

12. Daniel Lyman Epler, A Private in Pharaoh's Army

Soon after President Lincoln issued his call for troops in April 1861, the U.S. War Department sent Brigadier General William T. Sherman to Springfield, Illinois to meet with Governor Richard Yates to select a suitable training facility for the union troops. The governor assigned State Treasurer William Butler and Secretary of State Oziah Hatch to assist Sherman. They selected an area near Riverton, IL about 5½ miles from Springfield. A training camp named in honor of William Butler was established there on August 2, 1861. Camp Butler was the second largest military training camp in Illinois during the civil war. Over 200,000 Union troops passed through the camp during the course of the war. It served also as a prisoner of war camp when 2,000 Confederate prisoners were taken at the surrender of Fort Donelson in Tennessee in February 1862. It is now the site of a national cemetery, the final resting place for Union and Confederate soldiers, as well as those who died in later conflicts.

Among the first to arrive at Camp Butler was the Forty-eighth Illinois Volunteer Infantry organized in September 1861 by Colonel Isham N. Haynie in September 1861. The regiment consisted of nine companies formed by volunteers from southern Illinois and one company from western Kentucky. Kentucky was one of four slave states that remained with the union. Southern Illinois had mixed loyalties at the beginning of the war as its agriculture benefited from slavery, although Illinois was not a slave state. Many of its citizens traveled to Tennessee to join the confederate army.



Battle flags of the 48th Illinois Volunteer Infantry (<http://stumpf.org/III48Inf/flags.html>)

Southern Illinois has referred to as "Little Egypt." Cairo (pronounced 'Cay-row' in Illinois) sits at its southernmost tip where the Ohio River flows into the Mississippi River. The area reminded the early settlers of the Nile Delta in Egypt. In 1871 Judge Andrew Duff wrote an article in which he claimed the name of Egypt related to the role of Southern Illinois in supplying grain to northern and central Illinois following the "Winter of the Deep Snow" in 1830–31. Following a long winter and late spring, Upper Illinois

lost much of its harvest in an early September frost. The milder weather in southern Illinois gave the area good crops that year, so it was able to ship grain and corn north. The nickname arose from similarities to the account of the sons of Jacob travelling to Egypt for grain to survive a famine. It is not surprising that the Illinois 48th, which drew volunteers primarily from “Little Egypt”, would be attached with the nickname of “Pharaoh’s Army.”

Pharaoh’s Army, numbering approximately nine hundred troops left Camp Butler for Cairo on November 11, 1861. Upon their arrival they constructed barracks for winter quarters. They would see their first conflict early the next year.

Dr. David Stumpf summarizes the first two years of the regiment’s military service:¹

