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WALTER G. MORRILL

THE FIGHTING COLONEL OF THE TWENTIETH MAINE

by

James B. Vickery

“Colonel, it’s too hot for you to march to Peltoma Cemetery.”

The bewhiskered figure eyed the younger man sternly; “I prefer to walk,” he replied.

And walk Walter G. Morrill did on this particular Memorial Day in 1928 at Pittsfield, Maine.¹ What if he was nearly eighty-eight years old? Three years later Colonel Morrill held the last of his horse races that for fifty-five years he had promoted since his first one in Dexter on July 4, 1876. True enough, as someone might have commented, “They don’t make his kind any more.”

No, the Colonel never really gave up. In his ninety-third year he took his first airplane ride, an experience he didn’t wholeheartedly enjoy, although the Colonel was game for anything as long as there was an element of sport or chance in it. Race horses were his first love, and nothing delighted the Colonel more than watching a couple of fast trotters race nose-to-nose around a track. Indeed, horse-trading was in his blood. In his day Morrill had owned at different times around forty fast trotters. Horses were his life—or almost his life, except for a war that made Colonel Walter G. Morrill one of Maine’s distinguished heroes of the Civil War.

At Gettysburg he won never-to-be-forgotten laurels. In fact, from 1861 to 1865 Morrill participated in no fewer than twenty-three engagements beginning with his baptism of fire in McClellan’s peninsular campaign and ending at Appomatox. His army career began with his enlistment as a private and closed with his discharge as commander of the Twentieth Infantry Regiment, Maine Volunteers, thrice wounded, and the recipient of the Medal of Honor. This is the spectacular career of Walter G. Morrill, born on November 13,

1840, at Williamsburg, Maine, the third child of Aaron and Eliza (Willard) Morrill.

In this backwoods community young Walter grew up, obtaining his education in the "deestric" school.

With his education completed, he worked in the woods two winters, probably for his father. Physical toil developed a strong body, and young Morrill boasted that he could lift a barrel of flour as easily as a corn cob pipe. In stature he was not a big man, standing only five feet ten inches, but he was straight and sinewy and quick in his movements. In manner he was quiet, reserved. As a youth he was not what would be considered handsome, but his hazel eyes were deepset under heavy eyebrows and dark hair, his mouth firm, his chin square terminating a rather long face. His features indicated a resolution which bordered on stubbornness.

But woodwork did not appeal to the energetic youth, so when Adams Merrill, operator of the Williamsburg slate quarries, offered him a job, he accepted.

"Walt, why don't you learn to split slate? I'll tell you what I'll do. If you work from October 1st until April 1st, I'll pay you seventy-five dollars while you're learning the trade and pay you two dollars a day afterwards."

Thus in the fall of 1860 Morrill learned the difficult art of splitting slate, the first Yankee to do so, since the regular quarrymen were Welshmen. All went well until he completed his apprenticeship. Merrill did not keep his word and refused to pay Morrill the full raise that he had promised. In disgust Morrill quit, and ever afterward he had no use for a man who did not keep his word.²

Already rumors of war were imminent. Since Lincoln's election, tension had mounted in both North and South. Even in faraway Maine the issues were sharply debated and party feelings had caused bitterness among neighbors and even families. When Confederate guns fired on Fort Sumter, the majority of Maine citizens proclaimed their loyalty and responded eagerly to Lincoln's call for troops. Town competed with town to be the first to sign up a company of men to join the ten regiments at first assigned to the state. The towns, both large and small, in Piscataquis County joined in the hue and cry to muster their quota. Young able-bodied men thronged to enlist. In Williamsburg there were twenty-nine men between ages 18 and 45. Seven of them were handicapped, but thirteen men joined

a company formed by Moses Brown and Walter G. Morrill, called the Brownville Rifles, composed of forty-one others from Brownville, Barnard, and Sebec.³ Morrill had signed the recruiting roster on April 26 among the first to join up in that locality.⁴ On a foggy May 1, loaded down with gifts, last minute admonitions and tearful farewells, these 54 men mounted four stage coaches for Bangor, where the Sixth Maine was being readied for service. A week or so later the Dover-Foxcroft contingent made up of 82 men joined the Brownville men at Bangor. At Camp Washburne the men received some casual training—inadequate to be sure. In the latter part of June 1861 the companies of Brownville, Dover-Foxcroft and others chiefly from Penobscot, Washington, and Hancock counties enrailed for Camp Preble, Portland, where they arrived shortly before the Fourth in time to show off in the usual parade. It was a scorching hot day; the boys were routed out early, given a scanty breakfast and marched off. Tired, blistered and exhausted, the men returned to their tents at three in the afternoon after marching six hours and having no dinner. Such treatment brought indignant protests from the papers, but little comfort to the soldiers.

On July 15 Morrill and his comrades were sworn into the Sixth Maine by Captain Hight of the U.S. Dragoons, whereupon they received some pay from the state and bounty for their enlistment.

Along with other members of Brownville Rifles, Morrill was assigned to Company A, composed largely of Piscataquis county boys. The Sixth took “the cars” to Boston where the ladies offered a “cold collation” and heaped gifts upon the already laden privates who tossed them aside at their earliest convenience. In Philadelphia the Quaker elders fed them royally in contrast to the rather stingy hospitality in Boston, and on the 19th the regiment arrived in Washington. As they marched past the White House, President Lincoln came out on the north portico and reviewed this Maine Regiment. Then the officers hustled them out through Georgetown, up the Potomac to Chain Bridge, where they heard the distant thunder of artillery at Bull Run, but spent the next few days on picket duty.

