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Article Summary: While the Skirmish at Grand Prairie had no material effect upon the course of the war and rates only a few pages in the *Official Records of the War of the Rebellion*, it is justly remembered as part of Nebraska's Civil War history. More Nebraska troops were captured by the enemy in this skirmish and few, if any, of Nebraska's Civil War soldiers suffered more hardship, fear, and frustration than did Lieutenant Polock's little band of First Nebraska orphans in Arkansas and Missouri that summer and fall of 1864.

Cataloging Information:

Names: William A Polock, Edward Donovan, Billy Polock, Washington F Geiger, William Baumer, Robert Livingston, Joseph O Shelby, Sterling Price, Greenville M Mitchell, Hedrick

Place Names: Fort Henry; Fort Donelson; Shiloh; Nebraska Territory; Platte Valley; Grand Prairie, Arkansas; Missouri; Brownville, Nebraska Territory; Nemaha County, Nebraska; Devall's Bluff, Arkansas; White River Valley, Arkansas; Pilot Knob, Missouri; Fort Kearny, Nebraska

Keywords: First Nebraska regiment; First Nebraska Volunteer Infantry; Brownville Union Guards; Eighth Missouri Cavalry; *Queen City* [ironclad]; *Omaha Weekly Republican*; Civil War

Photographs / Images: Northeastern Arkansas and Southeastern Missouri, 1864, Map by Dell Darling; General Joseph O Shelby, CSA; Union camp at Pilot Knob, Missouri from *Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War*, Vol 1; William A Polock's grave in the Brownville Cemetery

The First Nebraska's Orphan Detachment and the Skirmish at Grand Prairie, 1864

By James E. Potter

Fort Donelson. Shiloh. Cape Girardeau. The Indian War of 1864–65. These battles and campaigns, among others, distinguished the Civil War service of the First Nebraska Regiment, and are relatively well known. Enlisted in June 1861 in response to President Abraham Lincoln's call for volunteers to put down the rebellion, the First Nebraska Volunteer Infantry, a thousand strong, left Omaha for Missouri in July. There, among the hills and valleys of southern Missouri, the regiment garrisoned towns from Pilot Knob to Springfield and pursued rebel bands during the fall and winter of 1861–62.

In February 1862 the First Nebraska was transferred to northwestern Tennessee as part of the buildup for Gen. Ulysses S. Grant's attack on the Confederate strongholds at Fort Henry and Fort Donelson. Assigned to Gen. Lew Wallace's division, the regiment played a key role in turning back the desperate Confederate attempt to break out of Fort Donelson on February 15, 1862, which led to the fort's surrender and brought the first decisive Union victory of the war. During the second day's battle at Shiloh on April 7, 1862, the First Nebraska Infantry fought bravely and helped drive the Confederates from the field in defeat. Though no more major battles lay in the regiment's future, the Nebraskans provided steady if not spectacular service while enduring grueling marches and scouts throughout southeastern Missouri and northeastern Ar-

kansas from 1862 to 1864, first as infantry and later as cavalry. Following a furlough to Nebraska Territory in the summer of 1864, the troopers of the First Nebraska Veteran Volunteer Cavalry helped keep open the vital mail, stagecoach, and telegraph route through the Platte Valley and fought several skirmishes with Indians before finally being mustered out in July 1866.[1]

