

by Richard W. Peterson

Tell the Boys I Die Happy

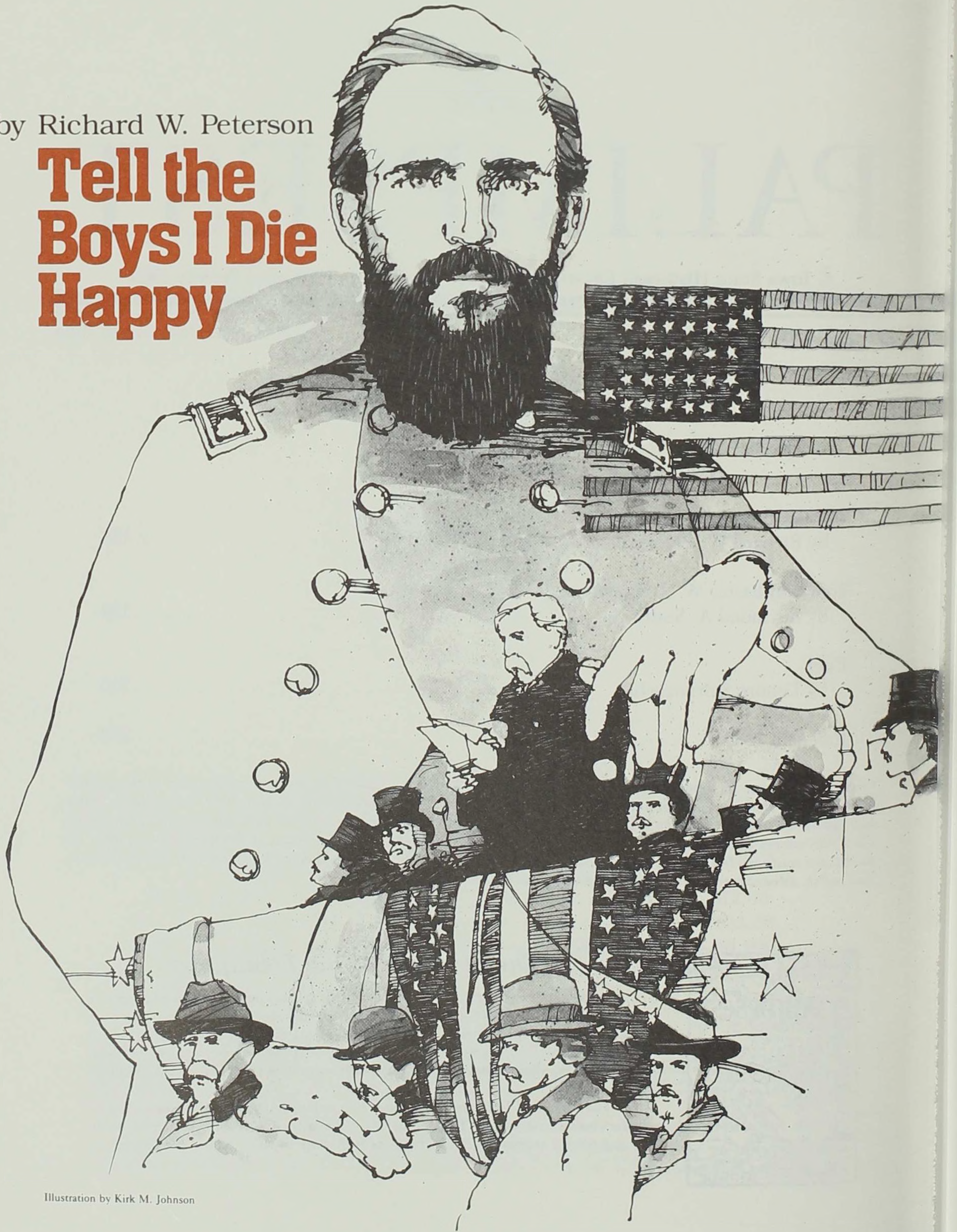


Illustration by Kirk M. Johnson

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By midmorning of May 18, 1863, the sun was high in the sky over western Mississippi, and the day was already blisteringly hot. The heat of the Deep South that day was adding misery to the already stern demands of combat for the Union forces on the attack and the Confederate troops defending as Grant's army pushed relentlessly west from Champion Hill toward soon-to-be besieged Vicksburg. If the excessive heat was misery for the troops in combat, it was agonizing torture for those wounded in the fierce fire fight the day before at Black River Bayou, who were lying in a nearby makeshift aid center beneath the blazing sun. There, among the dying, was William H. Kinsman who, as commanding officer of the Twenty-third Iowa Volunteer Infantry Regiment, had suffered fatal wounds the morning before when he led his regiment in a classic infantry charge across a cotton field toward the Confederate lines into a fusillade of enemy fire. Death came late that morning to the twenty-nine year old colonel, and he was buried by his men in an unmarked grave on the battlefield. There his remains lay for almost four decades until recovered by former soldiers of his command and returned north. The story of Kinsman's brief life, his death and burial on a southern battlefield and, years later, the removal and reinterment of his remains in his adopted northern hometown is a unique and compelling one.