In the following months Morrill received his basic training in army life. The Sixth Maine spent their time drilling, doing picket duty, and clearing areas for camps. Since many of the Maine men were expert woodsmen, they were assigned to woodcutting details. Once when an officer inquired the reason for all the activity in camp,

the brigade commander, General Winfield Scott Hancock, replied, "Oh, that's my Sixth Maine regiment axing its way to Richmond." ⁵

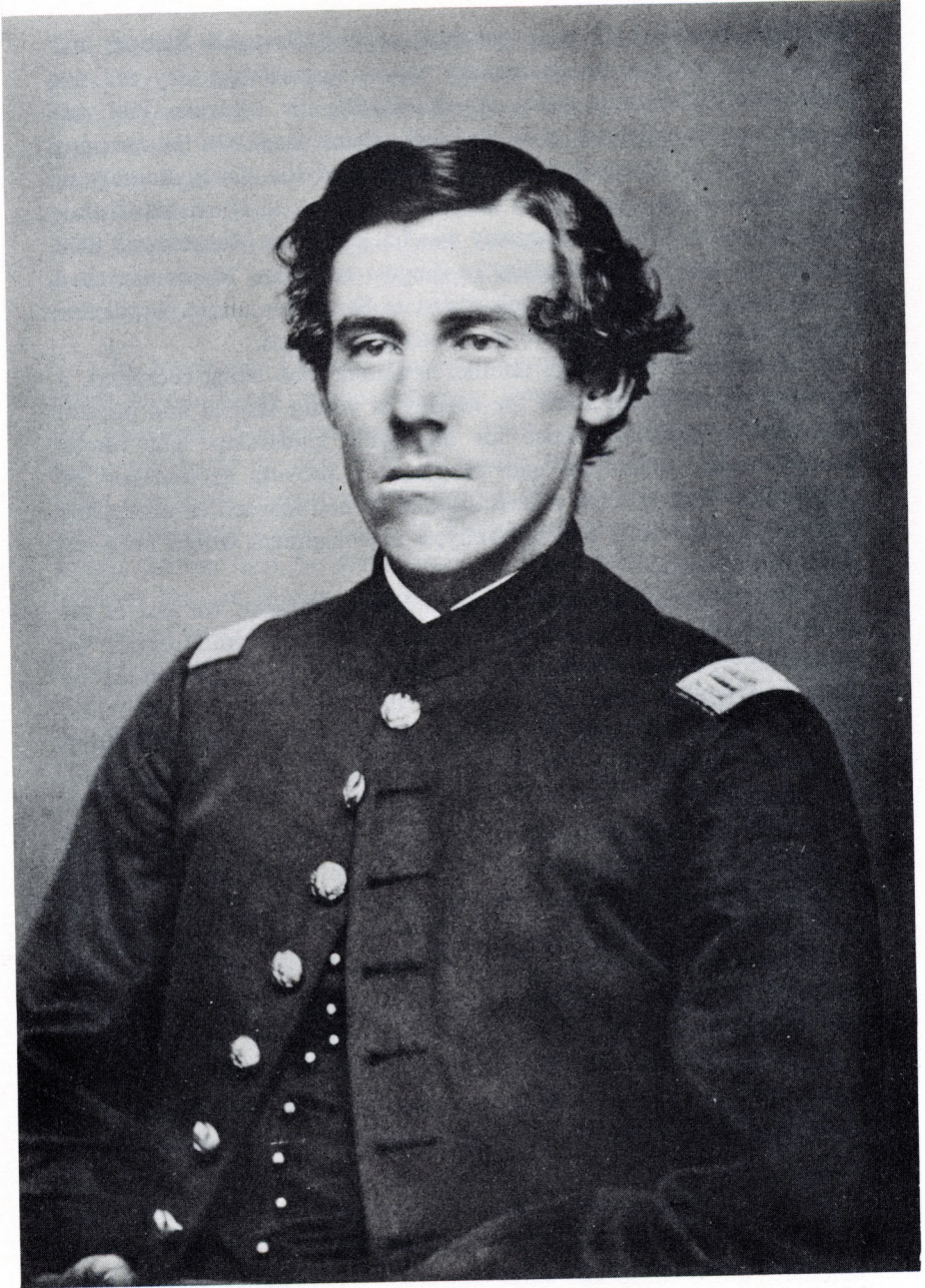
During the remainder of 1861 the Sixth Maine continued routine duty along the Potomac and went into winter quarters near Levinville. Here they got more drill and military instruction, built log huts and settled down to a routine life of general boredom. Camp food consisted of beans, salt pork, hardtack—a diet varied only by foraging or by a box from home. State of Mainers have a particular taste for green corn, and stealing corn became a favorite pastime for the soldiers. On one occasion a visiting officer asked General Smith how far his men had advanced, to which the general replied, "That's uncertain, but if you want to know, go out and pass the picket line and go as much further to the front as you think safe to do; then climb the tallest tree, and off in the distance you will see men from the Sixth Maine in cornfields stealing corn." ⁶

Young Morrill evidently took to army life for after only two months service he was promoted on September 19, 1861 to first sergeant.

In March 1862 McClellan began his peninsula campaign, and during the next six months the Sixth Maine became initiated into the rigors of war, campaigning valiantly in the fighting around Yorktown and Williamsburg. From May 9 to May 14 the Sixth Maine marched up the peninsula toward Richmond.

On account of rain, foul roads, and constant skirmishing, McClellan's army advanced slowly. The Sixth Maine found the going tough at Golding's Farm. On June 6 the Sixth Maine, now part of Six Corps, fought a desperate battle against a savage Confederate attack. The next day, June 7, Colonel Burnham's Sixth Maine were placed in a rear guard maneuver, but while getting into position were shelled unmercifully by the enemy. They held their battle position during the night, every man ready to repulse an attack. This may have been the night that Morrill remembered forever after, for in his old age he frequently spoke about a certain experience which depressed him on this anniversary. On this particular occasion Morrill was too exhausted to care where he slept and threw himself down between two soldiers to rest in order to benefit from the shelter of their bodies. In the morning he awoke to find that he had been lying between two corpses.

During the rest of June, at the time of the Seven Days Battles,



Walter G. Morrill

the Sixth Maine held their position around Savage's Station and White Oak Swamp, but except for minor skirmishing they did not participate at Gaine's Mills, Mechanicsville or Malvern Hill, although desperate fighting took place all around them. On the morning of July 1 they emerged from the swamps of the Chickahominy at Turkey Bend. From here they moved down river to Harrison's Landing. In August Morrill's company was back at Fort Monroe and then was transported to Alexandria. In August the Sixth Maine marched to intercept Stonewall Jackson's thrust at South Mountain. In all this campaigning Sergeant Morrill was actively involved.

Meanwhile, in Maine, another regiment was being recruited, a regiment which would affect the destiny of young Morrill and present him with a splendid chance for displaying leadership. The fifteen months of his enlistment had served as a proving ground for his capabilities. During these fifteen months he had learned to accept the hard lot of soldiering, and naturally, a new regiment would need experienced officers.

