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Stephen Watts Kearny

A large force of American regulars, volunteers, and militia crossed the Niagara River on October 13, 1813, and launched a terrific attack upon the British on the heights at Queenston. With the Thirteenth United States Infantry fought Captain Stephen Watts Kearny. As his regiment advanced they encountered a withering fire from a strongly intrenched battery. Almost every commissioned officer about him was killed or wounded within the course of a few minutes. Undaunted, Kearny went on resolutely, stormed the battery at the head of his company, gained the peak of the hill, and drove the enemy from the field. It was one of the most brilliant engagements of the War of 1812.

Young Kearny was a student at King's College when the war began. Descended from a family of unusually able military men, he was eager to enlist. His relatives opposed this ambition because of his youth and the hardships of the campaign along the Canadian line, but with that "fixedness of will, which characterized him through life, he made up

his mind to enter the service, and exhibited such decision, that his friends ultimately consented."

Kearny was commissioned first lieutenant and assigned to the Thirteenth Infantry on March 12, 1812, before he was eighteen years old, and was raised to a captaincy on April 1st in the following year. Born at Newark, New Jersey, on August 30, 1794, he was nineteen when he conducted himself with such heroism at Queenston Heights. Immediately after this charge he was taken prisoner but was soon exchanged. His offer to head a force of marines in Isaac Chauncey's fleet on Lake Erie was refused but he continued to serve throughout the remainder of the war in a manner that added laurels to the distinction of his ancestors of the Kearny, Watts, and De Peyster families.

Despite the reduction of the army in 1815, Kearny retained his rank as captain. Having been transferred to the Second Infantry on May 17, 1815, he was quartered at Sacketts Harbor but later transferred to Plattsburg and then to various forts west of the Mississippi. His activity following his removal to the Western Department of the United States Army was astonishing, even at a time when the regulars were unusually busy. He saw service at almost every post on the frontier.

It is doubtful if any military man or civilian saw and described as much of what now constitutes the State of Iowa as did Stephen Watts Kearny between 1820 and 1835. During the course of three

long expeditions into Iowaland he observed carefully the topography of the country, the kinds of plant and animal life, and the various Indian tribes encountered. His first journey was from Council Bluff, about thirty miles north of the mouth of the Platte River, to Camp Coldwater at the junction of the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers and thence down the Mississippi to St. Louis. In 1824 he left St. Louis with Brigadier General Henry Atkinson on an expedition up the Missouri River and did not return for two years. His third excursion through the Iowa country was made during the summer of 1835. Nothing escaped his watchful eyes on these trips. His reputation for insisting upon perfection in military tactics was reflected in the careful daily observations of his journals.

It was while he was stationed at Jefferson Barracks that Kearny acquired the reputation of being "one of the most rigid disciplinarians and best tacticians" in the army. From his entry into the service he had been regarded as "one of the coolest and calmest" of men whom nothing could disconcert. "While stationed at Jefferson Barracks," Fayette Robinson relates, "Kearny was drilling a brigade on one of the open fields near that post. An admirable horseman, he sat with his face towards the troops," while his perfectly trained horse backed in the same direction the command was marching. Suddenly the animal fell, "fastening the rider to the ground by his whole weight.

His brigade had been drilled to such a state of insensibility, that not one of them came to his assistance, nor was it necessary. The line had advanced to within about ten feet of him, when in a loud distinct voice, calmly as if he had been in the saddle under no unusual circumstance, General Kearny gave the command, '*Fourth company, obstacle — MARCH.*' The fourth company, which was immediately in front of him, was flanked by its captain in the rear of the other half of the grand division. The line passed on, and when he was thus left in the rear of his men, he gave the command, '*Fourth company into line — MARCH.*' " Not being seriously injured, he "extricated himself from his horse, mounted again, passed to the front of the regiment, and executed the next manoeuvre in the series he had marked out for the day's drill."

On March 4, 1833, Kearny was made lieutenant-colonel of the First Regiment of United States Dragoons, of which Henry Dodge, later Governor of the Territory of Wisconsin, was colonel. Although an able soldier, Dodge was not a tactician and Kearny was charged with the discipline of the regiment. This was a difficult task but Kearny performed it with such marked success that Brigadier-General Edmund P. Gaines published an order in which he spoke of the First Dragoons as "the best trained troops I ever saw." It is said that more young officers trained under the eyes of Stephen Watts Kearny were chosen for staff duty

than were selected from any corps in the service.

Recognition of this splendid work won for Kearny the rank of colonel on July 4, 1836. He was stationed at Fort Leavenworth with six companies of dragoons "where he made his regiment, or that part of it which he commanded directly, second to no troops in the world."

Fear formed no part of the character of Colonel Kearny. For a quarter of a century he was in almost daily contact with the Indians on the frontier. The red men had faith and confidence in his word. They honored him as a friend and feared him as an enemy. Among the Osage, Kansas, and allied tribes he was called Shonga Kahega Mahetonga, "horse-chief of the long knives."

