

...and a Tiger

By Robert Braun

In a recent article describing the correct pronunciation of the cheer "Huzzah" (written form) as "Hoorah" or "Hooraw" (spoken form), the issue of the origins of the elusive "tiger," of "three cheers and a tiger" fame, remained open. New research may now have solved one of the most enduring riddles of Civil War history: What WAS the "tiger" cheer? In a letter to his father dated May 8, 1862, Captain Henry Livermore Abbott, Twentieth Massachusetts Volunteers, described some of the early action of the Peninsula Campaign:

You have seen now the enemy have evacuated Yorktown. The morning they left was the last of my 24 hours of picket. Shots were fired at us about day break. A few hours later we heard, just opposite from the place we had been religiously guarding all night,... shouts & cheers at a tremendous rate. We thought it deuced strange that the enemy should be cheering, for their custom was to yell. But as soon as we heard the tiger, we knew our forces were inside.

In *Fallen Leaves, The Civil War Letters of Major Henry Livermore Abbott*, editor Robert Garth Scott footnoted on page 113 Abbott's use of the word "tiger" as "referring to the battle cry of the Boston Tiger Fire Zouaves, Co. K, 19th Massachusetts." This association of fireman and zouave at first seems strange. Then we recall the work of Colonel Elmer Ellsworth and his First Fire Zouaves, (later the 11th N. Y. Volunteers) comprised of mostly "fire laddies" of New York's famed volunteer department.* Ellsworth's tragic murder and the lackluster performance of the 11th New York at First Bull Run did not quell the enthusiasm of metropolitan firemen for military service. In fact, as men used to

taking orders and exposed to extremes of danger, they were highly desirable as soldiers. Regiments including the 73d New York (Second Fire Zouaves) of the Excelsior Brigade, the 72d Pennsylvania (Baxter's Fire Zouaves) of the Philadelphia Brigade, and a host of companies like the Boston Tiger Fire Zouaves added personality and dash to the Federal war effort. The *elan* of volunteer firemen was as well-known to antebellum America as the tales of gallant French Zouaves in the Crimea.

During this period, to say simply "New York" usually meant one was referring to New York City. If one meant to speak or write of the state, one added that word, as in "State of New York" or "New York State." Such usage was generally common only within the city or State of New York, and then only among New Yorkers. There was perhaps no more rousing chronicler of New York's "fire laddies" than Charles Dickens. In an English literary publication *All the Year Round*, an essay entitled "American Volunteer Firemen" appeared in a March 16, 1861 edition bearing Dickens's byline. Although strongly questioned as Dickens's own prose, author Kenneth Holcomb Dunshee quoted the article in his book *As You Pass By*, a landmark work on the New York Volunteer Fire Societies. One excerpt was especially interesting. After describing the receipt of a fire alarm, Dickens recorded the activities of the "laddies" as they prepared to haul their engine by hand out of the engine-house. He then wrote

Now the supernumeraries—the haulers and draggers, who lend a hand at the ropes—pour in from the neighborhood dram-shops or low dancing-rooms... A shout—a tiger! "Hei! hei!! hei!!! hei!!!!" (crescendo), and

out at lightning speed dashes the engine, in the direction of the red gleam... (*As You Pass By*, p. 35).

Dunshee continued to quote Dickens (page 36), who used the cheer "hei! hei!! hei!!! hei!!!!" a second time, in his description of the firemen at work at the scene of the fire. The use and enumeration of the "tiger" by New York's firemen as described by Dickens in 1861, and the connection of the "tiger" with Boston's firemen-turned-soldiers as recorded by Robert Garth Scott, all forms an exciting conjunction—with wartime provenance! The tiger also would explain the otherwise puzzling shout of Colonel Augustus Van Horne Ellis, who ordered his 124th New York State Volunteers (from Orange County, New York) forward in a charge during the frenzied third day's action at Chancellorsville. Then-Captain Charles H. Weygant remembered that the New Yorkers were ordered forward by a staff officer, in the name of General Sickles, and "Ellis, with no other reply than "Hi, hi, my Orange Blossoms," gave the order..." (Weygant, *History of the 124th New York State Volunteers*, p. 120). The evidence seems compelling!

What was "three cheers and a tiger?" Based on this information, "three cheers and a tiger" sounded similar to:

"Hoorah!hoorah!
hoorah!Hei! hei!! hei!!!
hei!!!!"

where the former is pronounced similarly to today's "hurrah"—the "hooraw" in Webster's Dictionary being an equally acceptable pronunciation—and the latter (the "tiger") pronounced with the long "i," as in "hi" or "Reich," and in *crescendo*, or increasingly louder.