

"Old Abe," the War Eagle, in Battle

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Regiments in the Civil war were composed of one thousand men, each in ten companies of one hundred men each. A part of the equipment provided by the government was a flag in charge of a color sergeant and a guard. The colors were carried in the center of the regiment as it stood in line on parade or in battle formation. In addition many regiments carried a presentation flag which was a gift from the people or town where the regiment was recruited or provided by the men themselves. This special standard was usually made of silk fringed with gold trimming and bearing a device or inscription. Thus regiments as they marched away to war usually were seen bearing two standards, one in accordance with the military regulations and another the gift of friends or chosen by themselves.

Wisconsin Regiment Had Eagle

The second standard, however, was not always a flag or a banner. The 8th Wisconsin, which departed for the war in September, 1861, chose to carry a live eagle along with the regular colors, and for three years the flag and the eagle were companions in numerous marches and battles. This particular bird was an American bald eagle, which had scarcely reached its growth when it was brought in by a hunter from the woods where he had captured it soon after it had left its parental nest. He offered it for sale and it was purchased by a patriotic citizen and given to the regiment then forming for a mascot. It was gladly accepted by the men and the name of "Old Abe" conferred upon him. Afterwards it came to be known that he "was not that kind of a bird," for he actually laid an egg at one of the camping places. However, as he was always referred to as "he" the gender of the pronoun was not changed even after this disconcerting discovery had been made.

The men were very proud of this unique standard and the regiment was known throughout the western armies as "the eagle regiment." The eagle was placed in charge of a soldier, who received extra compensation for this special duty. A perch in the form of a shield was made, fixed to the end of a stout staff, and a few inches above the shield was placed a cross piece which the eagle could firmly grasp with his talons while being borne along. A leather ring was fastened to one of his legs, to which was connected a stout line about twenty feet long, so that in case of his being seized with a sudden impulse to fly the bearer could curb his impetuosity. When on the march or in action, for he was many times in the midst of a storm of shot and shell, he was tethered more closely to his perch, but he would on such occasions give vent to his feelings by flapping his wings and uttering wild cries understood by the men to be "defiance of the enemy." It was no light task for the bearer, however, for in addition to the heavy staff which supported the perch, the eagle himself weighed over ten pounds after he had attained his full size. But the soldier had no other duties to perform than caring for the eagle, and his orders were strict in this respect.

"Old Abe" became famous throughout both the Union and Confederate armies, and it was said that General Price of the Confederate army on discovering the eagle at the battle of Corinth ordered his men "to be sure to capture that bird, as he had rather get him than a whole brigade of men." But the "boys in blue" were

able to withstand all attacks and triumphantly held the field as well as the bird in their possession.

Mascots Were Common

It is a common practice for soldiers and sailors to take with them mascots, who share with them all the vicissitudes of the campaigns and voyages. In the Civil war a Minnesota regiment carried with it a half-grown cub bear, which was present at a number of engagements, another had a racoon, while dogs, cats, squirrels and roosters were quite usual as members of the regimental family. In the navy goats and pigs were favorite mascots. While on its way to the front the regiment passed through Chicago and the eagle was the principal attraction for the crowd as the men marched by in platoons. Passing through St. Louis soon after the crowds composed of many southern sympathizers set up an uproarious shouting, yelling derisively, "a crow," "wild goose," "turkey buzzard," etc. The eagle became excited and boldly flew away to the end of his tether, alighting on the chimney of a house. Here he gazed on the crowd for some time, but finally descended to the street and was restored to his perch.

He recognized his friends among the soldiers, especially his keeper, and greeted them with a "plaintive cooing," but strangers could never approach him with safety, as he was always ready for an attack. One day while the regiment was resting in a southern town a little boy in bare feet came near the eagle, who was then on the ground. "Take care of your feet, boy," said one of the men by way of warning, "he will pounce on them if you don't stand back. The only reason he has not done so already is that he isn't very hungry just now, as we fed him a small boy a little while ago." The little chap placed himself at a respectful distance at once.

The war eagle of the eighth Wisconsin regiment was carried for three years, from 1861 to 1864, in all the campaigns in which the regiment took part during that period of the Civil war. The eagle was present in thirty-six battles and although often the most conspicuous figure at the battle front he escaped any serious injury. Once he had a few wing feathers shot away but was never wounded. At the battle of Corinth, where he was in full view from both lines, he was frequently the target of the enemy's marksmen, but always seemed to bear the charmed life. In that battle he became so greatly excited that he sprang into the air with such force that he broke the cord attached to his perch and soared high overhead, where through the cloud of smoke and roar of cannon he seemed to be cheering his compatriots with the splendor of his example," as one of the officers described the scene.

In battle "Old Abe" would almost constantly flap his wings and utter wild screams which could be heard mingling with the rolling thunder of cannon and musketry, and at such times he seemed "conscious of his relationship with the emblem of a victorious republic." One of his bearers, David McLane, said of him, "I have had him up to batteries when they were firing into the ranks of the enemy as fast as they could load, and then he would scream, spread his wings at every discharge, and reveal in the smoke and roar of the big guns."

In one of the battles a violent thunder storm added the awful din of

the elements to the roar of the guns. Gazing at the heavens the eyes of the eagle seemed to flash lightning, "the embodiment of a sublime fury," and the men said they could see the lightning playing upon his pinions. Not only was he an inspiration to his comrades, but the sight of him awakened among the captured prisoners, as one of them confessed, "all my old love of American freedom and loyalty," and the thought so haunted this man that he determined from

that hour he would no longer serve with those fighting against the cause of a free and united nation.

(To be continued next week)

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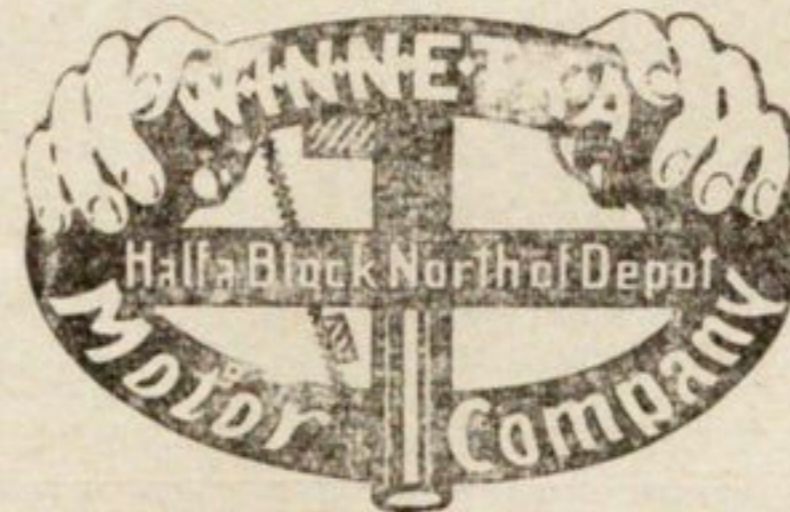
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