

STAND FIRM

By Thomas R. Schuck

Sunday, April 6, 1862 was a typical spring morning on the Tennessee. The rain that had soaked everything and turned the ground to mud had stopped. The night had been balmy and perfectly still. Soldiers of the 15th Illinois Volunteer Infantry were eating breakfast or relaxing in their large Sibley tents, enjoying the fact that their colonel, Edward F.W. Ellis, had won his argument with Lieutenant Colonel Markoe Cummins of the 6th Iowa over which unit would get the prized camping spot that the 15th now occupied. The men expected action; Ellis wrote to his family on April 3 that “[a]t Corinth, eighteen miles from us, the enemy are entrenching a large force and proposed to make a stand there. If we whip them at Corinth they will have no place to fall back. We shall do it of course. I send some peach and apple blossoms, but I doubt if they go safe.”

The 15th Illinois was a volunteer regiment mustered into service for three years at Freeport, Illinois on May 24, 1861, less than a year before. As was common with volunteer units at the time, their organizers generally held commissions in the units. The 15th was no exception; Ellis became company commander of the “Ellis Rifles” from Winnebago County (Rockford), Illinois. The unit became the regiment’s Company C with Ellis as captain. By April, 1862, Ellis had been elected lieutenant-colonel and had succeeded to command of the regiment.

The 15th Illinois served in the Army of the Tennessee under Major General Ulyses S. Grant, who sent it to Pittsburg Landing, Tennessee on March 15, 1862 in anticipation of the Union advance on Corinth, Mississippi. The 15th Illinois was one of the first Federal units to arrive. It camped approximately a mile and a quarter west of the landing and a mile and a half north of the Shiloh Methodist Episcopal Church, near the front of the Union line.

The Federals thought that the Confederates were massed at Corinth. They knew that there were Southern soldiers in the woods to their front, but they didn't know how many, and they had been ordered not to bring on a general engagement. An early morning patrol located the Confederates at dawn and the Union forces were alerted, but with only minimal time to form in front of their camps to meet a Confederate attack. As the drummer-boys beat the long roll to assemble the Union troops, 9,000 Confederate infantry of Major Generals William J. Hardee's and Braxton Bragg's corps, Army of the Mississippi drove in the Federal pickets and hit the infantry line early in the morning. They came out of the woods in line of battle, dressed in gray or a shade of brown called butternut, the sun reflecting from their mounted bayonets, flags flying and regimental bands playing.¹

The 15th Illinois was part of the Second Brigade, Fourth Division, Colonel James C. Veatch of the 25th Indiana commanding. Brigadier General Stephen A. Hurlbut commanded the division. When General Hurlbut learned of the attack, he dispatched Colonel Veatch's brigade to reinforce Brigadier General William T. Sherman's Fifth Division, on Sherman's left. The 15th Illinois joined the 25th Indiana, 14th Illinois, and 46th Illinois on a slight rise behind the right end of the Union line.

Veterans remembered Ellis' address to the regiment on the eve of battle. He recounted his connection with the 15th and his love for the troops, and exhorted them to do their duty in the coming engagement. Lucius W. Barber of Company D wrote home that "[w]e saw the stuff he was made of and the bold stand he took for his own and our rights and we would have followed him to the death if he had so ordered. Illinois sent no better man to the field than Lt. Col. Edward F.W. Ellis."

At about 9:00 a.m., the 15th Illinois took up position on the far right flank of the Union line. The troops in front of the 15th broke and the Union artillery gave way, creating confusion. The men fled to the rear through their newly arrived comrades, Confederates hot on their heels. The retreating soldiers masked the 15th's fire, hindering its ability to stop the Confederate

¹ In General Hardee's corps was the 6th Arkansas Infantry, Company E of which was known as the Dixie Grays. The Grays numbered among the company a 21 year-old immigrant from Wales who had changed his name to Henry Morton Stanley upon entering the United States at New Orleans in 1859 – the Stanley who as a journalist traveled to present-day Tanzania on behalf of the *New York Herald* in 1871 to locate the Scottish Congregationalist missionary Dr. David Livingstone, and the author of the famous salutation, "Dr. Livingstone, I presume."

advance until the stampede was over. The fleeing Yankees seriously disordered the 15th and 46th Illinois.

