* Editor's note: The Ernst von Vegesack Collection was acquired by purchase from the heirs of General von Vegesack by the American Swedish Institute in the 1970s. It consists of much of the memorabilia which has a bearing on his Civil War experience - his sword, pistols, medals and decorations, correspondence with American officers and his handwritten dispatches he wrote for the Swedish press.



Courtesy Rollins College Archives

Woodcut illustration in *Harpers Weekly* of New York, dated 25 Oct. 1862 showing von Vegesack leading the charge at the Battle of Antietam. Curiously his name is given as Van Vegesack.