Kinsman was born in Cornwallis, Nova Scotia, in 1834 but as a young man came to the United States and west to Council Bluffs, Iowa, then a bustling rough-and-ready frontier town on the Missouri River. Energetic and ambitious, he was by turns a schoolteacher, a reporter for the *Council Bluffs Nonpareil*, a local newspaper, and a lawyer; his adventurous nature took him to Colorado in the gold rush in 1859. Returning with a wealth of experience

but not much gold to Council Bluffs that same year, he was practicing law in the office of a local attorney when the guns of Charleston opened fire on Fort Sumter in April 1861.

In both the North and South many foreign-born Americans became fervent supporters of their respective causes; Kinsman was no exception. He was one of the first to enlist in the Fourth Iowa Volunteer Infantry Regiment which was raised locally by Colonel (later Major General) Grenville M. Dodge, a graduate of Norwich Military Academy in Vermont and in 1861 a civil engineer with an extensive background in railroad surveying. Dodge and Kinsman had already become acquainted in local party politics; Kinsman, said Dodge later, had impressed him by his intense and active work on behalf of the newly formed but burgeoning Republican party. After Dodge had completed raising the Fourth Iowa and had become its commanding officer, Kinsman, first elected as an officer in B Company, later became its captain and served with the regiment, including duty with distinction at the Battle of Pea Ridge, Missouri, until the summer of 1862. Following Dodge's promotion to brigadier general and his transfer from the Fourth Iowa, Kinsman also left the Fourth Iowa to become a newly appointed lieutenant colonel and the second-in-command of the Twenty-third Iowa Volunteer Infantry Regiment which was raised at Des Moines in August 1862. Following that regiment's transfer to St. Louis in the autumn of 1862 and the death of its commander, Kinsman was promoted to full colonel and placed in command.

Military command apparently only increased Kinsman's energy and ambition. Descriptions of the man by members of his regiment with whom he was popular and respected emphasized his restless, rather impatient, and certainly ambitious nature. Dodge, in later accounts, suggested that Kinsman sometimes chafed under the

restraints of discipline and often questioned the older officer as to its necessity, but was reassured by Dodge of its importance. Following the Battle of Pea Ridge, however, Dodge continued, Kinsman came forward to acknowledge with appreciation the good advice and how greatly he had benefited from it. (Dodge had many admirable character traits; modesty was not among them.) A letter written by Kinsman to Samuel J. Kirkwood, governor of Iowa, on January 3, 1863, from St. Louis requesting his [Kinsman's] appointment as a brigadier with five Iowa regiments and four batteries to act independently in the southern region [Missouri] while commanding officer of the Twenty-third Iowa displayed his extreme enthusiasm for and zealous attitude toward the Union cause. "To serve the country," his letter to the governor said, "our soldiers must fight. I repeat it, they must fight. Let me do my share. I know the ropes. My life is worth nothing to me if my country goes to ruin." In an expression of a later war, Kinsman was more than a little "eager!"

Although Kinsman's letter to the governor had no effect, his restless independence did. In early 1863, when his regiment had received no supplies, Kinsman defended freebooting foraging by the Twenty-third's troops around the Missouri countryside to his brigade commander, General Davidson. The general's critical remarks about the Iowa volunteers and their undisciplined ways led Kinsman, always loyal to his men, to respond in kind, and to the point of disobeying a direct order. The result was a court-martial in March 1863. Following a trial of over two weeks duration Kinsman received basically a reprimand and was restored to duty, but the restoration, unfortunately, was too late to allow him to rejoin his regiment before it left for the South to become a part of the massive assault force being assembled by Ulysses S. Grant for the encirclement and capture of Vicksburg.

