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Military Order 

of the

Loyal Legion

of the

 United States



COMMANDERY OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA.



WAR PAPER 48.

The 37th Illinois Veteran Volunteer  
Infantry and the Battle of Pea  
Ridge, Arkansas.



*Payroll*



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WAR PAPERS.

48

The 37th Illinois Veteran Volunteer Infantry and  
the Battle of Pea Ridge, Arkansas.

PREPARED BY COMPANION

Brevet Brigadier General

**EUGENE B. PAYNE,**

U. S. Volunteers,

AND

READ AT THE STATED MEETING OF APRIL 1, 1903.

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Memorandum

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## The Thirty-seventh Illinois Veteran Volunteer Infantry, and the Battle of Pea Ridge, Arkansas.

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The 37th Illinois Infantry (in which I had the honor of being an officer) was organized at Chicago, Illinois, in August, 1861.

We numbered 1,080 officers and men, and at first were called "The Fremont Rifles," in honor of General John C. Fremont.

About the middle of September, 1861, we received marching orders for the front, and proceeded to St. Louis and thence to Booneville, Missouri. We were fully equipped except that we had no transportation. We secured this by drafting wild mules from Governor Claib Jackson's farm near Booneville and breaking them in, and breaking in mules for a regiment in the early days of the war was almost as disastrous, to the breakers, as a small battle.

At St. Louis we were reviewed by General Fremont and his beautiful wife Jessie, who, to show her appreciation of our name, "Fremont Rifles," tied with her own hands streamers of red, white and blue to the tips of our regimental flag staffs.

We were far from being a rifle regiment, however, for we were not armed at all until we arrived at Benton Barracks, and then the best arms we could get were a lot of old worn-out

“Enfield muskets,” that were built on the same principle as an army mule—the most destructive end behind.

After uncoiling, however, some yards of red tape, we exchanged these arms for “Springfields” and Colt’s revolving rifles a few months later.

When we entered the State of Missouri everybody and everything was in a turmoil; neighbor was arrayed against neighbor, and, although the Unionists were in the majority, yet the rebel minority were reckless and daring. Many of these latter were in the army of Price, but many were in all portions of the State pretending to be quiet, steady old Union farmers, while our army was present, but, after we had passed, would form small bands and waylay and kill stragglers and small detachments, and murder and plunder the real Unionists of the neighborhoods. These were the bushwhackers and guerrillas of the West.

The battles of Booneville and Wilson’s creek had been fought. The first had dispersed a rebel legislature and sent Governor Claib Jackson and General “Pap” Price flying from the State. The battle of Wilson’s creek, owing to the death of that Connecticut hero, General Lyon, had forced the Union Army back upon Rolla and left western and southwestern Missouri a prey to rebel animosities and hopes.

General Fremont had issued his Emancipation Proclamation (August 30, 1861) which had just been revoked by order of President Lincoln (September 11, 1861). The General has been criticized for issuing his Emancipation Proclamation too soon. I contend that he did not merit this criticism. This proclamation might have been issued too soon for the conservative politicians, but it was not too soon for the education of the people. It was not too soon as a stepping-stone, enabling the solid North, including our army and the border States, to realize before a year rolled away that general emancipation was a

*military necessity*, justifiable not alone upon the ground of right but on the ground of *policy*, not only adding strength to the Northern armies, but sweeping away at one stroke the commissariat of the Southern Army. Fremont's proclamation was the shadow of a coming event; the shock to the Northern mind, which prepared it for the great crisis; which enabled it to see clearly that the old time sentimental sacredness of slavery must yield to that more sacred principle, the preservation of the American Union.

The removal of Fremont in the fall of 1861 was a mistake. It changed the whole tenor of the campaign.

