



THE drum roll

413th Regular Meeting Volume 42 Number 5 January 3, 2025



PLEASE NOTE!!!!

The January meeting will be in person at the Arlington Hts. Library, Jan. 3, 2025, and on ZOOM, at 7:00 P.M. The library is located at the corner of W. Euclid Ave. and Dunton St. in Arlington Hts.

Our speaker for the January meeting will be Gordon Ramsey. Gordon is Emeritus Professor of Physics at Loyola University in Chicago. He received his Ph.D. in Physics from the Illinois Institute of Technology, IIT, in 1982 and began teaching at Loyola that year. Gordon grew up in a musical household and has played in numerous theater orchestras and jazz bands in Chicago. He teaches a course in the Physics of Music and recently published his book on the subject. Gordon is President of the South Suburban Civil War Round Table. At our January meeting he will discuss the crucial role of music in the Civil War.

Music plays a major role in our lives. Throughout history, it has been vital to how societies function.

In times of war, music is very important in allowing people to mentally survive. The Civil War military relied heavily on musicians to provide an avenue of communication between their units in battle. This talk will discuss the roles of music for both the military and civilian populations. Connections between Civil War and present-day music will be made.

SONS OF THUNDER

The State of Illinois provided numerous artillery batteries to the Union army during the Civil War. On December 6, David Oberg related the story of one of the more notable of these units: Battery H, First Illinois Light Artillery.

At the start, Oberg related that he had an ancestor in the unit – Pehr Alfrid Oberg – who had immigrated from Sweden in 1857, settling in a heavily Swedish neighborhood in Rockford. In early 1862 a Swedish-

born Union officer, Axel Silfversparre, declared an intention to recruit a Swedish artillery unit. When formed the battery would have 59 Swedes and other immigrants, plus 12 others, from Rockford alone. Overall, it was constituted of 40% Swedes (among a total immigrant percentage of 2/3.) There were so many Johnsons in the battery that they would be referred to by their jobs: Quartermaster Johnson, Blacksmith Johnson, etc. Only seven original members had any military experience; another, a German immigrant watchmaker named Francis DeGress, was a watchmaker but at least had attended military school until the age of 10.

On February 20, 1862, the unit was mustered in at Camp Douglas, Illinois, as Battery H, First Illinois Light Artillery, with Axel Silfversparre as captain. It was then sent to Benton Barracks, Missouri for a few weeks, being issued four 20-pound Parrott rifled cannon. (At his own expense, Silfversparre purchased a number of custom fuses.) Finally, the battery arrived at Pittsburg Landing, Tennessee, on April 5, 1862.

The next morning, Rebels attacked the encampment, precipitating the battle of Shiloh. Battery H had been sent to the landing without their horses; as the day went against the Union forces, the guns were manhandled into their place in Ulysses S. Grant's gun-studded final defensive line. The battery performed well while "seeing the elephant," receiving the thanks of Grant and William T. Sherman. (According to Oberg family lore, Pehr Oberg was struck in the head by a small shell fragment, which was never removed.) Battery H then participated in the post-Shiloh operation that captured Corinth, MS.

All was not well with the battery, however. In summer 1862 the unit was plagued with disease and desertion. The former could be expected in the unhealthy climate at Corinth. However, the desertion rate was unusually high; from April through August, Battery H saw 38 desertions, a 25% rate – well above the average army-wide frequency of 11%. Oberg suggested that this may have been attributable to Captain Silfversparre. His "ironclad" discipline, a carryover from his Swedish army service, was possibly the main culprit. (Pehr Oberg was punished by Silfversparre for some infraction or another.) The captain also apparently had a checkered past, and was court-martialed twice but acquitted both

times. In any case, Silfversparre was eventually transferred to a rear-area fort; once he departed, there were only 3 desertions for the remainder of the war.

