



# M I L I T A R Y

## *Collector & Historian*

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### A NEW YORK REGIMENT IN CALIFORNIA, 1846-1848

by Colonel Brooke Nihart, USMC, Ret.

Possibly no regiment in a brief two years of active duty had so many names as Stevenson's Regiment of New York Volunteers in the Mexican War. We find this title frequently used informally as were also its two parts, Stevenson's and New York Volunteers. Officially, the regiment began its service as the 7th Regiment New York Volunteers.<sup>1</sup> Because of its destination it was variously known in New York before its departure as the California Guard,<sup>2</sup> and the California Regiment.<sup>3</sup> As it was equipped to act as a force of combined arms of infantry, cavalry, and artillery, it was also termed the New York Legion.<sup>4</sup> In California it was known as the California Volunteers, at least to Gunner Meyers of the U. S. Navy.<sup>5</sup> In early 1848, a year after its arrival in California, the regiment received orders from the War Department redesignating the 7th as the 1st New York Volunteers.<sup>6</sup> It seems the War Department decided that since Stevenson's Regiment was the first organized it should bear the designation "1st." Burnett's 1st New York Volunteers in Mexico was redesignated 2nd and understandably its members were never quite reconciled to the change and continued to refer to themselves as the "1st" long after the war.

With this abundance of names to choose from, and the drama of its mission, there is little wonder that the saga of the 1st New York Volunteers was recorded by not a few participants. Its unusual conception as a regiment of military colonists, and its signal contribution to the development of California, serve to make it doubly interesting to the students of military institutions and regimental

histories. The abundance of contemporary graphic material delineating its existence commend it to students of American uniforms.

Through the reports of Lieutenant Fremont of the Topographical Engineers, and others, the United States Government was well aware of California's attractions and its military weakness by the time war was brewing along the Rio Grande in the late spring of 1846. The Navy's Pacific Squadron, and Fremont with various bands of adventurers, might be sufficient to seize California, but were hardly the means to hold it and consolidate a United States presence there. War with Mexico provided President Polk with the excuse to dispatch formally organized bodies of troops to California for this purpose. His concept included the raising of a regiment of young unmarried volunteers from among the artisan class who would remain in California to colonize and, by their skills, build the new land.<sup>7</sup>

As might be expected for such a political task a politician *cum* soldier was selected to execute it. Colonel Jonathan Drake Stevenson, of the New York State Militia, was a ward politician and ex-state senator, had been private secretary to Governor Thompkins, and evidently, was not unknown to the politicians in Washington. Somewhere in political channels, his offer to raise a regiment met with Polk's desire for the military colonization of California and the effort was initiated with Marcy's letter of 16 June.

The New York *Herald* for 3 August and 6 September describe the volunteers in glowing terms,

“... we could not but notice the excellent material composing them. Some companies, indeed, are like picked men, strong, able bodied mechanics, generally in the prime of life, and already somewhat schooled in the discipline of the service.” And, “Nearly every man in the regiment is a mechanic and may carry his implements of trade with him. Should the regiment be disbanded immediately upon its arrival, it contains within itself the elements of prosperity, wealth and greatness.” One Company, “A,” was composed entirely of temperance men. The recruits were largely single and under 25, although a few married men were enlisted, and their wives accompanied them as company laundresses probably at the rate of four per company as prescribed by existing regulations. Terms of enlistment were for 12 months or the war, with the understanding that discharge was to be in California with no entitlement for transportation back to the States.

Lest the reader gain the impression that the entire regiment was made up of clear-eyed, highly moral, middle-class tradesmen, it must be reported that “bad elements” somehow slipped by the recruiters’ critical eyes. In the rush of completing the regiment on time many were enlisted at the last minute without regard for character or trade skills as long as they could pass the physical examination. These were mostly New York City rough-necks and recently arrived foreign adventurers. When in California many of these deserted for the diggings with the discovery of gold, while others turned to banditry and furnished the ringleaders of the *Hounds*, an underworld gang that terrorized San Francisco and led to the formation, by other veterans of the regiment, of the Vigilance Committee, the famed Vigilantes, to bring them to justice. Many eventually returned to the East upon discharge, but most stayed in California mining for gold, plying their trades, and acting in various official positions, thus affirming the validity of the original concept of Polk and Marcy.

