

## Lest We Forget

Few Iowans can, perhaps, recall offhandedly the name of Ralph Neppel of Glidden, the Iowa farm lad who won the Congressional Medal of Honor in World War II by stopping a German tank after both his legs had been blown off by its fire. Some have forgotten that Merle Hay from the same community had been one of the first three Americans to die in active and violent combat in World War I. A quiz master might stump us on the name of the commander of the *Iowa* at Santiago, Cuba, in 1898, but the record of Robley D. Evans and the gallant ship he commanded is written large in the annals of the American Navy.

Few of those who read these pages are aware, perhaps, that Joseph Evans Griffith, a member of the Twenty-second Iowa Infantry, was one of the two men who penetrated the Confederate lines in actual assault at Vicksburg and came back alive with prisoners and an enemy flag. And, speaking of flags, it was another Iowan, who, over one hundred years ago, placed the victorious banner of the invading Americans over the City of Mexico.

Since every reader may not recall the latter person by name, may we present Captain Benja-



min Stone Roberts, a former practicing attorney-at-law in Fort Madison. Born in Vermont in 1811, Roberts came to Iowa after his graduation in the class of 1835 from West Point, to become adjutant at old Fort Des Moines near the mouth of the Des Moines River. After his resignation from military service he went east to become a railroad engineer and assistant State geologist of New York.

Returning to Iowa to practice law after turning down an opportunity to build railroads in Russia, Roberts became an officer in the Territorial militia, then joined a mounted rifle regiment on the outbreak of hostilities with Mexico. At the storming of Chapultepec he distinguished himself by leading the advance company and the following day led the advance into the City of Mexico. In recognition of his dashing courage, he was given the honor of raising the United States flag over the Capitol.

Nor did his home State fail to note the dashing, reckless daring of the Iowan. In 1850, by vote of the General Assembly, Captain Roberts was officially presented with a beautifully engraved and inscribed sword. A suit of Mexican armor presented by Captain Roberts to the State of Iowa is now preserved by the State Historical Society at Iowa City.



All in all, some one thousand and twenty-three Iowa soldiers participated in this first American Expeditionary Force which took part in that epic struggle one hundred years ago. Of this number ninety-eight were killed and one hundred and nineteen were wounded. Thirty-eight Iowans advanced to ranks above lieutenant.

That the memories and incidents of the service of these men in the Mexican War might not be forgotten, early Iowa map-makers drew generously on the names of places and personages of that war. Three counties, Buena Vista, Cerro Gordo, and Palo Alto, were named for famous battlefields while eleven others — Butler, Clay, Fremont, Guthrie, Hardin, Mills, Page, Ringgold, Scott, Taylor, and Worth — bear the names of popular State and national heroes. Yell County, later merged to form Webster County, was named for Colonel Archibald Yell, killed leading a charge at Buena Vista. Risley County, later blotted out, was said to have been named for a Colonel Risley also killed in the Mexican War. He seems to have been the "forgotten man", for no definite data on him has been found.

Fremont, Scott, and Taylor counties wear the names of the three most famous generals of that time — John C. Fremont, Winfield Scott, and Zachary Taylor. Other generals of the period so



remembered were William O. Butler and William J. Worth. Clay County proudly honors the name of Henry Clay, Jr., son and namesake of Henry Clay of Kentucky, killed at Buena Vista.

Colonel John J. Hardin, a nephew of Henry Clay and a battle casualty from the sister State of Illinois, was another national figure recognized and remembered in the name of Hardin County. Page County bears the name of Captain John Page and Ringgold that of Major Samuel Ringgold, both mortally wounded in the fighting at Palo Alto. Mills and Guthrie counties obtained their nomenclature from two men more closely identified with Iowa's participation than are any of the others. Both were named for men who were Iowa residents at the time of their enlistment, served in an Iowa military organization, and gave their lives in heroic fashion. The service record of each was short but fully packed with daring and action.

Six months before his death, Frederick D. Mills was a practicing attorney at Burlington. Massachusetts-born and a graduate of Yale, he had arrived in Iowa in 1841. Five years later, President Polk commissioned him as a major in the 15th United States Infantry, six companies of which were to be recruited in Ohio, two in Michigan, and one each in Iowa and Wisconsin. In the chapel



of the Military Academy at West Point, a tablet bears his name as one of the outstanding heroes of the Mexican War. He met death riding ahead of his men in a wild charge at Churubusco. His horse, a spirited animal, jumped the enemy trenches and ran directly into the midst of the Mexican forces, bearing Major Mills, sword in hand, to a soldier's death.