Levi Hart briefly led the battery, after which Francis DeGress was elevated to command. Battery H was officially attached to the Second Division in Sherman's Fifteenth Corps. It saw service in the Vicksburg campaign, the post-surrender move on Jackson, MS (July 1863), and at Chattanooga. In early 1864, most of the battery members re-enlisted when their time was up. This was celebrated with a party in Chicago, at which Captain DeGress was given a presentation sword by the unit.

Next up for Battery H was the Atlanta campaign. On July 20, 1864, the battery fired the very first cannon shots into the city of Atlanta. Two days later saw perhaps the unit's most well-known action, during the Battle of Atlanta. A Rebel attack on the afternoon of July 22 penetrated the division's lines along the Georgia Railroad, overrunning Battery H. Due to terrain, the field of fire for the guns was obscured until the attackers' were about 20 yards away; Even four rounds of canister per minute – utilizing some of the custom fuses that Silfversparre had purchased back in 1862 – couldn't halt the Southerners. Soon, though, a counterattack retook the guns. The fall of the battery was immortalized in the Atlanta Cyclorama. One panel of the painting depicts the overrun battery's horses being shot to prevent the guns from being removed by the Confederates, and in another panel the hatless DeGress, brandishing a pistol, rides immediately behind Major General John A. Logan as he dashes forward to rally the troops.

Guns restored, the battery continued to serve for the remainder of the campaign. At Jonesboro, Logan instructed DeGress to "Give 'em Hell" and complimented the battery's accuracy, telling DeGress that he was a pretty good shot for a Methodist. On the night of September 1, the gunners could hear the sounds of ordnance being blown up as Atlanta was evacuated, and also saw the glare of the fires.

Battery H continued to serve throughout the army's marches, first to Savannah and then into the Carolinas. It didn't see much in the way of

action, not even at Bentonville in March 1865. Upon the close of the war, Battery H mustered out on June 14, 1865. Oberg related that the battery had traveled 3,000 miles by road, and another 2,700 by rail. As for the two primary battery commanders, Silfversparre would get captured while engaged in illicit cotton trading, escape, and survive the war, eventually becoming a surveyor in Denver afterwards. DeGress would marry and move to Mexico, becoming prominent in Mexico City, but would die of disease in 1882.

On behalf of the Round Table, I would like to thank Dave Oberg for this journey with Battery H, 1st Illinois.

Pat McCormick

The discussion group will meet Wed.night, Jan. 15, 2025. From 7 to 8:30 PM. The subject will be ARKANSAS 1863. Please join us on ZOOM.

The link for the reg meeting works for this.

<https://us06web.zoom.us/j/81433758155?pwd=S1FqVjJ1WmZsTTd1VIJNRCtLcjJLdz09>

Speakers

Sept. 6, 2024, Leslie Goddard: Clara Barton, Civil War Nurse

Oct. 4, 2024, Charlie Banks: General Herman Haupt

Nov. 1, 2024, Doug Stiles: Lincoln's Watch

Dec. 6, 2024, Dave Oberg: The First Illinois Light Artillery

Jan. 3, 2025, Gordon Ramsey: Music of the Civil War

Feb. 7, 2025, Father Bob Miller: Civilian Life in Vicksburg

Mar. 7, 2025, Jan Rasmussen: The Dakota War

Apr. 4, 2025, Brian Conroy: TBA

May 2, 2025, Dave Powell: TBA

June 7, 2025, Bob Presman: Could the South Have Won the Civil War?

Remember: The Board has decided not to charge dues for the upcoming 2024-2025 year. Let's use this to invite new members. What a way to try us out!



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Appointed Positions

Newsletter Editor Jerry Rodosky

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Upcoming Events

Join Zoom Meeting on Friday, Jan. 3, 2025, at 7 PM.

<https://us06web.zoom.us/j/81433758155?pwd=S1FqVjJ1WmZsTTd1VIJNRCtLcjJLdz09>

This link works for the discussion group also.

Questions? Comments? Email me or call.

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I will forward your questions or comments to the appropriate person.

