

Douglas Bendell Award*

**"It is a perfect hell to me":
L.R. Webber Experiences Soldiering in Civil War Missouri**

Matt Walker

At the close of more than six months of soldiering in Missouri during the opening year of the American Civil War, L. R. Webber, a private in Company D of the First Kansas Volunteer Infantry, wrote to a friend in Lawrence, Kansas, "I almost wish sometimes that I might fall in battle fighting bravely and thus be discharged honorably from farther service in this Regiment." He then elaborated as to why he wished to be separated from the regiment in such a drastic manner: "If what is practiced in this outfit is good soldiering then I never can get to be a good soldier. Getting drunk, stealing, shirking duty, rioting and imposing upon the few who are steady is the prevailing discipline in this Regiment. It is a perfect hell to me."¹

During the secession crisis preceding the Civil War, Webber had written, "Civil war of the most desperate character seems almost inevitable. Let it come." He continued that he would rather see the government ended than have an "oligarchy of slaveholders . . . rule the nation." Temporarily living in Iowa at the time, Webber wished that state would raise volunteers to send to Washington, D.C. to ensure the inauguration of Abraham Lincoln. "I would enlist," he wrote, "in spite of my anti-war scruples." Webber did not enlist in an Iowa regiment, but returning to Lawrence as short time later, the first one raised by his adopted state of Kansas. It was in this regiment that Webber experienced the life of a soldier first hand and found it was not at all what he naively believed it to be when he enlisted in the spring of 1861. Webber was soon plunged into the horrid guerilla warfare of Civil War Missouri and into the harsh and brutal life of a soldier. His efforts to make sense of this world and adapt to his new environment are revealed in the letters he sent home while in Missouri.²

Webber, a thirty-one-year-old schoolteacher who emigrated to Kansas from New England in 1859, was mustered into the First Kansas at Fort Leavenworth on June 3, 1861. Bookish in nature and of Republican, abolitionist, and tee totaling beliefs, Webber soon found that he was ill suited to the life of a private soldier. As he and the First Kansas campaigned in Missouri in the opening months of the Civil War, Webber related his experiences there to the various members of the John Stillman Brown family of Lawrence with whom he had boarded

* Douglas Bendell is a successful Kansas businessman in the oil industry and believes that the skills he learned from taking History 300: Research and Writing, contributed significantly to his success in the field. Thus, he provides the funding for this award concerning exceptional papers produced by students in History 300.

1. L. R. Webber to Mrs. Brown, January 11, 1862, John Stillman Brown Family Papers, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas.

2. *Ibid.*, emphasis in original.

and worked for as a farmhand in the months leading up to his enlistment. Webber’s letters chronicle his initiation to the harsh realities of the life of a soldier in a Civil War army and his growing dissatisfaction with his comrades, the officers who commanded him, and soldiering in general. It is during the period of time that Webber and the First Kansas spent in Missouri, from late June 1861 to late January 1862, that his disillusionment began and reached its apogee.³

The First Kansas Volunteer Infantry, in which Webber was a private for the duration of his service in the Civil War, was formed at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, in late May and early June 1861. The regiment was composed of various companies of men that organized themselves in the northeastern part of Kansas. Many of these companies, particularly those that were the products of communities on or near the Kansas-Missouri border, organized either shortly before or shortly after the outbreak of hostilities at Fort Sumter as militia to defend their homes from the hordes of Missouri Confederates they reasoned would soon swarm into Kansas. Some had been in existence on and off since the border wars of the territorial period. When President Lincoln called for an additional 400,000 volunteers to put down the rebellion in May of 1861, these companies began to rally at Fort Leavenworth and other points to be mustered into the federal service. Ten of these companies formed the First Kansas.⁴

Like other states, the staff officers of regiments raised by Kansas to be tendered to the federal government for service were to be commissioned by the governor. As such, commissions as colonels, lieutenant colonels and majors in these regiments became patronage plums to be distributed among political supporters. The governor of Kansas, Charles Robinson, determined the staff officers of the First Kansas. The three men he commissioned to lead the regiment, George Washington Deitzler, Oscar O. Learnard, and John Adams Halderman, had been lesser luminaries in the Free State movement that Robinson had led during the territorial period.

George Washington Deitzler had been with Robinson among the “treason prisoners” held in Leecompton by the federal government for organizing a rump legislature in response to voting fraud in the first territorial election. Deitzler was active in the Free State movement for its duration, smuggling Sharps rifles into Kansas from the east and serving as adjutant for the Lawrence Committee of Public Safety during the first “invasion” of Lawrence by pro-slavery forces during the “Wakarusa War” in December 1855.⁵

John Adams Halderman came to Kansas in 1854 as the private secretary of the first territorial governor, Andrew Reeder. Though southern in birth and Democratic in his politics, Halderman eventually became a convert to the Free State cause. Halderman was commissioned as a major in the First Kansas. Oscar E. Learnard, a prominent citizen and businessman in

3. Descriptive Roll of Lieut. Milton Kennedy’s Company D of the First Regiment of Kansas Volunteers, Records of the Adjutant General of the State of Kansas, Regimental Records of the First Kansas Volunteer Infantry, 1861-1864, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas.

4. “The Elwood Guards,” *Troy (Kansas) Chief*, May 21, 1910.; “Leaves from Memory—No. 6: The Lawrence Stubbs,” *Leavenworth (Kansas) Weekly Press*, December 11, 1879.; Martha B. Caldwell, “The Stubbs,” *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 6 (1937): 124-31.; *Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Kansas, 1861-’65*, (Topeka: Kansas State Printing Company, 1896), 3.