With 20 years in the militia behind him, Stevenson was not entirely unacquainted with military affairs and certainly as a politician he understood the import of his mission in California and undoubtedly his discretion was trusted in Washington. The regiment’s leadership was further strengthened by an infusion of West Pointers who must have added greatly to its efficiency and discipline thus placing it a cut above the average volunteer regiment. These were Lieutenant Colonel H. S. Burton,

Major James A. Hardie, several of the captains, and Stevenson’s own son who was adjutant and later commander of Company G. Secretary of War Marcy’s son was Paymaster. Nevertheless, these qualified officers must not have been enough to ensure complete discipline among the inexperienced officers and untrained volunteers as there were minor mutinies on all three transports during the long trip around South America.

Stevenson placed recruiting advertisements in the papers on 5 July, and by the 7th recruiting was well underway. Companies were recruited locally in the city and also upstate, and moved to Governor’s Island on 1 August, where they were mustered in as the 7th New York Volunteers by Colonel Bankhead of the 2nd U. S. Artillery. Rejected for physical reasons were 150, but the regiment was completed from 500 more applicants in the next two days. On Governor’s Island the regiment trained and equipped until embarkation in late September. It sailed 26 September on three ships: *Thomas H. Perkins*, *Loo Choo*, and *Susan Drew*.

The regiment was organized as a ten-company infantry regiment of the period with a regimental staff of a colonel, lieutenant colonel, major, adjutant, quartermaster, paymaster, surgeon, assistant surgeon, sergeant major, quartermaster sergeant, clerk, quartermaster clerk, chaplain, and sutler. The ten companies each had from 90 to 110 officers and men according to the practice of the day.<sup>8</sup> One regimental chronicler mentions that a regimental band of 24 instruments was organized and that each company had its drum and fife.<sup>9</sup> From the bandsmen’s names most appear to have been German, probably recent immigrants.<sup>10</sup> Company D, which was mounted, received its orders by means of bugles.<sup>11</sup>

There was one significant difference however that gave rise to the appellation “Legion” and marked the regiment as unique for that day save perhaps for the U. S. Regiment of Voltigeurs and Foot Riflemen, with its company of mountain howitzers and rockets. The Roman Legion was a force of combined arms: infantry, horsemen, and catapults which provided the name for similarly organized forces in later days (cf. Tarleton’s and Lauzun’s Legions during the Revolution and Wayne’s Legion of 1792-1796, each containing the three arms). The purpose was to provide a force of smaller than division or corps size, which would combine the staying power of infantry, the shock power and reconnaissance and mobility means of

cavalry, and the long range fire power of artillery, for small independent missions. This was the concept behind the Voltigeur Regiment and the New York Legion of the Mexican War and the Battalion Landing Team, Regimental Combat Team, and Armored Combat Command of World War II and subsequent wars. Stevenson's Regiment thus was provided with a battery of six guns and cavalry equipment sufficient to mount one company.

Shortly after organization both the Secretary of the Navy and the Secretary of War directed the Commandant of the New York Navy Yard to deliver "six light guns with carriages and tackle," to Stevenson.<sup>12</sup> These were probably the 12-pounder light howitzer, Model of 1841 or perhaps the 6-pounder gun Model of 1836 or 1841.

On the same day the Adjutant General wrote to Stevenson transmitting "one copy each of artillery and cavalry systems of instruction."<sup>13</sup>

Company D evidently received the horse equipments and whatever cavalry weapons were issued and drilled as the mounted company after horses were obtained in California. It sortied against Indian bandits into the San Joaquin Valley and onward to the Sierra Nevada. Again at La Paz, according to Ryan of Company D, it operated on horseback.<sup>14</sup> Sources consulted do not mention the "six light guns" being manned by a particular company. Since the regiment garrisoned a number of places in greater than company strength—San Francisco, Monterey, Los Angeles, and La Paz—the battery may have been divided between these garrisons to provide each essential support. Gunner Meyers shows two with the La Paz force when it exercised with his ship's landing party.<sup>15</sup>

Details on the cavalry equipment were not discovered but, if complete, probably would have consisted of around 100 horse equipments including saddles, saddle clothes, bridles, bits, valises, and holsters plus dragoon sabers Model of 1833 or 1840, pistols either Colt dragoons or single shot Model of 1836 flintlock or Model of 1842 or 1843 cap lock, and perhaps even Hall carbines or the Model of 1839 flintlock musketoon.

A recital of the adventures of each company from its place of recruitment to discharge will provide an overview of the regiment's service record which saw it garrison at various times up to nine key points spread over 1,300 miles of Alta and Baja California coast.