After months of being frustrated during the

winter of 1862-63 in his attempts to capture the strategically important Mississippi River port city, Grant, in March 1863, was at his daring best and on the move: crossing the Mississippi River miles south of Vicksburg, he intended to drive northeast to take Jackson, Mississippi's state capital, and then turn west to attack, encircle, and capture Vicksburg by land. In March 1863, the Twenty-third Iowa and its sister regiments, the Twenty-first and Twenty-second, became a part of the corps of General John A. McClernand. It was after the Mississippi crossing, and after sharp fighting at Port Gibson had bloodied the Twenty-third, that Kinsman arrived to resume command in the first week of May. As earlier planned, the prongs of the Union drive pushed northeast and captured Jackson. In the second week of May the entire Federal force turned west and began its concerted drive toward Vicksburg. Lawler's Brigade, composed of the Eleventh Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry and the three Iowa regiments, was in a minor action at Champion Hill on May 16, but on the following day, as the Federal troops pushed the Confederate forces of General Pemberton west, the Iowa regiments were in the vanguard. When the advance paused near Big Black River, a natural barrier east of Vicksburg, Kinsman repeatedly requested permission of General Lawler to charge the Confederate line of defense on the river's east embankment. Dubious at first of the wisdom of a frontal assault, Lawler finally gave way to Kinsman's insistence and the four regiments, in column order, moved first to the near bank of the river, which flowed at that point from east to west before bending south to where the Confederates were waiting. The brigade advanced cautiously along the shore to the west under the cover of the south embankment with the Twenty-third Iowa in the lead followed by the other three regiments. By mid-morning all four regiments were positioned along the river embankment ready for an assault across a cotton field toward the Con-

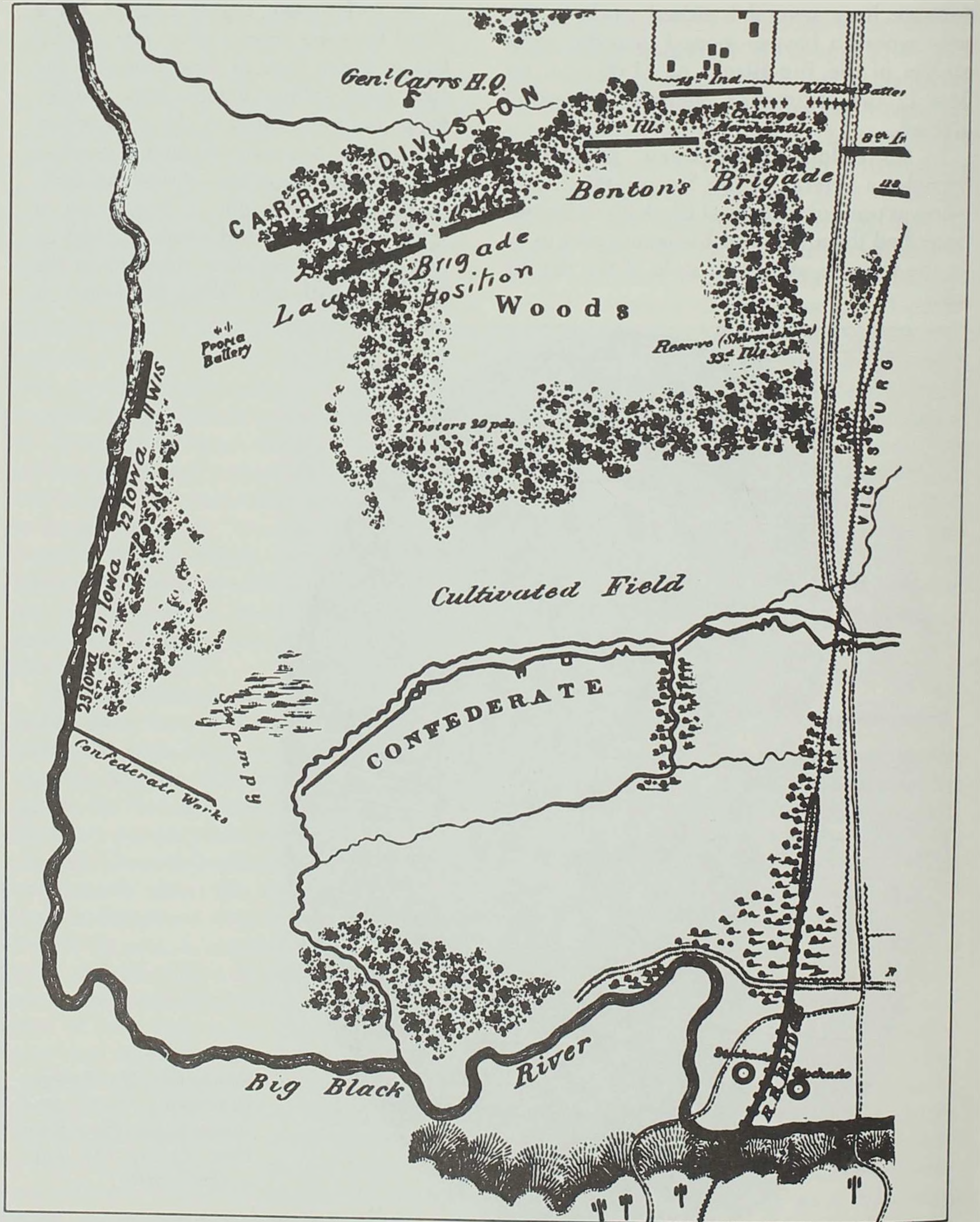
federate lines several hundred yards to the west where a bayou opened into the main stream of the Big Black. At 11:00 A.M. on May 17 the regiment's "moment of truth" arrived.