A more obscure chapter in the First Nebraska's history involved an orphan detachment of the regiment that was captured by the rebels during an August 24, 1864, skirmish at Grand Prairie, Arkansas, forced to march some 300 miles to Union lines in Missouri as paroled prisoners of war, then languish for weeks as virtual prisoners of their own army. Such was the fate of Lt. William A. Polock of Brownville and some seventy First Nebraska soldiers left behind in Arkansas when the reenlisted veterans were furloughed home. While Polock's contingent endured the fortunes of war in faraway Arkansas, their comrades in the First Nebraska Veteran Volunteer Cavalry were preoccupied with an outbreak of Indian warfare along the overland route in Nebraska Territory.
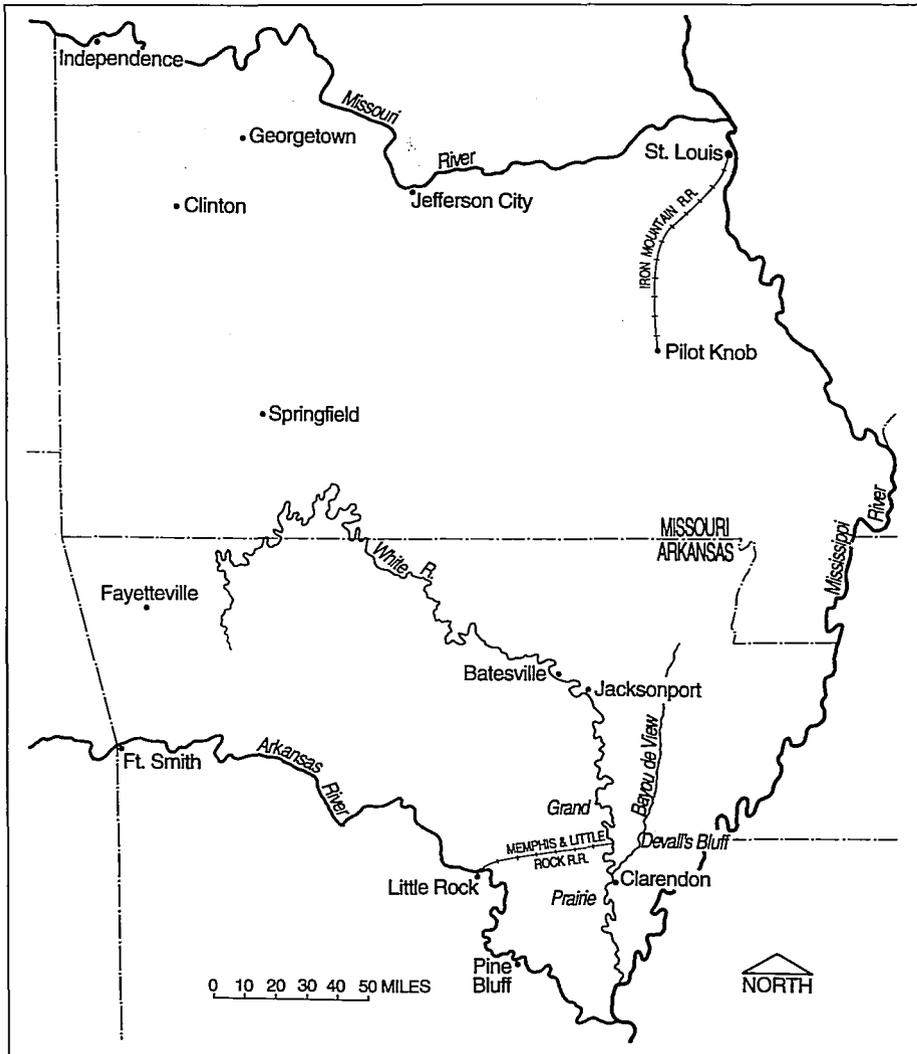
Forty-four-year-old William Polock was a dedicated soldier, considerably older than the rest of the men when he enlisted in 1861. He had served a stint in the regular army during the 1830s and came to Brownville, Nebraska Territory, in 1857. As the sectional crisis loomed, he helped organize the Nemaha County Republican Party, and joined the local militia company, the "Brownville Union Guards." When the war broke out, Polock helped recruit Company C of the

First Nebraska Volunteer Infantry and became the company's first sergeant, later its second lieutenant. He fought with the regiment at Fort Donelson and Shiloh. Several months before the skirmish at Grand Prairie, Polock was detached from the regiment on recruiting service.[2]

The First Nebraska soldiers involved in the fight at Grand Prairie were mostly new recruits, along with some non-veterans whose three-year enlistments had not yet expired. The recruits, enlisted both by Polock and by Lt. Edward Donovan, arrived at Devall's Bluff, Arkansas, on June 15, 1864, a bare five days after the reenlisted veterans of the First Nebraska Cavalry had been sent home. Along with the veterans went most of the officers and all of the regiment's records. Polock's contingent, which included his own son, Billy, along with the remaining non-veterans of the First Nebraska (a total of some 270 men), found itself at the mercy of events transpiring in east central Arkansas. This remnant of the First Nebraska was attached to a cavalry brigade commanded by Col. Washington F. Geiger of the Eighth Missouri Cavalry.[3]