We had taken Springfield, Missouri, and Price's army was on the run near Cassville, and this change and the early approach of winter threw our army once more back upon Rolla and the Missouri river. From this time until the early spring of 1862 our army, appropriately called "The Army of the Frontier," was employed in drilling and equipping itself for the hardest kind of marching and fighting, which all felt must soon come. During this interval, although strict orders were read at the head of each command, weekly, if not oftener, against molesting the property of residents (whether rebels or not), and especially against harboring slaves, yet the shrill cry of the festive pig and the dying bleat of the belligerent sheep, that dared to attack our picket lines, could be heard nightly. Even had one listened sharply outside the tents of our men, he could have detected the "yes, indeed Massa," of some Southern gentleman's "colored property," who was there in defiance of general orders doing a little cooking and washing for "Massa Linkum's sogers."

December 25, '61, General Sam. R. Curtis assumed command of the district of southwest Missouri; while in January, 1862, General Earl Van Dorn, C. S. A., assumed command of the Trans-Mississippi District and the Confederate army of the south-

west. The winter of 1862-'63 was spent by both General Curtis, in Missouri, and General Van Dorn, in Arkansas, in getting ready for the conflict which all felt must come, sooner or later. In January, 1862, General Sterling Price, C. S. A., invaded the State of Missouri with an army of 20,000 men, with 48 pieces of cannon, and advanced as far as Springfield, Missouri. General Halleck, who commanded the Department of the Southwest, immediately hurried forward all his available troops to General Curtis, then at Rolla, and about February 1, 1862, General Curtis, with 12,095 men and 50 pieces of artillery, advanced upon Price, who was intrenched at Springfield, Missouri, and February 13th and 14th drove him out of that place and fought him all the way to Sugar creek, Arkansas, along what was called the "wire road" to Sugar creek, at which place we arrived on the 17th of February, 1862, Price having fled before us to the Boston mountains, a ridge between the White and Arkansas rivers. Here he was joined by Major-General Ben. McCullough, with 17 regiments of Southern troops, and by General Albert Pike, with 3,000 Indians, and by Major-General McIntosh and General Hebert with their forces; the whole being commanded in person by Major-General Earl Van Dorn, commanding the Trans-Mississippi Department.

I am convinced from Confederate reports that on March 7, 1862, General Van Dorn was in command of 30,000 fighting men, with upwards of 50 pieces of artillery, while the Union forces, under General Curtis, were not more than 10,500 cavalry and infantry, with 49 pieces of artillery, including three little mountain howitzers. Curtis was 240 miles from Rolla, and his long line of communications required garrisons at Mansfield, Springfield, Cassville, and Keetsville, Missouri, which had depleted his original force of 12,000 men.

By the order of General Halleck our army went no farther than Sugar creek, Arkansas, which we fortified upon the south

or immediately in our front. Our army was in four divisions; Brigadier-General Samuel R. Curtis, Commander-in-Chief; Brigadier-General Franz Sigel, commanded the First and Second Divisions. The First Division of two brigades was under the command of Colonel Peter J. Osterhaus. The Second Division of one brigade, two batteries and two battalions of cavalry, was commanded by Brigadier-General A. Asboth. The Third Division of two brigades was commanded by Colonel Jeff. C. Davis, and the Fourth Division of two brigades was under the command of Colonel Eugene A. Carr, of the 3d Illinois Cavalry. The 3d Iowa Cavalry, Bowen's Missouri Cavalry, and the 3d and 24th Missouri Infantry were unassigned.

On the 5th of March, '62, General Curtis received information that General Van Dorn was moving north to attack us, and was then at Elm Springs, twelve miles south of Sugar creek. General Sigel, who was encamped near Bentonville, a few miles to our west, with his command (the First and Second Divisions) was ordered in.

These two divisions, under Generals Asboth and Osterhaus, reported at Sugar creek on the 6th of March, but they had not more than arrived when word was brought by courier that General Sigel, who had tarried at Bentonville with about 600 men, including several pieces of artillery, was surrounded. The First Division under Osterhaus immediately retraced their steps on the double quick, and three miles out met Sigel with the enemy close upon him. Sigel had been completely surrounded by the vanguard of Van Dorn's army, but with characteristic "Dutch pluck" he had mowed his way through with his cannon, carrying his dead upon his caissons. Osterhaus immediately deployed his division and put the enemy to flight. This was the beginning of the Pea Ridge fight. Our loss on this masterly retreat of General Sigel and the repulse of the enemy by Osterhaus was twenty-five. The 2d Missouri Volunteer

Infantry, belonging to Asboth's Division, was ambushed by the enemy coming in from Bentonville on the 6th instant and lost thirty-seven men.