Company A was recruited by Seymour G. Steele

at Stonealls Hotel on Fulton Street near Nassau Street in New York beginning the evening of 6 July 1846. Early on 1 August the company formed at its rendezvous and marched to the foot of Whitehall Street where it took boats to Governor's Island. On 2 September it was sworn in and mustered into the service of the United States, and on 23 September embarked on the *Loo Choo* and sailed three days later, arriving in San Francisco after rounding Cape Horn on 26 March 1847. On the 31st, it embarked on the bark *Moscow* with companies B and F, and sailed for Santa Barbara on 8 April. After camping on the beach for several days, it moved to barracks in the town. On 4 July, with Company B, it embarked on the U. S. Storeship *Lexington* and sailed for La Paz, Lower California arriving 21 July. During its garrisoning of La Paz these two companies withstood a 30-day siege by Mexican troops. In March 1848 Companies A and B were reinforced by the arrival of Company D, and 114 recruits. These reinforcements enabled the command to sortie inland where investing Mexican troops were dispersed and driven off. On 31 August 1848 the company embarked on U. S. S. *Ohio*, and sailed the next day for Monterey, where it arrived on 14 October, and was mustered out soon thereafter.<sup>16</sup>

Company B was recruited by James M. Turner at Harmony Hall, 17 Centre Street, New York, and left for Governor's Island 1 August. The company sailed on *Thomas H. Perkins* 26 September, and arrived in San Francisco 6 March 1847. After service in La Paz with Company A, as mentioned above, it returned to Monterey, and was discharged 24 October 1848.<sup>17</sup>

Company C was enlisted by John E. Breakett in New York. It sailed on *Loo Choo* for California. It was stationed at Sonoma from April 1847 to May 1848, when it was ordered to San Jose in Lower California. It got only as far as Monterey and was returned to Sonoma, and on 5 August 1848 exchanged places with Company H at the Presidio of San Francisco. In the fall of 1847, 35 men of the company garrisoned Sutter's Fort, then known as Fort Sacramento, for five months.<sup>18</sup>

Company D enlisted at LaFayette Hall on Broadway, but many of its members came from Philadelphia. It embarked on *Susan Drew*, arriving in San Francisco 19 March 1847. It was then sent to garrison Monterey, and while there, was mounted and sent against Indian horse thieves in the San

Joaquin Valley and Sierra Nevada Mountains. From Monterey it went to La Paz as noted above, and there embarked on U. S. Storeship *Southampton* for San Jose del Cabo in Lower California. It remained there until 6 September 1848, when it left for Monterey and discharge. It was thus the last U. S. unit to leave Mexico.<sup>19</sup>

Company E was recruited on the East Side and from the 9th Ward on the West Side, and parts of the company were embarked on all three transports. From 4 April to 5 May, it formed part of the Monterey garrison, and then was sent on *Lexington* to San Pedro, and thence to Los Angeles, the location of regimental headquarters, where it was mustered out 18 September 1848.<sup>20</sup>

Company F sailed to California on *Thomas H. Perkins*, arriving San Francisco on 6 March 1847. On 8 April it went to Santa Barbara, where it remained in the garrison until discharge 8 September 1848.<sup>21</sup>

Company G was organized by Matthew R. Stevenson, Colonel Stevenson's son and a West Point graduate, and also sailed on *Perkins*. It garrisoned Los Angeles until its discharge 18 September 1848.<sup>22</sup>

Company H was recruited at Albany by John B. Frisbie and Edward Gilbert. On 31 July it left Albany by steamboat, and upon arrival in New York was escorted to the foot of Whitehall Street by Captain Cooke's Company of Artillery and the Albany Washington Riflemen. It sailed for California on *Drew*. It garrisoned the Presidio at San Francisco until it exchanged with Company C at Sonoma, where it was discharged 25 August 1848.<sup>23</sup>

Company I (Steuben Volunteers) was organized at Bath, Steuben County, New York on 26 June 1846 by Captain Shannon and left 1 August for Governor's Island. It sailed on *Drew*, arriving in Monterey on 4 April 1847. The four companies (D, E, H, I) camped on the green in front of the Catholic Church, and named this bivouac "Camp

