

# THE PALIMPSEST

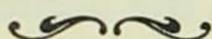
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## Life in the Army

To the civilian far from the battlefields or the historian long after the military campaigns have ended, war is regarded as a sort of social phenomenon. The public is concerned with the collective behavior of the armed forces, the general conduct of the war, and the broad results. But armies are composed of men and grand strategy is the coordination of detailed movements of troops. The soldier in the ranks sees the war from his own particular viewpoint. Battles break down into thousands of individual fights, at long range perhaps and usually impersonal. Actual combat consumes relatively little time. The experiences of Civil War veterans, for example, as recorded in letters and diaries, included many activities not of belligerent character.

After three years of campaigning in Missouri, Arkansas, Tennessee, and Mississippi, the term of enlistment of most of the men in the Third Iowa Cavalry expired. More than 600, or nearly all

who were fit for duty, straightway reënlisted as veteran volunteers on January 1, 1864. Thereupon the depleted regiment was relieved from duty at Little Rock, Arkansas, and returned to Keokuk. On February 12th the men were given a month's furlough to go home, visit their friends, and secure recruits. The Third Iowa Cavalry was composed mainly of men from Lee, Van Buren, Davis, Jefferson, Appanoose, Wayne, Decatur, Marion, Monroe, and Lucas counties. There were only eight from Ringgold, including Commissary Sergeant George L. Bathe, Second Sergeant Henry Ross, Fifth Corporal John W. Blades of Company M, and five privates, three in Company M and the Baldwin brothers in Company L.

Although about 250 men out of Ringgold's small population of 2923 had already answered the call to arms, further recruiting was not impossible, for nine more men were induced to join the Third Cavalry. Among these were Benjamin Keller and his two brothers-in-law, William Everley and Isaac Talley. All three had been married about three years and were engaged in farming, but the need of the country seemed great enough to transcend their innate love of home and family.

Benjamin Keller was born in Noble County,

Ohio, on May 12, 1833. In 1856 his father moved to Ringgold County, following the tide of immigration then beginning to populate southwestern Iowa. In 1859 Ben purchased eighty acres of land from his father, and on February 9, 1860, he married Sarah E. Talley. Being raised as farmers, they planned to continue in a home of their own.

When Ben Keller decided to enlist his leave taking was not easy. Besides his young wife, a baby daughter hardly sixteen months old had to be left behind. However, Ben was assured that they would be well cared for because the neighborhood was composed of closely related families of Stahls, Talleys, and Kellers who would willingly look after Mrs. Keller's welfare.

Like many Civil War soldiers, Ben Keller kept a diary. It began on "February 29 A. D. 1864 — B. Keller left home to go into the United States Service". With the exception of April, May, and June, 1864, when he made only five entries, the diary constituted a nearly complete daily account of his war experiences. The items were usually brief, but gave a good picture of some phases of a soldier's life. From it, in conjunction with official accounts and letters, it is possible to learn what occupied the time of the soldiers of the Third Iowa Cavalry during 1864 and 1865.

After being mustered into the United States service at Fort Des Moines, the recruits were sent to Camp McClellan at Davenport for preliminary training. Further training, as well as arms and mounts, were received at St. Louis, Missouri. After some active service in Arkansas, Ben and his brothers-in-law were apparently transferred to Memphis, Tennessee, where on July 25th they were assigned to Company M by Colonel John W. Noble. On that day Ben also recorded that he "went on a scout fifteen mile southeast of Memphis."

On August 5th Colonel Noble "Started from Memphis on an expedition" to Oxford, Mississippi, with 351 men. By the 7th they had reached Holly Springs, Mississippi. The next day the Confederates were encountered at the Tallahatchie River, where the Union forces drove them back across Hurricane Creek and thence to Oxford. On the 9th Oxford was shelled. Then, after several skirmishing and scouting excursions, the Third Iowa "marched to Oxford" again and "burned the town." Three days later the rebels were well routed, and the Federal troops gained a short respite at Memphis.

Presently, however, part of the Third Iowa Cavalry, commanded by Major Benjamin S. Jones, was detached for special duty, this time

destined for the campaign against General Sterling Price in western Missouri. Ben began his account on October 22nd when they started marching soon after midnight and, after crossing the Little Blue River, joined Major General Alfred Pleasanton's force at Independence. "Our Regt", wrote Keller, was "put in the front at dark driving the rebels 5 mi." Though the Third Iowa was "releaved at 10 Pm." there was "fiting till midnight", and the soldiers lay "in line of battle all night." At the end of twenty-four hours during the skirmish at Independence the men had no food, nor the horses any water.

On Sunday, October 23rd, the "battle of the big blew river commenced at Sunrise." The Third Iowa Cavalry was again placed in front at 8 A. M., charging the "rebs on foot, driving them 1 mile to the praire where a mounted Charge took place." That afternoon the Confederate troops were scattered and retreated southward. The next day at sunrise the pursuit began along the Missouri-Kansas State line. Ben and his comrades rode sixty-five miles before contacting General Price's rear guard at about 2 o'clock the next morning.