Already downcast to find that the regiment had gone back to Nebraska, the new recruits' morale was hardly improved by conditions at Devall's Bluff. Lt. Col. William Baumer, soon to return to Nebraska himself, noted, "It is really the Devil's Bluff" in a June 20 letter to regimental commander Robert Livingston. Baumer went on to say, "The sickness amongst the men increases fearfull, mainly amongst the new recruits. Everyday we must send 3 or 4 men to the hospital at Little Rock. The change in the

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Northeastern Arkansas and Southeastern Missouri, 1864. Map by Dell Darling adapted from the atlas accompanying *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington: GPO, 1880-1901)

Gen. Joseph O. Shelby, CSA. John N. Edwards, *Shelby and His Men* (Cincinnati: Miami Printing and Publishing Co., 1867)

weather, bad water, and foul air is the cause of the matter."[4] Moreover, the men were required to perform fatiguing duty unloading supplies from steamboats in the White River, hardly the preferred role for cavalrymen.

About this same time, Brig. Gen. Joseph O. Shelby was appointed to overall command of Confederate forces north of the Arkansas River. Famed for his 1863 raid into Missouri, Shelby was a formidable adversary whose cavalry roamed the countryside of northeastern Arkansas.[5] Although the Confederates were too weak to break the Union hold on Arkansas, their hit and run tactics nevertheless proved troublesome because much of the Federal strength had been drawn off for campaigns east of the Mississippi.

Something of Shelby's forceful personality can be gleaned from his proclamation designed to mobilize slackers and evaders of the Confederate conscription act. Estimating that there were ten thousand men of military age in the

White River valley of eastern Arkansas who had not joined the Confederate army, Shelby threw down the gauntlet. Until June 10, he wrote, every able bodied man could ponder what he wanted to do, but after that date, "You shall fight for the North or South. I will enlist you in the Confederate army or I will drive you into the Federal ranks. You shall not remain idle spectators of a drama enacted before your eyes. . . . I do not bully, but I strike. . . . Come up like men, or go to General Steele [the Union commander] like men but whatever you do, remember the tenth of June." Shelby promised to hang those who failed to rally to their country's flag.[6]

Shelby's aggressive leadership was amply demonstrated when, on June 26, his cavalrymen captured and burned the Union ironclad, *Queen City*, at Clarendon on the White River. As the summer of 1864 wore on, the Confederates planned another raid into Missouri beginning in late August. To support the opening of the Missouri campaign led by Gen. Sterling Price, Shelby was ordered to attack the railroad between Little Rock and Devall's Bluff.[7]

When Shelby's force of about 2,500 cavalry reached the rail line six miles

from Devall's bluff on the morning of August 24, 1864, at a locale known as the Grand Prairie, he found the prairie dotted with five small outposts guarding Federal hay cutters. The posts were two to three miles apart, each garrisoned by two companies of Union soldiers. The day before, Lt. Polock's detachment of about 120 men of the First Nebraska, along with the Fifty-fourth Illinois Volunteer Infantry under Col. Greenville M. Mitchell, had been sent out to guard the railroad and the haying parties on Grand Prairie. Early on August 24, the First Nebraska detachment was ordered to relieve the infantry at station number one on the west edge of the prairie.[8]