**THE ENCAMPMENT OF THE NEW YORK LEGION, OR THE CALIFORNIA REGIMENT,  
ON GOVERNOR'S ISLAND, IN NEW YORK HARBOR.**

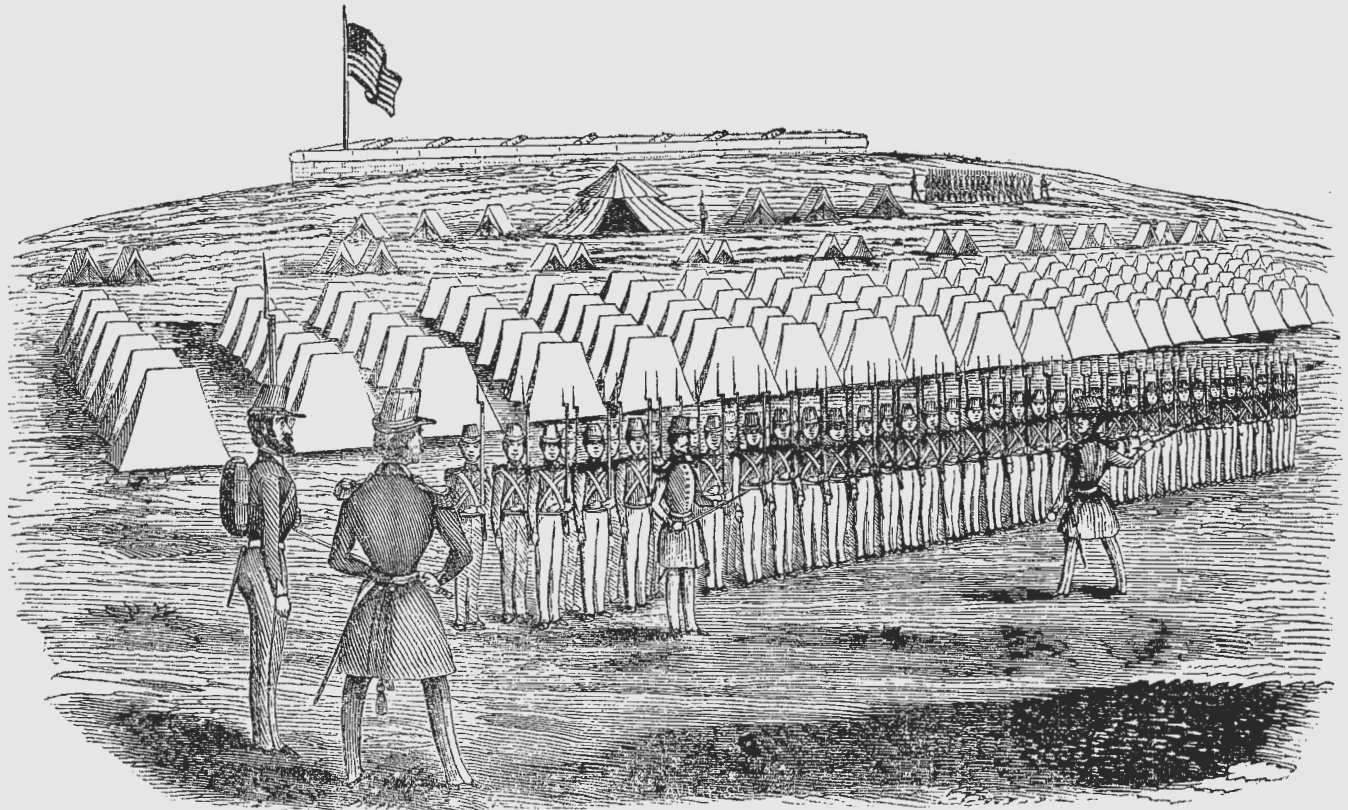
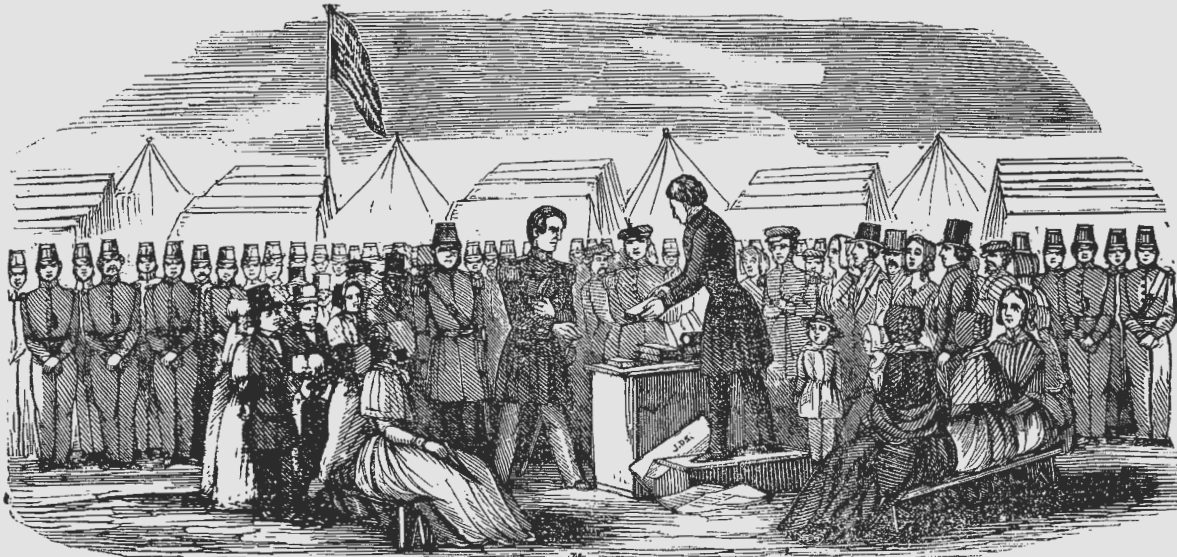


