

## Lewis E. Ijams (1841-1919)

Lewis E. Ijams was born on November 21, 1841 near Zanesville, Ohio. His parents were Lewis and Eliza (Rodman) Ijams who all together raised seven children (William, Lewis, John, Eliza, Charlotte, Thomas, and Joseph). In 1851, when Lewis was around ten years old, the family moved to McLean County, IL where they settled in Bloomington. Lewis's father worked as a farmer and the family resided on Grove Street. It is unknown why they chose this location and little is known about Lewis's life prior to his service during the Civil War.

The Civil War began on April 12, 1861 as Confederate forces fired upon Fort Sumter, South Carolina in Charleston Harbor. The fall of Fort Sumter was the beginning of a four year long war that tore the country apart and left hundreds of thousands of men dead or wounded. Thousands of men on the home front were called to action by President Lincoln and Ijams was one of those who answered that call. "From his mother and father, Lewis inherited an ardent love of liberty and when the great contest between the union and slavery forces arose he threw himself into the fight with all the ardor of youth."<sup>1</sup>

Lewis' first posting in 1862 was with the 68<sup>th</sup> Illinois Regiment under the commanding officers of Colonel Elias Stewart, Lieutenant Col. Houston Taylor, and Major George Lackey. Although Lewis saw little action on the battlefield, he was a part of the superiorly trained company nicknamed "Lackey's Zouaves," after its commander Major George Lackey. Zouaves units were inspired by North African French colonial units that were known for their colorful uniforms and being expert fighters.<sup>2</sup> Not much is known about the fighting style of "Lackey's Zouaves," but it was said that companies F and G of the regiment were "especially proficient in the school of the soldier and in skirmish and Zouave drill."<sup>3</sup>

After a brief guard duty at Camp Butler near Springfield, Illinois, the regiment traveled by rail to Wheeling, Virginia arriving on July 7<sup>th</sup>. Two days later they were ordered by the Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton, to Washington, D.C. They remained at the "Soldiers Retreat" until July 14<sup>th</sup> when they marched to Alexandria, Virginia. While the men never fought in battle, they executed their assigned duties swiftly and effectively. While posted in Alexandria, they cared for the wounded from the Battle of Bull Run and even walked in review before President Lincoln, "having the distinction of being the only Illinois Regiment present on that occasion."<sup>4</sup> They were then ordered back to Camp Butler on September 17<sup>th</sup> where they were mustered out of service on the 26<sup>th</sup>.

With no fear and superior training, Ijams did not wait long before re-enlisting. This time he was thrust into the very heart of the battle. He enlisted in Company M of the 16<sup>th</sup> Illinois Cavalry on May 16, 1863. After serving for a short time at Camp Butler, the 16th Cavalry was ordered east to Kentucky and then on to eastern Tennessee during the Knoxville Campaign. A portion of the Illinois Cavalry participated in the battle at Knoxville from October to November of 1863. One battalion under Major Beers, including Company M, was sent to the Powell Valley where Tennessee, Kentucky, and Virginia border each other. They were headed north towards Jonesville, VA where a battle ensued which almost cost Ijams his life.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Unknown author. "Lewis E. Ijams, Captain Company M 16<sup>th</sup> Illinois Cavalry, Capture and Escape," McLean County Museum of History Archives

<sup>2</sup> Researcher's notes: "Lewis Ijams Cemetery Walk Research Folder"

<sup>3</sup> *Adjunct General's Report*, "68<sup>th</sup> Illinois Infantry Regiment," <http://www.civilwar.ilgenweb.net>

<sup>4</sup> *Adjunct General's Report*, "68<sup>th</sup> Illinois Infantry Regiment,"

<sup>5</sup> David Chaltas and Richard Brown, "Battle of Jonesville," <http://www.bencaudill.com>