5. W.H. Isley, “The Sharps Rifle Incident In Kansas History,” *American Historical Review* 12 (1907): 546-66.; Phillip R. Rutherford, “The Arabia Incident,” *Kansas History* 1 (1978): 39-47.; C. Robinson and J. H. Lane, Pass issued to Josiah Miller dated December 4, 1855 and signed by G.W. Deitzler as “Adjutant,” Josiah Miller Papers, Kansas Collection, Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas.

Lawrence who played a key role in organizing the Republican Party in Kansas in 1859 was awarded the regiment’s lieutenant colonelcy.⁶

The men of the ten companies of the First Kansas themselves decided the captains and lieutenants who were to command them. This practice was standard in the organization of most military units at the company level in the opening period of the Civil War, both North and South.⁷

The junior officers of the First Kansas were of the same political stripe as the staff officers appointed by Robinson to lead the regiment. These men included Bernard Chenoweth, captain of Company A, who published a Union paper in the secessionist town of St. Joseph, Missouri. Chenoweth had been indicted by a grand jury in that town for “uttering and circulating incendiary publications,” and forced to move the offices of his paper across the Missouri River to Elwood, Kansas in consequence. Samuel Walker, captain of Company F, was credited with involvement in the killings of five pro-slavery men during the territorial period and was the leader of a company of Free State militia during that time. Walker was familiar with both John Brown and Jim Lane, the violently anti-slavery Free State leader and, at the outbreak of the Civil War, a federal senator representing Kansas. Francis Swift, a lieutenant in Webber’s own Company D, was the leader of the “Stubbs,” a free state militia unit which participated in several major “battles” of the territorial period. Many of the original members of the Stubbs were among those mustered into Company D.⁸

In a camp south of Fort Leavenworth, the First Kansas began the formidable task of transforming inexperienced and poorly disciplined militiamen into effective soldiers. Webber wrote no letters to the Brown family during the period of the regiment’s formation and initial training at Fort Leavenworth. However, Lewis Stafford, a twenty-eight-year-old lieutenant in Company F, wrote to his girlfriend describing the conditions the soldiers of the First Kansas faced in the early period of the regiment’s existence. He and the other officers of the First were quartered in a house with no doors, few windows and a roof in such poor condition that, should it rain, Stafford believed he would be “drown . . . out.” The men of the regiment were reduced to fashioning utensils to eat their rations from what few shingles remained on the dilapidated roof of the house their officers inhabited.⁹

6. Biography and Inventory, John A. Halderman Correspondence and Documents, 1854-1894, Kansas Collection, Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas.; Frank W. Blackmar, *Kansas: A Cyclopaedia of State History, Embracing Events, Institutions, Industries, Counties, Cities, Towns, Prominent Persons, Etc.*, (Chicago: Standard Printing Company, 1912), 1:801.; *Ibid*, 2:120.

7. Bell Irvin Wiley, *The Life of Billy Yank, the Common Soldier of the Union*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1952), 24.

8. Preston Filbert, *The Half Not Told: The Civil War in a Frontier Town*, (Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania: Stackpole Books, 2001), 1-3; *History of Buchanan County, Missouri Containing a History of the Country, Its Cities, Towns, etc.*, (St. Joseph, Missouri: Steam Printing Company, 1881), 464.; “The Elwood Guards,” *Troy (Kansas) Chief*, May 21, 1910.; Dale E. Watts, “How Bloody Was Bleeding Kansas? Political Killings in Kansas Territory, 1854-1861,” *Kansas History* 18 (1995): 116-29; Stephen B. Oates, *To Purge This Land With Blood: A Biography of John Brown*, (Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 160-2.; “Leaves from Memory—No. 6: The Lawrence Stubbs,” *Leavenworth (Kansas) Weekly Press*, December 11, 1879.; Martha B. Caldwell, “The Stubbs,” *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 6 (1937): 124-31.

9. Lewis Stafford to Dear Kate, May 27, 1861, Kate Newland Letters, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas.

The routine of camp life in the Civil War consisted primarily of drill. “X,” an anonymous correspondent from Company A of the First Kansas, wrote home to the readership of the *Elwood Free Press*, “We spend a great deal of time drilling, and though we spend six hours a day at the work, it will take us a long time to become proficient.” It is easy to imagine the members of the First pouring over copies of *Hardee’s Tactics* in an attempt to “become proficient” in the bewildering machinations of maneuver by company and regiment and William Hardee’s complex “School of the Soldier,” stepping upon each others feet all the while.¹⁰

The members of the First Kansas expected the federal government and the regular army command at Fort Leavenworth to supply them with arms and equipment. They soon learned, however, that both the government and the army had little to give. “X” mentions that only two of the regiment’s companies were armed in his June 8, 1861, letter to the *Elwood Free Press*. Uniforms and equipment were, apparently, even harder to come by than arms. As late as the battle of Wilson’s Creek in August 1861, one member of the regiment recalled an officer of the First “in rags like the rest,” carrying “an old bayonet for a sword and tinfoil shoulder straps sewed on with black thread.” Some of the officers of higher rank, said this soldier, had been fortunate enough to have liberated dragoon sabers from the camp of the regulars along with some “disabled gilt braid,” and thus felt themselves “elevated to a plane of unapproachable grandeur.” The rest of the men “wore government blouses and socks—those who were not barefooted—and a miscellaneous assortment of other clothing such that the country afforded.” In other words, apart from issued shirts and socks, the men either wore what they had brought with them from home or appropriated what they could from the civilian population.¹¹

