

# Some Notes on the Eighth Kansas Infantry and the Battle of Chickamauga

Letters of Col. John A. Martin

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## I. INTRODUCTION

THE Eighth Kansas infantry, organized in 1861 to protect settlers from Indians along the western and southern borders and from Confederates along the eastern border, probably saw more service outside the state during the Civil War than any other Kansas regiment. Orders to enlist the regiment were received by Gov. Charles Robinson in July. Although the young state had already supplied six regiments, and a seventh was being recruited, it responded with alacrity and by September six companies had been raised. In October Maj. Henry W. Wessels, of the Sixth United States infantry, having been appointed colonel by Governor Robinson, assumed command and completed the organization. In February, 1862, Colonel Wessels was recalled to his regiment in the regular army and Lt. Col. John A. Martin<sup>1</sup> succeeded him. After a reorganization various elements of the regiment were stationed in Kansas and at Fort Kearny, Neb.

Late in May, 1862, orders were received to send troops to the aid of General Halleck at Corinth, Miss. On May 28, by order of Gen. James G. Blunt, five companies of the Eighth departed for that place by steamer. From that time until the close of the war this regiment served in the campaigns in Tennessee, Georgia and Mississippi, traveled 10,750 miles, and participated in fifteen battles and eighteen skirmishes.

The soldiers of the Eighth, like those of other infantry regiments, suffered greatly from hunger and exposure. The following endorsement on a monthly muster roll by an officer of the regiment is amusing and yet portrays some of the hardships endured:

I make this roll lying flat on my belly on the ground, with a rubber blanket for a desk. If I was at Washington in a comfortable room, supplied with a hundred dollar desk, a gold pen, black, blue, red and purple inks, the latest and best patent rulers, and plenty of "red tape," I could make a more artistic copy. But I have been constantly soaked with rain for seven days and nights; there isn't a bone in my body that doesn't ache; my fingers are as numb as

1. For a biographical sketch of John A. Martin see *Kansas Historical Collections*, v. VII, pp. 410, 411.

though they were frozen, and my clothes are as stiff with Tennessee mud as my fingers are with chill. Under the circumstances this is the best I can do. If any first-class clerk in the department thinks he could do better, let him duck himself in the Potomac every five minutes and wade through mud knee deep for six days, and then try it on. If he succeeds, I will change places with him with great pleasure.<sup>2</sup>

As a part of the Third brigade, First division, Twentieth Army corps, the soldiers of the Eighth fought in the battle of Chickamauga, September 19, 20, 1863, where they displayed great courage, holding their position "firmly and defiantly" against repeated charges of a superior number of the enemy.<sup>3</sup> In the afternoon of the first day the brigade commander, Col. Hans C. Heg, was wounded and Col. John A. Martin of the Eighth Kansas assumed command. This battle on the banks of "Dead Man's River" took heavy toll of the Eighth. Colonel Martin in a telegram to his father stated:

Myself and brother are safe. The Eighth lost fourteen commissioned officers and one hundred and ninety-six men killed and wounded. It fought gallantly. Capt. Graham is safe. John A. Martin Col. Comd'g Brig.<sup>4</sup>

The later official report listed the Eighth as having lost 243 men in killed, wounded and missing. This was about sixty-five per cent of the force that went into battle on the nineteenth and was the largest loss in a single engagement sustained by the regiment.<sup>5</sup>

The Eighth was complimented frequently upon its soldierly appearance, the perfection of its drill, and the neatness and cleanliness of its arms and accoutrements. On June 19, 1863, the inspection officer reported: "The drill, military appearance and dress of the Eighth Kansas Infantry is the best observed in the Division, and that of the Twenty-fifth Illinois next."<sup>6</sup> The honors received by the Eighth reflected credit upon its commanding officers, particularly upon its colonel, John A. Martin. Martin was only twenty-two years old when he entered the war in 1861 as lieutenant colonel of the Eighth regiment. A year later he was promoted to colonel. He was solicitous for his men and was rewarded by their respect and devotion. At the close of the war he was breveted brigadier general for his gallant and meritorious service.

The Eighth was stationed at Greenville, Tenn., when news came of Lee's surrender. The regiment was ordered to Nashville, and the men expected to be discharged there, but much to their disap-

2. "Military History of the Eighth Kansas Volunteer Infantry," p. 117, in *Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Kansas, 1861-1865* (Topeka, 1896).