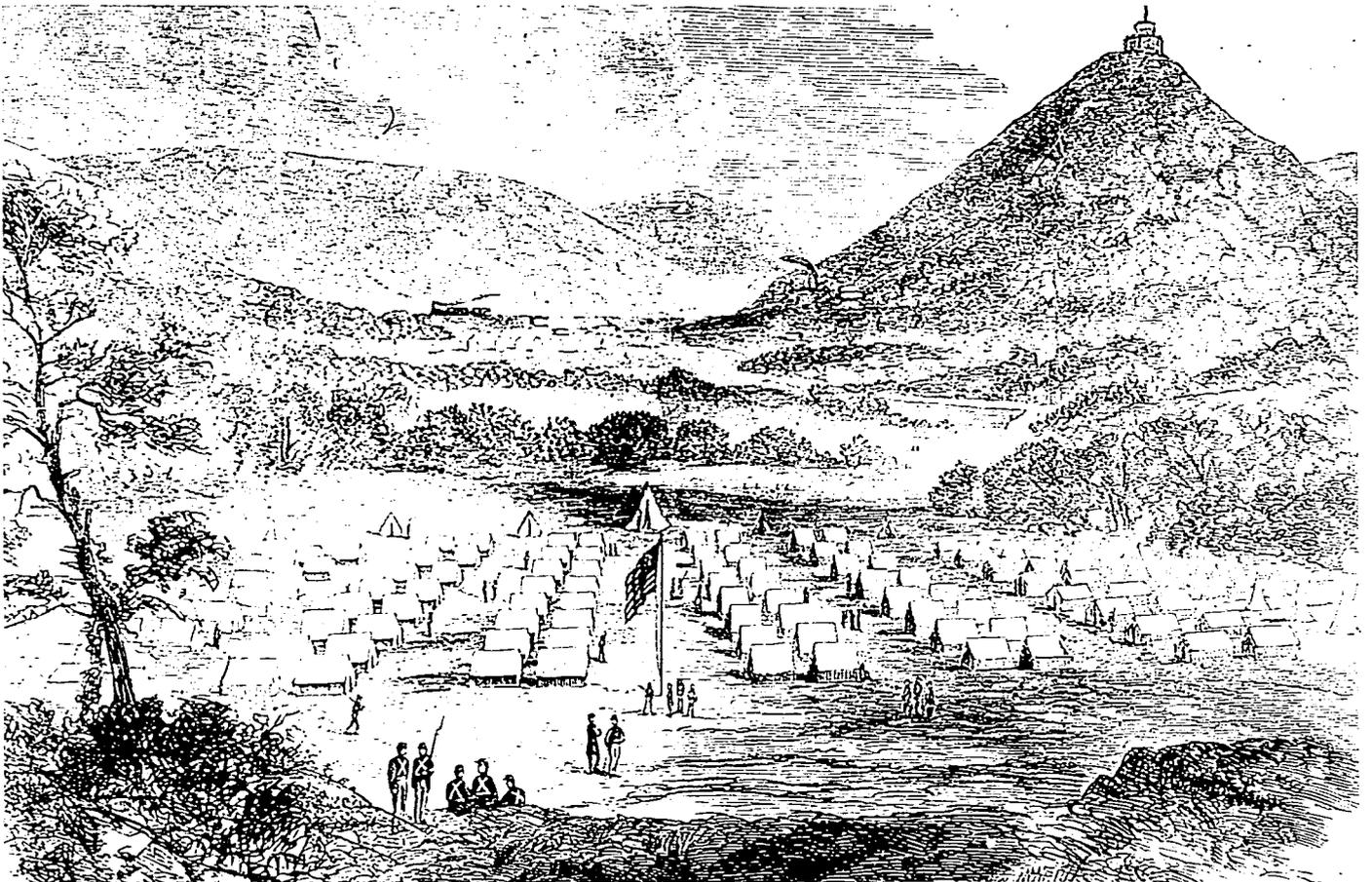Before Polock's detachment could reach its destination, however, they heard firing in the distance as Shelby swooped down upon the isolated outposts. Polock's men could see that the rebels had already gobbled up the Union soldiers at stations one and two, so the Nebraska cavalrymen fell back to station number four, known as Jones's Hay Station. Polock sent about fifty of the Nebraska troops back to Devall's Bluff with the haymaking teams and wagons. Six small companies of Illinois infantry and Polock's remaining seventy cavalrymen prepared to defend Jones's Hay Station against Shelby's onslaught.

The troops threw up a flimsy breastwork of hay bales. After a reconnaissance to station number three revealed the rebels continuing to advance, Polock's men retreated to Jones's station. The approximately 300 Federals shortly found themselves virtually surrounded by Shelby's entire force, which opened fire with artillery.