The regiment was shortly ordered to Wyandotte, Kansas, and then to Kansas City, Missouri. The First and Second Kansas, now under the command of regular army officer Samuel Sturgis, were then ordered south to rendezvous with the forces of General Nathaniel Lyon, currently pushing Confederate forces into southern Missouri.¹²

The period of the march to Clinton, Missouri, where the two Kansas regiments were to join the larger force under the command of Lyon was a harsh introduction to military life and, especially, military discipline for the Kansas men. The march in the heat of the summer took its toll on them and upon arriving at Clinton they immediately began to supplement their wardrobes and diets from the surrounding countryside. According to the grandfather of one Clinton resident who witnessed the appropriations of the Kansas regiments, the men “literally stripped this county of everything they could use.” It did not help matters that the county in which Clinton was located was heavily secessionist in sentiment.¹³

In addition to food and equipment, on July 4, 1861, the men of the First Kansas appropriated the press of the secessionist *Clinton Journal* and issued a one-page paper. Boasting “Secession in Missouri, like a scorpion engit[ed] with fire, will soon sting itself to death,” the

10. “From Camp Lincoln,” *Elwood (Kansas) Free Press*, June 8, 1861.

11. *Ibid.*; James A. McGonigle, “First Kansas Infantry and the Battle of Wilson’s Creek,” *Collections of the Kansas State Historical Society* 12 (1911-12): 292-5.

12. *Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Kansas, 1861-’65*, (Topeka: Kansas State Printing Company, 1896), 4.

13. Haysler A. Pogue, “When the War came to Henry County, Missouri,” *Clinton (Missouri) Daily Democrat*, November 9, 1970.

new editors of the *Journal* apologized if "any of our city subscribers fail to receive their paper this week."¹⁴

Some members of the regiment, apparently bolder than others in their acquisition of supplies from the Clinton area, were caught by regular army soldiers in the process of taking items not deemed of military necessity and placed under arrest by Major Sturgis. Sturgis then had the offenders tied to wagon wheels and whipped. Recalling the event in a later letter to the Brown family, Webber remarked that the men were "cruelly flogged, contrary to all decent law, human and Divine." Webber claimed in this letter, dated December 6, that he spoke to one of the men flogged and the man told him he "felt the effects of that whipping to this day."¹⁵

Tension already existed between the regular army soldiers and the volunteers and this incident did much more to alienate them further from one another. In addition to this, many of the men (and, once word reached the communities from which the regiment was raised) several Kansas newspaper editors held Colonel Deitzler responsible for not preventing the whippings. Webber also joined in the condemnation of Deitzler when discussing the incident several months later.¹⁶

Several days later two privates from one of the companies raised in Leavenworth got into a fight that resulted in the death of one of them. The man responsible for the killing, Joseph Cole, was knelt next to his grave and shot on July 17, 1861. The Kansas regiments were formed into a hollow square surrounding him and forced to watch the military execution, which was the first of the Civil War.¹⁷

The regiment had an extended stay in Clinton while waiting for Lyon and his troops to arrive. The Grand River immediately south of the town was at flood level due to recent heavy rains. Further time was spent waiting for its waters to subside to the point that the men could cross safely and resume the march south to the Springfield area where Confederate forces under the command of Generals Sterling Price and Ben McCulloch were massing. It would seem that in this time lay the seed of the regiment's later jayhawking proclivities of which Webber complains so adamantly when his letters resume after the fight at Wilson's Creek. Though the Kansas troops appear to have been wanton in their appropriation of civilian property, Lewis Stafford claimed, "It is gratifying to see how glad the people are, when troops pass through their country with the greatest order that can be maintained. They supposed their country was to be laid ruin as we passed." Perhaps Stafford, writing to his future fiancé, was hesitant to relate the thievery of the soldiers of the regiment to her. Some companies in the regiment were better officered and disciplined than others. It is possible the men under Stafford's command were among these and did not participate in the thievery in and around Clinton.¹⁸

14. *Clinton (Missouri) Journal*, July 4, 1861.

15. Robert Tracy, "Story of a Regiment," *St. Joseph (Missouri) News-Press*, January 10, 1913.; L.R. Webber to Esteemed Friend, December 6, 1861, John Stillman Brown Family Papers, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas.

16. William Garrett Piston and Richard W. Hatcher, *Wilson's Creek: The Second Battle of the Civil War and the Men Who Fought It*, (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 70-71.; L.R. Webber to Esteemed Friend, December 6, 1861, John Stillman Brown Family Papers, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas.

17. William Garrett Piston and Richard W. Hatcher, 71-72.

¹⁸. Lewis Stafford to Dear Kate, July 6, 1861.

