

# The Sperryville Outrage

Three men in blue thought they could get away with rape and terror on an isolated Virginia farm. They were wrong

THOMAS P. LOWRY

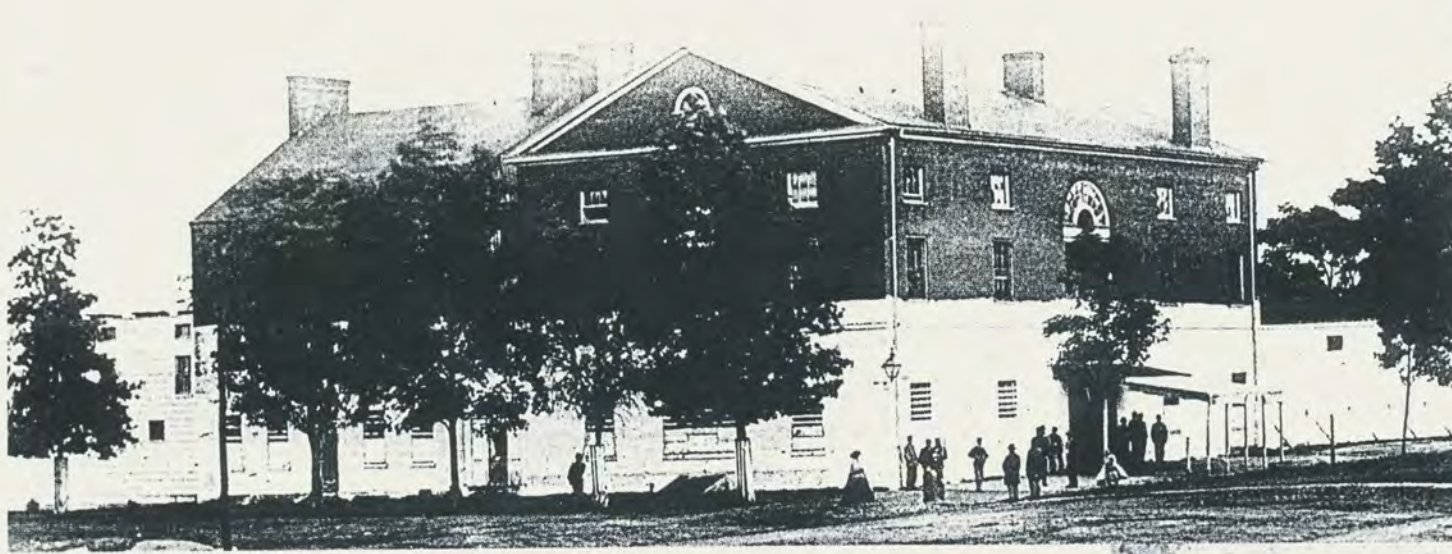
**W**ITH TWO MONTHS OF INTENSE TRAINING under their belts, the gunners and horsemen of Battery I of the 1st New York Light Artillery took to the parade grounds of their Buffalo, New York, camp for one last time. There they stood proudly in their dress uniforms, buttons and buckles flashing in the sun. Freshly painted tampions graced the muzzles of their cannon. It was October 16, 1861, and the time had come for these German immigrants to march off to war and prove their mettle.

For the most part, this unit commanded by Captain Michael Wiedrich of Lancaster served admirably. Wiedrich's Battery, as the unit was known, began its wartime service among the defenders of Washington, D.C., and remained at the capital until March 1862. Next it joined Major General John C. Frémont's army in chasing Major General Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson's army in April and May and fighting against Jackson in the Battle of Cross Keys in June. Future years would find the unit at Gettysburg and marching through Georgia with Major General William T. Sherman's army.

But July 1862 found Battery I encamped at the town of Sperryville, Virginia, where two of the artillerymen got seriously sidetracked from the business of fighting a war. On the night of July 16, Private Louis Sorg, Private Louis P. Troest, and Jerry Spades, a black servant of Wiedrich's, wandered out of camp and ended up a few miles away at the home of a widow whose name was recorded only as "Mrs.



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Swindler." Perhaps believing they could behave as they pleased in enemy territory without fear of punishment, the men tore apart Swindler's house and outbuildings, taking valuables and destroying property. The ugly situation took a turn for the worse when Polly Walker, a slave owned by Swindler, was raped.

Union authorities responded to the incident quickly, arresting the three men and convening a court-martial within the week, on July 22. The court, presided over by Colonel James Cantwell of the 82d Ohio, was to consider the charges of absence without leave and "committing numerous depredations upon the private property of a Mrs. Swindler," property that included a slave woman. Troest was also charged with rape, and Spades, with assisting in a rape. The first defendant to be tried was Troest, who pled guilty to charges of A.W.O.L. and theft, but denied the accusation of rape. But then came the witnesses.

Swindler herself was the first to testify. "He rode up into my yard about the 16th of July and called for cherries, and then for bread, and next for milk," she testified. "I set some milk, bread and honey for them to eat, and they had taken seats at the table."

