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Military Order of the Loyal Legion

OF THE

United States.

COMMANDERY OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA.

WAR PAPERS.

46

**The Story of the Raising and Organization of a
Regiment of Volunteers in 1862.**

PREPARED BY COMPANION

**Brevet Brigadier General
ELLIS SPEAR,**

The Story of the Raising and Organization of a Regiment of Volunteers in 1862.

Heretofore papers which have been read before this Commandery have related to personal reminiscences of campaigns and battles, with all the interest which accompanies the personal element in such affairs. The preservation of these details is of great importance, not only for the special interest which attaches to them, but because they illustrate the larger actions and will be of value to future generations, as showing the very body and features of the time. How valuable these minor matters are, we perceive plainly by the use made of them as they are found in autobiographies and diaries of former generations. The knowledge of the manner in which people lived and thought and acted in private life throws light upon public affairs and public characters. It is interesting, and not unprofitable, to know that the Father of his Country in some wrathful mood swore roundly; or that the Philosopher of the Revolution, in his younger days, trudged in the streets of Philadelphia with a loaf of bread under each arm; or, when older, was very gay and festive in the gay and festive capital of France.

I propose to continue in the same grave historical vein, but to treat of less important affairs. I propose to avoid the beaten track of campaigns, battles, marches and skirmishes, and the luxurious life of Libbey or Andersonville prisons, and going back to the beginning of things, endeavor to explain how a volunteer regiment was raised and gotten into the field, and, incidentally, perhaps, to touch upon the character of its officers and men.

The regiment of which I speak was the last to be organized in its State under the call for three hundred thousand men, made by the general Government in 1862. It was the last of that "three hundred thousand more" responding to the call of "Father Abraham," according to the popular ditty of the time. The recruiting was done by private individuals, and at their own expense, under the authority of the Governor of the State. These private individuals, as a matter of course, expected, as a reward for their labor and expenditures, to be commissioned in the companies which they might raise. That was the understanding. Doubtless, in their efforts, they were inspired by patriotism, but, as was said about the Pilgrim Fathers, that they "sailed by Deuteronomy, modified by an eye to the main chance;" so there was also, with the officers, some modification or further stimulus of personal consideration, just as with the enlisted men—their patriotic impulses were somewhat assisted by the bounty of a hundred dollars.

This method of raising troops was an effective one and inexpensive to the Government; but as it involved more or less of log-rolling amongst his neighbors, and more or less persuasion and perhaps promises in the obtaining of recruits on the part of the ambitious recruiting officer, it was not so promising for future discipline. Nor was the process of selecting line officers by their ability or success in persuading their neighbors to enlist, a severe test of military fitness. However, these considerations did not trouble the Governor nor the impromptu recruiting officer, who did not foresee them. He had no experience whatever in this line of business, and fortunately did not look so far ahead. To say that as a rule he was utterly green in military matters, is to do injustice to the words. However, he might be credited with some enterprise and even audacity, for such certainly were required in a young man given to serious reflection, who should proposed to organize a military company, and to command it in the field, when he scarcely knew a line of battle from a line of rail fence.

Amongst those raising companies were young lawyers who had perhaps learned to draw an indictment, but who would not then have been able to draw anything in the military line, unless it were rations, or the enemy's fire. There were schoolmasters whose only qualifications for getting men to the front and keeping them there, were based on experience in teaching young ideas how to shoot. There were farmers,

clerks, and fellows just out of college, some graduates and some undergraduates, but with not a tried or known military qualification in the whole squad. I mistake; there was one who recruited a company, and who had been in the Mexican War, but he was afterward found to have forgotten most that he had ever learned, and was soon found also unable, in the matter of legs, to keep up with the procession. And there was another who had had experience in an earlier regiment raised in 1861, but he resigned after his first battle. However, with these miscellaneous qualifications, unaided by experience, the embryo officers worked energetically to enlist the men. The work was largely, but not wholly, of the button-holing order. It was not unattended with exciting incidents. Anxious mothers met the recruiting officers sometimes in tears and sometimes in wrath. One such, I remember, drove him from the premises with a pitchfork. It was the first charge he had met and he retreated. The young man, however, got his recruit. The method of recruiting at that time would not bear strict investigation. It shared in the general and unavoidable slipshodness and haste which marked the whole work of raising great armies out of an undrilled and unmilitary population, and on short notice. Troops in large numbers were needed and that urgently. Political considerations forbade drafting. They must be raised by volunteering. The inducements were bounties to the men and commissions to the officers. He who could raise a company in the least time was looked upon with the greatest favor and, other things being equal, got the earliest letter in the alphabet of the regiment. The recruiting officer did not know what kind of a man, of what physical or moral fibre, the service required, and had no opportunity to learn. His object was to get his hundred men as quickly as possible; and provided the recruit had limbs, organs, and dimensions, that was enough. The care of the Governor of the State, and usually his knowledge, went also no further. He had the State's quota to fill, and was most concerned to fill it as early and as easily as possible. The average examining surgeon had no more knowledge of the business than the recruiting officer, and was inclined to take the patriotism of the volunteer as conclusive evidence of bodily soundness. The mustering officer mustered in the lump, what the recruiting officer had gathered and the surgeon had passed.