When Lyon arrived, he assumed overall command of the First and Second Kansas who were then placed into a brigade under the command of Deitzler. Lyon, a redheaded native of Connecticut and an even harsher disciplinarian than Sturgis, marched his combined forces to the outskirts of Springfield, Missouri, to confront the growing Confederate army there. The march in the July heat was rigorous and took an especially hard toll on the volunteers, not used to such forced and rapid movement. Stafford reported that on July 20, 1861, “In the Mo. Regt. there were two soldiers killed from sunstro[k]e—and one in the Iowa Regt.” Elaborating, Stafford wrote that in fifteen miles of marching on that day they stopped for water only one time and assumed “it was the ignorance of the commanding officer to march so far without giving the soldiers a rest.”¹⁹

Springfield reached, there were a series of small skirmishes with the Confederate forces there and one of these, at Dug Springs, was quite sharp. Lyon elected to make a surprise attack on the opposing force, camped in a valley along Wilson’s Creek southwest of Springfield approximately ten miles. Lyon, outnumbered two to one, attacked on the morning of August 10, 1861. This battle, later to be known as Wilson’s Creek, was a defeat for the Union. Lyon himself was killed and his army suffered very high casualties. The Colonel of the First Kansas, George Washington Deitzler, was seriously wounded in the right leg and, in consequence, unfit for duty for a portion of the time the First Kansas was to later spend in Missouri.²⁰

The First suffered particularly high casualties at Wilson’s Creek. Initially held in reserve, but quickly moved into the thick of the fighting on Lyon’s right flank, the regiment suffered 284 casualties, 35.5 percent of its strength. Throughout the course of the entire Civil War, only six more Union regiments suffered a higher rate of casualties in a single battle than the First Kansas did at Wilson’s Creek. Stafford remarked in a letter home “it [was] horrible to think of all that one saw, the dead and dying. The wounded calling for help.” The battle was so fierce, Stafford wrote, that, “Our company had 74 men when we went into battle and 47 were killed or wounded. Howe [sic] any of us ever got out alive is a miracle.”²¹

Among the First’s casualties was L. R. Webber who suffered a minor wound in the battle. He, with what was left of Lyon’s Army of the West, retreated from Springfield to Rolla, Missouri, the nearest railhead. Those most seriously wounded were left in Springfield. From Rolla the regiment was sent to St. Louis by railroad where many of the wounded recuperated in military hospitals.²²

Their period of recuperation and rest over, the First Kansas was ordered to Hannibal, Missouri, from which they were to guard the initial section of the Hannibal and St. Joseph railway and garrison the town. It was at this post that Webber resumed his letters to the Brown family. Garrison duty left Civil War soldiers with an unusually large amount of free time on

19. Louis Stafford to Dear Kate, July 21, 1861.

20. Jack D. Welsh, “George Washington Deitzler,” *Medical Histories of Union Generals*, (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1996).

21. William Garrett Piston and Richard W. Hatcher, 287-88; Lewis Stafford to Dear Kate, August 17, 1861.

22. Descriptive Roll of Lieut. Milton Kennedy’s Company D of the First Regiment of Kansas Volunteers, Records of the Adjutant General of the State of Kansas, Regimental Records of the First Kansas Volunteer Infantry, 1861-1864, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas.; *Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Kansas, 1861-’65*, (Topeka: Kansas State Printing Company, 1896), 6-7.

their hands. Webber's comrades in the First, apparently, utilized their spare time engaging in the sort of miscreant behavior that was to supply Webber with material to send home for the duration of the regiment's stay in Missouri.²³

The bulk of Webber's first letter home was reserved for a fusillade against the army and the government. By the time of his duty at Hannibal, Webber was well on his way toward becoming a disillusioned, cynical soldier. "Yesterday," Webber wrote to Sarah Brown, the daughter of John Stillman Brown, "one man was stretched [at] length by the thumb and another was 'bucked' that is, had his hands tied together and slipped over his knees and a stick placed in the angle of the elbows and knees. Thus skewered up he was to remain 8 hours. The first man was to remain stretched up for 2 hours in the fore noon and 2 in the afternoon." This sort of discipline, common in the military of the Civil War era, "galled [Webber] dreadfully," but what bothered him most was the fact that the man bucked had been so punished for "stealing a little butter at Rolla." In his defense of this man, Webber reveals the motivation for the First's plundering of the countryside in and around Clinton on the march to Springfield. "Our men were taught to steal by being half fed, half clothed . . . and to punish them now for doing what they had to do at first is to me sheer cruelty." Webber then takes aim at the federal government and the army: "I can't help but thinking why I should [next few words illegible due to tear in paper] for a Government that allows its soldiers, white men, to be treated as they say slaveholders treat their niggers and as no brute ought ever to be treated." The federal government, said Webber to Miss Brown, allowed the army to inflict the "the cruelties of the dark ages" upon its soldiers. Webber may have had abolitionist tendencies and he may have believed in the Union cause but, to him, for free, white men to be treated like "niggers" was beyond the pale.²⁴

As if the army's discipline was not bad enough, Webber reported, "We have not yet been paid a cent." It was not as if the army didn't have the money, as "other regiments and even our own officers have been paid but we have not. We who have done the hardest marching and the hardest fighting have had the least to do it with." But, said Webber, "We are now pretty comfortable in the way of clothing. Each has a double blanket and a large overcoat." Equipment was finally starting to be issued as well: "We are all well supplied with canteens and haversacks but many of our dippers, plates, spoons, bake ovens and the like have got lost." Not only this, but thievery within the regiment began to take its toll on Webber's kit as, "The gourd dipper which I bought at Leavenworth was stolen from me the day we left Rolla. Since then it is difficult for me to get my share of coffee and soup."²⁵

This letter, Webber's first to the Brown family since leaving Leavenworth in June 1861, set the tone for the remainder of his communications to them for the course of the First's service in Missouri. For the next several months a rapid decline in Webber's morale is chronicled in his

23. *Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Kansas, 1861-'65*, (Topeka: Kansas State Printing Company, 1896), 8.

