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A Life Cast Asunder: The Fate of Sanford Pettibone

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Abstract

As the American Civil War entered its fourth summer in 1864, both Union and Confederacy delved ever deeper into their remaining reserves of manpower. Legions of men continued to enter the armed forces of their nations, reinforcing drastically undermanned units as well as forming regiments of their own. One such regiment was the 133rd Illinois Volunteer Infantry. Organized at Camp Butler, Illinois in May of 1864 and mustered in for only one hundred days, the 133rd Illinois was stationed at the Rock Island Arsenal, where its men guarded Confederate prisoners of war. Here the 133rd would remain until its men's enlistment expired and they were mustered out of service in September. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, Sanford Pettibone, 133rd Illinois Volunteer Infantry, amputation, Civil War medicine

Disciplines

History | Military History | United States History

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

A Life Cast Asunder: The Fate of Sanford Pettibone

OCTOBER 10, 2013

By Bryan Caswell, 15

As the American Civil War entered its fourth summer in 1864, both Union and Confederacy delved ever deeper into their remaining reserves of manpower. Legions of men continued to enter the armed forces of their nations, reinforcing drastically undermanned units as well as forming regiments of their own. One such regiment was the 133rd Illinois Volunteer Infantry. Organized at Camp Butler, Illinois in May of 1864 and mustered in for only one hundred days, the 133rd Illinois was stationed at the Rock Island Arsenal, where its men guarded Confederate prisoners of war. Here the 133rd would remain until its men's enlistment expired and they were mustered out of service in September.

Among the soldiers that made up the 133rd Illinois was a young man named Sanford Pettibone. Barely more than a boy, Pettibone had enlisted in the 133rd Illinois as a private at only sixteen years of age. After serving his hundred days with the 133rd, however, Pettibone did not simply reenter civilian life. Instead, he re-enlisted, this time with the 33rd Illinois Veteran Volunteer Infantry. Pettibone must have been ecstatic about joining the 33rd Illinois. A distinguished unit that by the end of 1864 consisted entirely of veteran soldiers, the 33rd had served with distinction in Ulysses S. Grant's campaign to capture Vicksburg during the spring and summer of 1863. Now acting as garrison forces in Louisiana, the men of the 33rd were joined by Pettibone January of 1865.

For the next two months, the 33rd Illinois was stationed in Louisiana, guarding stretches of the New Orleans and Opelousas Railroad from Confederate partisans and raiders. Then, in March, new orders! At last relieved of the monotony of guard duty, the 33rd Illinois was to report to the headquarters of the Union XVI Corps, there to lend its support in the rapidly developing siege of Mobile, Alabama. This redeployment promised to give Sanford Pettibone, now seventeen, his first true taste of action in the nearly year-long duration of his service. Events, however, were to dictate otherwise.

Having boarded a train to take them eastward, the men of the 33rd Illinois sped onward towards their new assignment. On March 2, 1865, however, disaster opened its fanged maw. A horse, which had previously been noticed running alongside the train, attempted to cross the tracks directly in front of the engine. Lacking the speed to throw the horse's body clear of its path, the 33rd Illinois's train was itself de-railed, each successive car piling up onto the next as the locomotive ground to a wrenching halt. As the men pulled themselves from the wreckage, one described the scene as one of "wrecked cars and suffering humanity." Nine soldiers had been killed, while another seventy-two had been wounded. Among their number was Sanford Pettibone.

It is almost certain that Pettibone was not able to escape from the train under his own power. Both his feet had been crushed, and would require amputation. According to Pettibone, medical attention was administered approximately forty-five minutes after the infliction of his injury. Unable to save his feet, the surgeon was forced to amputate both of Pettibone's feet above the ankle, at the juncture of the mid to upper third of the lower leg. Luckily for an operation undertaken by the side of a railroad, Pettibone's procedure was successful and did not result in infection or any further loss of limb. Pettibone's war was over, however, and though he would remain on the roster of the 33rd Illinois until its mustering out in November, Sanford Pettibone would never again answer roll call with his regiment. Instead, he spent the remainder of the war recovering from his operation and preparing to adapt to a new life which, for a man of seventeen, can only have look indescribably bleak.

To be continued...

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