Kearny's bravery and daring were exhibited on numerous occasions. Thus, while traveling up the Missouri River he impassively noted in his journal on August 4, 1825: "The command was reviewed this morning at 7 by the Genl. [Atkinson] after which a council was held & a Treaty made signed by the Commissioners, and the Chiefs & Principal men of the *Crow Nation* — afterwards a very serious difficulty ensued, by *Mr. O. F.* [Benjamin O'Fallon] striking 3 or 4 of the Chiefs, on the head, & one so severely, that the blood ran down his face, very free — the Army Roll was beat — the Battalions paraded — three or four officers of us, alone remained with the Indians, who were prepared & ready for fight — their guns cocked, their

arrows ready for use — by some trouble and exertion a partial reconciliation was effected, which was afterwards matured by Genl. Atkinson, meeting and talking to some of the Principal men, outside of camp — at one time, it was considered, that the result, *Peace or War* was as uncertain, as in throwing up a copper, whether it comes, head or tail — the *Nation* moved about a mile farther from our camp — a Capts. guard was mounted and our chain of sentinels increased." The following day Kearny very nonchalantly mounted his horse and "went upon duty, as officer of the day."

Later, in 1839, Father Pierre-Jean De Smet related the following incident: "Colonel Kearny arrived at Bellevue with 200 dragoons. Held council with the Iowas. Took four prisoners among the most distinguished for depredations on their white neighbors and missionaries. Preparations were made to whip them. The colonel reluctantly pardoned them at the intercession of their new agent, Mr. Hamilton, and after previously consulting with experienced gentlemen living in this neighborhood. The Otoes came to the council in battle array, bows strung and arrows in hand, apparently ready for a blow. The manly conduct of the colonel, accompanied by great prudence and a great presence of mind, kept them in awe. I observed several chiefs tremble and stutter as they stood before him. Many who knew them well thought that great mischief was brewing."

Shortly after the Mexican War broke out, on June 30, 1846, Kearny was made a brigadier-general and placed in command of the Army of the West. Three hundred dragoons formed the nucleus of the motley army of 1658 men which left Fort Leavenworth late in June and filed across the plains with instructions to capture Santa Fé. "Amidst the fluttering of banners," wrote a volunteer, "the sounding of bugles, the rattling of artillery, the clattering of sabres, and cooking utensils, some of the horses took fright and scampered, pell-mell, with rider and arms, over the wide prairie. Rider, arms and accoutrements, saddles and saddle-bags, tin-cups, and coffee-pots, were sometimes left far behind in the chase." By the time New Mexico was reached, however, the raw recruits had become hardened troopers. Kearny entered Santa Fé on August 18, 1846, "without firing a shot, and after a fifty days' march of nearly nine hundred miles." As the first gun was fired during the hoisting of the flag, Kearny exclaimed, "There, my guns proclaim that the flag of the United States waves over this capital."

Late in 1846, following the conquest of New Mexico, Kearny began a march of a thousand miles from Santa Fé to San Diego to wrest California from the Mexicans. Guided by Kit Carson, the force of a hundred picked dragoons toiled over blazing desert. When Kearny finally reached California, his exhausted and almost starved blue-

coats were "well nigh naked — some of them barefoot — a sorry looking set." In a drizzling rain they fought a pitched battle at San Pascual on December 6, 1846. Kearny received two injuries and lost forty of his best officers and men, but he won the fight. After untold hardships he reached San Diego and joined forces with Commodore Robert F. Stockton in the capture of Los Angeles on January 10, 1847.

Returning to Washington, Kearny was brevetted major-general and ordered to Mexico. There he served as military and civil governor of Vera Cruz and Mexico City. While on duty in Mexico he contracted yellow fever, from the effects of which he died at St. Louis on October 31, 1848. His funeral was said to have been attended by the largest number of people that had ever assembled for such a purpose in that city.

In his varied career as a soldier Kearny exhibited no trait more conspicuously than his habit of decision and firmness. Calm and dispassionate in the formation of a judgment, he received advice and suggestions with an open mind but once his own decision was made he became immovable. A strict disciplinarian, Kearny "maintained a degree of fellowship, *esprit de corps*, and good feeling among the officers and men of his command which has seldom been equalled at any post." He willingly shared every hardship of the lowliest private. Once, when reduced to a diet of mule meat, he

gave the last pan of flour in camp to Kit Carson and two volunteers who volunteered to break through the enemy lines and secure reinforcements. It was such unselfish comradeship which made it possible for him to lead his men on forced marches against insuperable odds. Kearny was greatly beloved by the frontiersmen. "At all times courageous, bland, approachable, and just, yet stern, fixed, and unwavering when his decision was once formed, he not only acquired the respect, but commanded the confidence of all with whom official business or private relations brought him in contact."

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN