



## *Baptized by the Blood of Many a Brave Fellow* *The Battle Flag of the 9th Iowa Infantry*

by Bill Johnson

Private George Gordon Adam lay in a hospital in Helena, Arkansas, wounded in the thigh. Less than a year earlier, the attorney from Decorah had enlisted in the 9th Iowa Infantry. Now he was among that regiment's 118 casualties from the Battle of Pea Ridge. From his cot he wrote to his sister Phebe in Boston. He was dismayed that his regiment had fought six

months with no flag to rally to. Trained at Benton Barracks in St. Louis, the soldiers had received uniforms, Dresden muzzle loaders, and equipment, but no flags were issued.

He wrote, "Will not some of my Massachusetts friends send us one?"

The response from Boston friends was so abundant



that in August Phebe and a committee of Boston women sent two flags to the 9th Iowa. One was a national flag, with red and white silk strips sewn together [see left]. Within its blue silk canton in the upper right, painted stars circled "PEA RIDGE, March 7th & 8th 1862."

The second flag was a regimental banner of double-ly blue silk and trimmed in gold braid. In Phebe's words, its design of "two greyhounds in springing position on each side of the coat of arms [is] intended to be emblematic of the activity and rapid marching of the regiment . . . dubbed 'the Iowa Greyhounds.'" On the front appeared the words "The Ninth Iowa Greyhound Regiment." On the reverse: "Presented by their Countrywomen of Massachusetts in memory of Pea Ridge, Ark., March 6th, 7th, & 8th, 1862."

Phebe's enclosed letter conveyed the donors' wish that Private Adam would be the one to present the flags to his regiment. But the soldier was too ill with fever and could not even rise from his cot. The package was taken to the hospital on August 3, and the flags were unfurled before him. Regiment commander Colonel William Vandever offered to postpone the presentation until the wounded soldier was better, but Adam did not wish to deprive his comrades of battle flags any longer.

That afternoon Vandever unfurled the flags before the regiment. He read Phebe's eloquent letter: "We desire to present you with our national colors, . . . as a token of our grateful admiration for the valor and heroism displayed by you on the memorable field of Pea Ridge.

"We greet you today, not as strangers, but as true and loyal friends, for, though but [only] one of your number is personally known to us in far off Massachusetts, our hearts have followed you with prayer, and with a hopeful expectation of being gladdened by your success."

The letter ended: "God bless the Union. God bless you and all soldiers of the union armies is the fervent prayer of your countrywomen in Massachusetts."

Then Vandever shared the reply he would send to Phebe and her friends. The words were not easy to read

aloud. "That . . . [you] have thought us not unworthy of this token of approval will ever be cherished in grateful remembrance. Many in this regiment remember with tenderest emotion their kindred of the Old Bay State. . . . Be resolved that by the blessings of God, no traitor's hand raised to dim the luster of that flag shall prosper. This purpose transmitted from sire to son, our country, her laws and institutions will live while the granite foundation of old Plymouth endure or the floods of the West flow to the ocean."

A diary entry by Second Lieutenant Alonzo Abernethy hints at the flags' importance to the men: "The Regiment was paraded at two o'clock to receive the beautiful stand of colors presented by the Ladies of Boston to the Iowa 9th. Col. Vandever delivered a short speech at the presentation. Seemed much affected as were many others present at the respect & honor thus manifested by noble women of a distant state and at the associations connected with the scene."

Private Adam also described the scene: "I have talked with a great many officers and men of the regt. who came to see me while I was ill, and I will tell you [Phebe] what I have heard through them of the presentation. . . . When [Colonel Vandever] got to the last paragraph of his reply he choked for several moments, and three fourths of the regiment were in tears. Not a single cheer was given for the flag at this time! What with the address, and the reply, and the surprise at so splendid a testimonial from far-off Massachusetts, the men and officers were so affected that an attempt to cheer would have been a total failure. But when the colors were planted

near the Colonel's tent, they collected around them and cheered like mad-men."

Adam continued, "Nothing could have had a better effect on the regiment than this gift. The men were much dispirited by their continual privations, and, as many of them, like myself, have never seen a paper in which their conduct at Pea Ridge received anything but the ordinary newspaper praise bestowed on the whole army, the poor fellows are surprised and delighted to



**The finial from the 9th Iowa's battle flag.**

BOTH PAGES: PHOTOS COURTESY ABRAMOWITZ CREATIVE STUDIOS



find that they are understood and appreciated away off in old Massachusetts. Your gift has infused a fresh spirit into them, they look brighter and happier and would die to the last before the colors should fall into the hands of the rebels."

**T**he flags served the 9th Iowa well, leading them into battles at Chickasaw Bayou, Arkansas Post, Jackson, and Vicksburg. Private Adam, however, did not follow the flags into battle. His recovery was slow, and with the encouragement of General Samuel R. Curtis he was assigned as chief clerk in the quartermaster section, where he remained until discharged.

The regiment, reduced to 300 fighting men, joined Grant's siege of Vicksburg on May 18, 1863. The following day they were part of an unsuccessful charge against the city's fortification. Through tenacity the regiment obtained a position within 75 yards of the outer defenses, but still the Union forces were forced back. The attack cost the regiment 16 casualties.

Three days later a major assault was launched. The 9th Iowa was in the first wave. It was a hot day, Private Levi A. Green, from Allamakee County, wrote in his diary. "When all were in order, the order was given. . . . We moved steadily forward to the brow of the hill. Here we stopped a moment for rest and each one nerved his courage up to the highest point for a desperate struggle. We had orders not to fire a shot until we raised the breastworks and then to do our work quick. Then came the final order. Forward! And we sprang to our feet and each one made the best time he could to get to the breastwork. But few reached it."

Sergeant James Elson was one of the few. The 24-year-old from Benton County was the color bearer, with the duty of carrying the flag into battle. He and the others in the color guard dashed across the field, littered with fallen trees. The men scrambled through a trench, then struggled up the steep embankment of the breastworks. Cannon fire and bullets rained down from above.

Elson was the first to scale the embankment; perhaps he used the flag staff to help him climb. He reached the top and stood up with the flag. Immediately he was shot in the thigh and fell on the flag.

Corporal Otis Crawford, a 20-year-old from Maquoketa, now struggled forward towards the fallen Elson. "As I raised myself a ball tore through my shoulders and cartridge belt," he recollected years later. "I remembered: Pea Ridge is written on that flag. The rebels shall not have it. Hugging the ground I crawled back up to it, perhaps six to eight feet. A bullet struck the staff the moment I touched it. . . . I dragged it and myself down

the slope to the West. Dragging it affectionately, I kept the spear toward the foe. . . . Seeing the Adjutant behind a fallen tree, some 15 or 25 feet below, I called to him softly, asking him to care for the flag in the event I should succeed in passing it to him."

Weak with pain, Crawford rose a bit on his right side. Using his hand and foot, he slid the flag to another soldier, who passed it to yet another. As part of this human chain, James H. Gipe, from Spring Creek, was wounded in the head and hand. Finally it reached the adjutant, Captain George Granger. The young soldier from Marion untied the flag from the staff, hid it in his blouse, and crawled to safety.

As dusk fell, the remnants of the regiment awaited support. None came. For two hours, the 9th Iowa lay in the shadow of the Confederate fortifications, awaiting darkness and an opportunity to retreat.

**P**rivate Green summed up the valiant effort in his diary: "When Col. Wood saw the butchery of the men he ordered his men to halt [and later] each with one accord began to back down the hill. . . . Many of the dead we could not get."

On the next day he wrote: "Up all night and were busy burying the dead. Our reg't had to bury the dead of: 3rd reg't, 9th IA, 12th and 3rd Mo. At night we buried a few more of the dead and all the arms and accouterments were brought off and about 1 o'clock AM we left our position and moved back behind another hill about 80 rods from the lines and then retired to get some rest which we so much needed."

Vicksburg finally capitulated on July 4. The siege had cost the 9th Iowa 78 men, victim to disease, wounds, or death. Originally 1,200 strong, the regiment now barely numbered 200 fighting men.

The national flag so heroically guarded on the battlefield was now described in a letter from Private Adam to Phebe: "The flag is riddled with balls and stained with blood, & unfit for further use. The boys are discussing whether to send it back to you or to the Governor of Iowa." Although the custom was to send retired flags to the governor or adjutant general, the soldiers decided it should go back to the Boston women. Colonel David Carskaddon justified the decision. "The State had allowed the regt. to be in the service six months and fight a hard battle without any colors to fight under, that the 9th didn't owe the State anything, but did owe much gratitude to the donors of the flag."