The battle-ground of Pea Ridge is unique. Sugar creek, the head-lands of whose broad deep valley we had fortified, runs nearly east and west. The telegraph road from Cassville, Missouri, to Fayetteville, Arkansas, runs nearly due north and south, and cuts Sugar creek valley at right angles. About a mile north of Sugar creek, and half a mile west of the main telegraph road, stands the little village of Leetown. To the northeast of Leetown about one mile and on the "wire road" stands Elkhorn tavern. North of the Elkhorn tavern, and running almost east and west, is Pea Ridge, a broken, elevated, plateau, and still farther to the north a deep, broken, and heavily timbered valley called "Cross Timbers."

The whole country is wild, broken, mountainous, heavily timbered, with open patches and cultivated fields scattered over it. It is the same country that General Sheridan, who came to us after the battle with his wagons full of crackers, spoke of; when he said that if he owned both Pea Ridge and Sheol he would rent Pea Ridge and live in Sheol.

On the morning of the 7th of March General Curtis became aware of the fact that the enemy had refused to give us battle in front, but during the night of the 6th had marched around our right flank and were concentrating in our rear, on the plateau of Pea Ridge, and had cut our communication to Keetsville and Cassville, and separated us from our reinforcements and provision trains. This startling intelligence necessitated a complete change of program—the abandonment of all our fortifications and a complete change of our whole army from the front to the rear so as to face the enemy in his new position. The left or Fourth Division (Carr) became our right, and the First Division (Osterhaus) became our left. A hasty consultation was called

at General Asboth's tent, and General Curtis ordered Colonel Bussy, 3d Iowa Cavalry, then in command of the cavalry of the First and Second Divisions, to proceed with his command, consisting of five companies 3d Iowa Cavalry; the Benton (Missouri) Hussars, Colonel Nemett; four companies of the 1st Missouri Cavalry, Colonel Ellis; two companies of the Fremont (Missouri) Hussars, under Lieutenant Howe; and three guns of Captain Elbert's Battery, direct to Leetown, and check the advancing columns of the enemy. Colonel Osterhaus, with the 12th Missouri Infantry, 36th Illinois Infantry of his own division, and the 22d Indiana Infantry of the Third Division, was ordered to follow and support Colonel Bussy. Colonels Bussy and Osterhaus met and engaged the enemy about a mile northwest of Leetown.

At about the same time on the morning of the 7th, Colonel Eugene A. Carr with his Fourth Division encountered the enemy near the Elkhorn tavern on the "wire road." The enemy had massed his forces in two bodies. His right wing, in which were Pike's Indians, was commanded by Generals McCullough and McIntosh, and rested at and to the west of the little village of Leetown. His left wing was commanded by General Sterling Price of Missouri, called "Old Pap Price," and was stationed at and near the Elkhorn tavern on the main telegraph road. General Curtis ordered Colonel Jeff. C. Davis, commanding the Third Division, to go in at Leetown and support Osterhaus and Bussy. The Third Division consisted of two brigades; Colonel Patterson commanded the First Brigade; Colonel Julius White of my regiment commanded the Second Brigade, consisting of the 37th and 59th Illinois Infantry, Battery A, Second Illinois L. A., called "Davidson's Battery," and the First Missouri Cavalry. The Third Division arrived upon the battle line about 7 A. M., and found Colonels Bussy and Osterhaus with their brave commands hard pressed, but contesting every inch of ground. We deployed