Fig. 1. The encampment of the New York Legion, or the California Regiment, on Governor's Island, in New York Harbor. From the *New York Herald*, 10 August 1846.

THE SCENE OF THE PRESENTATION OF BIBLES TO THE NEW YORK LEGION, OR CALIFORNIA REGIMENT.



The above cut represents the appearance of the scene on Governor's Island at the time of the presentation of the Bibles to the California regiment, by Dr. McVickar, in behalf of the American Bible Society. The regiment is seen drawn up in hollow square, the spectators gathered around, kept at a respectful distance by a chain of sentinels, and the Colonel and staff, with invited guests, in the midst. The Colonel is receiving the good book, and Dr. McVickar, the chaplain of the island, is beseeching him to hold it as his guide and leader in whatever part of the world he may be with his troops; that they should go not only with the sword, but with the olive branch of peace, and with that Bible, upon which liberty has its foundation.

Kearney." When the other companies left on 5 May, Company I moved into barracks. On 28 December it went to San Diego, which it garrisoned until discharged 25 September 1848.<sup>24</sup>

Company K was recruited in Chenango County, New York, and sailed for California on *Loo Choo*. It garrisoned San Francisco until discharged 15 August 1848.<sup>25</sup>

A consideration of the regimental uniform is of particular interest to historians of military dress as both written contemporary accounts and a comparative wealth of graphic material exist which both tell the story of the regiment's initial issue as well as expedients and variations employed in California.

The *New York Herald* of 3 August 1846, states that, "The uniform of the regiment will soon be completed, designed by Major Hardie, is a very neat and serviceable, pantaloons of dark, mixed grey, with scarlet stripe or cord up the seam of the leg, blue coats with scarlet trimmings, a new style of French cap, very becoming; the first dress parade of the regiment will take place next Sunday."

The *Herald* for 10 August features a woodcut (fig. 1) titled "The Encampment of the New York Legion, or the California Regiment, on Governor's Island, in New York Harbor" showing a company

Fig. 2. Stevenson's 7th New York Volunteers receiving Bibles from the American Bible Society. From the *New York Herald*, 14 September 1846.

drawn up in front of a tent camp with a masonry coastal defense fort in the background. The cut shows the trousers with a cord in the leg seam for the men and a wide stripe for officers who wear a frock coat while the men wear the short fatigue jacket. The scarlet trimmings on the coats appear clearly as a sharply pointed cuff and a slanted collar tab. This distinction, rather unusual for the period, is confirmed in Lieutenant Hollingsworth's self-portrait done in California (fig. 4), and in the Kellogg and Thayer lithograph (fig. 3), of questionable authenticity, where the pointed cuffs are added by the colorist over the slashed and buttoned cuffs of the basic drawing.

The *Herald* of 14 September again illustrates the regiment (fig. 2) as it was being presented Bibles. The uniforms depicted are the same as in the previous woodcut. The "new style of French cap" is shown to somewhat better advantage with the absence of any cap plate or eagle clearly evident, and the corded seams of the cap body now apparent. These cords appear clearly in the Hollingsworth portrait and are gold.

Fig. 3. The "California Guard, 1846," a handcolored lithograph by Kellogg and Thayer, 144 Fulton St., N.Y., 1846. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.