This regiment was the Twentieth Maine Infantry, the last of the three-year regiments raised in the state. Mustered into service on August 29, 1862 at Portland, the 20th Maine was commanded by Colonel Adelbert Ames of Rockland, one year out of West Point. Like the Sixth, the 20th Maine was composed of companies from Aroostook, Piscataquis, Penobscot, Washington, Hancock, and Lincoln counties.

When the 20th Maine departed from Portland for the front on September 2, Lieutenant Morrill was not with it. He had been commissioned second lieutenant of Company B at Augusta on August 23, but evidently he joined his new regiment on its arrival in Virginia.

It appears that he continued in the ranks of the Sixth until after the battle at Antietam. Following the bloody battle of Antietam, Lincoln visited McClellan and reviewed the troops, but on October 1, 1862, after the army had been reviewed and inspected, Lt. Morrill, resplendent in a new uniform, formally joined the 20th Maine. Sergeant William Livermore of B Company records the event in his diary:

Our second lieutenant joined us this A.M.

We like his appearance very much.

During the month of October 1862 Colonel Ames ordered that this regiment be ready for action.

On October 30 the regiment broke camp and marched to Harper's Ferry, after having a brief fight at Snicker's Gap. During the next six weeks the 20th Maine marched themselves footsore. Soon both armies would go into winter quarters, but there was one tremendous fight ahead before 1862 came to a close. On the 9th of November the regiment established a camp near Warrentown; the 17th found them at Georgia Creek R.R.; a week later they camped at a point three miles from Fredericksburg near Stoneman's Switch, where the Maine boys performed picket duty for three weeks.

In November General Burnside succeeded McClellan in command of the Army of the Potomac. Burnside planned to strike at Lee through Frederickburg, but slow and over-cautious, and hampered by a flooded river, Burnside waited until December 12 when conditions had improved. Behind the town, hidden from sight, the Confederate Army, some 75,000 strong, prepared for Burnside's attack. On the 13th the main assault of Union troops struck the Confederate line at Marye's Heights. The southerners having the advantage of concealment and position, raked mercilessly the advancing Union troops. The carnage was terrible. More than nine thousand men were killed at Fredericksburg. As far as the 20th Maine were concerned, they were placed in the Union center and marched bravely out into a field heavily bombarded with artillery fire. The Maine troops found shelter behind slight foothills and ridges. Pinned down here for 36 hours before withdrawal, the men suffered from cold, thirst, and lack of medical attention. On December 14 the men under Chamberlain huddled in the cold and stacked up the bodies of the dead to afford protection from the onslaught. When night came the 20th Maine withdrew into Fredericksburg, exhausted, demoralized and beaten. After a brief respite, however, the 20th Maine was ordered back to the front to act as rear guard for the Union army, but the battle of Fredericksburg had fizzled.

In the midst of this holocaust Lt. Walter G. Morrill won the respect of his men. What they thought of him is revealed in the letters of Sgt. William Owen, one of Morrill's Company B. On December 4 Owen wrote of him: "but we have got a lieutenant that is a *man* in every sense of the word. He will look out for his boys as he calls them now." Evidently there was some talk of his being promoted as in one letter Owen writes, . . . "but if our 2nd lieutenant (Mor-

rill) is commissioned as our Captain, I say *good*, and the company will say good, the most of them.”⁷

Again, the latter part of January 1863, Owen wrote of his high opinion of his leader: “You wanted to know who our officers were; we have only one second lieutenant, and his name is Walter G. Morrill from the Sixth Maine. And that is all we want, for a better fellow never lived than he is to his men. We shall have some more soon, I think, and I think he will be captain.”⁸

Anyone who knew Morrill spoke highly of him as a man whose word was his bond, whose honesty was never questioned. Once he had determined on a course of action, Morrill never swerved from it. He had courage, stamina, determination, and that rare quality of leadership that inspired loyalty. He keenly perceived the needs of his men. Although he expected as much courage as he displayed himself, Morrill always had consideration for human weakness. Owen wrote home that during a hard march he was ill, and there was no opportunity to get a ride. Knowing Owen’s condition, Morrill, though an officer, took Owen’s knapsack and carried it the rest of the day.

On April 20, 1863, Morrill received his captain’s bars. At the same time he assumed command of B Company since his predecessor Captain Jefferds had resigned from the army. Livermore, one of Morrill’s company, commented upon the latter’s return from a brief furlough and upon his promotion, “Morrill returned at 11 a.m. commissioned captain. We are very glad of that.” On June 3, Lee, well aware of the odds against him, ordered the Army of Northern Virginia to invade Pennsylvania. Confederate and Union armies clashed at Gettysburg.

The only part of the battle necessary to this narrative is the heroic part played by Captain Walter G. Morrill. The day marked for Morrill’s great moment was July 2, at Little Round Top. In the late afternoon two craggy heights called Big and Little Round Top had not been occupied by either Union or Confederate troops. Command of these could make all the difference. In the late afternoon of the second of July the Fifth Corps, of which the 20th Maine was a part, was awaiting orders behind the lines. The Union lines extended in an arc south of Gettysburg, along Cemetery Ridge and should have occupied Little Round Top, except for the fact that General Sickles believed that a forward position along the Emmitsburg Road was better. In the course of events Sickles moved his men forward with his

lines bent back to a spot called Devil's Den. The choice of this exposed position was very unwise. Just as Sickles was about to withdraw his corps to the Cemetery Ridge, where Meade had indicated that Sickles should be, all hell broke loose. It was too late to withdraw. General Warren had in the meantime discovered that Little Round Top was unoccupied. Immediately he asked for troops. The help came from the reserve Fifth Corps and near the front the 20th Maine stood in readiness.

