

Ninety-First Ohio Volunteer Infantry

With the Civil War Letters of Lieutenant Colonel Benjamin Franklin Coates and An Annotated Roster of the Men of Company C. Lois J. Lambert. Milford OH: Little Miami Publishing Co., 2005. 209 pages. Hard cover.

A Review by Daniel H. Reigle

As the title and subtitle imply, this book could be described as two books in one. In the first section of 86 pages, author Lois Lambert has woven together a brief history of the 91st Ohio Volunteer Infantry, centered on selected letters from Lieutenant Colonel Benjamin Coates, who served initially as the regiment's second in command, then as regimental commander. In the second section, the author has devoted 70 pages to a superbly-researched roster of the men of Company C, one of whom was her great-great-grandfather.

The 91st was recruited in south central Ohio, from the counties of Adams, Scioto, Lawrence, Gallia, Jackson, and Pike. The author describes the efforts by Governors William Dennison, Governor David Tod, and Adjutant General Henry B. Carrington to organize troops and units from Ohio, and puts the organization of the 91st into the overall Union and Ohio manpower situation. The 91st was organized in August 1862, under command of Colonel John Turley, with Benjamin Coates as Lieutenant Colonel. Turley was an independently wealthy resident of Scioto County who had served in the Ohio General Assembly. Coates was a physician in West Union, Adams County, who had served one term in the Ohio Senate.

The 91st served in West Virginia from late 1862 until the middle of 1864, with activity in the Gauley Bridge and Fayetteville areas. The unit was usually aligned with the 23rd Ohio Volunteer Infantry and its commander, Rutherford B. Hayes, and served under the command of General George Crook for an extensive period.

Guerilla warfare was constant in West Virginia, and when General Crook formed a special group of independent scouts to oppose the highly-successful Confederate Colonel John Mosby, he selected Capt. Richard Blazer of Company B, 91st OVI, to command the new unit. The group became known as "Blazer's Scouts", and included at various times sixty-six men from the 91st, as well as troops from the 5th, 9th, and 14th West Virginia Volunteer Infantry regiments; from the 23rd OVI; from the 2nd West Virginia Cavalry; and from the 1st West Virginia Veteran Volunteers. In his book *Headquarters in the Brush: Blazer's Independent Union Scouts* (Ohio University Press, 2001), Darl Stephenson stated the significance of this group: "The Scouts may be the most extraordinary group of men to have emerged from the Civil War, and their leader years ahead of his time in his conduct of counterinsurgency warfare."

The 91st served under Crook in many of the major actions in western Virginia and the Shenandoah Valley in 1864, including Cloyd's Mountain and the New River Bridge in May, Lynchburg in June, and Stephenson's Depot and Winchester in July. Crook's command was assigned to General Phillip Sheridan in August, and the 91st participated in the Shenandoah Valley Campaign with major engagements at Winchester and Fisher's Hill in September, a month-long period of destruction of crops to deny their availability to Lee's command at Petersburg, and a final, crucial victory for the Union at Cedar Creek, south of Winchester on October 19th. LTC Coates served as regimental commander after Col. Turley's severe wound at Lynchburg, and periodically moved up to brigade command level temporarily.

The author skillfully describes the unit's history and movements throughout the 1862-1864 period in sufficient detail to put the 91st's activities into context, without getting lost in the detail of the large scale West Virginia operations and the Shenandoah Valley campaign. She weaves in excerpts from many letters written by LTC Coates during this period, primarily those to his wife, Lizzie. This collection of nearly two hundred letters is held by the Hayes Presidential Library, and the author credits Nan Card, curator of manuscripts at the Hayes Presidential Library (and OCWGJ Ask-the-Experts panel member) for her substantial assistance in the author's research for this book.

LTC Coates' letters offer insights into a number of issues related to the war experience. Some seem like the timeless opinions of the soldier in wartime, such as:

- "We are entirely shut out from the world. I have not seen a newspaper for ten days. Don't know what is going on

in the world. Don't neglect to write me all the news" (30 October 1862).

- "I have been in service long enough to learn that an officer in the army below the rank of a Major General does not know one week what he will be called upon to do the next. So I can make not calculations before hand" (3 November 1862).

Others recount important news from the regiment: "Our Colonel [Turley] is still under arrest and I am in command of the regiment which keeps me very busy. A General Court Martial is now in session and his case is being investigated. I am pretty certain he will be restored to command in a few days and then I will have more time to write" (22 November 1862). LTC Coates' prediction was correct. "Colonel Turley was yesterday released from arrest and assumed command of the Reg. which relieves me of that responsibility. He was charged with disobedience to orders the enemy being in front. Also encouraging insubordination in his Reg. Of these charges he was honorably acquitted by a General Court Martial which has just adjourned. The charges grew out of a misunderstanding with Col. [John T.] Toland who was in command of our Brigade on our march up the valley. There is great rejoicing in the Reg. tonight as the Boys of the 91st think well of their officers especially the field officers" (4 December 1862).