24. L.R. Webber to Miss Brown, John Stillman Brown Family Papers, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas.; Michael Fellman. *Inside War: The Guerilla Conflict in Missouri During the American Civil War*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 204; L.R. Webber to Miss Brown, John Stillman Brown Family Papers, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas.

25. L.R. Webber to Miss Brown, John Stillman Brown Family Papers, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas.

missives. The misbehavior of his comrades began to be the prevalent tone upon which Webber harped in his letters to the Browns while he was stationed at various railroad towns in Missouri, though the army (particularly his own officers) and the federal government still received their share of denunciation.

It was in Hannibal that, according to Webber and Stafford both, the men of the regiment began their habit of drinking in earnest at any available opportunity. The officer in charge of the regiment in Deitzler’s absence, Lieutenant Colonel Learnard, was forced to issue an order banning the sale to his men of “spirituous liquors.”²⁶

The First was next ordered to Chillicothe, Missouri, to perform more garrison duty along the Hannibal and St. Joseph railroad. Chillicothe, described by Stafford as a “forsaken place,” from which “two thirds of the men were in the Secesh army,” is located along the Missouri River. The counties along the river held some of Missouri’s highest concentrations of slaves and, as a result, were extremely secessionist. Stafford writes of constant rumors of attack from various unknown rebel forces in the area. As nearly all of the regular Confederate forces were concentrated in the southern portion of the state at this time, it may well be that these phantom forces were guerilla bands, though Stafford does not specify them as such.²⁷

As for L. R. Webber, he apparently was given a furlough to return to Lawrence for a time. He rejoined the regiment on September 18, 1861. For some reason there is a dearth of letters from Webber to the Brown family while the regiment was stationed in Chillicothe. The members of the First Kansas, however, again availed themselves of the opportunity to commandeer the printing press of a secessionist newspaper and issued volume one, number one of a regimental paper, *The First Kansas*, on October 1, 1861.

It was at Chillicothe that Colonel Deitzler rejoined the regiment after a period of convalescence in Lawrence to recover from the wound he received at Wilson’s Creek. Deitzler’s actions upon his arrival at Chillicothe lend credence to Webber’s tales of rampant drunkenness and knavery among his comrades. Deitzler immediately issued “General Order No. 2,” banning the sale of liquor to the men under his command, closing the saloons in Chillicothe, and promising the “swift destruction” of any vessels containing liquor found in the camp of the First Kansas. The officers of the regiment proposed that an “Army Temperance Union” be organized among the men and each member pledge to forego the use of alcohol. “Special Order No. 69” announced that, henceforth, the chaplain would be conducting church services each Sunday at three in the afternoon. “Special Order No. 70” forbade gambling by the men under Deitzler’s command. Each of these orders was published in *The First Kansas*.²⁸

The First Kansas is also instructive as to the nature of the fighting now being done by the men of the paper’s namesake. A local man presented himself at a store in a small town a few miles from Chillicothe and represented himself as an officer of the First Kansas. This man, probably a guerilla operating in the area, then robbed the store’s safe of over six hundred dollars. Upon hearing of the act, a detail of First Kansas men set out to capture the man, known as “Jeff Davis No. 2,” and his accomplices. The detachment located the men three days later some

26. *First Kansas*, October 1, 1861.

27. Lewis Stafford to Dear Kate, September 28, 1861; Lewis Stafford to Dear Kate, October 10, 1861.

28. *First Kansas*, October 1, 1861.

fifteen miles south of Chillicothe and wounded several of them in the process of bringing them into custody. Though the punishments of the men apprehended is not stated in the paper, its account of the incident ended with "The First Kansas has no mercy on thieves." This account and the fact, also mentioned in the paper, that Colonel Deitzler took pains to reassure the population of the area that "he wages no war upon unarmed men or upon the peace and security of the homes of this people . . . no matter what may be [their] political belief," leaves little doubt that the First Kansas, in addition to garrisoning the town and protecting a section of the Hannibal and Missouri railway, was conducting anti-guerilla operations in the Chillicothe area.²⁹

The First was next stationed at Tipton, Missouri, another town along the Hannibal and St. Joseph. According to Lewis Stafford, Deitzler's orders issued at Chillicothe were quite ineffective at preventing disorder among the men. In a letter home to his girlfriend, Stafford recalled the trip from Chillicothe to the regiment's new post. "Whiskey played the duce with some of the men, causing not a few to step behind as we arrived at the different towns through which we passed." Drunkenness and straggling were not the only offences the men were guilty of during the march as, "others became verry belligerent and from the great number of black eyes they carry, one would feel constrained to believe they gave vent to their feelings without regard to the feelings of others." Whether the men fought with each other or the locals, Stafford does not say, but he later arrives at the conclusion that "Our men are verry rough customers," and the officers of the regiment were sometimes required to "resort to extreme measures in order to secure that respect due them and the Regt."³⁰

According to Webber, whose letters to the Brown family resumed in earnest upon reaching Tipton, the regiment's primary duty there was "fitting out trains to send to Grant's army." Webber said that although "the men behave better than they ever have before," several of them were disciplined for drunkenness. "Since we have been here 3 men have had half their heads shaven on one side and drummed out of the service for drunkenness and staying back at Hannibal," he wrote, adding "they were a good riddance."³¹

Webber reported to the Brown family that his personal situation was improved. He was now "in a better mess than before, only 2 or 3 of the men get drunk very often," and mentioned that the regiment had received new uniforms and knapsacks, though he remarked in a later letter that these were "of an inferior quality in both appearance and serviceability."³²

The members of the Brown family were not Webber's only correspondents during this period of time, as Webber wrote two letters to the Lawrence *State Journal* detailing not only the mistreatment of the First Kansas by the federal government but also the unsoldierly behavior of some of its members. The letters were published and, when copies of the editions of *State Journal* in which they were printed inevitably made their way to the men at Tipton, Webber found himself, as he should have known he would, in much trouble with certain of his comrades. Though Webber intimated that he wrote the letters to the *State Journal* either anonymously or under a pseudonym, it did not take long for the offended parties within the regiment to identify

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*; Lewis Stafford to Dear Kate, October 28, 1861, Kate Newland Letters, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas.