The Confederate shelling soon set the hay bales ablaze, and the fire spread to engulf the entire breastwork. Solid shot and shell demolished the remnants and caused several casualties. After standing the artillery fire for some three-quarters of an hour, Col. Mitchell ordered the defenders to make a break for the timber four miles away on the fringe of the prairie. The retreating Federals had gone only a few hundred yards when the rebels overwhelmed them and forced their surrender. Polock described what happened next in a September 18 letter to the *Omaha Weekly Republican*:

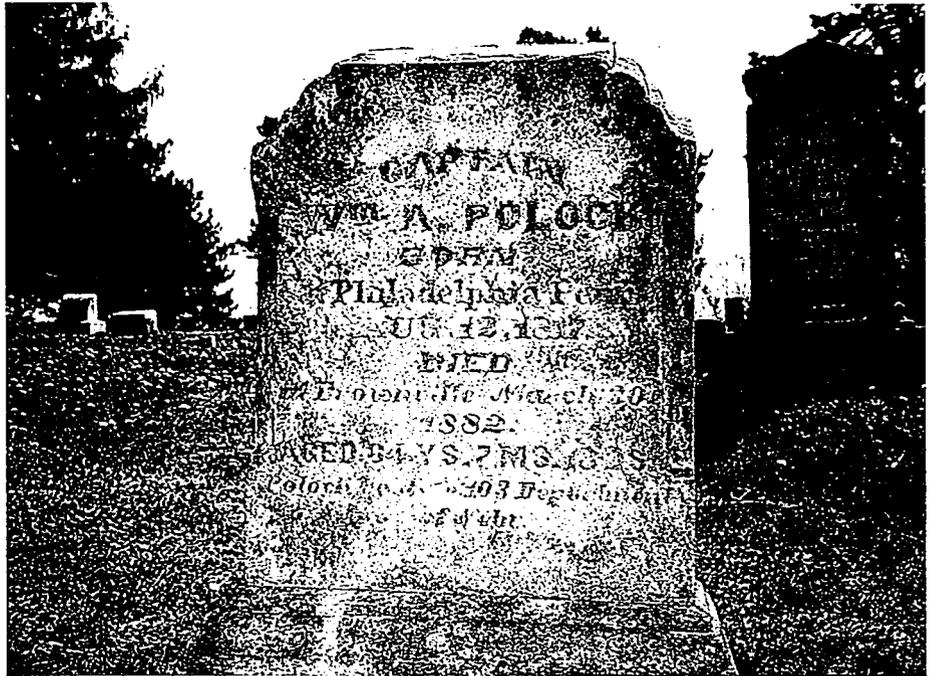> The rebels immediately robbed us of everything of value, money, watches, knives,

Union camp at Pilot Knob, Missouri. *Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War*, Vol. 1

combs, hats, and in many instances coats, jackets, blouses, boots, and shoes. They then hurried us north and marched us all night and next day without any rest or food. . . . Many of us had to march barefoot. The road in many places was a sharp gravel, which cut and blistered our feet terribly. . . . The first three days that we were in rebel hands, we marched 80 miles and about 3 ears of corn, a 1/2 pound of fresh beef, and 6 ounces of wheat bread was all that each man had to eat.

On September 1, near the Missouri state line, the Federal prisoners were paroled by their captors and released. A week later, still on foot, they straggled in to the Union camp at Pilot Knob, Missouri, where they boarded a train for St. Louis, arriving there at midnight on September 10. As paroled prisoners of war, the men had been released with the understanding that they would not again bear arms until they were "exchanged" for an equivalent number of paroled Confederates. At this stage of the war, however, with victory in sight, the Union army had ceased exchanging prisoners. With its superior manpower, the North could easily replace parolees or prisoners of war with fresh troops, while the South could not make up its losses. Although Polock and his men had reached the safety of their own army, as paroled prisoners they faced an uncertain future.[9]

According to Polock, two of the captured soldiers had been murdered after they surrendered. Corporal Merritt Slocum was sick and unable to march as fast as the rebels wanted. "The rebels abused and cursed him until he got desperate and angry and then they shot him to death."[10] Four of the Nebraska regiment recruits were accused of having deserted from the Confederate army. Two of them were returned to a Confederate regiment and one man, Hedrick, was executed by Shelby's order.[11] The fourth man later escaped. By the time the paroled Nebraska troops reached St. Louis, Polock and fifty-seven men were all that remained. They were virtually without clothing, mess equipment, or other personal effects. What was worse, their papers had been destroyed by the rebels. As a detached remnant of a regi-

William A. Polock's grave in the Brownville Cemetery. Courtesy of author

ment that was now guarding the Platte Valley back in Nebraska Territory, and without any records to substantiate their military status, Polock's men whiled away the time in the paroled prisoners barracks. The army didn't know quite what to do with them. Without records, they could not be paid. Nor would the army issue them new equipment without the proper descriptive rolls and clothing accounts. The men had no money to buy essential personal items, and the army would not allow them to work. Men whose enlistments had expired could not be discharged.[12]