About four p.m. Longstreet had begun his attack with heavy cannonading. There was the possibility that if he unflanked Sickles' Corps the Union line was in serious trouble. Both armies now realized the advantage of taking Little Round Top. Colonel Chamberlain, taking orders from Colonel Vincent, placed his men on the extreme flank of the Union line. Chamberlain's line formed a right angle, an awkward position from which to stop Longstreet's attack now thundering toward and around the 20th Maine. In order to protect his position, Chamberlain ordered Captain Morrill and his company to detach themselves and to extend themselves from his left flank across a hollow as a skirmish line. Morrill had orders to act according to whatever was deemed expedient as the situation developed. At any cost, his company was to prevent a surprise attack on Chamberlain's exposed flank and rear. Immediately his men, with a detachment of sharpshooters, located themselves several yards away and took up their position behind a stone wall.⁹ Morrill, Chamberlain knew, was quite capable of seizing advantage of an opportunity to harass the southerners should the occasion arise. Suddenly, like an avalanche, a heavy infantry assault burst upon the Maine men. Within minutes the boys from Maine were fighting desperately. To Chamberlain's dismay he found the Confederate attack enveloping his position. Quick as a wink, Chamberlain reorganized his men by forming a bent-back wing. The onslaught was terrific. Dust and smoke enveloped the soldiers on each side. Flashes of flame burst forth. Masses of men fought in struggling confusion. Amidst all the din and roar, Chamberlain discovered that the enemy was planning another attack to hit him on his flank and rear. Consequently, Chamberlain regrouped in order to meet the expected enemy, who hoped to take Chamberlain by surprise. The fighting was intense, and the enemy's charge nearly succeeded; only the terrible effectiveness of the Maine infantrymen saved the situation. In some places the enemy did

succeed in penetrating the 20th Maine's position. Each time the courage and valor of this company repelled the southerners' advance. Chamberlain's report describes the encounter:

The edge of the fight rolled backward and forward like a wave. The dead and wounded were now in our front and then in our rear. Forced from our position, we desperately recovered it, and pushed the enemy down to the front of the slopes.

Ammunition had been expended and another assault was under way. The men were desperate. Their ranks had become decimated, and most of their ammunition expended. In such a predicament, Chamberlain ordered, "Bayonets." Now almost simultaneously the Maine boys charged at the southern troops not more than 30 yards away. Cold steel and Yankee toughness were too much for the Alabama and Texas boys whose ranks broke in confusion.

Captain Morrill had obeyed orders precisely and acted wisely. In the madness of battle as far as his regiment was concerned, the others had forgotten about B Company. Some had supposed them captured; however, just as the Confederate line crumpled, the forgotten men of Morrill's company came to the rescue. Awaiting the propitious moment, he commanded his men to arise from their cover and discharge a volley of carefully-directed shots into the Confederate force. Company B then leaped over the stone wall and clashed in headlong combat with the enemy. Acting like a shock wave, they surged from their position to capture the badly mauled enemy. The combined effect of pointed steel and of Morrill's counter attack proved too much for the Alabamans and Texans. Their attempt to turn the Union flank turned the attack into a rout. In this sector of the battlefield at the end of the first day of this epic encounter three hundred and eight Confederates surrendered and left behind them one hundred fifty dead. Likewise, the 20th Maine had suffered one hundred thirty-six casualties, and thirty fatalities. The Union position was secured. Dusk settled over the battlefield, and the men of Maine collapsed from fatigue. Although the battle was not over, July 2 had been a day of days. Generations to come would remember the heroism of General Chamberlain, Walter G. Morrill, and the soldiers of the 20th Maine.

Gettysburg had brought forth the inherent fighting qualities of this quiet soldier-captain. Battle had created a gallant warrior, a

fighter charged with indomitable courage like some knight of yore. War sharpened and quickened his sensibilities. There was grim determination within Morrill, invincible, unyielding. The 20th Maine remained in reserve during the third and fourth, chiefly spending their hours burying their dead. Then on July 5 they started in pursuit of Lee's army.

In the subsequent months through the summer and fall of 1863, the 20th Maine occupied its time marching and counter-marching. By August 8 they had reached the Rappahannock, where they camped, guarding Beverly Ford. The regiment kept in shape and guarded the Orange and Alexandria rail line, an important means of communication to Washington. There was always the chance that Lee might get his army between the Union troops and Washington, a possibility that gave official Washington the jitters. Such a move seemed apparent in mid-October when Lee's army hit the Fifth Corps at Cattlett's Station. In the ensuing weeks the 20th Maine marched back and forth, enduring a jumble of confusing orders and never seeming to be at the right place at the right time. Finally, Lee entrenched his army at Rappahannock Station, ready to do battle with the Fifth and Sixth Corps, moving along the railroad. On November 7, after bombarding Lee's earthworks, the Union officers saw the futility of driving the Confederates out. At this point the Union commander devised a plan to storm the Confederates, who had thrown up formidable ramparts and defenses against which an attacking enemy could suffer terrible casualties. This plan was quite simple, yet one that took courage; it was simply to charge the Confederates with drawn bayonets in a sudden lightning attack. The Sixth Maine, a battle-scarred regiment, along with their so-called "twin regiment," the Fifth Wisconsin, were chosen to spearhead this awesome task.

Arriving at Rappahannock Station on the 7th of November, Captain Morrill met some of his former comrades of his old regiment. Together they were to earn new glory and add lustre to their battle records. To create the illusion of on-the-spot history, here follows Morrill's own description:

I was on duty with skirmishers on one side of the railroad and the sixth Corps lay on the other. My orders were to advance along the railroad to within a third of a mile of the fortifications and lie in wait for further orders. We lay there all afternoon. In the sixth Corps on

the other side of the railroad were the Sixth Maine, my old regiment. I saw many of my old comrades for the first time since I had transferred. Major George Fuller of East Corinth, now dead, was one (who) came over and he told me that the Sixth had orders to charge. I replied that I had no orders to charge. I could not order my men to charge, but that I should go ahead and all who wanted to could follow. When we charged at sunset, I called to my men that all could follow who wished. So far as I could see, every man responded. We had about one-third mile to go and we went with a rush and a hurrah. Not a shot was fired until we were within twenty rods of the fort; then a terrible fire from the infantry and artillery was poured into us. For a time it seemed to me impossible that a single man could get to the fort unscathed. Sixteen of twenty-one officers of the Sixth Maine were killed or wounded in that charge, but part of us reached and scaled the breastworks. Twice we were driven outside the works, but [we] managed to hold the fort. On the third attempt, until re-enforcements came, we were safe. It was pitch dark before the battle was over.¹⁰

Since the assault began late in the autumn afternoon, twilight and then darkness were favorable to the men who slipped forward over the darkened terrain. By the time the soldiers had reached the redoubts, night had hidden them and made it unwise for their adversaries to use artillery or other fire because of the impossibility of distinguishing between friend and foe. Morrill, with his company's assistance, had proved something like a stimulant to the men of the Sixth Maine. As one officer wrote, Morrill's "dash and gallantry rendered effective service in the assault." In order to carry this attack, Morrill's readiness to lead his own company lent an *esprit de corps* to the other one. It seemed to the ranks that if Morrill would lead, they would follow. Morrill had an attachment for his former regiment, many of whose men were his hometown friends or ones with whom he had campaigned many months. To see these comrades go into battle without his support was too much to bear. The same affinity between their captain and company B led all to respond and follow Morrill's leadership. According to General Russell, the commander of the entire group who led them personally into action, some 50, including a few others from other companies making up about 80 men, responded to Morrill's "Let's go, boys." With such a morale, great deeds are accomplished. As the Sixth Maine and Morrill's men began their assault, they rent the skies with shouts of "Tiger," and the attackers, numbering some 400 strong, gained momentum it seemed, and were swept along like a tidal wave.