The next illustration of the regiment was discovered in the Library of Congress print collection, and is titled "California Guard 1846" (fig. 3). It was registered almost three months after the regiment sailed. This plate only partially accords with other illustrations of the regiment. The colors used, blue coats and red trimmings, are as prescribed, but the trousers are also blue instead of grey. Other discrepancies; the stiff shakos with plates and brass scales, the bearskin, frock coats, and epaulettes for the men, the buttoned cuffs painted over in the pointed design, all suggest various hypotheses. Perhaps this was Major Hardie's original idealized design that was unfulfilled due to expense and the need for a more practical pattern. Or maybe it was a figment of an artist's imagination executed, as it was, some time after the regiment's departure. The writer is inclined to the hypothesis that it was a very commercial venture for sale to families of the volunteers and was an adaption or exploitation of an existing litho-drawing available to the promoters. This would explain the seeming incongruities mentioned above. It goes without saying that there was no "Guard" such as this in California at this early date, and the New York origin of the plate strongly suggests that it was intended to depict Stevenson's Regiment.

Unpaid tailoring bills have been the distress of military clothiers and well turned out soldiers since uniforms and sartorial elegance became military virtues. The relationship between Stevenson's Regiment and one Mr. Barnes<sup>26</sup> of New York, were no exception to this unpleasant fact of military life. The rather high price, for the times, of \$9.50 for hat, coat, and trousers, was objected to by many, but was supposed to be a checkage against their pay.<sup>27</sup> Somehow there was a slip up and procurement of Major Hardie's uniforms must have been a matter between each soldier and Mr. Barnes, the tailor, with many of the volunteers departing New York without having paid up. We find the Secretary of War, no less, writing Stevenson on 2 November 1846 (a letter he would not have received until around April 1847): "The amount of clothes taken off and not paid for was large. It is the duty of the officers to use their influence with the men who took clothes without paying for them to secure payment at a fair price. I trust the men will realize the justice of Mr. Barnes' claims, and not be disposed to withhold from him his just dues."<sup>28</sup> Whether or not Mr. Barnes got his money is not recorded, but the troops in the numerous

illustrations appear well and handsomely clothed, if not entirely appropriate to the California climate.

For further graphic testimony of the dress of Stevenson's Regiment we must follow it to California. Lieutenant Hollingsworth, who served in both Companies I and G, kept a journal, which he illuminated with his own drawings in color.<sup>29</sup> In a self-portrait (fig. 4) he shows an officer in blue frock coat and white trousers. The red pointed cuffs and collar tabs are clearly shown.



Fig. 4. Watercolor self-portrait of Lieutenant John McHenry Hollingsworth; frontispiece to his journal. Courtesy of the California Historical Society.

Fig. 5. "California Regiment in Camp," Company I, Stevenson's 1st New York Volunteers, Monterey, California; watercolor by Hollingsworth from his manuscript journal. Courtesy of the California Historical Society.

