

ISAAC WAITE AND HIS BROTHERS FIGHT FOR THE UNION

BY BILL WAITE

The state of Michigan responded generously to the Federal Government's early call for volunteer troops to quell the rebellion in the Southern states, ultimately supplying 37 infantry regiments, 17 cavalry regiments and 2 regiments of light artillery. After Confederate forces fired on Fort Sumter in April of 1861, President Lincoln's call for 75,000 volunteers was quickly answered. One reporter at the time stated that "Michigan is one vast recruiting station" and as a Michigan volunteer remarked, joining the Army was like smallpox: "It's catching".

Among those first volunteers were four brothers living in Ottawa County, Michigan. 25 year old Isaac Waite and three of his brothers, 22 year old Frank (Benjamin Franklin), 20 year old John, and 19 year old Thomas caught the "enlistment fever" and decided to join the Army together and help save the Union. The closest regiment accepting enlistments was the 3rd Michigan Volunteer Infantry Regiment which was being formed in Grand Rapids, just a few miles away. Frank had evidently been in a local militia prior to this time because he was enlisted as a veteran and was mustered into the regiment as a sergeant, while Isaac, John and Thomas all enlisted as privates, and it was no accident that all four brothers ended up being mustered into the same company ("I" Company) together on May 13th, 1861, less than a month after the war began.

The Waite boys spent their first few weeks constantly drilling and becoming accustomed to the Army's way of doing things. No doubt they were exciting times and Army life may have been a little easier for Isaac, John and Thomas because their sergeant and brother Frank may have spent some extra time after duty hours coaching them on the finer points of being a soldier. Sometime in the first week of June, the 3rd Michigan was issued their brand new uniforms, equipment and rifles. Their new uniforms, dark gray coats and light gray trousers, made everyone feel more like soldiers. Because of a shortage of the American made Springfield and British made Enfield rifles, the 3rd Michigan volunteers were issued the next best thing, brand new .54 caliber Austrian Lorenz rifle-muskets.

On the 10th of June, less than a month after mustering into State service, the 3rd Michigan Infantry Regiment was mustered into Federal service and received their regimental flag at a grand review in Grand Rapids. Isaac and his brothers must have been proud, standing there in parade formation, each with his new rifle polished bright and perhaps carrying a side arm or knife as was common with new recruits. Three days later, on the 13th of June, with tearful good-byes said to friends and loved ones, the Waite brothers climbed aboard a train in Grand Rapids with the rest of the regiment and headed east to join General McDowell's Army of Northeastern Virginia. Their train journey took four or five days with stops in Detroit, Toledo, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Baltimore and finally into Washington D.C. where they went into camp on the banks of the Potomac.

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Although excited and anxious to prove themselves the defenders of the Union, the reality was, the 3rd Michigan Infantry (along with most other Federal regiments in, and around the Capital) was almost totally untrained. They had performed little or none of the regimental or brigade maneuvering that was required for the standard battlefield tactics of the day. Worse yet, rifle ammunition was scarce and considered too valuable to waste on practice, so most of the regiment had fired their rifles less than a dozen times. Never the less, on June 18th, their brigade commander, Colonel Israel Richardson ordered the 3rd along with the rest of the brigade to march towards Centerville, Virginia. Richardson's brigade at this time consisted of the 2nd and 3rd Michigan, the 1st Massachusetts and the 12th New York Infantry regiments.



Colonel Richardson's Divisional Commander, Brig. General Daniel Tyler, was ordered to probe the area around Centerville for rebel strength, but not to bring on a general engagement. However, upon seeing very little activity around Blackburn's Ford on a little creek called Bull Run, he ordered Colonel Richardson's brigade forward, where they came under heavy fire from Confederate forces hidden in the undergrowth along the creek. Fierce fighting erupted along the line with the 3rd Michigan right in the middle of it. Eventually the brigade was withdrawn with the loss of 19 killed and 38 wounded in what would become known as the battle of Blackburn's Ford. One Michigan private wrote home stating that "We made excellent marks for the enemy" and that "the bullets whistled musically around us". Two days later Isaac and his brothers, along with the 1st and 2nd Michigan Infantry regiments, fought at the 1st Battle of Bull Run where Federal losses amounted to 481 killed, 1,011 wounded and 1,460 missing or captured. Retreating back to the Washington D.C. area, the 3rd went back into camp to await further orders.

