

Christian Soldier

When men are drafted for military service in a wholesale manner, as at present, we seem to forget the volunteer system of recruiting the Union Army in the Civil War. Ambitious citizens raised companies, patriotic rallies were held, and men, proud of their physical fitness and loyalty, enlisted. Eventually, when more troops were needed, they were drafted, but men were allowed to hire substitutes. Iowa quotas were usually filled by volunteers.

One day in midsummer of 1862, when Amasa O. Allen was in Maquoketa on business, he ran into a whirlwind campaign for recruits. Lee was frightfully aggressive, and Lincoln's forces seemed demoralized in the face of this critical campaign. Could men who loved their country resist the call for volunteers? Allen was a busy farmer. With his wife and two small children he was doing his utmost to earn a living and live in peace. He had come to town with no thought of enlisting, but as he listened to the appeals for recruits, he decided to volunteer at once in what later became Company I, of the Twenty-fourth Regiment of Iowa Volunteer Infantry.

Consternation reigned at home when he broke the news. The young wife, Agnes, put up a brave front, but her heart quailed at the thought of being left to run the farm and care for little Charles and baby Mattie. What it meant to the young father, to leave his dear family and go off to face the uncertainties of war, can be gathered from the loving letters he sent from the various camps and at the battle front.

"Leaving Maquoketa," he wrote from Muscatine on August 31st, "we proceeded to DeWitt, where we arrived at half past one. After dinner, we started for Davenport, where we arrived after dark — a tired, hungry set of boys. But after partaking of Mr. Davises supper and all camping on the floor, we felt somewhat refreshed. Saturday morning we loaded our baggage into wagons, then formed into line and marched down to the levee and aboard the steamer *Denmark* but did not start until just as we sat down to dinner, when we steered down the river for Muscatine, arriving about four o'clock. We marched up to the hotel where we left our baggage and had an introduction to our Colonel Byam.

"Then we started for Camp Strong on foot, distance about two and one half miles. Arriving there we were cheered by the regiment, and then marched to our barracks, which are very good

buildings, forty by twenty feet, with four tiers of bunks, one above the other."

Camp Strong — probably typical of the army camps in 1862 was situated, according to Allen, on an island of 2700 acres below Muscatine. "There are twenty-six barracks," he wrote, "and about 1500 soldiers, 900 of which belong to our regiment — and a better looking lot of men, I never saw! But the 'Excelsior Guards' get the praise every time we pass through. Adjutant General Baker made us a speech on the Denmark, and told us that we were the best company that ever passed through Davenport. . . . We are getting settled, and camp life is not harder than I expected. But, if it was not for my Country, give me home, where my wife and little ones can be with me!"

Spiritual needs were not neglected as is evidenced by his statement: "Today we were all escorted into a hollow square, and listened to some of the best addresses that I ever heard, by Reverend Truesdale, and I never saw a congregation keep as good order in a church, as did that 1500 men, seated on the ground — and many were the wet faces, as we listened to the advice that was given. Since writing the above we had a prayer meeting in our tent, and we had a good one before we closed."

No mail had come from home by September 10th, though he had written three times. "I want to hear that my beloved wife and little ones are well", he wrote. "I am well and enjoy camp life better than I expected, but there are some rough boys here, from all parts of the state. There are some twenty-two hundred men here — but most of the men of the 24th Regiment are steady, and have prayer meetings in their barracks every night and preaching twice on Sunday."

Of the first thirteen dollars he was paid he sent ten dollars home. He hoped "to get a furlough for a week," in order "to come home and see how you get along, and kiss my dear family once more". But neither the furlough nor the paymaster came. By September 17th he had part of his military clothing — "dress boots, pants, and caps and blankets". The other garments were issued after the regiment was mustered in on September 18th. "Don't think I am homesick," he insisted, "for I am not, but would like to see the friends at Sharon." On the roster he was listed as second corporal.