The "battle of the Osage River commenced at day brake" on October 25, 1864, with the capture of one cannon and twenty-five wagons. Seven

miles farther south at Mine Creek seven more pieces of artillery and 800 prisoners were taken, among whom were Major General John S. Marmaduke captured by James Dunlavy of Company D and Brigadier General William L. Cabell taken by Sergeant C. M. Young of Company L. Sixteen miles farther on the rebels made another stand, but again they were routed. Across Arkansas and into Indian Territory the cavalry pursued the fleeing Confederates without again overtaking them. By the end of November Major Jones's troop was again at Benton Barracks, having marched 1650 miles in less than three months.

This was the last fighting in which Ben Keller participated. The regiment was again united at Louisville, Kentucky, in January, 1865, and during the last months of the war was busy policing captured territory in Georgia. Six companies of the Third Cavalry helped take Columbus, Georgia, but Company M was not one of these, "being left to guard the wagon train." Active service ended on August 9, 1865, when the regiment was mustered out at Atlanta, Georgia.

If Ben Keller's diary is indicative of the interests of the soldiers, military exploits were scarcely as prominent as personal comfort, routine duties, news from home, and incidental experiences. Re-

ligion, for example, played a prominent part in maintaining morale in the army. Regimental chaplains conducted services for those soldiers who cared to attend. Since Ben Keller was a devout person, he seems to have attended divine worship whenever possible. His first mention of this was while he was in Little Rock, Arkansas, during June, 1864. There he "attended Colard quarterly meting" two Sundays.

The campaigns during the summer disrupted all religious gatherings for several months, so it was not until November 20, 1864, that Ben was able to attend church at Springfield, Missouri. Some Sundays he and his comrades went to church three times. This was especially true during the winter of 1864-65 while "religion [was] flourishing in camp." When the troops reached Georgia, religious services consisting of preaching by Chaplain James W. Latham of the Third Iowa Cavalry, prayer meetings, and Bible class were held not only on Sundays, but throughout the week as well. At many of these Ben "helped to seat a piece of ground" for the meetings.

Letters are important to soldiers. Mrs. Keller proved to be a faithful correspondent, as her husband mentioned many letters he received from her. One of these was particularly important to Ben. On December 2, 1864, he learned that a

month before a daughter, Rosa, had been born to his wife.

Speeches intended to stimulate courage and patriotism were common in the Civil War. Probably the experiences of the men in the Third Cavalry were typical. According to Keller's diary there were several such occasions during the summer of 1865. The first of June had been pronounced a "day of mourning and prayer and humiliation" for the death of President Lincoln. At one o'clock the Third Iowa Cavalry marched to the Presbyterian Church in Atlanta. There, amidst flags "dressed in mourning", they heard a "discourse delivered by the chaplain of the 3rd Iowa, Latham, suited to the occasion."

On June 10, 1865, Brevet Major General Emory Upton, commander of the division to which the Third Iowa Cavalry belonged, recited the achievements of his troops and praised their valor. "Though many of you have not received the reward which your gallantry has entitled you to," he observed, "you have received the commendation of your superior officers, and have won the admiration and gratitude of your countrymen. You will return to your homes with the proud consciousness of having defended the flag of your country in the hour of the greatest national peril, while through your instrumentality liberty and

civilization will have advanced the greatest stride recorded in history."

Numerous other men addressed the soldiers. On July 10, 1865, James Johnson, Provisional Governor of Georgia from June 17th to December 14th of that year, spoke on the "state of the country" and urged the need of a reconstruction of the nation. John A. Kasson from Iowa delivered a short speech when the first orders for mustering out were read on July 21st. Three days before leaving Atlanta, Colonel John W. Noble presented a new flag to the regiment and took that occasion to praise his soldiers for the valiant way they had conducted themselves throughout the war.

When not engaged in battle or on the march, much time was spent in routine army procedure. Drill was the order of the day most of the time, and inspections were monotonously frequent. Sunday inspection, general inspection, inspection of arms, horses, and quarters were ordered repeatedly. In addition to these, dress parade was held nearly every week while the troops remained on guard duty in Georgia following the cessation of hostilities.

For a cavalry troop there was the additional necessity of caring for the horses. When the supply of hay was low, the horses had to be taken

out to graze every morning and evening. Besides this, the horses had to be shod and otherwise kept in condition.

Guard duty was another task that often proved unwelcome. Camp guard and horse guard had to be stood, sometimes for twenty-four hours, often in rain or snow. Occasionally there was special guard duty. At Elyton, Alabama, and Columbus, Georgia, the supply train had to be watched by Company M. In Montgomery the streets were patrolled. Ben Keller was stationed to safeguard "Judge" McKendree's home in Columbus while the public works in general were burned by the United States forces.

Fatigue duty was varied. It might range from building a bridge to cleaning up the quarters. At one time the men of Company M had to rive clapboards to build shelters for themselves. Unloading a barge of hay, working at the stable, laying a pontoon bridge, and making corduroy roads across the bottom of Swamp Creek were a few of the tasks in which Keller participated on the march from Louisville, Kentucky, to Montgomery, Alabama. At Atlanta the grounds around the hospital had to be cleaned. During June, 1865, Ben went to cook for five others of Company M while they were rebuilding a railroad bridge across the Chattahoochee River. On returning to

camp, he recorded that he cleaned up around headquarters and put up horse troughs.