Jonesville was a small town in the Powell Valley of Lee County, VA. The area was completely closed in by mountain ranges to the North and South, so the town was utilized for supplies and sustenance by both armies. Jonesville was located less than four miles south of Kentucky and six miles north of Tennessee, and the roads to Confederate and Union strongholds were all connected at Jonesville.<sup>6</sup> During the winter of 1863-1864, Union forces under the command of Major Charles Beeres were sent on a foraging expedition to look for the necessary supplies to help keep Union soldiers alive during the unusually harsh winter. As they went from town to town (which were largely Confederate), it was rumored that Beeres had ordered his troops to burn the courthouse at Jonesville for no reason and to also burn Franklin Academy because he believed it was a Confederate hospital.<sup>7</sup> Because of this, Confederate troops in the area sought out Beeres and his men to “exact some revenge.” They would get their chance when Beeres was ordered to take the 16<sup>th</sup> IL Cavalry (which included Ijams) and the 22<sup>nd</sup> Ohio Battery, nearly 450 men, and attack a small encampment of Confederate soldiers stationed near Jonesville.<sup>8</sup>

The commanding officer of the Confederate forces of Southwest Virginia and Eastern Tennessee was General William “Grumble” Jones. He was headquartered in Rogersville, TN in December of 1863 and received word that the 16<sup>th</sup> Cavalry under Major Beeres was moving towards Jonesville. Beeres was unaware that additional Confederate forces were being sent to Jonesville to help defend it. Ijams and the men set up weaponry on the hill west of town. On the morning of January 3, 1864, a surprise attack reigned down on Ijams and his battalion. All of Company L was captured, but Ijams and his comrades in Company M stood their ground. They fiercely attacked the Confederates, driving them back and saving the artillery. During the attack, the captain of Company M was injured and unable to hold his command. As Sergeant, Ijams took over command of the forces and held this position to the battle’s end. A nearby house, owned by Andrew Milburn, was used by Union forces as a shelter enabling them to keep the enemy at bay. Srgt. Ijam’s company held on until a rebel force appeared in the east, closing Company M into the valley on all fronts. The rebel soldiers made another assault, leaving the Union forces with no choice other than surrender. Around 383 men and officers were captured, 45 wounded and ten killed. Unfortunately, Srgt. Ijams was seriously wounded during the final attack. A musket ball pierced his naval, perforated one of his intestines, shattered the top of his hip bone, and exited near the spine. He was taken to a makeshift hospital at the Milburn house where he was thought to be fatally wounded.<sup>9</sup> Milburn was a union man who provided his home as shelter to the Union soldiers wounded in battle.

As Srgt. Ijams lay there in his bloodied uniform, barely tended to, he persevered. Although he was initially considered a hopeless case, a sympathetic rebel guard gave him fresh water. On the second day after the battle, a rebel surgeon examined Ijams and treated his wound only after those who were less severely wounded had been treated. For two weeks, a nurse poured water over his wound, allowing the intestine to heal. However, Ijams had become emaciated from lack of proper nutrition and weakened by loss of blood.<sup>10</sup> The living conditions within the makeshift hospital were also deplorable. Bare rooms were full of wounded and sick soldiers. Odors emanating from fever and untreated wounds filled the air. The attendants were

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<sup>6</sup> Chaltas and Brown, “Battle of Jonesville”

<sup>7</sup> *Adjunct General’s Report*, “68<sup>th</sup> Illinois Infantry Regiment,” <http://www.civilwar.ilgenweb.net>

<sup>8</sup> Chaltas and Brown, “Battle of Jonesville”

<sup>9</sup> “Lewis E. Ijams: Capture and Escape” p.3

<sup>10</sup> “Lewis E. Ijams: Capture and Escape” p.4

merely rebel soldiers assigned to stand guard. There was nothing to read, nothing to write, no choice but death or prison. It is a wonder that Ijams or any of the wounded survived at all. As the weeks passed, Ijams continued to hold hope. Milburn provided assistance with little notice from the rebels who guarded the house. He managed to make Ijams a pair of wooden crutches, which allowed him to move around somewhat. However, his hip wound was unable to heal completely until all the bone fragments were gone which took about five months.<sup>11</sup>

Soon enough, Srgt. Ijams began to regain strength as his wounds healed. Thoughts of escape into the unknown wilds were a hopeful alternative to a rebel prison. It was every soldiers fear that after they had healed enough, they would be sent to a confederate prison, worst of all Andersonville. Without exaggeration, confederate prisons were seemingly places where the enemy was sent, but rarely survived. Thirty-five out of Company L and thirty from Ijams own company out of the 113 captured died in these prisons. Ijams concealed his recovery progress from his captors with the help of a medical attendant, a Union supporter. However, the nearest Union forces were quite far away. Luckily, the guards were somewhat lax in their duties guarding the prisoners as most of the men in the hospital were severally wounded. The guards feared no escape. Often on Sundays, the guards would visit the neighborhoods, leaving the hospital beds unattended. This offered Ijams an opportunity for escape.<sup>12</sup>