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So there was small effort at sifting. The results were sometimes even ludicrous. One fellow, too short, was passed in high-heeled shoes, and grew shorter as time and his shoes wore on; but he made an excellent soldier. Another passed muster in a black beard, which soon after disclosed an ever widening zone of grey, and he became a veteran prematurely. More obscure bodily defects developed on the first hard campaign, and speedily furnished ample material for the hospital and pension roll. However, by hook or crook the ten companies were raised, and from various quarters were transported at the Government's expense, to the camp where they were to be organized into a regiment. There was some grumbling on account of having to ride in a freight car on the part of men who afterwards, many times, would have very gladly availed themselves of that jolting method of transportation. At the rendezvous the company first to arrive found neither quarters nor rations, and therefore marched into the city, woke up the Mayor, and then relied on his patriotic charity. But the later arrivals fared better, and there was plenty of beef and bread.

The Governor, when he saw the enlistment rolls, and heard that the men had been placed in camp at the rendezvous, said to himself and his counsellors: "These fellows who have recruited so many men and have actually landed them in camp must have military qualifications," and straightway he commissioned them all. Strictly speaking, however, it was not straightway, but as soon as the clerks could fill out the commissions and the Governor found time to sign them.

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All these assembled recruits and expectant officers presented when in camp the general appearance of a town meeting. But one uniform was to be seen; that was of the gentleman who had seen service in the regiment of 1861; the uniform of the Mexican veteran evidently had been worn out long since. However, soon the Major came who had seen some service as a captain in an earlier regiment, and who had succeeded in getting himself transferred with an increased rank; leave of absence and promotion at the same stroke. He wore a uniform, but looked lonesome. However, he had seen a camp and had been in a regiment, and had some ideas of what ought to be done. He organized a guard whose only weapons at first were those given by nature or borrowed from the wood pile. His first officer of the day, in a brown cutaway, striped trowsers, and a silk hat, bore as insignia of his office a part of a military weapon, now discarded, but at that early date in use, and known as a ramrod. If there were a sword in camp, excepting those of the major commanding and the veteran of '61, its owner must have concealed it, perhaps for fear of applications to borrow. Imagine the guard mounting! the difficulties of getting into line; no two hats alike; no uniforms and no two suits alike, and the officer of the day in costume approximating that of a Quaker, and with a ramrod for a sword! The orders were of a nature of explanation and conference, and were the result of an agreement between the officers and men. To the credit of all concerned it must be said that these agreements were faithfully carried out, and if any fellow presumed to disobey the officer of the guard after due remonstrance, he was liable to be knocked down and perhaps kicked, according to the gravity of the offence. But there were no

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accidents from fire-arms. Shot-guns had been left at home and Springfield muskets had not arrived. Clothing arrived in boxes in advance of the quartermaster, but lack of quartermaster was a small matter. One of the captains (since a distinguished lawyer), was detailed to attend to the business of distributing the clothing, and the invoices and vouchers were long afterwards, I believe, made up by counting noses and multiplying that factor by the number of articles properly allowed each man. By good luck or the favor of Providence rations soon became plenty. There was no canned roast beef nor those other luxuries much advertised long afterwards, as we all know, but there was salt beef in abundance and bread and potatoes and coffee. The country boys sorely missed their daily pie, but there was no grumbling; the beef and potatoes were cooked in the company's kitchen, and such were the innate good manners of the cooks that the officers were served first out of the rations of the men.

But I anticipate. Prior to the issue of the clothing, and while the affairs of the camp were conducted in this go-as-you please manner, more civil than military, one evening the Colonel arrived, a West Pointer, and recently from service in the regular army in the field. At once there seemed to be a general impression throughout the camp, which cannot perhaps be expressed better than by the use of a phrase common on that ship-building coast, "that there was the devil to pay and no pitch hot."