Basic training was brief and perfunctory. By the end of six weeks the regiment was preparing to leave Camp Strong. All the equipment had arrived, including "Enfield rifles that were taken from the rebels. They were never unboxed and

came here with 'C. S. A.' marked on the boxes. They are a nice gun and weight just ten pounds, and the boys feel very proud of them."

Corporal Allen wished his wife could visit him before he was transferred to front-line duty, but the wish appears to have been unfulfilled. "About fifty men, women and children are here visiting our company today", he wrote on October 12th, and "they all bring baskets of provisions. Since I came to camp, I have hardly had a meal without pies, cakes, molasses, baked chicken, etc. But these days will soon be over, and then I expect to see no more of my friends until I come home, and I don't want to come to stay, until the last Rebel is driven so near the Gulf of Mexico that they will have just room enough to kneel down to be shot."

A little touch of wifely anxiety must have crept into Mrs. Allen's letters, for he goes on to explain: "Ag, you wanted to know if we kept up our prayer meetings; we do, twice a week, and sometimes every night, besides preaching twice each Sabbath. You wanted to know if I used any profane language. No, I do not — Ag, I have made up my mind to return no worse than when we parted, and just as much better as I can."

Company I of the Twenty-fourth Regiment left Camp Strong on October 20th, on the steamer

Hawkeye State, arriving at St. Louis on October 22nd, but the troops were ordered to remain on board and proceed to Helena, Arkansas, as soon as knapsacks arrived.

The first active experience of the Twenty-fourth Iowa was in foraging for food. One of the men was shot while on such an expedition. "The ball struck him in the back, and followed a rib around, and came out below the pit of the stomach and he caught the ball in his hand."

On November 15th, the regiment received orders to be ready to march in three hours with three days' rations. Under General A. P. Hovey, a large force moved down the river to attack Arkansas Post. The maneuver failed, however, and the expeditionary force returned to Helena.

"Perhaps you would like to know how we live", wrote Allen to his wife. "While we were down the river last week, we had Iron Clad crackers, and Sow Belly, and coffee, when we could get a chance to make it. You may think that it is rather hard feed, but it is nothing when we get used to it — we shut our eyes and 'chaw' whatever they give us and call it good". His letters never complained or revealed any deterioration of character. Certainly Corporal Allen sustained the reputation of the Twenty-fourth as the "Temperance Regiment", noted for the abstinence and

piety of the men. His attitude was always that of a brave Christian soldier, whose greatest hope was righteous victory for his country.

On picket duty "it was so warm that I did not take my blankets out of my knapsack — much more like May than the 19th of December." Back in Iowa, he assumed, they were sleigh riding. "Perhaps I will step in some day and take you out riding! Wouldn't we enjoy it — but we will wait a bit, till we *whip Old Jeff*, then I will come home to stay with you."

A long letter on New Year's Day carried a message of optimistic faith. He wanted to appear cheerful despite the hardships of war. The regimental camp was on low ground and sickness was prevalent. "My health still keeps good," he wrote, "but some of our boys look rather hard." About thirty-five were "not fit for duty".

He deplored the absence of the paymaster. Not that he needed the money, for he had "not used fifty cents" since he left Iowa, but he knew his wife was having a hard time. "Ag," he advised, "if you think best, you can have Uncle Cha try and see if he can sell my right to that land with the house on it. If I don't get back by spring he can sell what little I have for money or anything else that he thinks best, for I don't think it will amount to much unless I should come home soon.

You can talk with him and see what he thinks about it. The cow and heifers, you had better try and keep, for they will get better; they are good property at any time."

He was pleased to answer a note from his small son, Charley. "I hope you will be a good boy and remember all the prayers that your Mama learns you", he admonished. "Mama says your feet are so sore that you cannot go to school; you must read at home and learn to write so you can write me a good long letter. Charley, you did not tell me who gave you and sister Mattie all those nice things at Christmas. When you write again you must tell me all about it. Take good care of little Mattie and help Mama all you can, and Papa will come home soon."