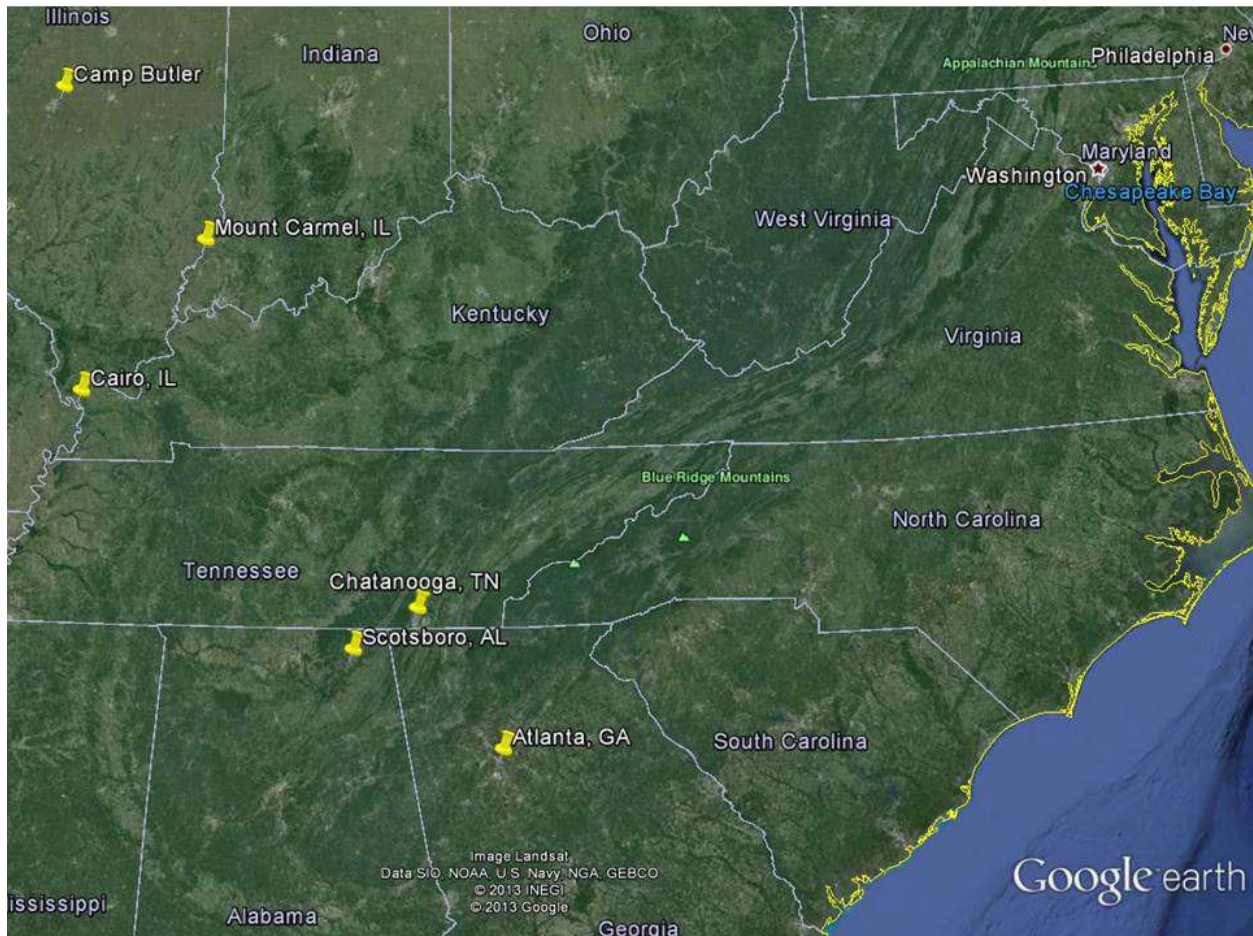
“[The Illinois 48th] was the first Federal regiment that formed a line of battle in Tennessee at Fort Henry in February 1862. The ensuing battle with repeated charges, one retreat, then victory, cost the regiment 40 killed and wounded. They then moved with General McClellan’s Division to Savannah and Pittsburg Landing. On April 6 and 7, bearing their full part in the battle of Shiloh; half the unit was lost, killed or wounded. Next was the siege of Corinth, then garrisoning at Bethel for about 6 months. Haynie was promoted to Brig. General and the unit was assigned to the Sixteenth Army Corps. They participated in the rear guard operations at the siege of Vicksburg, then moved with General Sherman to Jackson, Mississippi. In the siege and charge, they lost another 45 killed or wounded. They then traveled north to Memphis, before receiving orders to march 400 miles to Chattanooga. After the battle of Mission Ridge, they were ordered to Knoxville. Without rations, blankets or overcoats and only half with shoes, they marched 270 miles. Blankets, jackets and trousers were used to protect their feet from the sharp rocks and snow. They then moved to Scottsboro, Alabama, barely recovered; there 90% reenlisted as Veteran Volunteers.”

At the end of 1863, the men of the Illinois 48th were furloughed for 3 months in Illinois. During this respite, more volunteers joined their ranks. Hearing the story of the war experiences of the 48th during the prior two and a half years and considering the large number that did not return with the unit, it is amazing that so many reenlisted and that they were able to recruit more to join them. This speaks to the character, the courage, the tenacity, the conviction and the willingness to sacrifice for a greater purpose that was displayed in these young men from Illinois. Of course, this same

¹ Reference 3

mettle was displayed all across the Union – and also in the Confederacy – during the long and costly war.

Among the fresh recruits joining the Illinois 48th was a young man just a month and a half shy of his twenty-first birthday from Mount Carmel, Illinois, Daniel Epler. Daniel enlisted in Company G of the 48th Regiment on February 4, 1864.



Important Cities in Daniel Epler's Military Career

Daniel Lyman Epler was born on Mar. 23, 1843 in Dauphin County, Pennsylvania to Daniel and Elizabeth Kinport Epler. The family moved to Mount Carmel in Wabash County, Illinois, probably when Daniel was an infant. His sister, Catherine, who was two years younger, was born in Illinois. Mount Carmel is located in Southern Illinois on the banks of the Wabash River which forms the boundary between Illinois and Indiana at that location. Daniel was the fourth of nine children. His father was a farmer and Daniel followed in his footsteps until interrupted by the call to duty.

On March 1, 1864, less than a month after his enlistment, Daniel Epler, along with the rest of the Illinois 48th, left Illinois and headed for Georgia. They traveled first to Scotsboro, Alabama and were there until May 1864.