upon their right, and with them met and fought the enemy until dark. All of the balance of General Sigel's forces (First and Second Divisions) who could be spared from holding the roads to our west were sent by General Curtis to Carr's support near the Elkhorn tavern. Thus the Third Division, under Colonel Davis, with a part of the First Division, under Colonels Bussy and Osterhaus, became our left wing near Leetown, while Carr's Division, with portions of the Second and First Divisions, became our right wing near Elkhorn tavern. The fighting was then incessant until darkness closed around us. We had not only held our ground but had driven the enemy from the field into the heavy timber on Pea Ridge. The right wing had also maintained its ground by the most terrific fighting. There had been many charges and counter charges, and many hand-to-hand conflicts, where the cold steel had to be used, and many times the tide of battle seemed to be against us; but when we lay down that night hungry and exhausted we rejoiced for we knew we had killed their best leaders and that victory would be ours on the morrow.

The night of March 7, '62, our troops slept upon their arms without blankets or fire, although the weather was intensely cold. Before daylight it was ascertained by scouts that the enemy had all withdrawn from in front of our left wing and had concentrated to the rear of the Elkhorn tavern. Our whole army was moved at daylight and placed in battle line in regular order nearly east and west upon the ground fought over the day before by our right wing. We had hardly marched into the position assigned us when the artillery upon both sides opened up in a terrific manner, and soon the infantry and cavalry became engaged. We then found that the fighting was easy to what it had been the day before, and about noon the rebel artillery, having been silenced or crippled by the superior handling of our cannon, a general charge with fixed bayonets was ordered along our whole line of battle

and most nobly was it performed. That beautiful charge I shall never forget; with banners streaming, with drums beating, and our long line of blue coats advancing upon the double quick, with their deadly bayonets gleaming in the sunlight, and every man and officer yelling at the top of his lungs. The rebel yell was nowhere in comparison. It was true as General Sigel said, "Oh, dot was lovely." In this manner we charged the whole rebel line. The enemy could stand lead, but when it came to the cold steel they were not "in it." They begged to be excused, and, for fear we would not excuse them, they took to their heels and fled. Our infantry pursued them upwards of two miles, and our cavalry continued the pursuit until their horses were utterly exhausted.

Thus the magnificent army of General Van Dorn's 30,000 Confederates were utterly routed and dispersed. Thousands of them were taken prisoners. Other thousands threw down their arms and fled to their homes. Over two thousand of their dead lay upon the field of battle. We captured many cannon, flags, and trophies, and many thousand stands of small arms. The remnants of the broken and utterly demoralized Confederate army separated or fled in two bodies—one going many miles around our right and the other many miles around our left flank. They fled to and met in the Boston Mountains to the south of us, and from thence continued their flight into southern Arkansas. As to my own regiment, it was our first real battle. The dozen little skirmishes with the retreating rebel army on our way to Arkansas could not be so dignified. Pea Ridge was not only our first but it was our hottest and most stubbornly contested battle. It was continuous fighting without a moment's rest all day of the 7th, and from daylight until 2 P. M. of the 8th of March, '62. My regiment lost heavily in both officers and men on both days. Our gallant major, now General John Charles Black, had his right arm shattered by



a rifle ball. Several of our officers were killed. The loss in my regiment alone (37th Illinois) in killed and wounded for the two day's fighting was one hundred and forty-four, the heaviest of any regiment in our division. But what saddened and angered us beyond all expression was the murdering of our men who were taken prisoners by those inhuman fiends, called Indians. Several men of the 37th and 59th Illinois, and eight men of the 3d Iowa Cavalry, were thus killed and scalped after being taken prisoners. My own dear brother Fred., a beautiful boy of nineteen, in one of our charges near nightfall of the first day's fight was severely wounded through the thigh, fell into the hands of the Indians and was by them cruelly murdered. This deed so maddened me that, although severely wounded, I fought next day with a Colt's revolving rifle instead of my sword. Our total loss was 1,351 killed and wounded, officers and men. Every command had its death roll and left some comrades sleeping under the rebel soil of Pea Ridge. I will tell you what won for us the victory. It was not the weakness of the Confederate army—it was strong in numbers, arms, and officers. True the fall of Generals McCullough, McIntosh, and Hebert demoralized their right wing and aided us greatly. It was not the advantage of position that won for us the battle, for our enemy choose the the battle-ground. The fight was in the open forest and field with only natural defenses for either side. In my opinion the victory of Pea Ridge was won by the cool, rapid, and effective handling of our forces while under fire, coupled with the bold, dare-devil, reckless bravery of our troops, both officers and men, fighting for life; fighting for the life of the nation; fighting for the preservation of the grandest, dearest flag that ever waved—the Stars and Stripes. The battle was a most glorious victory to the Union arms, and resulting as it did in the utter rout and extermination of General Van Dorn's grand army of 30,000 rebels, it