The men of the 15th Illinois lay down or sheltered behind the numerous trees and fired into the advancing Confederate infantry, the brigade of General Sterling A.M. "Sam" Wood, but to little effect. Colonel Preston Smith's 154th Tennessee crashed through the crossroads in front of the Union line, driving it back and turning Colonel Veatch's right flank, so that the Confederates were able to fire into the side as well as the front of the 15th. Unable to see the Confederates through the haze of battle, Colonel Ellis climbed onto a log in order to get a view of the enemy over the gunsmoke. A ball passed through his wrist, but he continued to direct the regiment as one of his lieutenants bandaged his wound. Major William R. Goddard, Ellis' second in command, shouted to the men, "stand firm; stand your ground...take good aim." He was shot dead, along with all but two of the company commanders and more than 100 in the ranks. As Colonel Ellis encouraged his regiment to hold the line, he was hit again several times; a shot to the heart ended his life. So fierce was the fighting that five officers, including Colonel Ellis and Major Goddard, were killed. With the loss of both field grade officers, the regiment retired to reform. It continued to fight throughout the engagement.

Colonel Veatch wrote in his after-action report that the collapse of the line to the right of the Second Brigade on the morning of April 6 "left the Fifteenth Illinois exposed to the whole force of the enemy's fire in front and a raking fire from the right. Lieutenant-Colonel Ellis heroically held his ground and returned the fire with deadly effect. While cheering his men and directing their fire he fell mortally wounded. Nearly at the same time Major Goddard was killed, and the regiment, now without field officers, was compelled to fall back before overpowering numbers. *** The field officers behaved with gallantry on every occasion. Lieutenant-Colonel Ellis and Major Goddard, of the Fifteenth Illinois, held that regiment steady under the terrible shock of the first attack on this brigade and yielded not an inch till they fell. They were gallant officers and worthy men, whose places it will be difficult to supply."

The story of Ellis' life reads like a boy's adventure tale. Edward Fortescue Warrington Ellis was born in 1819 in Jay, a small farming community in east central Maine, where he lived

until 1838. He was one of eight children. At the age of 19, he moved to the village of Felicity in southern Clermont County, Ohio for reasons unknown. Felicity lies on the waters of Bullskin Creek and straddles an ancient pathway known as the Bullskin Trace, which led from the salt licks near Mayslick, Kentucky to Detroit. When Ellis arrived, the village was barely 20 years old and had been incorporated by the Ohio General Assembly only two years before. At the time, Felicity was the second most populous community in Clermont County and a center of industry and commerce. By 1857, it supported seven dry goods stores, three drug stores, four groceries, several clothing stores and tailors, five shoe shops, a tin shop, two hat stores, four carriage and wagon shops, two chair manufactories, a saddlery, five blacksmiths, three silversmiths, two butchers, a bakery, and a confectionary. According to a gazetteer of the day, the population boasted five physicians, two or three pharmacists, and “4 full grown Lawyers, and 2 or three more in the bud.” Ellis was one of these budding lawyers.

Ellis earned his living initially as a schoolteacher and in his spare time, read law under Alonzo L. Knowles, who kept a tavern in a brick building on Market Street now occupied by Hall’s hardware store. The local Masonic lodge met in rooms above the store; Ellis joined the lodge in the early 1840’s, serving as its secretary from 1842 to 1844 and as its worshipful master in 1848.

Ellis was described as tall, bold, clear headed, fearless and of powerful appearance. He had dark, curling hair and sported a Van Dyke beard. He soon married. His wife, Harriet Oster, died in 1845, and he did not remain single long. He eloped with one of his students, 17 year old Lucy Ann Dobyne, to Brown County, Ohio, where they were married on August 2, 1845. Edward and Lucy Ann had three children by 1848, but none of them survived.

Ellis’ standing in Felicity continued to grow; he served as clerk to the Franklin Township trustees in 1844 and 1845, and began practicing law in 1846. In July, 1847, he was appointed school examiner for Franklin Township. However, Ellis was of a restless nature, and responded enthusiastically in 1849 to news that gold had been discovered in California. He abandoned his law practice, left his wife in Felicity, and travelled by way of Panama to Nevada City, California (northeast of Sacramento). He met with little success as a prospector, so he opened a mercantile business there.

Unfortunately, a major fire in the new community destroyed his business and left him in debt, so he began to practice law again. He was a great success. The story survives of a case in which Ellis disputed the credibility of a witness, a doctor from Tennessee with a high opinion of himself. As he addressed the jury, Ellis observed the doctor draw a pistol and move toward him. Without hesitation, Ellis drew a long knife from his breast pocket, leaped over counsel's table, and went for the doctor, who fled the courthouse. Having determined the doctor's credibility to his satisfaction, Ellis calmly concluded his speech to the jury. Not surprisingly, Ellis was elected to the California House of Representatives in 1851, representing the Whig Party. However, either Ellis' foot began to itch again or his conscience got the better of him, because on April 2, 1852, he took a leave of absence from the legislature to return to his wife in Felicity.

Ellis remained in Felicity until 1855, when he moved his wife and year-old daughter, Clara Blanche, to Rockford, Illinois. In Rockford, he joined friends whom he had made in California in the Spafford, Clark & Ellis Banking & Exchange Company. He also practiced law in Rockford.