On March 17, 1864, General Grant met with General William Sherman at Nashville and told him his role in the grand strategy. Sherman was to leave Chattanooga and march to the sea passing through Atlanta. His mission was to destroy Confederate General Joseph Johnston's armies and capture Atlanta, one of the most important industrial centers in the Confederacy. With 254 guns, Sherman matched his three small armies, and a separate cavalry command – a total force of more than 100,000 men – against General Johnston's Army of Tennessee and the Army of Mississippi including General Wheeler's cavalry, consisting of 65,000 men.

The following summary is from “Sherman's Atlanta Campaign, March to the Sea Georgia 1864”:²

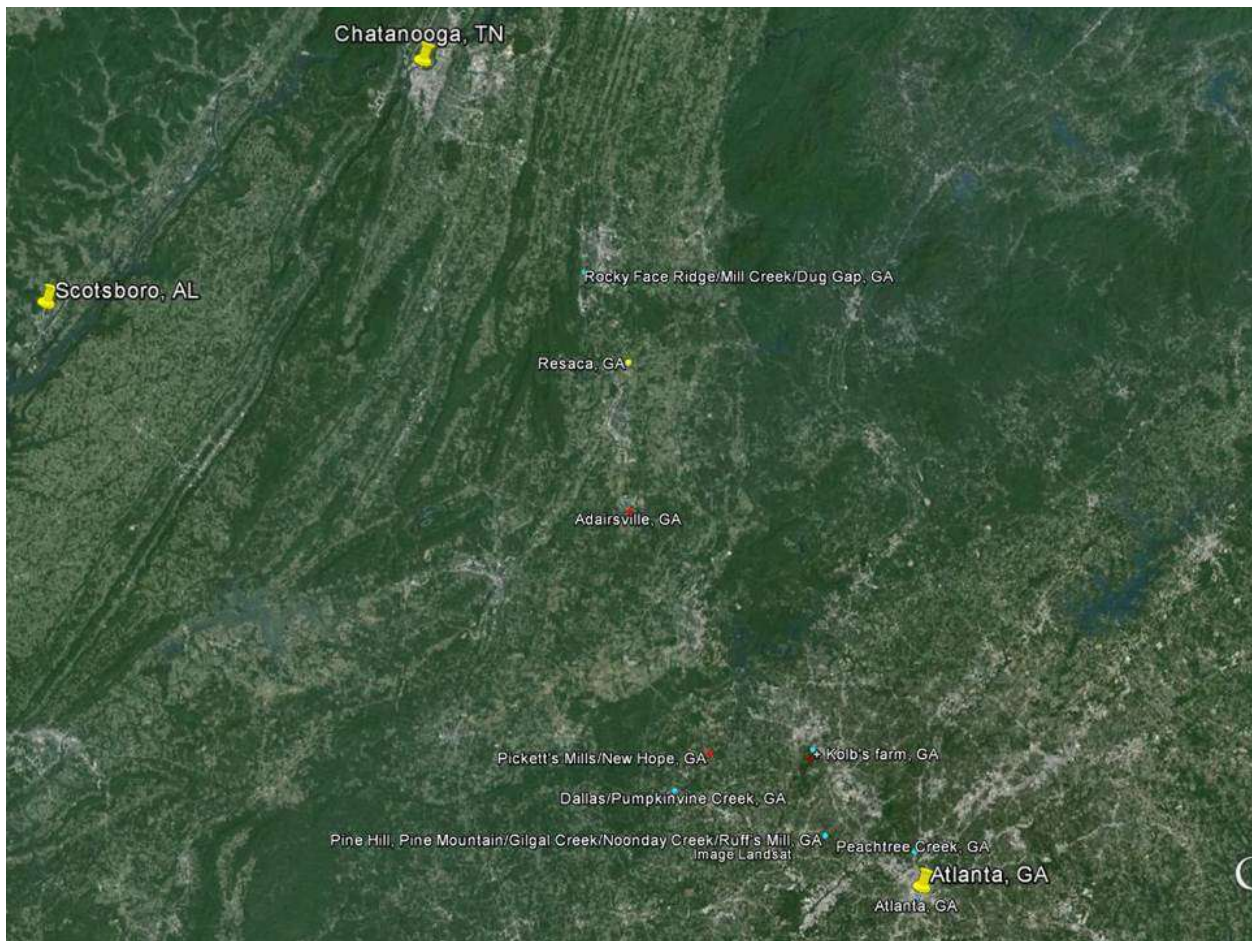
Sherman moved out on May 4, 1864, the same day the Army of the Potomac crossed the Rapidan. Johnston, realizing how seriously he was outnumbered, decided to go on the defensive, preserve his forces intact, hold Atlanta, and delay Sherman as long as possible. There was always the hope that the North would grow weary of the costly struggle and that some advocate of peaceful settlement might defeat Abraham Lincoln in the election of 1864. From May 4 through mid-July, the two forces maneuvered against each other. There were daily fights but few large-scale actions. As Sherman pushed south, Johnston would take up a strong position and force Sherman to halt, deploy, and reconnoiter. Sherman would then outflank Johnston, who in turn would retire to a new line and start the process all over again. On June 27 Sherman, unable to maneuver because the roads were muddy and seriously concerned by the unrest in his armies brought about by constant and apparently fruitless marching, decided to assault Johnston at Kennesaw Mountain. This attack against prepared positions, like the costly failure at Cold Harbor, was beaten back. Sherman returned to maneuver and forced Johnston back to positions in front of Atlanta.

