

Two Pistols Overture

I'm looking at a salted paper print by Egbert Guy Fowx of the officers of the New York 7th Regiment taken in 1863.

They are drinking beer and whiskey while eating from a wicker basket in front of a tavern somewhere in Virginia.

A young Negro man is serving them. They appear not to understand the incongruity of this relationship.

Raised by Brig. Gen. Michael Corcoran just 9 months earlier, most of these men of the 7th were escapees from the Irish Potato Famine.

They appear glad of good food and clothes to wear while a divided nation pays them to fight, something they would do anyway.

In the picture, the windows of the tavern are open. It's summer. Some are in shirt sleeves. 17 officers led 820 men in 1862.

By the time they arrived at Appomattox Court House, their numbers were reduced to 130, a mere 24 months later.

How cocky and sure of themselves these officers look now after fighting just one brief battle for Fort Dix at Suffolk, VA.

Corcoran's Union division approached the Confederate stronghold cautiously.

Gen. Lee assessed and quickly ordered Longstreet to retreat to Fredericksburg.

The photograph betrays their false confidence. They pose gaily, even triumphantly. They do not yet know Spotsylvania, North Anna, Cold Harbor and Petersburg.

Everyone will go home with money in his pocket. the war will be over by fall. "I'll be having some fine Virginia for my pipe now," one is saying to the servant.

-- Gary Lehmann