Polock was bombarded with army paperwork requesting information on the status of the men. He, in turn, pleaded with the adjutant general and the regimental officers in Nebraska for copies of the men's records so he could respond to the army's requests. Polock's frustrations came out in a letter to the Nebraska newspapers:

I want to appeal through you to the people of Nebraska in their behalf. The government has furnished the men with nothing, but they will not receive any pay

until November and are not allowed to leave the barracks to work. . . . They need tin cups plates, knives and forks, spoons, tin pans, stationery, postage stamps, tobacco, pocket knives, combs, needles and thread, and many other notions. They drink their coffee out of a few oyster cans that they have picked up, and take their bread and meat in their fingers. I tried today to get the post sutler to let them have such things as they absolutely needed and wait until payday for his money, but he coolly told me that he did not do business in that way. I then hunted for the Sanitary commission and was informed that it did not supply anything but hospital stores. I have never known it to supply anything to soldiers.[13]

Polock's letter prompted a fundraising effort in Nebraska that garnered nearly $350. Unfortunately for the men cooped up in the paroled prisoners' barracks, the money was sent by mistake to the First Nebraska's regimental headquarters at Fort Kearny. Not until early November did the donated funds finally reach the impoverished soldiers in St. Louis.[14]

Although records are sketchy, the army eventually sorted out the fates of

the men captured at Grand Prairie. A few were mustered out late in 1864 because their enlistments had expired. Several died or deserted while in the paroled prisoners' barracks at St. Louis. Although there is no evidence that the remaining men had been officially exchanged, particularly in view of the Union moratorium on exchanges, many of the men captured at Grand Prairie joined the regiment in Nebraska and completed their terms of service there, including Polock's son, Billy. Four of the paroled men deserted in St. Louis, and fifteen more deserted from the regiment in Nebraska during 1865 and 1866. Not all of the First Nebraska recruits captured at Grand Prairie were from Nebraska to begin with; some had enlisted from Missouri and Arkansas to fight for the Union. Many of the 1865 deserters were these men, who probably did not relish risking their lives fighting Indians on the Plains. Nonetheless, several of the Missouri and Arkansas enlistees served faithfully in the First Nebraska Veteran Volunteer Cavalry until the regiment was mustered out in July 1866.[15]

Lt. Polock, who had been in the army since 1861, requested his discharge during his sojourn as a paroled prisoner. On October 14, 1864, he wrote regimental commander Col. Robert Livingston at Fort Kearny: "I did not like to ask to be discharged after being on recruiting service for nine months, but now after serving through the summer in the field, being captured, and no prospect of being exchanged for many months, I hope that my request may be granted. . . . I have now served three years and four months, am forty-seven years of age, and would like to retire and let younger men take my place."[16]

For unknown reasons, Polock's request was not granted and the summer of 1865 found him with the regiment at Fort Kearny, although it is unclear whether he was allowed to perform military duties. In September 1865 he was finally mustered out, having served a total of four years, three months, and three days. He returned to Brownville where he lived as a

respected citizen, serving nine years as postmaster and two terms in the state legislature. Polock died March 30, 1882, and was buried in the Brownville Cemetery, his coffin accompanied by a firing squad of former soldiers from Company C of the First Nebraska.[17]

The skirmish at Grand Prairie had no material effect upon the course of the war, nor did it advance the careers of any of its participants. It rates only a few pages in the *Official Records of the War of the Rebellion*. Nevertheless, this minor skirmish in far off Arkansas is justly remembered as part of Nebraska's Civil War history. In no other instance were so many Nebraska troops captured by the enemy. While casualties in the skirmish itself were minimal, few if any of Nebraska's Civil War soldiers suffered more hardship, fear, and frustration than did Lt. Polock's little band of First Nebraska orphans in Arkansas and Missouri that summer and fall of 1864.

Notes

[1] A summary of the First Nebraska regiment's service appears in *Report of John N. Patrick, Adjutant General of the State of Nebraska to the Governor of the State of Nebraska, January 1st, 1871* (Des Moines: Mills & Company, 1871). Benjamin Franklin Cooling, *Forts Henry and Donelson: The Key to the Confederate Heartland* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987) provides the best analysis of the Fort Donelson campaign. For details on the First Nebraska's role at Fort Donelson, see Cooling, "The First Nebraska Infantry Regiment and the Battle of Fort Donelson," *Nebraska History* 45 (June 1964).