preserved Missouri to the Union cause and inflicted irreparable damage to the Confederacy.

The battle of Prairie Grove, Arkansas, six months later, was indeed a hard fought battle for the one day that it lasted, but it was among the last efforts in the southwest of a beaten and disheartened rebel army.

General Hindman, their leader, staked his all upon that battle and lost; lost and fled, closely pursued by General Herron's victorious troops over the mountains and across the Arkansas river.

The Missouri campaigns from October, 1861, to 1865, were a succession of glorious victories to the Union cause. The brave boys of the "wild and wooly West" need no encomium at my hands. Their deeds are written in letters of blood on over four hundred victorious battle-fields from the Missouri river to the Gulf. Their valor is enshrined in their victories, and those victories aided very materially in the salvation of our beloved country. I aver it, as a fact of history, unrecorded, except by us, who spilled our blood there, that the Missouri campaigns, especially our victories at Pea Ridge and Prairie Grove, were as important in putting down the Rebellion and did as much to destroy rebel hopes and plans as many larger battles of the East and South.

But everywhere, East as well as West, the Union soldier did his duty even unto the death. Words cannot express all that the Union soldier did, nor can history ever do him justice. Every Union soldier who fought was a hero; every Union soldier who fell is a star in the crown of his country's glory.

"Nor shall their glory be forgot  
While Fame her record keeps,  
Or Honor points the hallowed spot  
Where Valor proudly sleeps."

In conclusion allow me to say :

The 37th Illinois Infantry served 20 months of its five years' service in the States of Missouri and Arkansas. It veteranized in January, 1864, and was mustered out at Springfield, Illinois, May 15, 1866, having served continuously for four years and ten months. It participated in twenty-one battles, sieges, and skirmishes, including Pea Ridge, Prairie Grove, Vicksburg, Fort Blakely and the Spanish Forts in Florida.