31. L.R. Webber to Friend Charley, October 31, 1861.

32. *Ibid.*; L.R. Webber to Miss Brown, November 11, 1861.

him as their author. One of these, Captain Ketner of Company G, appeared at Webber’s post, sans shoulder straps, and according to Webber “almost crazy . . . showed himself a jackass by abusing me with . . . the most degrading epithets.” Though only orally abused by Ketner, more serious action was foreshadowed. “He threatened to whip me within an inch of my life if I ever wrote such letters again,” Webber told the “Esteemed” member of the Brown family to which the letter recounting the event was addressed. Though Webber boasted that Ketner’s abuse “passed by me like the idle winds,” it is quite likely that it did much to further the resentment he felt toward many of the officers and the other members of the regiment that he considered unworthy of wearing the same uniform as he did, tattered and poorly made as it may have been.³³

In late November 1861 a camp rumor at Tipton came close to inciting the First Kansas to mutiny. The regiment, though furloughs had been granted piecemeal to individual soldiers, had yet to return to Kansas and anxiously awaited any news and entertained any rumor of orders home. Word came that, indeed, the regiment was to be ordered back to Kansas but that it was to be quartered at the desolate town of Burlington in a sparsely populated area in the southeastern portion of the state. As if this was not bad enough, it was soon learned that the regiment’s lieutenant colonel at the time, Oscar Learnard, was a major holder of town shares in Burlington and, when in St. Louis, had engineered the regiment’s posting there.

Both Webber and Stafford were vehement in their denunciations of both the plan to send the First Kansas to Burlington and Learnard. Stafford devotes almost an entire letter to his girlfriend in discussion of the matter. As an officer, Stafford was in a better position to be privy to the actual state of affairs than was Webber, a private. Judging by the seriousness in which Stafford regards the rumor and the specific details he mentions regarding other officer’s efforts to have it countermanded, it is safe to assume it had a modicum of truth attached to it. “It is highly insulting to the Regt., having seen as much service as we have, now to make us a means of advertising this town, which but few ever heard of before,” stated Stafford. “We might as well be buried for all the good we can do the Government in that place.” Stafford believed that if the First was, in fact, sent to Burlington, it would be better that it be “disbanded at once and let us go back to our shops and Farms.”³⁴

Webber went even further in his denunciation of the possible posting in Burlington, going so far as to accuse Learnard of “pocket[ing] our payrolls,” in an attempt to assure that the men would not have money to spend until they reached “his town of Burlington.” Webber maintained that hatred of Learnard was now widespread in the regiment and “curses loud and deep are muttered against him by the boys.”³⁵

The order to winter quarters in Burlington, if Stafford is to be believed, was eventually rescinded through the efforts of Colonel Deitzler and “all the officers,” who, “joined with the Col. to have the order countermanded.”³⁶

Now on duty in the cookhouse, Webber was somewhat happy because the head cook he worked for there was “a first-rate fellow . . . and don’t use tobacco or get drunk.” Elements of

33. L.R. Webber to Esteemed Friend, December 6, 1861.

34. Lewis Stafford to Dear Kate, November 21, 1861, Kate Newland Letters

35. L.R. Webber to Esteemed Friend, December 6, 1861.

36. Lewis Stafford to Dear Kate, December 8, 1861, Kate Newland Letters.

the regiment had been mounted while at Tipton and Webber had given up his position among them in order to work in the cookhouse when the cook requested him for duty there. Webber offers no explanation for his apparent demotion from mounted trooper to cook. There is no doubt, though, that cooking in camp presented a soldier with considerably less dangerous circumstances than mounted patrol in a hostile countryside. This, coupled with the fact he was no longer witness to the misbehavior of his comrades on these expeditions, could explain Webber’s satisfaction with duty in the cookhouse at Tipton.³⁷

Though happy in his assignment, Webber continued to recount the lurid misdeeds of his comrades to the Browns. While posted in the cookhouse, what Webber termed the “most shocking affair that has yet occurred in the Regiment,” took place. According to Webber, a soldier from Company C returned home from a night of drinking and “loaded his gun swearing that he would kill some man before he slept.” A scuffle ensued between the drunken man and the provost guard who attempted to arrest him. The guard shot the drunken man in the arm with a pistol. The drunken soldier returned fire with his rifle, missing him but striking and killing another soldier sleeping in a nearby tent.³⁸

Webber cited this event as proof of the charges he had made against his fellow soldiers in his letters to the *State Journal*, calling it “an illustration of the terrible evil of the use of ‘Decayed Bowels’ (rot gut) as our men like to call whiskey.” Stafford makes no mention of the incident in his letters but does comment, “it seems as if the Kansas men would take the town [Tipton] every day,” and the men have “such an exciting time” with the provost guard “it is a great wonder some of them do not get hurt.” That Stafford did not mention the accidental death Webber wrote of is surprising. Both Webber and Stafford imply in their letters that the regiment was stationed piecemeal in the smaller towns surrounding Tipton. It is possible that Stafford was not at Tipton, but stationed at one of these smaller communities at the time of the incident and did not witness or hear of it.³⁹