Carskaddon wrote to Phebe: "We return this flag to you because it has fulfilled its mission. Beneath it many a martyr to constitutional liberty has gone to his last



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Battles in which the 9th Iowa fought appear on the once white stripes of the second national flag from the Boston women.

rest. It is to us, and we trust it will be to you, the emblem of the eternal union, cemented by the best blood of patriots."

Before the national flag was returned to Boston, it was taken to Dubuque, where "its appearance created a perfect furor," Adam wrote to his sister. "People hurrahed and cried over it. It was very difficult to preserve it from destruction, as everybody was trying to obtain a little piece of it as a relic of the fight, in which some father, son or brother served, perhaps was wounded or killed. The Col. says that only one old lady got a piece—he could not refuse her. She begged him, with tears in her eyes, to give her a small piece as her two sons had fallen under it."

**T**he 9th Iowa continued in service until January 1864. The regiment was now considered a veteran unit, and as in many such prestigious units, the majority reenlisted. For this they were rewarded with a 30-day furlough. But before they left

Nashville for Dubuque, another package arrived from Phebe Adam. Enclosed was a new flag to replace the blood-stained silk national. It held within its canton the regiment's identification and the statement that it was presented by their country-women of Massachusetts.

"Once more, Countrymen and Friends, it becomes our privilege to extend to you, from our far-off New England home, 'the right hand of fellowship,'" Phebe wrote. "How faithfully you have discharged your trust, the blood-stained, war-worn relic you have returned to us gloriously attests—its tattered folds speaking to our hearts in language more eloquent than words. . . . And, now, we ask your acceptance of another battleflag [above], to replace the one you have returned to us. May the sight of the list of your victories, emblazoned on its folds serve as an incentive to new deeds of heroism, so that, in the close of another year, you may bear it home with you in triumph, an emblem of Peace—a peace valiantly won and honorably achieved."

When the soldiers of the 9th Iowa returned to active duty they carried their new flag with pride, but not



into battle. A stand of regulation flags from the federal government would serve that purpose. With care and respect, the new flag would be flown only in camp or carried in marches and parades.

After the war, George Gordon Adam practiced law, and his sister Phebe continued to teach school in Boston. Colonel William Vandever, who had first unfurled the flag to Adam in the hospital, again practiced law, served as U.S. Indian Inspector under President Grant, and moved to California, where he was elected to Congress. He kept the regimental "greyhound" flag, eventually giving it to the regimental association. Color bearer James Elson was wounded again in Atlanta. Later he operated a dry goods store, and served as postmaster in Shellsburg and sheriff in Benton County. He received the Medal of Honor in 1891 for his gallant stand on the edge of Vicksburg.



**Color bearer James Elson, years after the Civil War.**

Phebe G. Adam was my sister, both now dead, and as one other sister and I are the only members left of our family we wished the State of Iowa to have the Flag."

The governor's office gave the flag to the Department of History and Archives in Des Moines (now the State Historical Society). It was displayed in a glass case in the capitol alongside dozens of other flags.

Tradition—but not definitive proof—holds that the blood on the flag is that of Sergeant Elson, the color bearer who fell upon the flag. Recently a direct male descendant of Elson's brother, Daniel, was located in Iowa City. Samples of the descendant's DNA and of the blood-stained flag were compared by the Iowa Department of Public Safety's Crime Laboratory to determine whether the 9th Iowa flag is indeed stained with the blood of Sergeant Elson. Regrettably, the DNA material is too degraded from years of exposure and natural decomposition to provide a viable sample. Although it is disappointing that no results were determined, the DNA test is just another tool in the research involved in the history of such flags. The story of this battle flag and its blood stains are forever tied to the actions of Sergeant James Elson and of Private George Gordon Adam and his sisters Phebe and Helen. ❖

**I**n January 1902, a letter arrived in the Iowa governor's office. It was signed by Helen J. Adam. "The one member of the 9th Iowa known in Massachusetts was my brother George Gordon Adam, and

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**A State Historical Society of Iowa flag conservator tests for the presence of blood on the battle flag of the 9th Iowa Regiment.**

**NOTE ON SOURCES**

Research for this article relied upon the manuscript collections and records of the adjutant general at the State Historical Society of Iowa (Des Moines).