Johnston had done his part well. He had accomplished his missions and had so slowed Sherman that Sherman covered only 100 miles in 74 days. Johnston, his forces intact, was holding strong positions in front of Atlanta, his main base; but by this time Jefferson Davis had grown impatient with Johnston and his tactics of cautious delay. In July he

² Reference 7

replaced him with General John B. Hood, a much more impetuous commander.

On July 20, while Sherman was executing a wide turning movement around the northeast side of Atlanta, Hood left his fortifications and attacked at Peach Tree Creek. When Sherman beat him off, Hood pulled back into the city. While Sherman made ready to invest, Hood attacked again and failed again. Sherman then tried cavalry raids to cut the railroads, just as Johnston had during the advance from Chattanooga, but Sherman's raids had as little success as Johnston's.



Battle sites on the march to Atlanta – May to July 1864

The 48th Illinois may have joined Sherman's armies at Resaca, the site of the second battle on May 13, 1864, having traveled from Scotsboro while other troops traveled from Chattanooga. They would have been involved in the subsequent skirmishes as the army slowly advanced to Atlanta. Daniel's active military career ended on July 22 in the battle of Atlanta when he was wounded in the shoulder. He spent the remainder of the war in various military hospitals. He was mustered out on May 13, 1865.



Hood's vicious offensives at Peach Tree Creek and the Battle of Atlanta did not halt the Union advance. (Library of Congress)

General Sherman eventually captured Atlanta in early September and then in November left Atlanta in his famous "March to the Sea", taking Savannah in December, leaving a burning path of destruction throughout Georgia.

Following his discharge, Daniel returned to Illinois and married Susan Orth on June 19, 1865. Three sons were born to them in Illinois and then sometime between 1873 and 1876, they moved to Colorado where Mary Elizabeth and Clarence were born. Susan died from complications delivering Clarence and he also died a few months later. Mary eventually married George Gresham, the son, grandson and great-grandson of confederate soldiers.³ Daniel remarried and had other children. He died in 1912 in Idaho and is buried in Elbert, Colorado.

Many years later, Bernice Gresham Roberts shared these memories of her grandfather, Daniel Epler:

"Grandpa had a repertoire of Civil War stories that he told and retold many times. The mystery is that he had so many interesting experiences to relate, when only five months after he enlisted, he was wounded in the shoulder in such a manner that the wound never healed and he spent the rest of the war in army hospitals, shuttled from one to another. When the war ended, he was mustered out and given \$150.00 indemnity and a small pension for life!"

³ Elijah Grisham, James Westmoreland Jones and Clement Meador, respectively.

“He never did entirely recover and died at sixty-nine of anemia, the result of that wound. He never wavered in his patriotism, always praising General Sherman as the greatest of generals. He never missed an opportunity to don his uniform and march in a military parade. As might be expected, he named his oldest child ‘William Sherman.’”

Pension records indicate that he applied for his pension in August 1865 and payments of twelve dollars per month commenced in June 1866. Apparently his wife, Abigail Epler, was granted a widow's pension upon his death but the amount is not known.

Concerning his source of material for war stories, his military career was very active, albeit short. Others have written that the typical civil war soldier spent much more time in camp waiting for something to happen than he did in battle or in moving to a new location. That doesn't seem to be the case for the 48th Illinois in the late spring and early summer of 1864. They engaged the enemy frequently and surely must have been constantly on alert. Over the course of the war, the 48th certainly experienced more than their fair share of hardships and hard-fought battles. Daniel may have borrowed stories from the veterans he signed on with to supplement his own. Nevertheless, Daniel cannot be faulted for his pride in his service to his country and his role in the preservation of the union.

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