Ellis became active in Rockford affairs and moved his Masonic membership from Felicity to Rockford. He served Star In The East Lodge No. 166 in Rockford as its worshipful master five times between 1855 and 1860. As his business ventures grew, so did his family; the Ellises had four more children.

Ellis was a fervent abolitionist. Within a week of the commencement of hostilities in South Carolina, Ellis and other leaders of Rockford organized the 15th Illinois Infantry under the state's Ten Regiment Bill, which called for the establishment, equipage, and drilling of a regiment in each of Illinois' congressional districts in anticipation of the nation's needs.

Ellis was a forceful and prickly commander, jealous of his regiment's interests and his own dignity. At one point, he refused orders to move from winter quarters at Jefferson Barracks, near St. Louis, Missouri, because he feared that the regiment would not be properly equipped and the soldiers paid. According to a letter written by one of the members of the regiment to his family, the order to move reached Ellis while he was asleep in his tent. After being awakened and hearing the order, he turned over on his cot and remarked that "they might go to hell with

their orders, he would not go with the men until they had Minnie rifles as had been promised them and their pay and the whole regiment were again together.” Early in 1862, Ellis ran afoul of the military bureaucracy by taking upon himself the responsibility of moving his troops to a more sheltered area, despite the threat of discipline for having endangered his brigade by the move.

After the battle at Shiloh, Ellis’ body and that of Captain Holden Brownell, commander of the 15th’s Company C and also a member of Star In The East Masonic Lodge, were recovered from the field and returned by train to Rockford to receive the honors due them. Ellis’ body lay in state at the Winnebago County Courthouse, where hundreds of residents paid their respects to him. His metallic coffin was decorated with flowers and surmounted by his sword and belt and a portrait of the fallen soldier. He was buried in Greenwood Cemetery in Rockford by his fellow Freemasons.

The depth of community feeling at the loss of this gallant soldier is reflected in the resolution that Star In The East Lodge adopted in honor of Worshipful Brother Ellis at its stated meeting on April 14, 1862:

Whereas, it has pleased an all wise Providence to call our highly esteemed and worthy Brother Edward F.W. Ellis, in the full vigor of his useful manhood from labor to refreshment to that lodge on high where the Supreme Architect of the Universe presides.

Resolved, that as a Brother he was ever an abiding friend and kind councilor, who won our love and reverence while sojourning among us, by his prompt charity, unselfish benevolence, high minded firmness, reasonable remonstrance, well timed advice, unwearied perseverance and lucid intellect.

Resolved, that in the death of our beloved Brother we deplore the loss of a valuable, active and prominent member, one of the brightest lights of our institution, a truly good and public spirited citizen.

Resolved, that our County has lost in Col. Edward F. W. Ellis a brave, efficient and patriotic officer, true patriotism alone actuated him to enlist in the glorious cause of our Union,

to help fight her battles and sustain her constitution, was his high aim; for this purpose he made pecuniary sacrifices, left family, friends, an inviting home and the state to die the death of a hero in the late fearful battle near Pittsburg, Tennessee.

Resolved, that we, as Masons, tender to the widow and orphans of our departed Brother our heartfelt condolence, in this hour of their deep affliction, assuring them of our sincerest sympathies.

In July, 1862, Lucy Ann Ellis was granted a pension by the Adjutant General's Office in Washington. The Ellis family continued to live in Rockford; Edward's son and namesake, born in 1859, played baseball there under the direction of Albert Spalding, the famous baseball player and sporting goods manufacturer.

Postscript: The Lens of History

The Battle of Shiloh was the largest and bloodiest of the war to that point. Total casualties were estimated at almost 24,000. The late historian Shelby Foote calculated that the combined casualties exceeded those in all of America's previous wars – the Revolution, the War of 1812, and the Mexican War – combined. They were twice those in all of the earlier battles of the Civil War. The magnitude of the losses staggered both North and South, destroying whatever illusions remained that the war would be a quick-run thing. Although the great battles of the East were in the future, notably Antietam in September, 1862 (more than 14,000 casualties in a single day) and Gettysburg in July, 1863 (more than 51,000 casualties over the course of three days), it was Shiloh that set the pattern for what was to come over the next three years.