Meanwhile, the campaign against Confederate strongholds on the Mississippi was developing. News of heavy casualties became more frequent. By January 10th the regiment had received orders to pack up and be ready to board a boat for some unknown destination. "Now Ag, don't worry about me, because I say we don't know where we are going". Two weeks later heavy rains had flooded the camp. "You don't know anything about mud in Iowa; there, there is some bottom to it, but here there is none." Though the regiment moved to higher ground, sickness still

plagued the men. Exposure to inclement weather on scouting duty disabled many. Four were discharged from Company I "and quite a number more soon will be", reported Corporal Allen on February 8th. Fortunately he had not been sick a day since he enlisted.

And so the winter passed. Spring came early in Arkansas, but the Twenty-fourth Iowa continued to mark time at Helena. "Some of the regiments are getting nearly discouraged", Allen wrote. But in March the Iowans drilled hard every afternoon until the Eleventh Indiana, tired of that drudgery, cut the levee above the town and flooded the drill ground. "The river being high, it soon overflowed the whole town, and now half the houses in Helena have to be reached by boat. The river is still rising — 16 inches more of water, and there will not be a foot of dry land in the town."

Friends at home sent loads of potatoes, turnips, beets, and some sauerkraut, dried peaches, molasses, and ginger snaps, concerning which he remarked, "So you see we are living very well, and are not suffering for food and clothing, as I hear it is reported in Iowa. But I think it is from some *Copperhead*." One can read between the lines his contempt for such propaganda.

Soon after a big "war meeting" of ten thousand

troops, addressed by prominent generals to develop morale, the long period of waiting came to an end. The Twenty-fourth Iowa was assigned to the Second Brigade of the Twelfth Division, Thirteenth Army Corps, and ordered to join General Grant's army in the operations against Vicksburg. By April 24, 1863, the regiment was located at Fisk Plantation, Louisiana, five miles from the Mississippi, and twenty miles from Vicksburg.

Amasa Allen liked Louisiana. "We are in one of the finest countries that ever lay out of doors", he wrote. "The Rebels intended to farm rather extensively in corn. Within the last week I have passed through millions of acres that was about eight inches high, and did look fine — until the army passed through and let the cattle in to feed it down." Evidently the Union men did not scorch the earth, but they devastated pretty thoroughly for, "Mr. Rebel will not raise anything in this part of Rebeldom, this season, nor will they have many houses to live in when they return."

The campaign was progressing in earnest. Gunboats were nightly running the blockade and the army was maneuvering into position around the doomed city. "We left ten of our boys at Milliken's Landing, who were unable to march, and

we have since heard that two of them died", wrote Corporal Allen. As for himself, his health was good, but two arduous weeks had left him fatigued.

"My dear", he wrote to his wife on May 5th, "I will try to give you an idea of where we have been since the 28th of April. At two P. M. we left our camp at Perkins Plantation two miles from the Mississippi and thirty miles below Vicksburg. We marched to the river, boarded transports and lay there until twelve o'clock at night, when we started down the river; at sunrise we were in sight of the fortifications of Grand Gulf. We also found seven of our best gunboats. Soon after we arrived, the flagship signaled for the fort to surrender, which it would not do, and at fifteen minutes before eight the boats turned their prows toward the Fort. When within about a mile, the batteries opened fire on our boats, to which they responded, and the firing began in earnest — the engagement lasted about six hours. It was the intention of our General to land the Infantry at the Fort, but the bluffs were too high, and there were too many rifle pits to climb. Our boat lay about three miles from the batteries, and in plain sight. I must say it was the grandest sight that ever I saw."

The attack having failed, the gunboats and

transports retired, the troops disembarked and marched down the levee opposite the town, and the boats ran past the Confederate batteries in the dark. In the morning the soldiers boarded the transports and went down stream to Bruinsburg where they landed and drew rations for four days. About sundown, they started for Port Gibson, and marched all night, in order to get in the rear of Grand Gulf.