3. *Ibid.*, p. 123.

4. *The Weekly Kansas Tribune*, Lawrence, October 3, 1863.

5. *Report of the Adjutant General, Kansas, 1861-1865*, pp. 130, 164.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 120.

pointment the Fourth corps, of which the Eighth was a part, was sent to Texas. On August 21 the brigade reached the Salado river five miles from San Antonio and on the 23rd the Eighth moved into the city, where it was placed on provost duty. The regiment remained there until November 29, when it was ordered to Fort Leavenworth. Here the men were finally mustered out on January 9, 1866.

In 1895 Kansas erected monuments and tablets on the battle fields of Chickamauga and Chattanooga to commemorate the service of the Kansas troops.<sup>7</sup>

The following letters, written by Colonel Martin to John J. Ingalls shortly after the battle of Chickamauga, throw additional light on the engagement. They were given to the Kansas State Historical Society by Ellsworth Ingalls of Atchison, son of John J. Ingalls.

## II. THE LETTERS

Oct. 8th '63.

Messrs Ingalls & Horton:—

I send you accompanying a short letter, and in same mail two rebel papers of latest dates, and a copy of *Cincinnati Commercial* giving account of Battle of Chic[k]amauga.<sup>8</sup> It is much the best account I have seen. In only one or two particulars is it an error, and the writer is evidently honest. Its account of Sheridan's feat in extricating himself from the enemy when our lines were cut in two is all an error.<sup>9</sup> As our Division was cut off with Sheridan's, and as Sheridan had command of us until we again joined the main army

7. *Kansas Historical Collections*, v. VIII, pp. 271-275.

8. Presumably the same article referred to by Colonel Martin in his letter of October 18, as having been written by Capt. J. W. Miller. See pp. 142, 143.

9. The correspondent's mention of Gen. Philip H. Sheridan in his three-column story of the battle was as follows:

"Where was Sheridan? 'Captured,' you would have been told that night. But I did not believe it. I had seen too much of him and his fighting division to credit that story. At midnight Sunday night Sheridan doffed his hat to Thomas, and reported for duty with more men and more guns than he had carried into the fight originally!

"Even after he was cut off he repelled a desperate charge of the enemy, and one of his regiments—the 51st Illinois—captured the battle flag of the 24th Alabama and the major of the regiment who was carrying it, endeavoring to rally his men. The general is an ardent, practical student of roads, as I had occasion to know while riding with his staff one day, on a march of six miles. I must have gone double that distance before I found that the general was taking his daily lesson in geography. Gathering together his noble brigades, two of whom had lost their beloved leaders, he struck across the Missionary Ridge directly to the west, as the rebels had possession of the country to the north of him, including, for all he knew, every road. Reaching the top of the ridge, he caused the 'assembly' to be blown, and picked up all the stragglers from other divisions he could find. He had lost three pieces of artillery in the fight, but he came across a quantity that other divisions had abandoned, and took it in charge. In this way he saved a whole battery, given up for lost by Johnson.

"With all that was left of his own division, and with a long line of stragglers and additional artillery, he struck the road on top of Missionary Ridge, which he traversed until he found it in possession of the enemy. Quietly breaking off again to the west, he adroitly passed the enemy's flank, regaining the road and turning east through Rossville, and, without halting for a moment, he reinforced Thomas by midnight, as I have already indicated."—"The Battle of Chickamauga," by a correspondent of the *Cincinnati Commercial*, copied in the *Daily Missouri Democrat*, St. Louis, September 30, 1863.

at 4 p. m., (not 12 p. m. as the correspondent says) I *know* this.<sup>10</sup> I had command of our Division during most of this time, as Genl. Davis had been cut off from it by the rebels, and forced to the left.

Truly,

Jno. A. Martin.

Chattanooga, Tenn.,

Oct. 18th, '63.

Dear Ingalls:—

Yours of 4th inst. rec'd yesterday. It was the first letter I have received from you. I have rec'd all the *Champions* published since I left Atchison except one number, but have never rec'd any other papers from you. Our mails are very irregular, and we cannot, for the present, hope for any improvement. The nearest point reached by a R. R. is Stevenson [Ala.], 60 miles distant. The road between here and there is damnable, and much cut up now by the heavy trains passing over it. So I presume our amiable army mail contractors lighten their wagons whenever they desire, by throwing out mail.