The Mexican War was the first opportunity for Iowa militia to be called into federal service. On May 13, 1846, President James K. Polk called for fifty thousand volunteers, asking the Territory of Iowa for one regiment of ten companies, each company to consist of one captain, two lieutenants, four sergeants, four corporals, two musicians, and sixty-four privates. The message was sent to Governor James Clarke who responded with a prompt appeal for Iowa enlistments. The thinly-spread citizenry answered enthusiastically. By June 26, 1846, the Iowa quota was filled and overflowing with fourteen, not ten, volunteer companies. Two companies each were offered by Lee, Des Moines, and Van Buren counties, one each from Louisa, Muscatine, Washington, Dubuque, Jefferson, Henry, and Jackson, with Johnson and Linn combining to form another.

John Chambers, then ex-Governor, who had served throughout the War of 1812 on the staff of



William Henry Harrison, was offered the appointment as commander but failing health and his advanced age necessitated his declining the proffered honor. Fortunately, the services of the entire regiment were not needed; only four companies were ever actually mustered into service and only Company K actually participated in the war in Mexico.

Company K was attached to the 15th United States Infantry in which Frederick D. Mills served as major. Edwin Guthrie of Fort Madison was named captain of Company K. A native of New York, Guthrie had moved to Iowa in 1836. He was warden of the State Penitentiary at the outbreak of the war and as a prominent Whig had frequently been mentioned as suitable to represent his county in the legislature. Captain Guthrie led his men until mortally wounded on June 20, 1847, in a skirmish at La Hoya Pass on the road between Vera Cruz and Perote. He died exactly one month later at the last named place, aged forty-one.

Company K was actively engaged from the time it landed at Vera Cruz until the end of the war. A long series of brilliant and bold achievements established for it a high standard of excellence that has proven a worthy example of inspiration for all the Iowa organizations which have followed



it in our succeeding wars. Forty per cent of its original one hundred and thirteen members were lost in action, including its major and captain.

One other military unit belongs in the annals of Iowa for this era. In 1846 Mormons in large numbers were crossing Iowa enroute to their newly founded community in Utah. At the suggestion of the Secretary of War, Captain James Allen of the First United States Dragoons was detailed to enlist a battalion of five companies of one hundred men each to join an expeditionary force for California. Captain Allen met little trouble in enlisting the five hundred Mormons at Kaneshville, now Council Bluffs. This battalion participated in one of the most remarkable marches ever undertaken — from Fort Leavenworth to Santa Fe and thence to Los Angeles, only to find no fighting to do since the Pacific Coast had already been taken by the Americans.

While fighting was going on in the south and southwest, minor clouds appeared in northeast Iowa and in Minnesota. Unrest among the Indian tribes in the vicinity of Fort Atkinson, claimed by some to have been fomented by Mexican interests, required the active service of three of the four Iowa units accepted for service. Among these were Captain James M. Morgan's Independent Company of Iowa Infantry Volunteers, mustered



into service on July 15, 1846, for one year's service, Captain John Parker's Company of Iowa Dragoons Volunteers which served from September 9 to November 4, 1846, and Captain Morgan's Company of Iowa Mounted Volunteers, mustered into service on July 15, 1847. The Mounted Volunteers escorted the unruly Winnebagoes to their new home in Minnesota in 1848. This proved an exciting and dangerous mission: the little band of courageous horsemen moved nearly three thousand braves, squaws, and Indian children in a cavalcade of one hundred sixty-six supply wagons, nearly sixteen hundred ponies, and one hundred and forty cattle for a journey of three hundred and ten miles through hostile country.

One hundred years and more have passed since these early Hawkeyes sprang to answer their country's call for armed force with the offering of their lives. Their generous response revealed a willingness that Iowans, since that early date, have ever shown whenever America has wanted or needed fighting men. In each of our succeeding wars Iowa regiments and individual soldiers have been conspicuous for their gallantry and daring and for a courage and tenacity second to none. "May the wreaths they have won never wither, nor the stars of their glory grow dim."

RAY MURRAY