Some letters offer insight into the issues that were created in some marriages by the decision to enlist and the extended separation: "I am sorry you are so much opposed to my remaining in the service ... in the very nature of things this war must soon cease for no nation on earth can long sustain so extensive an army as is necessary to carry on this war. When the war is over I can honorably return home with those who went into the field with me. If I leave them, I will always be reproached with persuading others to do what I was not willing to continue to do myself ... I was born poor ... I think if I remain one year in the army I can come out of it with a little money which will enable me to establish myself in [a] comfortable place where I can at least enjoy the ordinary comforts of life" (2 December 1862).

Sometimes LTC Coates expressed opinions of his higher commanders: "... General Crook is the best general we have ever served under, not excepting Rosecrans" (19 May 1864). At other times he criticized his command's policies or their implementation: "I fear you will hear of some things being done by Gen. Hunter's Army that will not be very creditable to our cause ... (I) must say that his propensity for burning is very great as evidence in burning of Gov. Letcher's house in Lexington" (8 August 1864). Periodically, he made predictions that, in retrospect, seem humorous. After the foray into Virginia that included the engagements at Cloyd's Mountain and Lynchburg, LTC Coates predicted from Charleston WV that: "I think we have done our share of raiding and fighting for this year. We have marched in the last two months over eight hundred miles and fought two pitched battles besides doing any amount of skirmishing and bushwhacking" (6 July 1864). On that same day, General Jubal Early's Confederate force completed its crossing of the Potomac River into Maryland. The 91st OVI would have a lot more hard marching and fighting to do before the end of 1864.

In the second half of the book, the author creates an extensive annotated roster of the key field grade officers of the 91st, and the company grade officers and enlisted men of Company C. These biographical sketches will be very valuable for anyone doing genealogical research on the 91st or on the communities from which these men came. The author has drawn on a wide range of resources for the information, including the Compiled Military Service Records for every soldier in the company, the *Official Roster of the Soldiers of the State of Ohio in the War of the Rebellion*, soldier discharge records in Pike and Scioto counties, a sampling of pension files, pension application and certification index entries, marriage and other county records, death notices from local newspapers, county histories, and the US census. In addition to its research value, this roster provides rich information about the people who served in Company C. For example, Charles Pratt, a 42-year-old school teacher who had been wounded in the Battle of Churubusco in the Mexican War, enlisted in 1864 and served the final year of the war. Daniel Ramsey was tried before a court martial on a charge of desertion; found not guilty of desertion but guilty of being absent without leave, Ramsey forfeited five months' pay and served thirty days' hard labor, but stayed with the unit for the remainder of the war. He died at the National Soldiers Home in Dayton in 1916. Robert Frowein, a native of Germany, served as the regimental butcher and as the regimental baker for various periods; however, at the battle of Winchester (or Opequon Creek) on 19 September 1864, he was wounded while serving as the color bearer for the regiment. Sometimes the omnipresent soldiers' humor was evident: in an 1888 deposition in support of a colleague's pension claim, Isaac McJunkin answered all the questions asked of him, and then opined, "If it takes as much evidence to get a man through to Heaven as it does to get a Soldier a pension I am afraid there will be very few get through."

The value of such extensive genealogical research to other Civil War scholars is illustrated by the Kaps brothers. In the author's biography of Captain John Kaps, she mentions that his brother, Peter, was a First Lieutenant in the 15th Kentucky Volunteer Infantry (US). Kirk Jenkins, author of *The Battle Rages Higher: The Union's Fifteenth Kentucky Infantry* (The University Press of Kentucky, 2003) has also created an extensive biographical roster of the regiment, including 1st Lt. Peter Kaps. Military careers and family connections can be researched (and perhaps even discovered) in the work of these two fine examples of Civil War genealogy.

Throughout the book, the author includes short segments on general Civil War topics, such as hospitals and medical practice, pensions, the National Soldiers Home, Ohio's contribution to the war effort, and the draft. One of these segments fits into the category of "little known gems." Thanks to the efforts of General Adna Chaffee (himself a Civil War veteran as a young cavalry officer and known to the modern US Army as the "Father of Armor"), the War Department in 1907 created the Civil War Campaign Medal for military service between 15 April 1861 and 9 April 1865. Although campaign medals are well-known in the modern military, this was its first application in the U.S. It was little used, however; only 554 veterans were issued the medal upon their application.

The author is a member of the First Families of Ohio and The Society of Civil War Families of Ohio. Her extensive research in creating this book is a superb way of remembering and honoring her great-great-grandfather, Private Daniel B. Cutlip, Company C, and his colleagues in the 91st Ohio Volunteer Infantry. There is currently only one other SCWFO member with a proven connection to the 91st OVI. This book should be of great assistance in producing several more!

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