“In the morning of May 1st we heard the cannon begin to boom. They fired about 400 shots, and all was still. The Rebels had evacuated Grand Gulf, and were making their way to Vicksburg, and our advance had overtaken them in the night. The Rebels chose their battle ground at Magnolia Church. Our division arrived at sunrise, and we had about 30 minutes for breakfast, and our Brigade was ordered into the field. We unslung knapsacks and advanced about half a mile, and were ordered to lie down until we were wanted. We lay there half an hour, the shells and balls whistling over us, when orders came for Second Brigade forward — We advanced about 80 rods and were ordered into a canebrake — the worst place that white men ever saw! Again we were ordered to lie down. Here we were in range of the enemy, and had it not been for the canebrake, our Regiment would have been badly cut up. As

it was, our Regiment got separated, on account of our Colonel not standing up to the rest. He is not the man to hitch to, in a tight place. He gave no more commands through the day. Lieutenant Colonel John Q. Wilds and Major Ed Wright are men that won't flinch in a tight place. They led us through the fight. Our Brigade was then ordered out of the woods to take a Battery. The 24th Regiment was kept in the rear all forenoon, so that when we got out of the woods, the Battery was taken and the Rebs had all left.

"We rested a half hour, and were ordered to follow them, and advanced about a mile, when the Secesh shells began to burst all around us. The Rebels did not come out into the open field — they kept in the woods all day. The 24th was then ordered to support the Peoria Battery; we lay down close to the Battery, but the Rebels got range of us, and the balls were flying thick when General Hovey came and ordered us to change position, or we would get all cut to pieces; so we removed a few rods, and were out of range.

"We lay there a short time and were then ordered to double quick through the fire of the enemy for about 80 rods, and lie down in front of one of our batteries. We got to fire only two rounds, the whole day, as they kept us as support.

"The battle lasted till dark, and our Regiment

lost one killed and ten wounded. The Rebs considered themselves badly whipped and made tracks for their hole in Vicksburg. We had double the force of the enemy — not more than one third of them were on the field”.

The Confederates retreated eastward to Port Gibson, where they crossed Bayou Pierre and burned a bridge. This detained the Union forces about eighteen hours, but, said Corporal Allen, “we are again after them with a sharp stick, and shall follow them, until the last Secesh has given himself up, as a prisoner.” Port Gibson fell on May 2nd.

“I often thought of home on the first day of May”, confessed the soldier, “when the bullets were whistling and the shells bursting and was glad that you did not know where I was, for I know you would have been crazy — But the day is past, and I am safe — I never even thought of being shot, and I can’t say I was at all scared. I didn’t fire but twice, and then was as cool as if I had been shooting at a mark. It is dark and I must close by wishing you good night, and may God protect and care for you until I return” —

There the record ends. Whether Corporal Allen fought at Champion’s Hill on May 16th, where the Twenty-fourth Iowa lost 45 per cent of its men, is not known. Perhaps he won his

promotion to the rank of first sergeant in that terrible battle. Sometime in May or June, during the hard fighting around Vicksburg, he was taken sick and removed to Memphis, Tennessee. From a hospital there, on July 3, 1863, the chaplain wrote to Agnes Allen that her husband was dying. It was his last wish that she should take care of their children and meet him at last in heaven, the home of the good.

The young wife was distracted with grief, but she had her two children to rear, and she could not sit and mourn. Amasa Allen's Uncle "Cha" Lamson assisted her in the sale of property, and build a small brick house, near his own, in Anamosa. There she bravely faced life, doing sewing for others, and making a living as best she could.

The Christianity and patriotism of Amasa O. Allen have served as guiding beacons for the later generations of his family. The daughter Mattie married, but left no children: Charlie married Lillian Wheeler and had two daughters — Mrs. G. Leming of Hampton and Mrs. Ray Baird of Webster City. Two great grandsons, Allen Baird and Alfred Baird, are now in the service of the United States Army — Christian soldiers like their great grandfather.

BESSIE L. LYON