In his eulogy of Kinsman, Joseph A. Straight, a veteran of the Twenty-third Iowa who was present that day at Black River Bayou, described the attack and Kinsman's part in it. In the fulsome, oratorical style of the day he said:

The order came, and at a signal, like a cloud bursting from a clear sky, a solid line of brave boys in blue mounted the river bank without firing a gun, and flying as upon the wings of the wind across those cotton rows into the jaws of death—into the very rain of fire, of shot and shell, up against a solid line of brave men in gray, with a torrent of musketry thick as hail-stones tearing their ranks upon the left flank, with men falling like leaves in



Grenville M. Dodge, Kinsman's friend and commanding officer for a time during the war, c. 1865. (SHSI)



The Big Black River Bridge battlefield, taken from a War Department map. (SHSI)

autumn—yet ever onward went the bravest of the brave, until the bayou was crossed and the strong works were taken. . . ! But where was the brave commander? About fifty feet from the top of the river bank, while waving his sword and coolly ordering the regiment to be steady, double-quick, march, he was shot, a minie bullet passing through his sword belt and entirely through his body from the left side, his face being turned towards his regiment as he was urging them into a rush upon the enemy's works.

He said to a comrade who stopped to ask him where he was shot, "I am all right—go on with the boys! Give me your canteen; the Twenty-third will get there! Go and help them!" and with his hand upon the bleeding wound, proceeded to tear part of his shirt to staunch the flow of blood.

The boys did get there, and as they passed over the breast-works after passing through a bayou of water up to their arm-pits, leaving ninety officers and men scattered on the cotton field dead and wounded, their loved commander, their wounded and dying colonel, without coat, hat or sword-belt, came rushing across the bayou like as upon the wings of the wind, and with his naked sword waving around his head, shouting, "My brave boys; I knew you would do it!" and while shouting "On boys, on to the bridge," a stray shot from some Tennessean to the right of him passed through his body from right to left.

Men of his regiment carried him to a grove of trees where an improvised aid center had been established. There he lay in undoubtedly great pain until the next morning, when, after a few final words to those attending him, he quietly died. His body was buried as he had requested on the nearby battlefield.

As death ended Kinsman's career, the tide of war carried that of Dodge, his former commanding officer, to ever greater responsibility and recognition. After leaving the Fourth Iowa and gaining his first star, Dodge joined Sherman's western forces and served in securing and maintaining effective control of the railroad system serving the Union forces in Tennessee for his superior officer and close friend, "Cump." Later as commanding officer of the left wing of the Sixteenth Army Corps, Army of the Tennessee, he fought with vigor and distinction from the beginning of Sherman's campaign at Chattanooga in May 1864 until he was wounded during the siege of Atlanta in August. Following a term as commander of the District of Missouri, Dodge concluded his active military career on the Great Plains in the Indian conflicts of the mid-1860s; Dodge City, Kansas, named for him, is a present-day reminder of his days on the western frontier. His railroad engineering background and a chance meeting with Abraham Lincoln when the president-to-be had visited Council Bluffs in August 1859 had involved him in early transcontinental railroad planning. In 1866 he was appointed chief engineer of the embryonic Union Pacific Railroad which was then edging west from the Missouri River. He would continue in that position until the road's completion at Promontory Point, Utah, in May 1869. As his railroad enterprises progressed, Dodge became well established not only in railroad development, but in other business ventures as well, and counted as close friends his former commander-in-chief, General—or President—U. S. Grant and many other influential business and national leaders of the day. While there were—and still are—critics of Dodge, he was a man of his times: energetic, innovative, crafty, and, at times, ruthless. Yet even with the mercenary qualities, loyalty to friends, particularly old comrades-in-arms, was a paramount feature of his character. Thus when the century was drawing to a close, and two vet-



Grenville M. Dodge responded immediately with earnest encouragement and financial assistance when two veterans of the Twenty-third Iowa Volunteer Infantry Regiment requested his help in locating the remains of his friend and former junior officer, Colonel William H. Kinsman. (courtesy the Historic Grenville Dodge House, Inc., Council Bluffs)

erans of the Twenty-third Iowa Volunteer Infantry Regiment approached him for assistance in locating the remains of his former junior officer, Kinsman, on the Mississippi battlefield and returning them to Council Bluffs for reinterment, he responded immediately with earnest encouragement and financial assistance.