At the close of the fight, a tragic incident occurred, one of those events that are peculiarly ironic, more tragic than many instances of battle. During the afternoon while the members of the Sixth and 20th Maine Regiments were waiting or were exchanging stories and news, Captain Morrill fell in with his good friend, Lt. Lyman H. Wilkins, whom he had not seen for many months. In this way the men learned news from home. On this occasion the two officers exchanged views and ate dinner from the same haversack. Lt. Wilkins seemed very dejected and low-spirited. He felt that he would be killed in the attack that afternoon. Morrill tried to talk him out of this gloomy mood. When the attack came, Wilkins fought in the midst of the terrible ordeal and came through unscathed. Despite the fact that the fighting had finished and that the prisoners had been secured, from across the river the Confederates kept up a random and desultory fire with small arms. Seeing Wilkins had come through successfully, Morrill walked up to his friend and said, "Hello, Lynn. See, you didn't get killed after all." At that moment a bullet struck Wilkins, and he fell dead at Morrill's feet. In silence and in grief Captain Morrill helped bury his friend the next morning.

For his conduct and heroism at Rappahannock Station, Morrill received the Medal of Honor, though the recognition was somewhat tardy. Not until 35 years after he performed his noble deed did the United States government act. When the book *Maine at Gettysburg* was being compiled, former Governor Burleigh, noting Morrill's feat, wrote to the War Department recommending that Morrill receive the nation's highest military award. As a consequence the Secretary of War wrote on March 28, 1898 to Morrill stating that he was the recipient of the coveted medal, which would arrive by mail as soon as it could be engraved. No fanfare, no speeches, no publicity—one medal via parcel post. If Morrill ever felt slighted or bitter, he never said so.

Lee now moved his army to the Rapidan and had them construct a solid entrenchment at a strategic point named Mine Run, where the 20th Maine arrived on November 29. To the Maine men this place looked even stronger than the defenses at Rappahannock or Marye's Heights at Fredericksburg. To take these fortifications the corps would have to cross the Rapidan under sharp fire and climb a steep bank to get at the emplacements. It reminded them too much of Fredericksburg, and they shivered with apprehension and from

cold. However, the attack did not materialize, only an exchange of cannon shot and sporadic rifle fire. Strangely enough, Captain Morrill was one of the few wounded, however not seriously. He was hit by shrapnel and was granted a fifteen-day leave—a welcome time off, since he had been two years without leave. On December 4 his regiment went into winter quarters at Rappahannock Station.

With the dawn of 1864, little did the battle-worn captain of B Company realize the year would prove the most trying in his life. January passed uneventfully enough with his company doing picket duty, and standing frequent inspections. In the evenings, three times a week Morrill held classes for his non-coms instructing them in tactics. On time off the men sometimes went quail shooting to supplement their diet or to serve a more nourishing food for the sick. In February there was a little reconnaissance, but generally camp life seemed monotonous, relieved by a few getting drunk. Sgt. Card of D Company was reduced to ranks for forging the major's name to a whisky order and getting drunk. Lt. Morrell, not to be confused with the subject of this article, was arrested for threatening to put his sword through the body of one of his men. And even Captain Morrill got into a scrape that nearly ended his career.

About February 23, Morrill, always one to flare up when someone crossed him or when angered by insubordination, cheating or dishonesty or unfairness, all just reasons, got into a "scuffle" with the quartermaster. Perhaps he had good reason to quarrel, for the quartermaster was a scoundrel and a cad. A few months previously he had kicked a sick sergeant viciously, then reported him for insubordination. Such brutality Morrill could not tolerate. He hated bullies. What instigated the quarrel we do not know; we can surmise that the quartermaster was officious to Morrill, and Morrill was not a man to be pushed. What ensued must have been more than a scuffle, for on the 25th the doctor thought Morrill had suffered internal injuries. Sgt. Owen wrote, "The doctor was with him all night." He feared that Morrill would never recover. Whatever his sickness was, he regained strength slowly. Sgt. Owen sat up with his commander night after night, and even a month later wrote, "Capt. Morrill's health is very poor."¹¹

Morrill did recover, thanks to a strong constitution and the devotion of his men. When spring came, he was well enough to lead his regiment in Grant's maneuver to out-flank Lee below the Rapidan,

where Lee's army still held a strong position. The gallant captain might enjoy momentary good health, but not for long. Grant's plans were hard on men. The coming battles took a cruel toll. By May 4 the Fifth Corps crossed the Rapidan and reached a point known as the Wilderness. The part played by the 20th Maine was to move down the Orange and Fredericksburg turnpike and move through the woods through which this road passed. While negotiating the Wilderness, they were struck by Lee's offensive. The going got rough as they moved through the brush and undergrowth. As they advanced, the firing got noticeably brisk, and the 20th Maine, coming to an open field, reformed their lines before charging across. Such open places could be death traps, but cross it they must. The Maine boys made a dash for it into the wilderness once more, all the time encountering heavy fire. In the thickets no one could keep in touch with other squads, let alone keep in contact with supporting units. Suddenly the 20th Maine discovered that they had advanced ahead of their supporting regiments and were outflanked. Heavy enemy crossfire forced Morrill's company to halt. He tried what Chamberlain had tried at Little Round Top, to swing his company around to face the enemy, but the enemy counterattack was too strong. In less than five minutes Morrill's company numbering 47 men suffered 33 casualties, killed, wounded, or captured.¹²

The wounded were left on the field, and the surrounded company fought its way out the best way it could. Morrill was hit by a minie ball, which struck him in the left cheek and lodged in his mouth. Dazed, he tried to continue, but the flow of blood nearly strangled him, and he was taken to the rear. The bullet had passed through his cheek, lodged itself in the roof of his mouth. Mercifully he became unconscious. Given up for dead, he came to when a doctor rolled his body over.

The doctors left Morrill alone, thinking his case hopeless, but the spunky captain used his own fingers in probing and loosened the minie ball lodged in his mouth. This souvenir he kept all his life; in his advanced years he took pleasure in drawing it out of his vest pocket and telling about his experience in the Battle of the Wilderness.

On May 7, twenty ambulances and mule wagons left in the evening at ten p.m. loaded with wounded officers and men. On May 12 Morrill was transferred to Seminary Hospital at Georgetown, where the doctors treated him and sent him home to recuperate.

The wounded hero came home to be nursed back to health by mother and sisters, and a bride. On May 27, less than two weeks after returning, Captain Walter G. Morrill, bandaged, but clad in dress blues, became the husband of Rachel Carle of Hampden.

The wound must have been a nasty one which caused considerable discomfort and healed slowly. At the end of his furlough he had not gained sufficiently to return to duty; therefore, his physician, Dr. Ezra Kimball of Milo, wrote out a certificate of disability stating that Morrill would not be able to resume his command in less than 20 days from the 13th of June. Warm June days and refreshing Maine air, and a devoted wife, were enough balm for a recuperating veteran.

On July 20 he returned to the front, where he learned of his promotion to the rank of brevet major, being advanced over five senior captains. Despite his apparent good health, his wound troubled him. He remained with his company until he had to return to the hospital. As usual, he hated to give in, but after a couple of brief visits to the camp hospital, where Sgt. Livermore found him looking slim, Morrill went to the division hospital on September 15. Two days later Livermore brought his valise, and the next day Morrill started a 60-day sick leave. On November 17, Sgt. Livermore recorded his commander's return, "Captain Morrill returned in p.m."¹³ In December Morrill went along on a raid with the Fifth Army Corps to wreck the Weldon-Petersburg railroad which the men succeeded in ripping up for miles. The soldiers discovered some "mountain dew" which more than inspired them. Many got roaring drunk. Through January the 20th Maine was camped on the Jerusalem Plank Road until the 5th of February. These were weeks of routine duty with days interrupted by skirmishes. Morrill's work was recorded in his loyal sergeant's diary with entries such as: "Capt. Morrill went on picket duty today, in charge of the detail from the regiment." Or again on the 12th of February, "Camped near Hatcher's Run, Va.; Capt. Morrill went on picket. The cold and exposure is telling on the men." March 6: "Capt. Morrill is on picket, commanding the brigade's pickets." The brigade remained in its position at Hatcher's Run, where they had a hard engagement on February 6.

With the advent of spring General Grant made plans for smashing the Army of Northern Virginia. The strength of Lee's army was being gradually whittled down under the tightening hold of Grant's

army. On the 20th of March the first division staged a grand review before Major General Charles Griffin. For the 24-year-old Morrill this was a day for congratulations. Standing at attention, he listened to an order which raised him to the rank of lieutenant colonel.¹⁴ By the 25th of the month he had assumed the command of the 20th Maine. Such a record of advancement few others could show; indeed, Maine might be proud of this native son, who had achieved such an exceptional military record.

Now Grant was waiting until Sheridan could bring his cavalry from the valley of the Shenandoah, and on March 27 Sheridan joined the Union forces. Grant planned to shift his troops westward to force Lee into the open with hopes to turn his flank. On March 25 the first division of the Third Brigade moved out of its position at Hatcher's Run. Morrill led his men toward the right of the army. At noon they marched toward the left near Hatcher's Run acting as support to the Second Corps which probed ahead its way. A brief skirmish ensued, but in the evening his regiment returned to its previous position. The day's action had been inconclusive. On the 29th of March, however, the entire army moved in what proved to be the final campaign of the war.

On March 29 General Grant's forces facing Petersburg consisted of Sheridan's cavalry of three divisions under Generals Devins, Custer, and Crook, numbering about 16,000 troops; the Army of the James, composing the 24th and 25th Corps; and the 2nd, 5th, 6th and 9th Corps under Meade. During the last week of March, Grant's army held a continuous battle line, nearly 20 miles in length, extending from the James River on the right to a point on the White Oak Road on the left, about five miles southeast of Five Forks. Sheridan's cavalry had moved southeasterly and had taken up a position at Dinwiddie's Court House. The Second and Fifth Corps crossed Hatcher's Run and took its position on the Vaughn Road. Until the 31st of the month such fighting consisted of hard skirmishes, harder marches, with inconclusive results. Heavy rain on the 30th had turned roads into quagmires so that mules floundered, teamsters swore, wagons upset, all making general confusion, quick tempers, and physical exhaustion. Infantry and cavalry soldiers alike worked like beavers cutting logs to lay corduroy roads so that the ammunition train, supply trains and ambulances could push forward. High echelon commanders sent a bevy of orders which added to the overall confusion.

On March 29 the 20th Maine left its position on the Vaughn Road and marched forward, finding the going rough through the brambles and wooded countryside, cut up by ravines which with sandy soil made marching fatiguing. Scouts ran into the enemy advance, and engaged in a snappy exchange of fire, but the Confederates put up only token resistance, then withdrew. About noon Morrill's regiment heard artillery fire off to its right. Shortly after, the 20th Maine received orders to advance. Crossing a field, the regiment entered a woods where they met stubborn opposition, which was so brisk that further advance was useless. The first brigade, further to the right under Chamberlain, had had a severe battle on the Boynton Plank Road and had carried the field. In mid-afternoon the third brigade which included Morrill's 20th Maine was ordered to relieve the first brigade which had suffered many casualties. The afternoon's action resulted in the Confederates falling back to a stronger position.

Morrill had orders to advance, and his regiment moved ahead cautiously, with the brigade. Suddenly enemy artillery let loose with terrific bombardment, which halted any advance. Because of this, the third brigade fell back to the right of the Confederate position attacked earlier in the afternoon. During the afternoon barrage a spent ball struck Colonel Morrill and knocked him senseless. His aide came to his rescue and placed him on a porch of a nearby house until the regimental surgeon could attend to him. When the doctor arrived, he turned Morrill over with his foot, supposing he was dead. This action revived the scrappy colonel enough to show he had only been stunned. The ball had not even broken through his skin, perhaps because the colonel was wearing several thicknesses of clothing. The next day, the colonel was fit as a fiddle and back in action.