I am glad to learn that the *Champion* is paying expenses. Hope it will continue to do so during the time you have charge of it. I do not remember telling father when the material (printing paper, &c.,) was to be paid for, although Judge [Albert H.] Horton & [Frank A.] Root made an invoice of stock on hand, and the Judge said he would pay father, as I requested. I gave father the invoice, price, &c., to collect. I presume he will not hurry you about it. If there is any stuff not used during your term it can be invoiced to me again, and I will pay you for it. Any, however, that you do not need, you need not consider in the account paid father.<sup>11</sup>

About the Battle [Chickamauga], I presume you have already

10. An article in the Cincinnati *Commercial* by Major Schneider and others on the part taken by General Davis' division in the Battle of Chickamauga, reported:

"'J. W. M's' account of Sunday's operations on the right, is substantially correct, but what he says of Sheridan's division should include also the division of General Davis. These divisions gave way almost at the same instant. They were re-formed at the same place, and marched off nearly to Rossville in good order, under command of Major General Sheridan, the officer to whose able management the troops referred to are probably indebted for their extrication. Your correspondent also conveys a wrong impression when he says 'General Sheridan reported to General Thomas at midnight on Sunday.' Both Sheridan and Davis were in a position to communicate with General Thomas long before midnight on Sunday. At 4 p. m., in less than three hours after the right was cut off, and, according to some veracious correspondents, 'disgracefully routed,' Davis and Sheridan, with their divisions decimated by shot and shell, but almost intact so far as concerns stragglers, *marched to within supporting distance of Thomas*, and would again have breasted the storm of battle had they not been ordered back to Rossville."—*Freedom's Champion*, Atchison, November 26, 1863, reprinted from the Cincinnati *Commercial*. See, also, p. 144.

11. When John A. Martin enlisted in the army in 1861, he left his paper, the *Freedom's Champion*, in charge of George I. Stebbins. In September, 1863, he leased it to John J. Ingalls and Albert H. Horton. On January 1, 1865, Colonel Martin, having returned from the army, resumed the control of the paper.—*Kansas Historical Collections*, v. I-II, p. 172.

read more than I could write or say. Whether it was a defeat or victory depends pretty much on what was desired to be accomplished by the campaign. If this was to end by the taking of Chattanooga, it was a great victory for us, for with an army of only 35,000 men we held the rebel army of 120,000<sup>12</sup> at bay for two days, and we yet have Chattanooga—we damaged them as much as they did us, captured as many prisoners (not including wounded) as they did, took from them half as many pieces of artillery as they took from us, brought all our transportation off safe; and hold Chattanooga, so strongly fortified that they cannot take it with 200,000 men. There was bad Generalship on our side (not on "Old Rosey's" part, but by some of his subordinate commanders) and our Right, the second day, was simply *crushed* by overpowering numbers. Our little Division, reduced by the first day's fight to less than 1,200 men, was confronted the second day by at least *two full divisions* of the enemy's army, and both its flanks were left exposed by some one who moved the troops on our left away.<sup>13</sup> McCook & Crittenden are under the cloud, but whether the errors of that day are attributable to them or not, I cannot say. Certainly it didn't look well to see them in Chattanooga on the evening of the 20th, when their thrice decimated Corps were yet fighting at the front, eight miles from this town.<sup>14</sup>

Our Regiment fought magnificently. No more sublime courage was ever witnessed. There was hardly a straggler from it, found in the rear. It has received the highest praise from the Division Commander, Genl. Davis, for its action. But at what a sacrifice!—the whole Regiment does not now look larger than two of our Companies used to.

The best account of the Battle I have seen is the letter of the special correspondent of the Cincinnati *Commercial*, "J. W. M.," understood to be Capt. J. W. Miller, formerly of an Ohio Regiment. With a few exceptions the details of the battle are given with admirable correctness. You will also find in the *Commercial* an ex-

12. Reports of the strength of each side varies. The probably more nearly correct estimate is that of Maj. E. C. Dawes, who after a careful study gave the total Union force as 56,965, and the Confederate force as 71,551.—Nicolay, John G., and Hay, John, *Abraham Lincoln, A History* (New York, 1904), v. VIII, pp. 106, 107.