The Colonel, a thoroughly trained soldier, saw things, to him new and strange, and perhaps with a prejudiced eye. It was his first experience with volunteers, and he found them in their most immature condition. The respectable citizen who seemed to be half loafing, half on guard at the Headquarters' tent did not salute, and, in fact, had nothing military to salute with, but cheerfully remarked "How do you do, Colonel." Him the Colonel regarded as a villain of the deepest dye and perhaps as a fool into the bargain. But this was all of a piece with the general appearance of the camp, so far as the Colonel saw it. Once in the tent he sent an orderly disguised as an honest citizen of the State, and who did not know, in fact, that he was an orderly, for the officer of the day. When that friend appeared, the Colonel propounded questions to him which he had never heard before, and never dreamed of. If the Colonel had inquired about hexameter verse or the volume of the cycloid, he might have obtained perhaps prompt and correct answers. But concerning the details of guard mounting and the duties of his office, the embryo Captain and Officer of the Guard was as ignorant as a spring chicken; and after some fruitless pursuit of information the Colonel expressed the opinion that it was "A hell of a regiment," and terminated the interview. The officer of the day went out with the impression that he had smelled something sulphurous, and that the Colonel was correct in his location of the regiment.

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However, the men were speedily put into uniform, company books were distributed, and there was a scramble, under pressure from Headquarters, for information as to tactics and army regulations. Commissions for the officers came from the Governor, and uniforms from the tailor; the mustering officer appeared, and these miscellaneous gentlemen of various previous occupations and training, suddenly became officers and men, in the army of the United States, tailor-made and Governor-made.

Probably the parchments and the textile fabrics had been selected with quite as much care and discrimination as the raw material which they covered and designated. Certainly the commissions and uniforms were made by rule and in accordance with the army regulations. The officers, so far, had simply happened.

The diverse effect of all these new clothes was remarkable. Of course there was no such blaze of glory as that which now appears upon the Avenue on occasions of official display; but compared with the sober drabs of civil life, the blue cloth with the gold buttons and the new shoulder-straps were comparatively gorgeous. Some whose youth was more easily affected by the unusual display assumed airs of importance; others wore their honors with meekness, and some went about with a settled determination expressed upon their faces to attend to business and to ignore as far as possible these honors and glories thus suddenly thrust upon them. The camp put on a military appearance, and the regiment, if not a lion, was at least clothed in the skin of that formidable beast. Arms and equipments were procured for two companies, and there were feeble attempts to drill. Company K, blessed with an officer of some experience, went forward with a bound, and the blind leaders of the blind in other companies groped on. A drum corps was organized, if that could be said to be organized in which every member drummed or fided independently of all others.

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The Adjutant and Sergeant-Major were made out of the same raw material, and in a few days the regiment reached that astounding perfection of drill which permitted it to get into line and go from line into column and the reverse. The sound of men counting off, "1, 2," "1, 2," "1, 2," was heard throughout the camp, and that wonderful complication in which No. 2 was perpetually stepping to the right of No. 1, was a daily occurrence, and finally came to be understood. Of course the line was not at first the shortest distance between two fixed points, and the process of going from line into column resembled a convulsion.

In this advanced stage of the drill, the Colonel determined to hold a dress parade. With much running to and fro and much discord under the theory of drumming and fifing, from the drum corps on flank, much exhortation on the part of the line officers, much right-dressing and left-dressing, the regiment was gotten approximately into line. The Colonel was in his place in front, with his war visage on, and filled with energy and disgust, when suddenly and prematurely the drum corps broke loose and began to ramble down the line uttering discords galore. It was very far from "sonorous metal blowing martial sounds." Then came the first order of the Colonel which, as faithful history must record, was the beginning of the military history of the regiment as a battalion. The order was: "Captain Bangs, stop that damned drumming." The order was directed to Captain Bangs from local considerations, he being the Captain nearest to the point where the confusion had broken out. It is needless to say that neither Captain Bangs nor the drum corps heard the order. They would not have heard it had it been uttered through a megaphone, and megaphones had not then been invented. The Colonel, the noise continuing, and the drum corps continuing, grew more and more wrathful, and finally charged upon that musical body sword in hand. It was an unfair advantage, justifiable only on the ground of military necessity. The Colonel was armed and the drum corps had only drums and fifes, formidable for offence but not for defence. Instantly they were routed and fled, and disappearing around the nearest flank, took refuge in the rear. It was the first victory in the regiment. It could not be said that this charge reduced things to order; it only tended to suppress disorder.

