

For Country, Community, and Comrades Why Iowans Went to War

by Timothy Walch

Why would Iowans serve voluntarily in a violent conflict that pitted them against their own countrymen? That was the question that many young men from this state must have asked themselves when they were called to join the Union army in 1861. In fact, it is a question that historians continue to ponder as we commemorate the 150th anniversary of the Civil War over the next several years.

There were many reasons to join the war effort, of course, and Iowans were not unique in their responses. Certainly, some young men were attracted to the idea of adventure. After all, daily life in Iowa and many other states was filled with hard work, boredom, and drudgery. The idea of fighting "Johnny Reb" must have seemed exciting and romantic. Few Northerners believed that the Confederates could withstand the might of the Union army; many believed that the war would last only a few months. It is not surprising, therefore, that the first calls for Iowa regiments were answered by young men seeking adventure.

Some enlisted for humanitarian reasons. As a 36-year-old doctor with a thriving practice in Ottumwa, Seneca Brown Thrall had every reason to remain at home, but he joined up with the 13th Iowa because he considered it his duty to care for the wounded.

Some Iowans were fighting for emancipation—either to end slavery or to end the war. Like many Unionists, most Iowans did not consider the slaves as their equals, but slaves were a tremendous asset to the Confederate forces. "The [Union] army is in favor of the emancipation message and views," Thrall wrote in November 1862, "not because they favor abolition of slavery, or the freedom of the negro, but because the Rebels use them as essential aids to their cause."

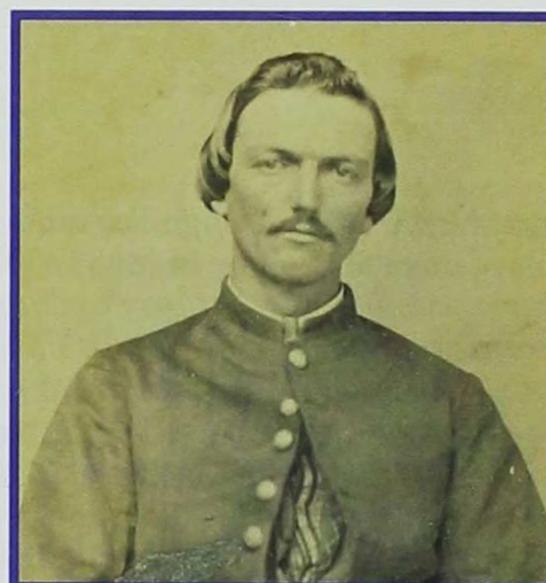
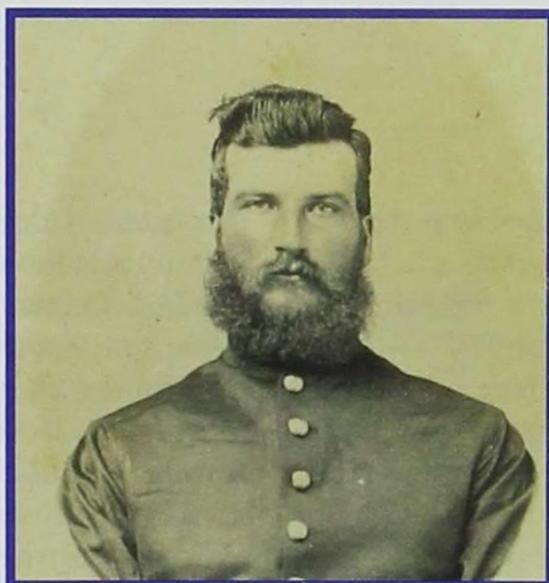
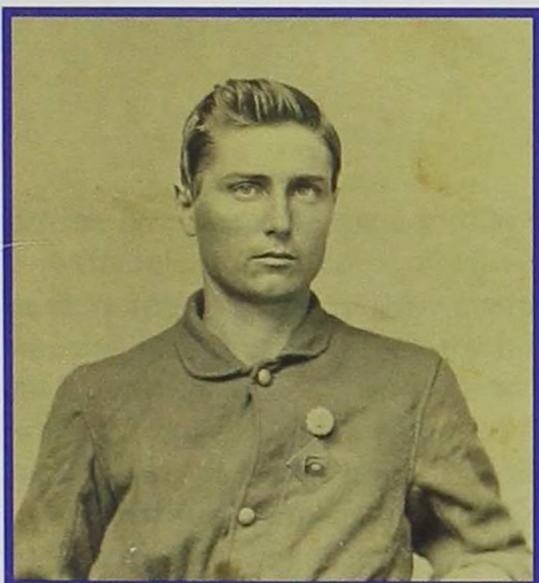
Of all the motivations to join the war, none was nobler than the belief that service to one's nation and state was a fundamental responsibility of citizenship. There would be no inner peace for any man who would shirk from this responsibility.