[2] Edgar S. Dudley, comp., *Roster of Nebraska Volunteers from 1861 to 1869* (Hastings, Neb.: Wigton & Evans, State Printers, 1888), 30–31; A. T. Andreas, comp., *History of the State of Nebraska* (Chicago: Western Historical Company), 1154; *Nebraska Advertiser* (Brownville), Jan. 17, June 13, 1861; May 5, 1864; Apr. 6, 1882.

[3] *Nebraska Advertiser*, Sept. 1, 1864; Andreas, *History*, 236; Lt. Col. William Baumer to Col. Robert Livingston, June 20, 1864, RG 18, Records of the Nebraska Military Department, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln; Lt. William A. Polock to Adj. Gen. of the Army, Sept. 16, 1864, RG 18.

[4] Baumer letter, RG18.

[5] Daniel O'Flaherty, *General Jo Shelby: Undefeated Rebel* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1954), 212; Wiley Britton, *The Civil War*

on the Border, v. 2 (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1904), 387–88.

[6] O'Flaherty, *Shelby*, 212.

[7] Ibid., 213; John N. Edwards, *Shelby and His Men* (Cincinnati: Miami Printing and Publishing, 1867), 320–23; *Official Records of the War of the Rebellion* (Washington, D.C.: GPO), ser. 1, v. 34, pt. 1, 1042–45.

[8] Unless otherwise noted, the account of the skirmish at Grand Prairie and the fate of the First Nebraska detachment until their arrival in St. Louis on Sept. 10, 1864, is from *ORWR*, ser. 1, v. 41, pt. 1, 280–288, 650–51; *Report of the Adjutant General, Illinois*, v. 3 (Springfield: 1901), 685; Polock to "Lieut.," Sept. 14, 1864, RG18; and Polock letter, Sept. 18, 1864, in *Omaha Weekly Republican*, Sept. 30, 1864.

[9] Paroles and exchanges are explained in Mark Mayo Boatner III, *The Civil War Dictionary* (New York: David McKay Co., 1959), 270–71, 620.

[10] Polock to Lt. F. A. McDonald, Adj., First Nebraska Cavalry, Oct. 14, 1864, RG18. Slocum, of Company I, had enlisted at Nebraska City. Dudley, *Roster of Nebraska Volunteers*, 106–07.

[11] Henry Hedrick, age twenty, had been mustered in at Batesville, Arkansas, on June 2, 1864, and was executed on Aug. 31, 1864, by order of General Shelby. Dudley, *Roster of Nebraska Volunteers*, 60–61.

[12] Polock letter, Sept. 12, 1864 in *Nebraska Advertiser*, Sept. 22, 1864; Polock letter, Sept. 18, 1864, in *Omaha Weekly Republican*, Sept. 30, 1864.

[13] Polock letter, Sept. 12, 1864, in *Nebraska Advertiser*, Sept. 22, 1864.

[14] Polock letter, Nov. 1, 1864, in *Nebraska Advertiser*, Nov. 10, 1864.

[15] Muster rolls and descriptive rolls for Polock's recruits, if they had been completed in the first place, were lost at the time of their capture. Polock was still being asked to provide non-existent descriptive rolls on a few of the men as late as March 1865. See Polock to McDonald, Mar. 15, 1865, RG18. Records of some of the non-veterans left behind in Arkansas when the veterans were furloughed in June 1864 had accompanied the regiment to Nebraska. Much of the data on the men captured at Grand Prairie and their subsequent fate comes from lists Polock submitted to Adjutant McDonald on Oct. 14, 1864, and from Dudley, *Roster of Nebraska Volunteers*. Polock also furnished lists of the men who died or deserted while they were at Benton Barracks. The lists and letters are in RG18.

[16] Polock to Col. R. R. Livingston, Oct. 14, 1864, RG18.

[17] Polock to Lt. W. K. Bowen, A.A.A.G., E. Subdistrict of the Plains, Sept. 16, 1865, RG18; *Nebraska Advertiser*, Apr. 6, 1882.