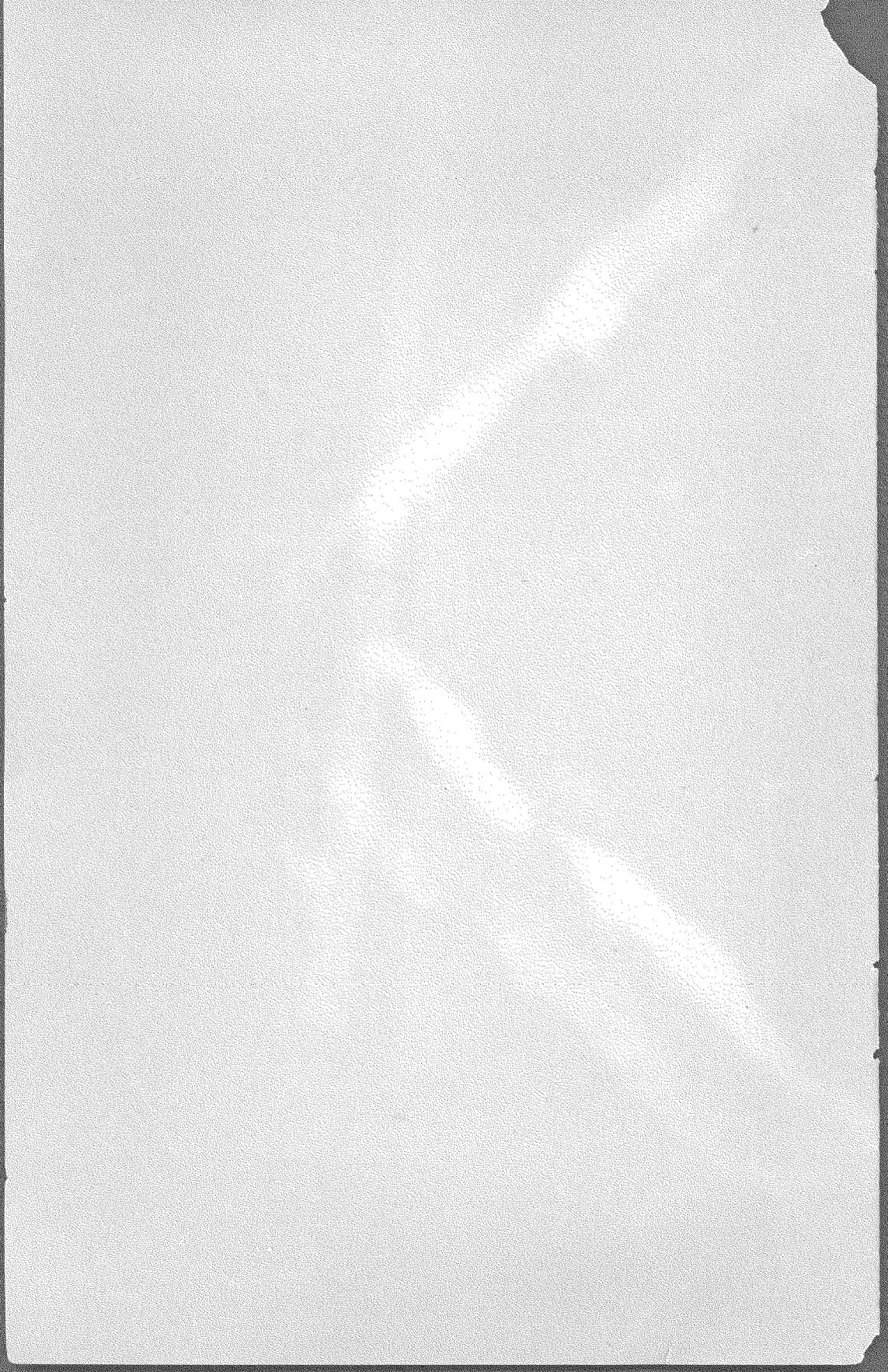
Out of the 1,080 officers and men who enlisted in August, 1861, only 187 were left at the final muster out. The balance (except 200 who did not re-enlist) had been killed or had been discharged for wounds or disease. After the muster out, this little band of "Old Vets" took the cars for that great city which is destined to become the greatest metropolis of the Western Hemisphere—Chicago.