With the death of Colonel Ellis and Major Goddard and the death or injury of all but two of the regiment's captains and several lieutenants, the regiment was forced back repeatedly until by the end of the day's fighting on April 6, what was left of it formed part of the Union line on the bluff above Pittsburg Landing, where Grant augmented the infantry with field artillery and gunboats on the Tennessee River. During the Civil War, the normal compliment of an infantry regiment was 1,000 men (ten companies of 100 men each). On the morning of April 7, the 15th Illinois had only 212 men present, with no one above the rank of captain left (sergeants were in command of some companies and a corporal was in charge of Company D). The regiment's

official losses at the Battle of Shiloh were 41 killed, 146 wounded, and 24 missing, indicating that it was understrength when the fight began. Throughout most of the day, the 15th fought alongside the 14th Illinois from the west-central part of the state. These regiments were consolidated on July 1, 1864 as the 14th and 15th Illinois Volunteer Infantry Battalions, indicating their substantially reduced size, and reorganized as the 14th Illinois on April 28, 1865. The regiment mustered out on September 18, 1865 at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

The butcher's bill reached into the highest echelons of both armies. General Albert Sidney Johnston, commanding the Confederacy's Western Department (everything west of the Mississippi River) and the Army of the Mississippi at Shiloh, had been described as the "finest soldier" in the pre-war army. During the afternoon of April 6, as he sat astride his horse Fire-Eater observing the assault of Colonel Winfield S. Statham's brigade on the concentration at the center of the Union line known as the Hornet's Nest, he was struck by a bullet that clipped the popliteal artery behind his right knee, and bled out before medical assistance could reach him. On the Union side, Brigadier General Charles Ferguson "C.F." Smith, who had been one of Grant's instructors at West Point and was one of his closest advisors, commanding the Second Division in Grant's army, died following the battle of an infection resulting from a scrape on his leg from a rusty piece of tin sustained while getting into a small boat during the storms of the preceding days. Brigadier General William Hervey Lamme (known for obvious reasons as "W.H.L.") Wallace, who assumed command of Grant's Second Division when Smith was injured, was shot in the head when his division was surrounded in the remnants of the Hornet's Nest known as Hell's Hollow. Wallace was rescued by his men, who carried him to the Union steamship *Minnehaha*, where his 29 year old wife Ann was waiting for him – most of her male relatives were in the fight. Wallace, a former Illinois lawyer and friend of Lincoln who hailed from Urbana, Ohio, died in his wife's arms four days later.

So widespread was the carnage that the deaths of even regimental commanders such as Lieutenant Colonel Ellis went virtually unremarked save in the after-action reports of their superiors and the hearts of those who held them dear. Although thousands of Union soldiers fled the lines and hid beneath the bluff at Pittsburg Landing, thousands more stood their ground over the course of the two days. As Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimintz said of those who fought on Iwo Jima more than 80 years later, "uncommon valor was a common virtue" at Shiloh.

The Battle of Shiloh was a tactical draw – at the end of the second day, the Union soldiers reoccupied what was left of their camps in the clearings above Pittsburg Landing, while the Confederates withdrew to Corinth, Mississippi to await the assault for which Grant had assembled his army at Pittsburg Landing in the first place. However, it was a strategic victory for the North. Grant prevailed at Shiloh for three reasons: First, he was stubborn and ruthless; not for nothing had he been nicknamed “Unconditional Surrender” Grant after the capture of Fort Donelson on the Tennessee River the previous February. Secondly, Grant was reinforced on April 6 by Major General Don Carlos Buell’s Army of the Ohio and Grant’s Third Division under Major General Lew Wallace (later governor of New Mexico Territory and the author of *Ben Hur*, the most popular American novel of the late nineteenth century), while the Confederates had no fresh troops with which to continue the battle. Third, General Pierre Gustave Toutant-Beauregard, the “Great Creole” from New Orleans, who assumed command of the Confederate forces following Johnston’s death, decided on April 7 not to continue the assault on what was now a concentrated Union line and ordered the army to withdraw around 3 p.m. that day. Although the tremendous sacrifice on both sides seemed pointless, the losses sustained by the Confederacy at Shiloh, especially the death of Johnston, and Beauregard’s decision to withdraw spelled the beginning of the end for the Confederacy in the West and laid the groundwork for Grant’s capture of Vicksburg on July 4, 1863, freeing the Mississippi River for Union navigation for the first time in two years.

It is not surprising that the Ellises of this great conflict became footnotes in history, because of the sheer vastness of the slaughter. However, it was the Ellises who gave Grant his victory. But Lieutenant Colonel Edward Ellis is not forgotten. He is memorialized in Rockford, Illinois, where an elementary school, an arts academy, and another Masonic lodge are named for him. Ellis Street in San Francisco attests to his prominence in California’s early days. Sadly, however, there is no monument to him in Ohio, where by virtue of his heroic character he deserves to be remembered.

Beside me is a photograph of the portrait of Colonel Ellis in his uniform and Masonic regalia that hangs in Star In The East Masonic Lodge in Rockford. I intend to present it to Felicity Masonic Lodge in Clermont County, of which Ellis was Worshipful Master in 1848, in

the hope that his story will serve as an example of character and courage to the young men who enter the fraternity in years to come.

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