Ijams, along with six of his comrades made their escape on a Sunday in late March. With the excuse of retiring early to bed, the guards left the rooms. By 10 p.m., the seven men slipped out into the night for Union lines. The Cumberland Gap, their eventual route, had been evacuated by Union forces for some time. Jonesville, held by Confederates since January 3, was forty miles southwest of the Gap. The Confederate lines spread out twenty miles from Jonesville to the Gap. Beyond the lines was neutral ground, which had been ravaged by both sides.<sup>13</sup> The group of seven did not dare take the road to the Gap out of fear that the enemy was near. Instead, they took to the mountains. Thanks to Mr. Milburn, they were advised a route and the given names of Union men whom they could rely on for assistance during the journey. While still on crutches, Ijams was elected leader of the rag tag group.<sup>14</sup>

With wounds tearing and medical supplies low, Ijams led the weakened men through tattered roads, into mud holes, and over boulders for forty miles. As it was early spring, snow storms hampered their journey and covered roads.<sup>15</sup> Progress was slow, but rest was not afforded as rebel forces loomed nearby for the first 20 miles. The first friendly face they came upon was a mountaineer, a loyal supporter of the Union, at about noon on a Monday. Although they were a poor people and had little to offer, they welcomed the men with warmth and kindness. The wife offered a scant meal of corn meal and bacon which was a handsome treat for the men. Even though they were offered shelter for the night, the men moved on out of fear that they would be captured. What they feared most were guerillas, part of the rebel forces who had deserted only to become dangerous outlaws. Lead by Ijams, the men passed from one mountain cabin to another, sharing little meals prepared by Union friends. To avoid detection, the men traveled by night, but the darkness hid obstructions in their path, making the trip no less dangerous.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> "Lewis E. Ijams: Capture and Escape" p. 4-5

<sup>12</sup> "Lewis E. Ijams: Capture and Escape" p. 5-6

<sup>13</sup> "Lewis E. Ijams: Capture and Escape" p. 6-7

<sup>14</sup> "Lewis E. Ijams: Capture and Escape" p. 6-7

<sup>15</sup> "Lewis E. Ijams: Capture and Escape" p.7

<sup>16</sup> "Lewis E. Ijams: Capture and Escape" p.8

As they were about to cross the last enemy line into neutral territory they ran into trouble. The soldiers were warned by a “large, rumped, mountain woman” that the rebel forces were coming down the main road. Thankfully, they evaded capture and continued on their way. They made it to neutral territory and after eight more days, they reached a Union hospital in the Cumberland Gap. Unfortunately the hospital was full and Ijams was forced to sleep in an out building on a bunk made of clapboards.<sup>17</sup>

Although Ijams remained in a weakened condition, he was compelled to leave out of fear of enemy scouting parties visiting the hospital. If he were captured, he would no doubt have been sent to a confederate prison. Ijams continued on by himself to Mt. Sterling, Kentucky, the first Union post near his position. However, it was a 120 mile journey to there on a road “marred by destruction.” Miles of dead animals and starved horses lined the trail and debris from both armies littered the entire way. Ijams took advantage of these circumstances, fashioned a saddle from supplies he scavenged, and mounted a weak horse, which was in no better condition than he was. The journey was a long, hard, and lonely one for Ijams. Sleet and rain alternated and filled the river beds, making fording impossible. Ijams anxiety ran high even when approaching Union lines. He feared that at the last minute he would be “seized by some prowling guerrillas and murdered or captured by some adventurous rebel band and sent to the southern prisons.”<sup>18</sup> Then:

*One morning late in April as he was slowly plodding along, he and his horse worn almost to the point of exhaustion, he saw in the distance the first picket in blue of the Union army and away off in the distance floated the starry flag, the emblem of liberty, the hope of the world. Travelers on foreign lands have attempted to describe their feelings on beholding our flag floating from one of our ships but what did it not mean to him? Life and liberty and all that can be contained in those imperial words, escape from the rebel prisons, next door to death itself, proper care for his open wounds, rest, rest for the weary worn body, rest for the anxious mind, friends, comrades and home, home sweet home and the dear faces of father and mother. What wonder that completely overcome he wept like a child.<sup>19</sup>*

While at Mt. Sterling, he found the other two battalions of his regiment. He was sent to the hospital and received proper care to his wounds. Ijams was then sent back home to Bloomington on furlough to recover. This must have been a great relief to his family since his sister, Mrs. Colwell, had received a letter from a Union Army Officer which informed her that her brother was mortally wounded and dead, presumably in the battle at Jonesville.<sup>20</sup> Upon his return to Bloomington, Ijams was urged to discharge from the army but he could not rest “until the war was over or his life came to an end.”<sup>21</sup> After thirty days at home in Bloomington, he returned to his regiment. He then took part in the Hood Campaign, battles of Columbia, Spring Hill, Duck River, Franklin, and Nashville. Ijams was then promoted to Captain of Co. L based on his outstanding service as a non-commissioned officer. At the close of the war, he returned

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<sup>17</sup> “Lewis E. Ijams: Capture and Escape” p.9-10

<sup>18</sup> “Lewis E. Ijams: Capture and Escape” p.9-10

<sup>19</sup> “Lewis E. Ijams: Capture and Escape” p.11-12

<sup>20</sup> “Capt. Ijams in War,” *The Daily Pantagraph*, February 11, 1919

<sup>21</sup> “Lewis E. Ijams: Capture and Escape” p.11-12

home, physically injured, but strong in heart. He was now deaf in one ear and hearing impaired in the other.<sup>22</sup>

After the war, his life in Bloomington was one of modesty and distinguished civility. Ijams was twice elected Treasurer of McLean County for the duration of twelve years. He was involved in the real estate business and also was a member of the First Methodist Church in Bloomington. As a veteran of the Union Army, Ijams was also eligible to join the Grand Army of the Republic, known as the G.A.R. The G.A.R. was a fraternal organization (much like the American Legion or the Veterans of Foreign Wars today) that was instituted and organized in Springfield, Illinois in 1866. Ijams was a member of the William T. Sherman Post #146 in Bloomington which was organized on July 26, 1882.

Although Capt. Ijams carried himself with great decorum, he became embroiled in an unfortunate (and somewhat embarrassing) situation. In the fall of 1906, he went to court with a claim against the estate of the late millionaire Abraham Brokaw. The claim in the amount of \$10,000 was for services rendered during Brokaw's last years. These services, Ijams stated, were of telling stories and jokes under the direction of Mr. Brokaw. From Ijams early life and history, to the events of the day, Mr. Brokaw included his own stories as well. Ijams claimed that this job required him to have much knowledge of "people and history," as he talked every night.<sup>23</sup> The case was reported in the *Daily Pantagraph*, on which Ijams claimed "that during the time that he cared for Mr. Brokaw that he did so at the request of the aged man and that the duties were arduous and responsible, exceeding those of a nurse."<sup>24</sup> Ijams also recounted that he spent 16 hours tending to business interests, bodily comforts, and offering protection from women who wished to marry Brokaw for his money. In the end, Ijams was awarded \$5,050 from the Brokaw estate and was regrettably likened to a court jester.<sup>25</sup>

Captain Lewis Ijams died at the age of 78 on February 8, 1919 at his home on South McLean St. He had suffered from uremic poisoning (kidney failure) for a week which gradually grew worse. He was never married but left behind family and numerous friends. He was always remembered as a quiet and unassuming gentleman who served his country gallantly. He most surely would have vanished into history as many of the unsung heroes of the Civil War had it not been for his friends who felt that he should receive his due from all he gave to his country. He is buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington, IL.

By: Emily Swartz, 2011

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<sup>22</sup> Researcher's notes: "Lewis Ijams Cemetery Walk Research Folder"

<sup>23</sup> "Cupid in the Brokaw Case," *The Daily Pantagraph*, October 16, 1906.

<sup>24</sup> "Cupid in the Brokaw Case"

<sup>25</sup> "Cupid in the Brokaw Case"