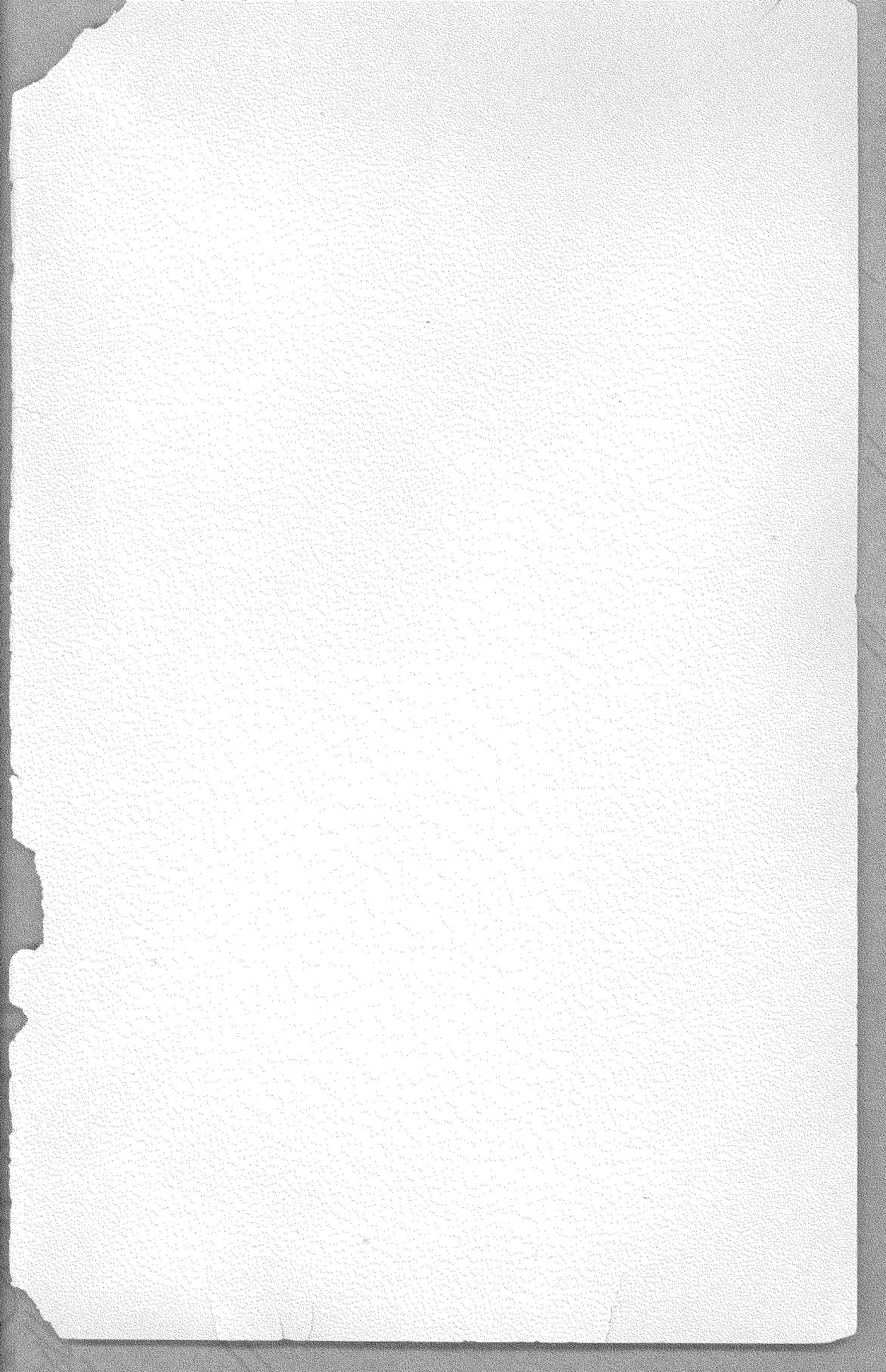
Our dear old flag, the same one that had been presented to us by the Board of Trade of Chicago, five years before, torn and rent by rebel shot and shell, hung in ribbons from its staff. It had floated over us four years and ten months; it had always been tenderly cared for; its "Guard" had gone to join the majority many times, but volunteers had always taken their places. It had traveled with us 18,000 miles, 3,500 of which had been on foot and the balance by rail and water. It had been the "pillar of fire" to the 37th Illinois in 21 battles, sieges and skirmishes. It had never been captured nor surrendered and did not know defeat. Next to their Maker it had been, and was, the veterans' idol. A cool, refreshing breeze from old Lake Michigan came along and kissed its torn and mangled folds, and it fluttered with joy. *It was going home.*

The same breeze fanned the bronzed and bearded faces of the "Boys" who went with it to the field, and as their eyes rested upon the deep blue bosom of Lake Michigan, and their ears

drank in the soothing melody of her waves breaking upon the shore, the tears of joy coursed down their cheeks, as they realized that they had at last reached "God's Country," and in it was

"Home, sweet Home."





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