The long awaited order for the First Kansas to return home arrived while the regiment was posted at Tipton. The regiment was to march by way of Kansas City to Fort Leavenworth and receive orders there for its next assignment. The First departed Tipton on New Years Day of 1862, but not before, as Webber dutifully reported, “most of the men and officers [got] drunk” on Christmas Eve and day.⁴⁰

Plagued by miserable weather that, according to Stafford, consisted of “sleet and mud, snow and frozen ground,” on the march to Kansas City, the regiment laid over in Lexington, Missouri, for a period of two weeks. Webber reported that the misery of the march left him nearly “played out” and that he and the other men were made to “sleep out on the ground in the snow,” but that he was so cold and wet he could not get to sleep.⁴¹

Cold, tired and anxious to get home, Webber complained, “I have grown poor and lank,” and the other men in the regiment were “used up pretty badly” after the march to Lexington. Not

37. L.R. Webber to Esteemed Friend, December 6, 1861.

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Ibid.*; Lewis Stafford to Dear Kate, December 8, 1861, Kate Newland Letters.

40. L. R. Webber to Mrs. Brown, January 11, 1862.

41. Lewis Stafford to Dear Kate, January 17, 1862, Kate Newland Letters. L. R. Webber to Mrs. Brown, January 11, 1862.

too “used up,” though, to return to their familiar habit of jayhawking and Webber noted that they had “stolen and plundered considerably from the rebels” in the Lexington area.⁴²

A letter, dated January 11, 1861, written by Webber to Mrs. Brown and another to her husband following it on the twenty-third mark the lowest points of his disillusionment while in the army. It was in the January 11 letter that he wished that he would be killed in combat rather than continue to serve in the regiment, remarking that membership in it was “a perfect hell” to him. In his letter to John Stillman Brown, Webber wrote he received word from his family that his father had died on the fifteenth of that month after a short illness. His father’s death, he told the Reverend Brown, brought to mind memories of his mother’s death that had occurred sixteen years before on January 14. Webber related his sadness that his siblings were now “scattered to all parts of the country” and the fact that, because his father had died in debt, the family home would pass out of their possession soon. Though Webber was fond of grouching endlessly about his mistreatment by comrades, officers, the government, and others, it is very hard not to feel sympathy for him now sick, tired, cold and hurting from the loss of his last parent and childhood home in these two melancholy letters to the Browns. As Webber’s disillusionment with his circumstances reached to the furthest depths they would during the war, the attitude of the regiment in general toward the civilians of Missouri and the guerillas they were trying to ferret out of the countryside became more severe.⁴³

While on the march to Lexington, the regiment’s rear guard was fired upon by guerillas concealed in the brush and woods along the road. A member of the rear guard, J. M. Koberle, was wounded in the ambush and died the next day. Upon arrival at Lexington, Colonel Deitzler immediately placed under arrest a number of wealthy and prominent citizens of that city who were known to be secessionists. In his “General Orders No. 1,” published in the second issue of *The First Kansas* regimental newspaper, Deitzler stated, “humanity and justice require that the crimes committed by them [the guerillas who ambushed the rear guard and killed Koberle] should be retaliated upon the aiders and abettors, who are less bold, but equally guilty.” Deitzler’s order then grew brutal, warning that further “assassinations” of his men would result in the “shooting or hanging of at least five of these wealthy rebels” for each one of the men under his command killed by guerillas. “[I]nfernal bushwhacking will not be practiced on the men of my command without the severest penalties of the law of the military,” concluded the order.⁴⁴

Expeditions against local guerilla bands were mounted immediately by the First. Three of these sorties and their successful results were recounted in *The First Kansas*. Lewis Stafford participated in one of these actions under the command of Captain Chenoweth. Chenoweth’s party returned to the area where the rear guard was fired upon in an attempt to locate the perpetrators. They were unsuccessful in the apprehension of the bushwhackers but the paper reported, “a good haul of secesh property was made.” In all probability this was nothing more than a sanctioned jayhawking expedition. Another expedition, led by Captain Clayton, did

42. L. R. Webber to Mrs. Brown, January 11, 1862.

43. *Ibid.*; L.R. Webber to Rev. J. S. Brown, January 23, 1862.

44. *First Kansas*, January 18, 1862.

apprehend several “notorious rebel officers” along with a number of their horses and other “booty.”⁴⁵

Webber believed that these expeditions had been undertaken for more than just the persecution of the war effort. He later complained, “Most of the horses which we took at Lexington as contraband have been taken by the officers at a merely nominal price.” At least the officers in question apparently paid the government for the horses they took but Webber was still upset “the results of our toils and exposures go to benefit chiefly a lot of swindlers.” Webber states that he did not have any objections to participating in the regiment’s jayhawking activities as long as “everything is honestly turned over to the Government.”⁴⁶

That jayhawking of the sort unsanctioned by the regiment’s officer corps was a problem in Lexington is attested to not only by Webber’s correspondence but also by the edition of *The First Kansas* published there. “We are sorry to record,” stated the paper, “that a few of our soldiers, imitating the custom of our secession enemies, have been pilfering articles of more or less value from some of the citizens.” The paper then named the offenders, noting that one of them had stolen “several articles of ladies apparel.” These men were apparently court martialed and sentenced to various punishments, ranging from restitution to confinement at hard labor upon the regiment’s return to Fort Leavenworth. The article concluded, lending credence to Webber’s claim of a long-standing habit of jayhawking within the regiment, “It is time the men of the First Kansas learned that stealing is no part of the duty of a soldier; and that it will always be punished with severity.”⁴⁷