This sense of a noble purpose is substantiated by Civil War historian James M. McPherson, who has read the letters and diaries of close to 1,100 soldiers. These men "were not long-term professional soldiers," he points out, but rather "citizen volunteers." About two-thirds of the letters from both Northern and Southern soldiers reflect patriotic convictions. Confederate soldiers saw secession as a sacred right; Union soldiers saw it as a challenge to the very foundation of the republic and the constitutional irrevocability of the Union.

Iowa's soldiers were no different. In dozens of letters home, they described this sense of a higher calling and their willingness to share in the sacrifice. The letters and diaries that are most articulate are those written by more literate and educated men, but farm boys and shopkeepers also expressed these motivations.

Of course, some soldiers' motivations were mixed. Cyrus Boyd, age 24, enlisted in Company G of the 15th Iowa Infantry in October 1861. He mustered into service in his hometown of Ottumwa with his best friend, Dan Embree, at his side. "Times are dull at home," Boyd wrote in his diary. "The War may be over by spring and we should feel as if we had lost a great deal by not going." He added, "Every one seems to be actuated by the purest and most patriotic motives and those who are going seem to be moved by a sense of duty."

Philip H. Goode of Glenwood joined the same month as Boyd. Married and the father of two children, Goode helped to organize Company F of the



SIX PHOTOS: SHSI (IOWA CITY)

15th Iowa Infantry and for his initiative was appointed second lieutenant. The regiment remained in Keokuk for five months, waiting for the ice to clear. In March, Goode started a diary: "We are going to the scene of conflict, there to face the enemy." Then he asked himself a question that surely crossed the minds of many soldiers. "How will we conduct ourselves? . . . I believe that it is the firm determination of all of us to act like men and like patriots and all of us feel a strong desire to prove our claim to merit on the field of battle."

Goode was no young man full of bravado and bluster; he was a 27-year-old who realized that he might not return to his family. "It is a serious thing to face death in any form," he confided to his diary. "When I think of my own home, the dear wife and helpless little ones that I have left behind, life is indeed sweet and I almost shrink from the uncertainty of a soldier's fate." Goode further debated with himself over his mutual desire to be with his family but also to do his duty as "a citizen and a soldier."

A week later: "I feel a strong inclination to give up military life and go home to the loved ones that miss me there. But I believe duty calls me the other way." Although resignation was an option, he resisted and used his diary as a means to express his anguish. "Good night dear wife, good night dear children," he wrote in the diary on March 28. "Should anything serious befall you it would break my heart."

Goode returned to the burden of sacrifice repeatedly in his diary. On April 2, as the 15th Iowa moved south to meet the enemy, he asked more searing questions: "How many of the boys will return, certainly not all. Then who will be the missing ones? Perhaps some of my best friends, perhaps myself. I feel sad when I think of the strong probability that ere a month many of us will sleep the sleep that knows no waking but so we will die gloriously and fill a soldier's grave."

Family responsibility eventually outweighed civic duty, and a week after fighting at Shiloh in April 1862, Goode gave in to his wife Maggie's repeated efforts to get him to resign his commission. "The reasons she gives for

Six men from Company A, 31st Iowa Infantry: From left, Ralph E. Tripp, Robert G. Thurston, Samuel Moore, Newell J. White, Solomon S. Sager, and Michael W. Coleman. Some Civil War soldiers recorded in letters or diaries why they were fighting. Others may never have articulated it on paper—or to others.

coming home are good ones," he wrote. "I have promised her that as soon as the active duties of the campaign are over I will resign, go home and leave family no more."

Goode's military career did not end in mid-May 1862, however. For reasons unrecorded, he felt compelled to reenlist as a captain in the 4th Iowa Battery in November 1863 and served until the end of the war. It was as if he had returned to fulfill a promise that he had made in April 1862: "Let us cheerfully go forward," he wrote, "perform our whole duty and time will bring our reward, if indeed we are not already rewarded by the proud consciousness of being defenders of our Country."

Twenty-year-old Abner Dunham was also moved by patriotic sentiments. A farmer near Manchester, Dunham first expressed this in a letter to his parents less than a month after his enlistment in November 1861. "I often think of home," he wrote, "and if god sees fit hope to return to it, but I do not for once regret enlisting in the noble cause in which I am now engaged. I would not miss sharing the glory of victory which we are sure to gain, for hardly any thing. Money could not hire me to miss it. There is not a man in our camp but would be on the [alert] at the prospect of having a battle." This impulse to seek grand adventure in a noble cause was common early in the war.

Two years later, Dunham wrote to his family of "excitement" among the 12th Iowa to reenlist. This was no small decision for Dunham because his family was opposed. "I have weighed the matter well," he wrote. "I have studied on your advice." But he was intensely committed to his comrades. "Do you have the [e]ast idea," he asked, "that I could remain [quietly] at home and see those boys who have been with me constantly for over two years, who have endured the same hard-