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What became of the drum corps on that day I do not now remember. I have the impression that they retired to the guard-house for recuperation. Certainly they appeared no more upon the scene that day, and the dress parade proceeded as a school of instruction, which the Colonel administered partly to the regiment as a whole, and partly to individuals, with distressing particularity. Of the instruction given in general terms it is sufficient to say that it was of the most elementary character, and was such wholesome counsel as an experienced and trained officer would give to a green regiment; only the terms were unusually emphatic, and the amount too great for one occasion. Of the individual exhortations a sample should be preserved to posterity as illustrating the conditions of these times. If any be inclined to judge harshly, from the character of these exhortations, as to the patience and forbearance and longsuffering spirit inculcated at West Point, he may consider the trying nature of the job suddenly placed upon the graduate of that venerable institution (only one year out of the school, and of a temper naturally not mild), called upon to direct and drill, in one lump, a thousand greenhorns, and charged with the duty of making soldiers out of them. Unfortunately, in the center of the line, in front and in plain view, was a newly uniformed and commissioned Lieutenant, whose *nomme de guerre* was Simps. On this occasion he was standing much like a tall, full meal bag, bulging under its own pressure. The eagle eye of the Colonel soon detected him and the wrath accumulated, and unsoothed by the strains of the drum corps, broke out afresh. Referring in terms of emphatic condemnation to Simps as an individual, and assigning his spiritual being to a warmer climate, he ordered him to "draw up his bowels." The embarrassed Simps, thus singled out and complimented, already feeling himself in too conspicuous a position, and quite too new to the business, and also alarmed at the suddenness and warmth of the personal address in front of so large and critical a company, made some convulsive movement as if struck by lightning; but either because he had no control over his abdominal muscles, or because he was paralyzed by fear, he did not "draw up" perceptibly. However, Simps was not the only awkward figure in the line, though perhaps the most conspicuous; and the exhortations of the Colonel proceeded, and soon no fellow felt sure that some particular exhortation, uncomplimentary and perhaps not fully understood, would fall upon him. The attention of the Colonel, however, recurred to Simps, no less bulging, but rather worse than before: "Mr. Simps, for God's sake draw up your bowels." The miserable Simps could not; his bowels were not built that way, and further exhortations followed in the same vein, and with increasing emphasis. He was advised to employ the worst drilled man in the regiment to teach him, and finally was driven into the rear of the regiment, where he disappeared to fame, and from whence he soon after retired to private life. His military career was short but conspicuous. He had one notice from his commanding officer in front of his regiment. He was probably, too, the only man in military history, certainly the only one whom I have found in a somewhat extensive reading, who was disabled as to the military service and lost to the defence of his country because he could not "draw up his bowels." Other heroes, notably in the recent Spanish war, have failed to confer luster on the American arms and to secure immortal fame for themselves simply from lack of opportunity. It was reserved to Simps alone to miss the shining mark by reason of stomachic distortion.

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This particular lesson, however, was not lost upon the regiment, and the enforcement of it was subsequently made easier when in the field, by reason of material change in the rations. For some days, however, instruction mixed with similar emphatic exhortations continued, and the regiment continued to learn military drill and a new vocabulary at the same time.

The regiment had been in camp about a week when, on the 29th day of August, it was mustered into the service of the United States, and soon thereafter was ordered to the front, greatly to the relief of all, and especially of those slowest to learn.

After these trials by fire, so to speak, the Government in its wisdom proceeded to give a further seasoning by water, and this regiment with another (2,000 men in all) were shipped, packed like so many sardines, in one vessel, from Boston to Alexandria. This process was perhaps a process of artificial aging as of liquor, and served well to assist in the process of drawing up the bowels to the regimental standard.

While the men, packed in the hold of the ship, on this voyage, were taking care of themselves as best they could, the company officers, under the tutoring of the Colonel, were cramming themselves with Casey's Tactics.

In due time they passed Alexandria, and, as a cheerful introduction to the service, saw on the decks of the river steamboats the crowds of wounded from the field of the Second Bull Run and heard of the disastrous result of that battle. Landed at the Arsenal the regiment passed the first night in an adjacent open lot, on a downy bed of dead cats, bricks and broken bottles; the next day they were supplied with arms and equipments, and on the hot September evening of that day marched without a halt, seven miles, and joined the brigade to which the regiment had been assigned.

It is a striking illustration of the pressure of the emergency, and of the wasteful unpreparedness of the Government, that within three weeks from the day this regiment was mustered into service, and before it had ever had what could properly be called a battalion drill, it was in the battle of Antietam. But subsequently officers and men were instructed and drilled in the field, in time snatched from battle, marching, picketing, and camp duties. They learned the duties of a soldier by performing them, and in performing them; at first laboriously, with difficulty and awkwardly. But they learned them well. Of the original officers, two served with great distinction and rose to the rank of Major-General. And the men so raw and undrilled at first, under the severe but wise discipline and thorough instruction, became soldiers as good as any that ever carried muskets. At Gettysburg, ten months after muster in, they stood till 40 per cent. of their number had been killed or wounded, and then charged. That line, so awkward, raw, and unprepared at first, in all the subsequent campaigns, from Antietam to Appomattox Court House, in fights as stiff, and under fire as searching and deadly as any, was never broken. Never!

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*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE STORY OF THE RAISING
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