After a little over two weeks spent in Lexington, the First resumed the march home. Stafford advised his girlfriend after arriving in Kansas City that “if our commissary stores had not given out, we might have been there now for all I know as the Col. and indeed, everyone else seemed well satisfied to stay there.” After arriving at Kansas City, Colonel Deitzler proceeded to Fort Leavenworth alone to report to Major General Hunter, now in command of the department of Kansas, and receive the regiment’s orders for its next posting.⁴⁸

Webber reported that the regiment was “comfortably situated” and had “little duty” while in Kansas City. The regiment was also paid upon its arrival. With time on their hands and money in their pockets, the men promptly engaged in what Webber felt was their favorite pastime, going on a drunk. One man, Webber wrote, got so drunk that he “rode his horse into the Missouri River. But fortunately (or unfortunately in the case of the man) both were rescued. I guess he got sobered off after being some 10 minutes in the freezing liquid.” This man, Webber continued, did not learn his lesson, though, as “The same man on the evening of the next day was up in town drunk, and got his face all cut and mashed up.”⁴⁹

Several days later the First arrived at Leavenworth. “It seemed that every man, woman and child came forth to greet the Regt. home,” Stafford wrote. Senator Marcus Parrott led the reception of the First at Leavenworth. Speeches were made by the Senator and many of the officers of the regiment itself. In his speech, Deitzler announced that Major General Hunter had

45. Ibid.

46. L.R. Webber to Miss Brown, February 1, 1862.

47. *First Kansas*, January 18, 1862.

48. Lewis Stafford to My Dear Kate, January 29, 1862, Kate Newland Letters.

49. L.R. Webber to Miss Brown, February 1, 1862.

appointed him Brigadier General and that he was to command a brigade of three Kansas regiments, including the First, at Fort Scott. Before reporting to that post, however, the new general announced a ten-day furlough for every member of the regiment reminding them that they were home now and "in a community where there are no secessionists. Here you have no enemies to punish and many friends whose goodwill you should labor to preserve." In other words, there will be no behavior here of the sort you learned in Missouri.⁵⁰

Both Webber and Stafford apparently went home after this, as there are no more letters from either of them until the regiment reassembled. After a brief posting at Fort Riley, from which the regiment was to mount an expedition to New Mexico that did not materialize, the First Kansas was attached to General Ulysses S. Grant's army. After garrison duty in Tennessee and Mississippi towns in the wake of Grant's march south, the regiment was posted at Lake Providence, Louisiana. There the men of the First labored to open a channel from the lake to the Yazoo River, in order for Grant to perform an end run around Vicksburg and take it from the east. The entire regiment was mounted by order of Grant on February 1, 1863, and the men of the First served the remaining periods of their enlistments as mounted infantry. As such, according to Webber's remaining communications with the Brown family, they introduced the natives of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Arkansas to their well-honed skills in drinking and jayhawking.

It was near Lake Providence that Lewis Stafford was killed. A large timber broke loose while the men he was supervising on fatigue duty were attempting to move it. The timber rolled over Stafford causing a severe head injury. He lingered for three days and died on January 31, 1863.⁵¹

L. R. Webber, grumbling all the way, soldiered on with the First Kansas until the expiration of his enlistment in 1864. Though he never did countenance their chronic inebriation and thievery, Webber, by the end of his time in the army, had come to at least understand some of the reasons why his comrades were driven to act as they did. Judging from Webber's later letters to the Browns, it would seem he reached a point where he simply agreed to disagree with his fellow members of the First Kansas. Webber's later letters also begin to display a callousness absent from those he wrote in Missouri. Perhaps the developing hardness of heart evidenced in his correspondence while in the Deep South served to insulate him to a degree and allowed him, if not peace with, then at least tolerance of his circumstances and fellow soldiers. He even began jayhawking for his own enrichment, though he allowed himself only to steal books from the shelves of the plantation houses his comrades plundered.⁵²

The last three of Webber's letters to the Brown family were posted from Maine, to which he returned upon being mustered out of the First Kansas. It would seem that Webber had not only gotten his fill of the army, but Kansas as well. He went home to New England where, he no doubt felt, life made more sense than it did in the west and south.

50. *Wisconsin Volunteer*, February 6, 1862.

51. M. Bailey to Surgeon General, January 31, 1863, Photostatic copy of copy obtained by the Jefferson County Historical Society, Valley Falls, Kansas, original held by National Archives and Records Administration.

52. Webber to Mary, February 10, 1863.

Given Webber’s strict morality and his gentle nature, it is unlikely he would have been happy in any Civil War regiment, North or South. That the First Kansas was so harshly adjudicated by him in his letters to the Browns is not due to any especially diabolical behavior on its part during its service in the Civil War, but to the stringent standard to which Webber held it. During the First’s service in Missouri, L. R. Webber was forced to face and adjust to the coarse life a soldier in the Civil War. Webber never accepted the realities and cruelties he experienced during his service with the First Kansas, though later in his enlistment he learned to live with them. Webber’s struggle to reconcile his own strict moral code with the severe realities of military life in the Civil War era was doubtless not a unique experience among Civil War soldiers. His letters chronicling that struggle offer additional insight into the experience of the soldier of that conflict.