In this day's encounter the 20th Maine engaged the rebels, just about holding the enemy in check.

As April 1 dawned, a cold frosty morning, the brigade moved to the left of the position which they had reached the previous night. They started off in the direction of Five Forks, a small junction where destiny hurled the remnants of Lee's army against Grant's massive forces. Lee held a stretch of the Southside Railroad, a strategic link with Richmond, over which Confederates received supplies, so this railroad meant survival to the beleaguered Confederates. Consequently, they had built strong fortifications running parallel to the railroad which they felt obliged to hold at all costs. About two

o'clock on April 1 the Fifth Corps prepared their offensive by forming two battle lines. The 20th Maine was placed in the second line. Morrill commanded, besides his Maine regiment, the 1st Michigan, both detachments comprising not over 400 men. After marching, stumbling and struggling through the dense woods and sharp ravines, the Maine and Michigan regiments found that their position had changed. Without realizing how this had occurred, they found themselves now in the forward line. Somewhat bewildered, Morrill ascended a small hill and saw the enemy only a quarter of a mile away. About four-thirty Morrill received orders from General Bartlett to move by the left flank and attack, whereupon Morrill's command emerged out of the woods into a field.

Morrill describes his movements in this way:¹⁵

I moved down across the field and around and up a slight incline through some brushes and came into immediate sight of the enemy. The Confederates had felled trees in front some five or six rods wide and their works were manned by troops six deep.

He directed his men to rush the Confederate position, thinking at the same time that they were doomed. Much to their surprise while the Yanks were crossing the opening before the defenses, the Confederates withheld their fire. The colonel wrote: "As I jumped over the breastworks I found General George Pickett in command. Pickett said, 'We'll surrender everything.'" "I'll take your sword," Morrill replied. Pickett removed his sword, belt and all, and handed them to Morrill. Pickett's men had been having a fish fry. Realizing that they were outnumbered about ten to one, Morrill hastily made preparations for taking his prisoners to the rear. In the excitement, a Confederate, noticing their superiority in numbers, cried, "Damn it, boys, we can whip them yet," and the Confederate seized a rifle and shot a Michigan captain in both thighs. But before anyone could say "Jack Robinson," one of Morrill's soldiers in Company C lunged with his bayonet at the hot-headed Confederate and killed him. This action triggered off a fight. Seeing his predicament, Morrill hastily managed to get his men on to the other side of the breastworks which offered some protection. Because the contest raged in hand-to-hand combat, the soldiers resorted to clubbed muskets. In the midst of this fray Col. Morrill covered himself with glory by joining the thickest of the fighting. Gerrish, author of *Reminiscences of the War* and a participant in this scrap, wrote "Feats of individual bravery were performed on that

afternoon, which if recorded would fill a volume." He singles out a veteran of the 20th Maine named Morrison, who with three other comrades dashed among the Confederates and captured the battle flag of the 9th Virginia regiment. Seeing the audacity of this feat, the rebels rallied and cut off the four federals. Fighting tooth and nail, the men slugged their way back to their own lines, only to meet death from a volley of rifle fire as they attempted to get back to the Union position. Knowing fully that he and his men were in a perilous situation, Morrill sent Major Atherton Clark with an appeal for aid. All the while his command waged war in desperate confusion. Minutes passed, and no sign of help. He dispatched another plea, and again, no reply. Finally, in desperation, Morrill sent forth Capt. H. F. Sidelinger, one of his most trusted officers, to get reinforcements. Sidelinger informed General Bartlett, brigade commander, of Morrill's plight, and in due time help arrived.

On his way back, Capt. Sidelinger encountered Sheridan. The captain said, "We cannot hold the works unless we have reinforcements." Perhaps Sheridan had no idea of Morrill's dangerous situation. At any rate, Sheridan commanded, "Go back and tell your men they're not fighting." This answer disgusted the gallant colonel, who from then on had scant praise for Phil Sheridan. Morrill held on, but it was an hour and a quarter after the fighting began before he received the desired support—and from a green regiment at that, the 185th New York. Presently Sheridan's cavalry galloped up and smashed the Confederate placements on Morrill's left. Even "Little Phil" himself rode up. One of the colonel's men, noting the presence of Sheridan remarked, "See that Major-General! You don't often see a major-general come up to battle." To which Morrill furiously answered, "No, but you didn't see him where there was anything going on. Everything is over now." The hell-for-leather cavalryman had not impressed Morrill.

The pressure on Morrill's command presently diminished, while troops to his right drew most of the fire making it possible for the 20th Maine to thrust forward and seize a part of the Southside Railroad, the prize which would force Lee to abandon Petersburg. As a result, thousands of Confederates were captured and quantities of supplies were destroyed or seized. When the casualties were counted the regiment found that seven men had been killed and 23 wounded.

At Five Forks Colonel Morrill had reacted in accordance with

his brilliant presence of mind and courage. His resentment of Sheridan was characteristic of a sensitive, unpretentious and modest man. Morrill, an infantry soldier, had advanced from a private to a regimental commander, so perhaps his sensitivity was a reaction to the indifference of the so-called top brass. Fighting which demanded total war, as Sheridan and Sherman understood it, was alien to Morrill's concept of war. He had seen combat at close quarters and realized its horror. Later in the day he heard of Sheridan's decision to remove General Warren from command of the Fifth Corps, because it appeared that Warren had been slow in pushing his men into position to assist Sheridan at Five Forks. In anger and impatience, Sheridan removed General Warren from command. Such callous treatment of a leader, beloved by officers and soldiers, stung Morrill, who felt that Sheridan's act was the "meanest trick of the war."

Sheridan's reluctance to admit an error made in the heat of battle always rankled the feelings of any Fifth Corps soldier, and Morrill, who was not a man to forgive a slight or an act of injustice, never forgave Sheridan for Warren's removal on this vital day at Five Forks.

Lee's harassed army tried to escape, but Grant and Sheridan acted swiftly. Sheridan's cavalry, following the railroad, blocked Lee's attempts to get away, while the Fifth and Sixth Corps pursued Lee's retreating army, intercepting it at Saylor's Creek, and defeating a portion of it. On the morning of April 9, eight days after Five Forks, Lee confronted solid Union lines at Appomattox. Further fighting seemed futile. At the McLean House Lee accepted Grant's terms. Colonel Morrill awaited on the sidelines and observed the departure of both generals after the surrender.