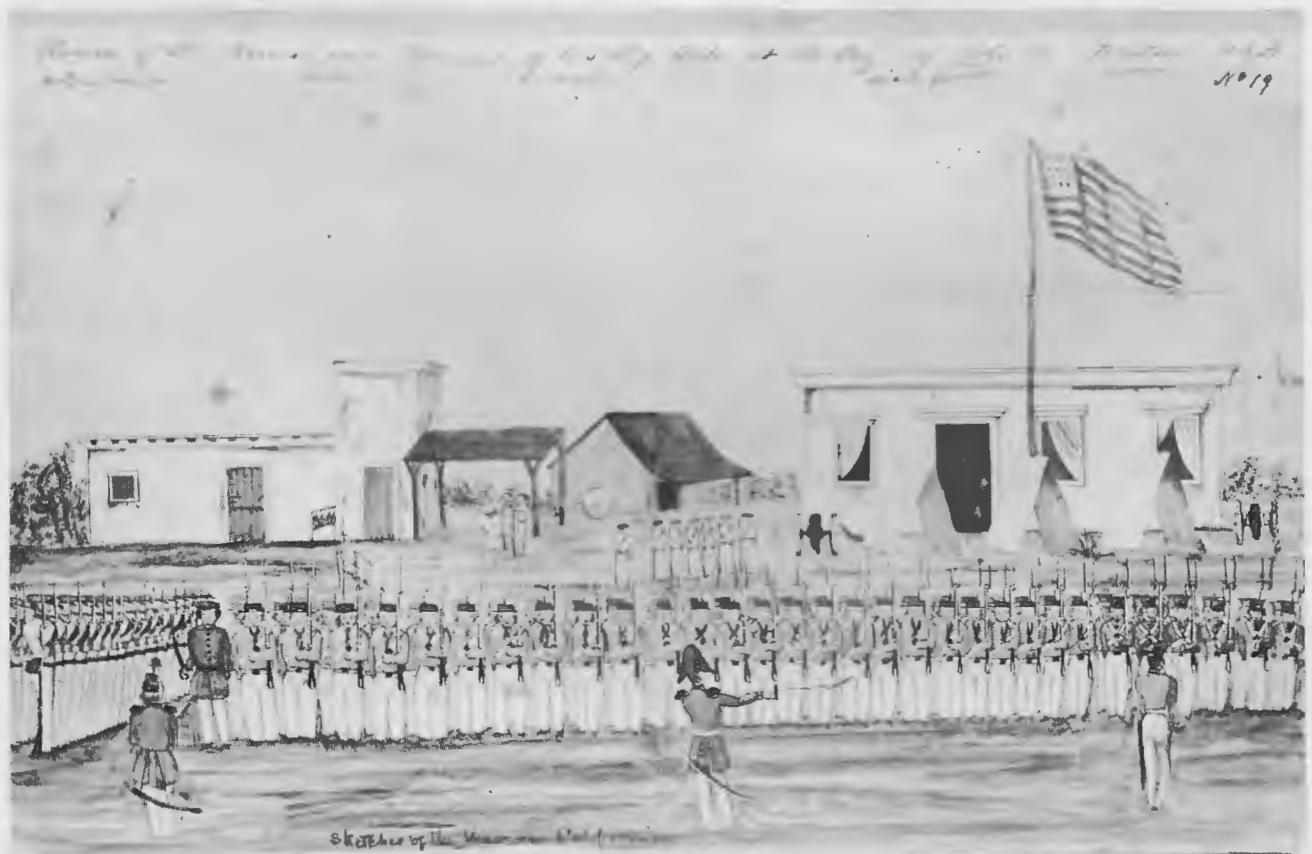
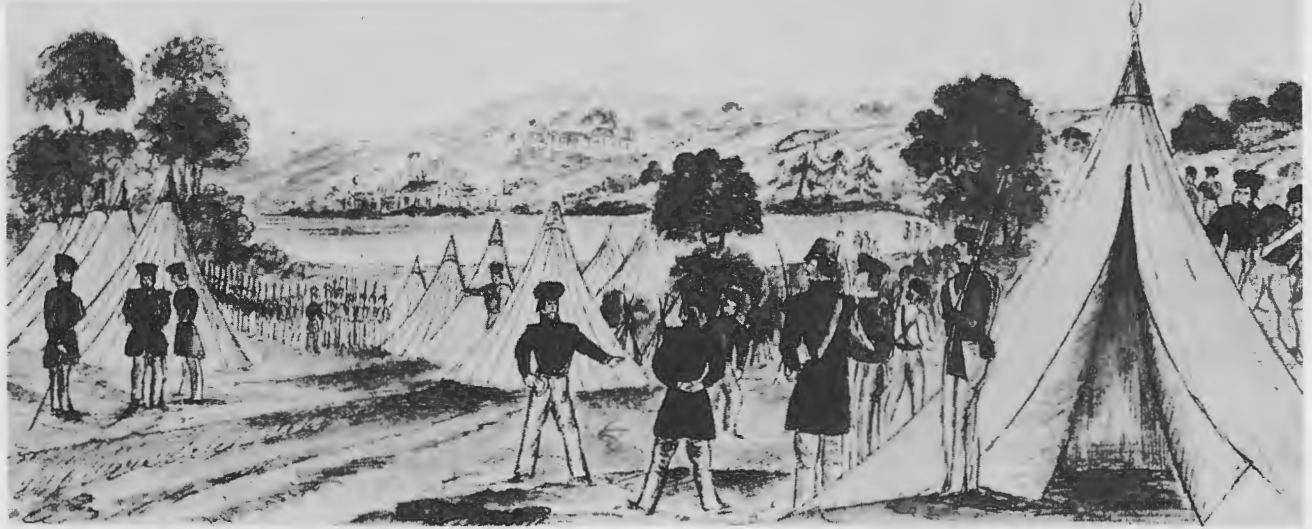


Fig. 6 "Review of the Seamen and Marines of the U. S. Ship Dale, at La Paz (Baja, California), by Lieutenant Colonel Burton." "California Volunteers" Companies A and B, Stevenson's 1st New York Volunteers at left,

and in rear, wear white fatigue uniforms trimmed with red. Watercolor by Gunner William H. Meyers, U. S. N., in his NAVAL SKETCHES OF THE WAR IN CALIFORNIA. Courtesy of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, N.Y.