13. Col. Geo. P. Buell in executing an order from his commander, moved his division to the left, leaving a great gap in the line. Colonel Martin's brigade was ordered to move into it. His small force was inadequate to defend against greatly superior numbers. The Confederates poured in through the gap, routed the divisions and drove them from the field. Brig. Gen. Jefferson C. Davis wrote: "The sudden withdrawal of troops from my left and the absence of any support on my right, just as the attack was being made, made my position little better than an outpost and perfectly untenable against the overwhelming force coming against it."—*The War of the Rebellion*, . . . (Washington, 1890), ser. I, v. XXX, pt. I, p. 500.

14. A court of inquiry held early in 1864 exonerated Maj. Gen. A. McD. McCook and Maj. Gen. T. L. Crittenden from blame.—*Ibid.*, pp. 961, 962, 996, 997.

tended account of the part taken by Genl. Davis' Division, which I wish you would copy.<sup>15</sup> It is a correct and truthful version.

We are in no danger here unless the rebels succeed in cutting off our communications and starving us out. But a great army ought to be massed here. We should be enabled to assume the offensive in a month, and drive the rebels from our front. The d—d silly expeditions the Government seems to be constantly getting up to *occupy territory*, should be denounced by the press of the country in the strongest terms. Annihilate the rebel army, and the territory will need no army of occupation—it will come back itself. Destroy Bragg's and Lee's armies and the war is practically ended—there will be nothing more but guerrilla warfare, which only cavalry can put down. Such nonsense as Sabine Pass Expeditions,<sup>16</sup> Blunt's Arkansas and Indian Country campaigns, &c.,<sup>17</sup> certainly ought, by this time, to be exploded humbugs. In the name of reason what do we want with the Indian Country or Texas now, or why take men there, where they can accomplish no practical good, and let our forces in Tennessee and Virginia constantly confront armies superior to them in numbers.

Respects to all friends,

Yours truly,

Jno. A. Martin.

Chattanooga, Tenn.,

Nov. 6th, 1863.

Dear Ingalls:—

I send enclosed an article from the Cincinnati *Commercial* respecting the part taken by our Division at the Battle of Chickamauga, which I wish you would publish.<sup>18</sup> It is correct in every particular, and was written mainly by Maj. Schneider, assisted by other officers of the Division, who furnished the facts that could not have come under his personal observation.

All well here, and the aspect of affairs unchanged. We are still on half rations, but hope to do better soon. I send you a small ex-

15. This probably referred to the same article that Martin enclosed in his letter to Ingalls on November 6.

16. The critical situation in Mexico induced the Federal government to raise the U. S. flag in Texas. Gen. Nathaniel P. Banks was ordered to conduct an expedition into that region. He set out in September, 1863, to invade the country by way of the Sabine Pass. This expedition failed and in November he occupied the mouth of the Rio Grande and from there took the region along the coast.—Nicolay & Hay, *Abraham Lincoln, A History*, v. VIII, pp. 286, 287.

17. See "General Blunt's Account of His Civil War Experiences," *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, v. I, pp. 211-265.

18. The article was published in the *Freedom's Champion*, Atchison, November 26, 1863. See Footnote 10.

tract from B. F.[?] Taylor's correspondence giving the amusing experiences of one of the Potomac Generals, who imagined Tennessee to be filled with splendid hotels and elegantly furnished restaurants, and whose stomach, filled with the dainty fare of Washington, revolted at the idea of "hard-tack" and "sow-belly." To those who have experienced the discomforts of nearly a two-years' campaign in Tennessee the anecdote is highly amusing and refreshing.

What can be done about bringing our Regiment back to recruit? We have now only 165 men for duty, and only 569 aggregate in the Regiment, present and absent. Most of the men will re-enlist as veteran volunteers, if the Regiment could be brought home for a month or so and recruited to the maximum. I think we could easily do this. Lane and Pomeroy, with Wilder, might bring this about, if they united in the demand, and the chances are greater from the fact that the Regiment was originally raised exclusively for home protection. It has served in the South for over two years now; only ten months remain to complete its three years' enlistment; it has suffered terribly from battle and disease, and is so far reduced as to be of little service here. Will you please make such efforts as your judgment will dictate as best, for the accomplishment of this object. It can only be done through the Secretary of War.

My best respects to all old friends, and to Horton, Root, Holthaus and Tom Murphy particularly.

Truly your friend

Jno. A. Martin.

Hon. Jno. J. Ingalls.