Sanitary conditions in the Army camps during that hot summer of 1861 were terrible by anyone's standards. Disease actually took the lives of more soldiers than were ever killed in action. Sometime between July and September, Isaac came down with a very common ailment called dysentery. Though he was looked after and nursed by his three brothers, his condition worsened until by October he could no longer function as a soldier. He was discharged on a surgeon's certificate of disability and returned home to Michigan, leaving Frank, John and Thomas to carry on without him.

In less than a year, however, John was also medically discharged and sent home to Michigan; but not before seeing his youngest brother Thomas wounded in the battle of Fair Oaks, Virginia and sent home to recover. By October of 1862, Frank was the only Waite brother still serving in the army. Frank evidently liked the army life though, because on Christmas Eve of 1863 he re-enlisted. By June of 1864, the 3rd Michigan Infantry had been so decimated by disease and casualties that it basically ceased to exist, and was absorbed into the 5th Michigan Infantry. Frank transferred to company "I" in the 5th Michigan in late June of 1864 and served until the end of the war with that unit.

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Meanwhile, back in Michigan, Isaac, John and Thomas had been recovering from their disabilities and wounds. John, who had been discharged in September of 1862, was married to his longtime sweetheart within a few months. Isaac met a beautiful young woman named Adelia Francis Thompson and married her on the last day of January, 1863. Isaac was a farmer by trade, but after the excitement of battle, farming must have seemed pretty dull. By the end of 1863, both Federal and State governments were offering generous bounties for veteran re-enlistments, so, despite the fact that his wife Adelia was two months pregnant with their first child, Isaac re-enlisted in the Army for another three years.

By the time his re-enlistment in late November of 1863, Isaac would have undoubtedly had his choice of units to pick from, as many regiments were actively recruiting volunteers to fill their ranks with new recruits to replace members killed or wounded. Why Isaac didn't re-enlist with the 3rd Michigan is unknown. Perhaps Frank had written and told him the 3rd had lost so many men that it was going to be absorbed into another unit, we may never know. What we do know is that Isaac eventually decided he'd had enough of slogging through the mud and he re-enlisted as a sergeant with Battery "B", 1st Michigan Light Artillery which was recruiting in the Grand Rapids area. At that time, Battery "B" consisted of six, model 1857, 12 pound Napoleon gun-howitzers. These guns were capable of firing a 12 pound projectile, 2 to 4 times per minute and were fairly accurate out to 3,500 yards.

Although it must have been hard for him to leave Michigan and his pregnant wife behind, Isaac and his section left Grand Rapids by train for Pulaski, Tennessee in December of 1863. In Pulaski, Isaac learned the art of being an artillery man and in April of 1864 his battery commenced a march through Huntsville and Bridgeport, Alabama, Chattanooga, Tennessee and on to Resaca, Georgia where it engaged with the enemy but sustained no serious losses. His battery had a number of contacts with Confederate forces on the march to Atlanta, and on the 13th of November, Battery "B" left with General Sherman's army on his long march to Savannah and the sea.

On the 22nd of November, at Griswold, Georgia, the battery had an engagement with the enemy and sustained a loss of seven wounded. We know that Isaac was wounded at least once on the "March to the Sea" and it was probably at Griswold that Isaac was shot in his left side, the bullet traveling across his back muscles and coming to rest up against his spine. Since General Sherman's army had cut loose from his supply lines on his march, all of the wounded were carried along with them. The surgeons decided to leave the bullet where it was rather than take a chance of paralyzing him in an attempt to remove it. In his later years Isaac would claim to regret this decision because the bullet against his spine caused him almost constant pain in the last years of his life. After his death in 1913, the bullet was removed by the undertaker in Manton and is now in a collection of his things including his Grand Army of the Republic medal presented for service during the war.

By the time Sherman's army had reached the Carolinas on their march north to join with General Grant, Isaac was back on duty fought in some of the final battles of the war. Battery "B" was present for the surrender of General Joe Johnston's Confederate army at Raleigh, N. C. and then proceeded to Washington via Petersburg and Richmond, Virginia. Isaac participated in the Grand Army of the

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Republic's march through the streets of Washington in May of 1865. The unit then left their guns in Washington and proceeded by train to Detroit where they were all discharged in June of 1865. Isaac immediately left Detroit for Grand Rapids where he was reunited with his young wife and his 11 month old son Leon he had never seen.