Army life has always involved early rising. The call to start the day was likely to come at any time after two o'clock in the morning and usually the company was on the march within an hour afterward. Reveille was recorded by Ben Keller as early as eleven P. M., and Boots and Saddles hardly ever came later than "day Brake". When the cavalry was on an expedition, twenty to thirty miles were covered in a single day with as high as sixty-five miles traversed in times of great urgency.

Transportation was a continual problem. On raids and active campaigns, of course, the cavalry traveled horseback, but when troops were transferred from one theater of the war to another other means of transportation were used. Railroads carried supplies and sometimes troops. More often in the west the armies were moved by steamboat on the Tennessee, Ohio, Mississippi, and Missouri rivers. Thus, during October, 1864, the Third Iowa Cavalry traveled by boat from Cape Girardeau to St. Louis. On this short trip it was necessary to unload the men and a part of the horses in order to get over the sandbars. On December 10, 1864, Company M was ordered on board the *Schuyler*, but the river was so full of ice

that the boat did not attempt to start. The next day the ice broke several boats loose from the wharf so it was decided to go by way of the railroad to Cairo, as this was a more certain means of travel in the winter.

Ben Keller's diary mentioned some incidents which reflect no glory or honor upon the army. On the march from Montgomery, Alabama, to Columbus, Georgia, the troops lay by the roadside several hours, "the officers being too drunk to travel." On the Clinton Road from Columbus to Macon the Third Iowa Cavalry was "halted and by order each man in the command was searched for gold, silver, and other property taken unlawfully on the expedition."

Sickness is one of the serious hazards of army life. During the Civil War thousands of soldiers contracted diseases and hundreds died. Only twice, however, did Keller mention being sick during his period of enlistment. Even then he was more fortunate than many of his comrades for he had only "chills and fever".

Amid the innumerable duties of military life, there were still a few intervals for private interests and recreation. Each man had to take care of his personal belongings. Clothing had to be washed and mended. Ben Keller made a knapsack while in Atlanta. One day while he was washing his

blanket in a creek, a Confederate soldier suddenly appeared and demanded his money and gun. Ben, noticing some uncertainty on the part of the Southerner, refused and then discovered that his would-be captor had no ammunition. As a result, the tables were turned, and the Confederate was captured. On another occasion he visited the battlefield at Peach Creek. Blackberry hunting was also a welcome diversion in the summer of 1865.

Besides keeping a diary and writing letters, Ben tried to compose ballads. Once he mentioned that he spent the day writing five, of which four have been preserved with his diary. Three of them were in Negro dialect, probably based upon his own observations. Written for his own amusement, the ballads like the diary were not models of orthography or poetry, but they were probably typical of many similar efforts by Union soldiers. One, called "Oald Shady", expressed the irrepressible jubilation and childlike faith of the free Negroes. His "Song of Babylon" and "Grandmother Told Me So" represent the naive attitude of the slaves toward the war. A ballad which expressed the sentiments of many of his comrades was "A Soldier's Farewell to Home".

Ben Keller was unusually thrifty. During 1864 he drew \$265.45 in monthly pay and bounty

checks. Of this he sent \$235 home for his wife and family. When he was mustered out, the government still owed him \$100 in bounty besides some monthly pay. He kept a record of the clothing drawn and the value of it. At first he received a blouse — \$3.15; 1 pair of pants — \$2.50; 1 gum blanket — \$2.48; 1 woolen blanket — \$3.35; 2 shirts — \$2.80; 1 pair of drawers — \$.95; 1 overcoat — \$7.50; 1 hat — \$1.60; 1 pea jacket — \$6.00; and 1 pair of socks — \$.35. Later he drew the following articles: 2 pairs of cavalry pants — \$8.30; 1 overcoat — \$10.50; 1 pair of boots — \$3.25; 2 pairs of drawers — \$2.00; 1 hat — \$1.80; 1 blouse — \$2.50; 2 pairs of socks — \$.70; and 1 shirt — \$1.50.

On August 5, 1865, the men of Company M turned over their arms and horses, and on August 9th the regiment was mustered out at Atlanta, broke camp, and boarded the cars, bound for Davenport where "the sitisins gave us a reception by making a short speech witch was followed by colonel Noble." On August 19th they were "paid off and Discharged from the United States Service" at Camp McClellan.

Ben Keller at once boarded a boat for Burlington. On Sunday, the next day, he went by train to Ottumwa where he stayed all night. From Ottumwa he traveled by wagon to Leon where he

caught a stage and rode all night to reach Mt. Ayr at sunrise.

He was glad the war was over. For many soldiers who had to find new employment in civil life the transition was difficult, but Ben Keller found readjustment relatively easy. He simply returned to his family and resumed farming. In later years he prospered. He became the father of a large family, and remained a staunch supporter of the Union.

HOMER L. CALKIN