One attempt to locate the colonel's grave in the 1880s had been unsuccessful. In 1898 Joseph A. Straight and Jesse Truitt, both aging members of the Grand Army of the Republic (G.A.R.), gained the support of Dodge and returned to the Black River Bayou battlefield armed with more accurate information. They located the colonel's remains and returned with them to Council Bluffs. Under the direction of General Dodge and with the assistance of the local G.A.R. post, an appropriate granite

memorial was erected by public subscription in Fairview Cemetery at the north edge of the city, in a section called the "Soldiers' Circle," already the location of many Union veterans' graves. Dedicatory exercises were scheduled for May 17, 1902, the thirty-ninth anniversary of the battle in which Kinsman had fallen.

Early on the morning of the 17th, thirty-five veterans of the Twenty-third Iowa, members of Kinsman Post No. 7, G.A.R., mustered in the rotunda of the Iowa Statehouse in Des Moines. There, under the watchful eye and direction of the state archivist in charge of Civil War memorabilia, the battle colors of the Twenty-third Iowa were carefully removed from the large glass display where they were kept with the flags of dozens of other Iowa Civil War regiments and delivered with ceremony

into the hands of the former regimental color sergeant of the Twenty-third Iowa. The contingent then marched from the statehouse west across the Des Moines River and south to the Rock Island depot where a special train was waiting to take them to the Kinsman Memorial ceremonies in Council Bluffs, one hundred and thirty miles to the west. Arriving late in the morning, the veterans of the Twenty-third detrained, formed ranks, and, led by the color sergeant proudly bearing the now unfurled standard, marched north to a central city park to join veterans of the Fourth Iowa who awaited them. From the park the dedication parade with General Dodge as president of the day, composed of local and out-of-town dignitaries, bands, veterans' groups, National Guard troops, and the Council Bluffs High School Cadet Corps marched north to Fairview Cemetery and up the long slope where they finally reached the shrouded Kinsman Memorial on the top of one of the bluffs from which the city took its name.

The newspaper descriptions of the dedication ceremony provided a wealth of detail: the grey-bearded, distinguished General Dodge in the center of the platform as master of ceremonies with old soldiers and veterans, city officials, and citizens of Council Bluffs gathered about him; the unveiled granite shaft monument with the bronze medallion of Kinsman rising behind the townspeople, old and young. Members of the high school cadet corps in grey uniforms on the east side of the large memorial circle faced on the west side the khaki-clad, campaign-seasoned veterans of the local National Guard unit which had recently returned from combat duty in the Philippine

Insurrection. The newspaper reprinted the speeches which were filled with the typically florid language of the day. In our own times such oratory might seem flowery, bordering on the grandiose or the exaggerated, but on May 17, 1902, it was the style of the moment, and was considered in order.

More than twelve decades have passed since the fury of the infantry assault that morning at Black River Bayou near Vicksburg, decades during which the nation has endured other wars—wars that brought both the high fervor of patriotic response and the depths of frustrated confusion. During those wars Kinsman and his comrades-in-arms have rested in quiet vigil on the peaceful hilltop overlooking the Missouri River Valley. To visit the Kinsman memorial and the graves of those lying there, as it is to visit the thousands of similar memorials and grave sites in both the North and the South, is to be reminded of the sacrifices made by those lying there. It is to reflect and, indeed, be moved to know that there was once a place, a time, and a day in which a mortally wounded military commander would say, as did Kinsman in his final hours, "Tell the boys I die happy, I fell at the head of my regiment, doing my duty!" □

Note on Sources

A wealth of material for this article was drawn from the *Council Bluffs Nonpareil* for the period before and during the dedication exercises for the Kinsman monument. A published volume of *Nonpareil* news stories was also valuable, the *History of the Recovery and Final Interment of the Remains of Col. W.H. Kinsman and the Erection and Unveiling of the Kinsman Monument at Council Bluffs, Iowa, May 17, 1902*. Source materials were also provided by the Historic General Dodge House, Inc., Council Bluffs, which included photographs of both Kinsman and Grenville M. Dodge.