

Captain James Thompson knew immediately this was going to be hot work.

How far out are we going, he must have wondered as his brigade commander, Lieutenant-Colonel Freeman McGilvery, led Thompson and his battery forward. They had left the sanctuary of the army reserve artillery park behind the Union position, and McGilvery was leading Thompson and four other reserve batteries not just toward the front, but *beyond* the Federal battle line running south from Gettysburg. Thompson's trained artilleryman's eye noted the terrain was rising gently as they moved out along a farm road heading almost due west. They passed a large, rock-covered hill on the left with a commanding view of the farms beyond, a small farmhouse, and barn next to a small creek. Further to the right was the left flank of the Union line.

Thompson knew his orders were to support the III Corps of Maj. Gen. Dan Sickles. Sickles had moved his corps forward away from the main line, and Thompson guessed this was the ground Sickles originally occupied. The farm road continued uphill to the west, and soon an intersection with the north-south road between Emmitsburg and Gettysburg came into view. The roads met atop a rise, higher than any other ground nearby, marked by two farmsteads on the north and a rectangular peach orchard on the south. Sickles' two infantry divisions were spread thinly northwards up the road toward Gettysburg, and back, eastward at an angle through the orchard to the south toward the rock-covered hill. Sickles had already posted three batteries of his corps artillery along the Emmitsburg Road facing west, and those guns were already in action. What they were firing at worried Thompson greatly.¹

James Thompson was born on May 8, 1821, near Ballynahinch in County Down, not far from the city of Belfast. At age 23, he enlisted in the Royal Regiment of Artillery, the "Gunners," and

received specialized training in artillery tactics at the Royal Military Academy in Woolwich. Raised a Protestant, Thompson received a Degree in the Loyal Orange Institution, a Protestant fraternal organization also known as the Orange Order, in Feb. 1850. His battery fought in the Crimean War's Battle of Balaclava on Oct. 25, 1854, where the Royal Artillery played a significant role in defending the British base against Russian attacks. The unit also supported the charge of the Heavy Brigade against the Russian cavalry. Thompson received a promotion for gallantry at Balaclava, and was discharged from the British army as a sergeant in 1856. He immigrated to the United States with his family later that year, eventually settling in Allegheny City (modern day Pittsburgh), Penn. He made a living as a painter and raised a family of three children with his first wife, and later a fourth child with a second wife.²

When the Civil War came, Thompson knew his artillery experience would be of value. He offered his services that summer but was denied because the War Department had not yet asked the state to supply artillery batteries to the army. Instead, Thompson found a sponsor in Ward Hill Lamon, a close friend of Lincoln and the U.S. Marshal of the District of Columbia. Lamon had been authorized by Lincoln and Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton to personally raise a brigade of infantry, cavalry, and artillery to defend Washington. He eventually mustered 700 men from Pennsylvania and a few other states and, in late Sept., "Lamon's Brigade" went into camp on the Potomac River near Williamsport, Md., not far from the Pennsylvania border.³

When Thompson formally entered the Union army on Sept. 24, he was appointed a captain of light artillery. His army record described him as "height 5' 9 1/2", complexion fresh, eyes grey, hair lt. brown."⁴ Searching for local Pittsburgh men that he knew

would be loyal to him, Thompson placed advertisements in the *Pittsburg Dispatch*, asking for "A FEW MORE MEN WANTED... Pay and subsistence will be furnished from the day of enlistment. Capt. Thompson has had an experience of twelve years as an artillery officer in the British service." Another request for enlistees in the *Gazette* appealed for "twenty men, also four shoeing Smiths, one saddler and one Wagon maker, "probably the result of Thompson's practical experience managing an artillery unit.⁵ With no artillery pieces or horses yet assigned them, the men were posted on picket duty along the Potomac above Harper's Ferry. In Nov. 1861, when Lamon's Brigade was dissolved and its units incorporated into other organizations with 3-year enlistments, Thompson's men were assigned to a brigade of Maryland infantry and designated the 2nd Maryland Battery.

Thompson, knowing almost all the men were from Pennsylvania, and that his officers held commissions from Governor Curtin, filed a petition with the Penn. Adj. Gen. for designation as a Penn. Batry., and included the muster roll with the filing. The Adjutant General finally approved the request on June 17, 1862, and the unit was designated Thompson's Light Independent Pennsylvania Battery C.⁶

Twenty-seven of the first 90 men to enlist in the unit were from Pittsburgh. Sixteen were from Maryland, and the rest were from other Penn. counties as far away as Philadelphia. The men represented a broad spectrum of society. Twenty-four were laborers and twenty were farmers. Most of the rest were miners, clerks, carpenters, and engineers. The unit also mustered one butcher, a dentist and a "preacher." Three men were unemployed.⁷ Duty in winter camp on the upper Potomac was uneventful, although it could at times be dangerous to new recruits. During one eight day period there were four accidental shootings, three of which were fatal.⁸

On Feb. 2, 1862, the unit reported