Up to that point, Swindler said, she had been concerned, but not frightened. "Then they got up and went through the house breaking locks and plundering whatever suited them," she continued. "They pretended they were looking for a pistol and a gun. Then they turned my things upside down. They asked me a great many questions, and said there would be many men there presently to set my house on fire. I started to leave, but they ordered me back, so I set in the door. They said if I left, they would kill me."

The court asked her if the men stole anything. "They robbed my house, my henhouse, my springhouse and my garden," she respond-



ed. "They went upstairs and through all my rooms and took coverlets, blankets and oilcoat clothing, socks, dried cherries and other articles. They put a silk dress and a coverlet on the floor, poured preserves on them, and then trampled on them until they were spoiled. There was only me there, no man, and a Negro boy, and a Negro woman.

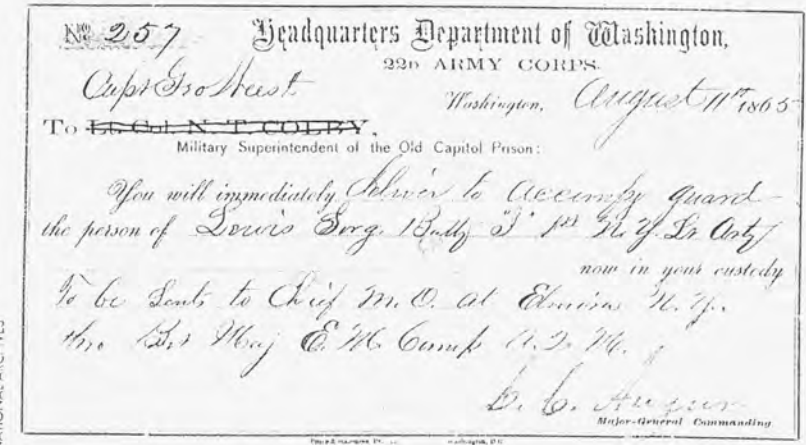
"They took all my sugar, coffee and preserves, then abused me for not having more. They killed some fowls, which they did not carry away. All the time they called me a 'god dammed secessionist.' I went to this man here [indicating Troest] and requested him to leave my pitcher. He drew his sabre on me and or-



dered me to go into the house."

Swindler went on to describe the fear she felt and her despair about the possibility of rescue: "I live in an out-of-the-way place in the mountains about four miles from Sperrytown. These men were at my house about three hours. Oh, and they also took a silver watch."

The next witness for the prosecution was a Lieutenant Hoffman of the 3d West Virginia Cavalry. Smith and a commissary sergeant had ridden out from the camp, looking for men absent without leave. When they rode into Swindler's yard, they saw Troest sitting on the porch, eating eggs. Hoffman noticed that the



Battery I of the 1st New York Light Artillery is the epitome of military discipline in this October 1861 photo (bottom). Apparently, though, for some men the discipline was only an act: in July 1862 two privates and one black servant were sentenced to hard time for theft, vandalism, and rape. One of them, Louis Sorg, completed his sentence only to land right back in jail—at Old Capital Prison (far left) in Washington, D.C.—for another offense. In those days, a prisoner was less likely to wear clean clothes than a ball and chain or a barrel jacket (left). Sorg remained in Washington until an official order (above) sent him to Elmira, New York.

"I belong to the widow Swindler," Walker responded.

"Did you ever see this man [indicating Troest]?"

"Yes. I saw him the day he came to our house. There was another white man and a black man with him. The prisoner came to me first. He said he wanted something to do with me. He took hold of me and laid me down on the floor. I told him I did not want to do it. I told him I had a husband, but he said that made no difference. I cried and struggled. He said if I did not give up he would kill me."

"Where did this occur?"

"It was in my own room. I didn't try to hurt him, or pinch, or kick him, or pull his hair. There were two beds in the room. I don't know why he used the floor, I guess he liked it. I tried to get up twice, but he pushed me back. He pulled up my clothes. I begged him not to do it. When he was done, the black man came upstairs, and began before the white man left."

Here the testimony regarding Troest ended. The court then adjourned to give Troest the customary opportunity to prepare a written defense. The next day, Troest submitted the following statement, signed by both him and Sorg:

"The repeting of heavy Charges, Miss Swindler Named union People: against Lewist T. troest, Lewis Sorg: Jeremiah M. Spades. From Widrick's Battery. Juli the 16th 1862. L.P. Trost and L. Sorg went out in the country 8 Miles from camp without a pass for to get something to eat and because we did not get anything in the camp for diner as we have been 1 1/2 Miles away from camp we have met several men from our Batery and a darky wich turned around and went with us we went together on to Miss Swindells farm and ask for somthing to eat and she gave us something as we rised from the table we had seen 2 colors [flags] upon the Clock wich were taken down and were 2 litle S. flakes [secessionist flags]. Then L.P. Trost said now i have found one of them God dam Sech [secessionist]. Houses then he asked for Arms. Miss Swindler said she had nothing of that kind and then went to examine the house by wich L.P. Trost had a ham saber Overcoat blanket & Cherries. L. Sorg sugar coffee and eggs. Jerry M. Spades Preserves & Powderhorn & killed one duck. by examining we did not break one lock in the house we found some keys in a little drawer[.] the old Woman says she found them [probably the saber, overcoat, and powderhorn] on the Battle ground she says she has 2 Sons in the Rebel army and 1 in the Union army after this we had went into the darkeys house and looked for arms. Trost went upstairs and looked in a box then Miss Walker came upstairs and said there is nothing but our clothing you wont kill us will you Trost said no man would not do such a thing and after this Trost went down and Spades had wend upstairs as long as Trost was standing on the steps & spades asked the dark-ey for to use her she said I will let you have it but do not let that other fellow [illegible] in wich I had went away. As we were getting sacks and loaded in our things and in the same moment there was a Lieut. & Seargt. coming and made us lay our things down again. Signed Louis Paul Trost, P. Louis Sorg."

After reviewing the testimony and the written statement, the court found Troest guilty of all charges and sentenced him to "hard labor in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, or at any of the docks or fortifications of the United States during the remainder of the term of his enlistment [about two years]." During his imprisonment, he was to wear a ball and chain attached to one leg, be put on a diet of bread and water every other 14-day period during the first year of his confinement, and forfeit all his pay and allowances. At



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the end of his term, he was to be "disgracefully discharged."

The court then turned to the case of Spades, who was charged with being absent without leave (although he was not enlisted in the army), theft, and assisting in the rape of Walker. The first witness was Wiedrich himself.

"Is this boy your servant?" the court asked.

"Yes, sir, with me in the army," Wiedrich responded.

This ended the captain's contribution to the fact-finding. The court then called Swindler to the stand again.

"Do you know this man [indicating Spades]?"

"I know that man. He searched my house from top to bottom, plundering and searching. He used insulting language to me, cursing and swearing. He called me a 'God damned secessionist bitch' and threatened me with a sabre and a bridle strap. I am a widow, over 60 years old."

"Did your black woman say anything about the outrage?"

"She said the black man dragged her upstairs, and the two men misused her. I asked Polly if she had put herself in the way, but she said she did not."

Walker was then recalled as a prosecution witness, and the court resumed its inquiry.

"Have you seen this man before?"

"Yes. He was the gentleman who came to rob our house. He asked if I had a husband. I said I did and he called me a damned liar. He came to me after the white man did, in the little room above the kitchen. I did not fight him, because he said he would kill me if I did. I cried and said was not willing."

Wiping off the tarnish of the Sperryville incident, Captain Michael Wiedrich (right, as a colonel) and his battery went on to serve admirably in the Battle of Gettysburg in July 1863 and in Sherman's march through Georgia in late 1864. Here, veterans of Wiedrich's Battery, as the unit of German immigrants was known, pose for a postwar reunion photo.

"Did he make an arrangement with you?"

"No. I told him I did not want to do it."

"What did he say to you?"

"He said he wanted to f— me."

The prosecution then rested, and Spades called Sorg as a defense witness.

"Did I commit violence on the Negro woman?" asked Spades.

"No," Sorg responded. "You asked the Negro woman to 'give me a f—ing.' Those were your words. She said she was willing if you kept the white man away. I saw you at it. She made no resistance. You wanted me to do the same to her but I would not. She did not cry out or seem troubled when you did it to her."

After deliberation, the court found Spades guilty on all counts, and sentenced him to hard labor for five years, wearing a ball and chain. He was to be put on a diet of bread and water one week of every month.

The third and final defendant was the 19-year-old Sorg. Sorg was on trial for A.W.O.L. and for "numerous depredations," but not for rape. Swindler was called once again as a witness.

"What did Private Sorg do at your house?"

"He took a liberal hand in plundering and destroying with the others. He did say he would try and stop the others from destroying things. I don't know if he stopped them. He did not curse or abuse me."

"Was he drunk?"

"They were not drunk when they came to my

house. I had a half-pint of spirits in a decanter. When they left, the spirits were gone and the decanter was broken."

The court considered the testimony and the written statement signed by Troest and Sorg and found Sorg guilty on both charges. He was sentenced to one year of hard labor, during which he was to forfeit all pay and allowances.

After the trial, Battery I remained in Sperryville for two weeks, leaving town on August 9, 1862, to join Major General John Pope's army in northern Virginia. Meanwhile, Troest, Spades, and Sorg were on their way to prison.

On August 21 of the following year, Sorg rejoined his unit, having served his sentence. He did not, however, seem to have mended his ways. On June 10, 1865, at New Hope Church, Georgia, Private Adam Reitz of Battery I fell asleep with his pocketbook under his head. When he awoke, it was gone, but it was soon found hidden under Sorg's jacket. Sorg confessed that he had taken \$32.85 and spent \$3.00 of the loot on cigars. Reitz was left with \$29.85, and Sorg went off to prison again, the Old Capitol Prison in Washington, where he remained through the end of the war. **CWT**

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