

# The Home Guard

Brigadier General J. W. McElroy, North Carolina Home Guards, to Governor Zebulon Vance, April 12, 1864. Published in *The war of the rebellion: a compilation of the official records of the Union and Confederate armies*, Series 1, Volume 53 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1898), pp. 326–27.

## As you read...

The Home Guard was comprised of men over the age of 45 and under 18. Unlike the army, which was formally organized and commanded from the top down, the Home Guard was a collection of small units organized on a local level. The Home Guard's activities were supervised by the state government, and the Governor could call out the Home Guard in case of an emergency.

The Home Guard's duties included arresting deserters, enforcing the draft, policing residents who were suspected of having pro-Union sympathies, putting down domestic disturbances or unrest, and gathering and protecting supplies for the army. The Home Guard was also the last line of defense against invading Union troops.

This letter, written in 1864 by General J. W. McElroy of the Home Guard to Governor Vance, describes the difficult task of the Home Guard, particularly in western North Carolina. Many people in the western part of the state had pro-Union sympathies. These people felt that the Confederacy only supported the interests of plantation owners and they did not wish to die to support the interests of the wealthy. Moreover, deserters from the Confederate army often hid in the mountain regions because the rugged terrain provided many hideouts.

By 1864, Tennessee had been captured by Union forces. This put added pressure on the Home Guard in western North Carolina, which now had to deal with raids by Union soldiers.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What did the raiders steal? Why were the supplies not better protected by the Home Guard?
2. What were some of the problems McElroy had with the local population? What disturbances did he have to deal with?
3. What types of problems did McElroy have in recruiting men to help the Home Guard?
4. According to McElroy, was the local population loyal to the Confederacy? Why did he come to this conclusion?
5. What did McElroy need from the governor?
6. If you had McElroy's job of securing the home front in the western part of North Carolina, what would you do in this situation? What were his options?

First Brigade, North Carolina Home Guards, Mars Hill College, Madison County, N. C.,  
April 12, 1864.

Governor Z. B. Vance:

A dispatch reached me last night that a band of Tories, said to be headed by Montreval Ray<sup>1</sup>, numbering about seventy-five men came into Burnsville, Yancey County, on Sunday night last, the 10th instant, surprised the guard, broke open the magazine<sup>2</sup>, and took all the arms and ammunition; broke open Braylys store and carried off the contents; attacked Captain Lyons, the local enrolling officer, in his room, shot him in the arm slightly, but accidentally he made his escape. They carried off all the guns they could carry; the balance they broke. They took, I suppose, about 100 State guns. No one else wounded. They also took off the bacon brought in by my commissary about 500 pounds. On the day before about fifty women assembled together, of said county, and marched in a body to a store-house near David Proffitts and pressed<sup>3</sup> about sixty bushels of Government wheat and carried it off. I very much regret the loss of the arms. On Monday previous to the robbery I wrote to one of the captains in that county and to the ordnance officer to either remove the guns and ammunition or see that a sufficient guard was placed there to protect them. It seems that neither was done. I also urged on the citizens to lay to a helping hand in this hour of danger, but all done no good. The county is gone up. It has got to be impossible to get any man out there unless he is dragged out, with but very few exceptions. There was but a small guard there, and the citizens all ran on the first approach of the Tories. I have 100 men at this place to guard against Kirk, of Laurel<sup>4</sup>, and cannot reduce the force, and to call out any more home guards at this time is only certain destruction to the country eventually. In fact, it seems to me that there is a determination of the people in the country generally to do no more service in the cause. Swarms of men liable to conscription are gone to the Tories or to the Yankees some men that you would have no idea of while many others are fleeing east of the Blue Ridge for refuge. John S. McElroy and all the cavalry, J. W. Anderson and many others, are gone to Burke<sup>5</sup> for refuge. This discourages those who are left behind, and on the back of that conscription [is] now going on, and a very tyrannical course pursued by the officers charged with the business, and men conscribed and cleaned out as raked with a fine-toothed comb, and if any are left if they are called upon to do a little home-guard service, they at once apply for a writ of habeas corpus and get off. Some three or four cases [have] been tried by Judge Read the last two weeks and the men released. What are we to do? There are no Confederate troops scarcely in the western district of North Carolina.... This emboldens the Tories, and they are now largely recruited by conscript renegades and very soon it is possible our country may be full of Yankees. Give me your advice and orders.... If something is not done immediately for this country we will all be ruined, for the home guards now will not do to depend on. I have written you several times on subjects of importance to me, and received no answer. I know your time is valuable to you and that you are pressed to death with business, but some instructions from you would be of great benefit to me and some encouragement to our citizens. Do let me hear from you at once. Very respectfully, your obedient servant,

J. W. MCELROY, Brigadier-General, Commanding First Brigade, North Carolina Home  
Guards.

---

## On the web

### More from LEARN NC

Visit us on the web at [www.learnnc.org](http://www.learnnc.org) to learn more about topics related to this article, including Civil War, Home Guard, Madison County, North Carolina, history, and home front.

## Notes

1. Montreval Ray was the leader of a group of men with pro-Union sympathies. Ray and his men were located in the mountains of Tennessee and made raids into North Carolina.
2. A storage building for arms, ammunition, and explosives.
3. Impressed. Usually *impressment* refers to an army's taking goods from civilians that were needed for soldiers, and the Confederate Army did this through most of the war, taking food, supplies, and slaves. In this case, women on the home front impressed wheat back from the government, because they needed it to feed their families.
4. George Kirk was from eastern Tennessee. He was loyal to the Union and led a group of Union sympathizers and Confederate deserters on raids into North Carolina.
5. Burke, North Carolina, is located about 75 miles east of Mars Hill.