On the 12th of April another supreme moment came to Morrill, for the 3rd Brigade, commanded now by General Joshua L. Chamberlain, had been selected as one of the units to receive the flags and arms of Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. It was a solemn and breathless moment as each Confederate division marched forth to stack its arms and fold up its precious battle ensigns. Colonel Morrill with his regiment stood at attention as the sober-faced men of the Confederacy filed past.

On April 15 the Union armies started their journey home—back through places which the men remembered only too well. Morrill

and Lt. Decker took their leave for home on April 30, near Sutherland Station. On May 27 the two officers returned, missing only by three days the Grand Review in Washington. It was not Morrill's nature to enjoy the limelight. He much preferred leaving pomp and circumstance to others, so doubtless the fact that he was absent when the brass staged its impressive parade in full dress was a relief to him. Soon after the war he stated his feelings, "The war is over; forget it." Thus it was years before he would ever talk about his personal experiences, always turning the conversation over to another topic or to a story he recalled about another's experience. The colonel was well into his eighties before he could be persuaded to relate anything about his Civil War experiences.

On the day that he and Decker returned, Morrill did, however, observe an impressive incident. During the evening of the 26th the soldiers, encamped on Arlington Heights, began a mass illumination by striking candles over their tents or up in trees. The idea caught on, until the entire camp appeared as a great ocean of twinkling stars. Sgt. Livermore wrote, "Our brigade fell in and marched with our candles to the division camp headquarters. I never saw a grander sight." Each division anxiously awaited its orders to leave for home, but the disbandment of an army required time. On May 31 Colonel Morrill went to Washington to have the names of the 20 battles inscribed on the regimental flag. What memories could these battles evoke—Antietam, Fredericksburg, Gettysburg, Rappahannock Station, The Wilderness, Petersburg, Weldon Railroad, Five Forks, and Appomattox, to name a few?

While camped at Arlington Heights, the veterans had ample time to see the sights of the Capitol, but impatiently they awaited the moment when they would begin their trip homeward. On Wednesday, June 8, they arrived in Portland. In conjunction with the Seventh Maine regiment, the two distinguished regiments formed a procession and marched triumphantly through the thoroughfares of that city. Then they were taken to their former camps, where they expected to be discharged. Nearly a week passed before the enlisted men were released and on June 22 the long-awaited pay arrived. In a street near the Portland arsenal the men of the 20th Maine stacked their rifles for the last time. Morrill called for three cheers for their old rifles which had done them so much service. The boys gave a hearty

cheer for their colors, and then turned to their commander and gave him three hearty cheers. Three hearty cheers to Colonel Walter G. Morrill whose "courage was only exceeded by his modesty." This was farewell, but one more gesture of appreciation to this fighting commander. The men had chipped together and presented him with a beautiful Colt revolver, all neatly encased in a varnished box. It had an ivory handle with an eagle carved on the stock. The colonel was touched beyond words.

In spirit of brotherhood and abiding friendship these seasoned veterans went their separate ways—the gallant colonel to Brownville, the others to all sections of the state. In the years directly after the war Morrill returned to his slate business in Hampden briefly, then at Monson. In 1876 he made his residence at Dexter, where he helped conduct the Exchange Hotel. In Dexter he purchased a race track and began his life-time career of managing horse races. In 1886 he moved to Pittsfield, where he lived to a ripe old age and passed away there on March, 1935, one of the few remaining veterans of the Grand Army of the Republic, and the last Maine veteran of the Civil War who had won the Congressional Medal of Honor. Justly, he was regarded as Maine's grand old man of the race track, but most of all he became known as "the fighting colonel."

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The record of the Twentieth Maine Regiment during the Civil War has been amply treated by John J. Pullen. His book, *The 20th Maine*, prompted me to perform further research on the war career of Col. Walter G. Morrill of Pittsfield, Maine, who died in March 1935. Maine's last survivor of the Civil War holding the Medal of Honor. The preceding account reveals something more of his remarkable soldier-ship in the Sixth and Twentieth Maine Regiments. Morrill's word was his bond, and his own personal account appearing in *National Tribune*, the mouthpiece of the G.A.R., throws more light on his hitherto little-known heroism at Five Forks. It is alleged that Gen. George Pickett had halted his troops to enjoy a fish fry. Failing to post sentries, Col. Morrill's regiment interrupted the festivities, and the Southern officer taken by surprise surrendered to Morrill. An article written by him provides further grist for the eventful last days of Lee's Army.

In the bibliography I have omitted standard works of reference with which any scholar of the Civil War is already familiar.

NOTES

- ¹ *Pittsfield Advertiser*, May 31, 1928.
- ² *Portland Sunday Telegram*, April 1, 1928.
- ³ *Bangor Whig and Courier*, May 4, 1861.
- ⁴ Susan M. Lewis, *A Handbook of Brownville History*, Bangor, 1935, p. 50.
- ⁵ Charles A. Clark, *Campaigning with Sixth Maine*, p. 9.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ William Owen, Letter, December 4, 1862.
- ⁸ Owen, Letter, January 28, 1863, near Fredericksburg.
- ⁹ General Chamberlain's Report, July 6, 1863. *Official Records*, Series I, Vol. XXVII, Par. II, pp. 622-626.
- ¹⁰ *Pittsfield Advertiser*, April 14, 1898.
- ¹¹ William Livermore, Diary, February 25, 26, 27, 1864, and March 26, 1864.
- ¹² William Jackson wrote to the *Piscataquis Observer*, "At signal given we charged down the road through woods driving the enemy nearly three-quarters of a mile, when to our surprise we found the line on the right of the road had not advanced with us and rebels were coming across the road on our flank as far back as we could see. Our regiment being on the right and Company B being the second company from the right, suffered severely, losing the captain and twenty-six men in a short time."
- ¹³ Morrill's record shows that he was promoted to a major, probably during his illness. His promotion may have been revoked or he may have been only an acting major. There is some question about his service grade. He is called Captain in the diary until March 20, 1865, when he became a Lt. Colonel.
- ¹⁴ Actually his promotion dated from March 13, 1865 (Livermore Diary, Adjutant General Report, Maine, Vol. I, p. 1127).
- ¹⁵ *National Tribune*, March 18, 1920.

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