The "new type of French cap" is blue with gold piping in the top and bottom seams as well as vertical seams joining the several pieces of the cap body. Epaulettes are gold, sash crimson, and the white shoulder sword belt bears an unidentified silver on gold plate.

Another drawing by Hollingsworth (fig. 5) shows a camp scene on a small bay, undoubtedly Monterey, where Company I was stationed. Officers are shown in frock coats, white trousers, and either the "new type" cap, or the flat-crowned fatigue caps, of the period. The men wear dark blue fatigue jackets, white trousers, and fatigue caps, with one wearing what appears to be a white fatigue jacket. Tents are conical, trees are the local Monterey pine and California live oak, and the town of Monterey can be seen across the bay.

Gunner William H. Meyers of U. S. Sloop-of-War *Dale* illustrated the naval services participation in the Pacific War although he was not present at all the events he depicted. His original drawings are in the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library at Hyde Park and have been published.<sup>30</sup> Meyers was at La Paz in Baja California when the blue jacket and Marine landing party of *Dale* went ashore for joint exercises with Companies A and B who garrisoned that place. He illustrated that scene (fig. 6) showing Lieutenant Colonel Burton of the 1st N.Y.V. reviewing the combined force in chapeau bras, blue frock coat, and white trousers. One of Burton's officers wears the cloth shako with a red cord and what appears to be a red feather plume. The volunteers themselves provide the most interesting variation of the regimental uniform, however. They are turned out in white fatigue jackets trimmed with red pointed cuffs and collars, white trousers, and the ubiquitous fatigue cap. This uniform must have been a welcome solution to the scorching climate of Lower California and was probably made from local homespun cotton or linen or perhaps from sailcloth procured from the transports' sailmakers and made up during one of the two equator crossings on the trip around the Horn.

Meyers of course drew the naval services with considerable detail. The blue jackets wear the usual flat-crowned, brimmed, tarred canvas hat, blue jumper with wide white-trimmed collar and black neckerchief, and bell-bottomed white trousers. The Marines wear bell crowned shakos, which they continued to wear until the 1859 regulations took effect, blue coatees or fatigue jackets, white cross

belts, and white trousers. Their officer wears a fatigue cap, blue fatigue jacket, and white trousers.

The Englishman, William R. Ryan, who had enlisted in Company D, published his adventures and illustrated them with 23 drawings.<sup>31</sup> Only one shows members of the regiment (fig. 7) and they are on the march on a mountain trail. They still wear their cloth shakos and appear to have rolled up their trouser cuffs or tucked them into boot tops. A mounted man seems to affect the local dress. Ryan must be describing a scene such as this when he says, "We had all sorts of costumes; some military, some California; some wearing a hybrid between the two; . . . some had thrust the lower portion of their trousers into their boots, affecting a dashing style as they road upon their steeds."<sup>32</sup>

The regiment must have been provided with a non-regulation knapsack as Ryan, recounting a



SKETCH DURING THE WAR—LOWER CALIFORNIA.

Fig. 7. Company D, Stevenson's 1st New York Volunteers on patrol in Baja, California. From a drawing by William R. Ryan in his PERSONAL ADVENTURES IN UPPER AND LOWER CALIFORNIA.

Fig. 8. Reconstruction of the uniforms worn by Stevenson's 1st New York Volunteers, by Colonel Frederick P. Todd. Left to right: private, 1846 (blue jacket trimmed with red, grey pants with red stripe, blue cap); officer, dress uniform, 1847 (blue frock coat trimmed with red, white linen pants, blue cap); sergeant, summer fatigue uniform, 1847 (white linen jacket and pants, trimmed with red, blue forage cap).





*Kellogg & Payer, 144 Fulton St. N.Y.*

*J.B. & C. Kellogg, 159 Nassau St. Hartford Conn.*

*B. Vankham, 217 South St. N.Y.*

## CALIFORNIA GUARD.

*Entered according to Act of Congress, in the Year 1848, by Kellogg & Payer in the Clerk's office of the District Court of the Southern District of N.Y.*