

The Pride of the Regiment

by The Recollections of a Drummer Boy

"Old Abe" was the war-eagle of the Eighth Wisconsin Volunteers. Whoever it may have been that first conceived the idea, it was certainly a happy thought to make a pet of an eagle. For the eagle is our national bird, and to carry an eagle along with the colors of a regiment on the march, and in battle, and all through the whole war, was surely very appropriate, indeed.

"Old Abe's" perch was on a shield, which was carried by a soldier, to whom, and to whom alone, he looked as to a master. He would not allow any one to carry or even to handle him, except this soldier, nor would he ever receive his food from any other person's hands. He seemed to have sense enough to know that he was sometimes a burden to his master on the march, however, and, as if to relieve him, would occasionally spread his wings and soar aloft to a great height, the men of all regiments along the line of march cheering him as he went up.

He regularly received his rations from the commissary, like any enlisted man. Whenever fresh meat was scarce, and none could be found for him by foraging parties, he would take things into his own claws, as it were, and go out on a foraging expedition himself. On some such occasions he would be gone two or three days at a time, during which nothing whatever was seen of him; but he would invariably return, and seldom would come back without a young lamb or a chicken in his talons. His long absences occasioned his regiment not the slightest concern, for the men knew that, though he might fly many miles away in quest of food, he would be quite sure to find them again.

In what way he distinguished the two hostile armies so accurately that he was never once known to mistake the gray for the blue, no one can tell. But so it was, that he was never known to alight save in his own camp, and amongst his own men.

At Jackson, Mississippi, during the hottest part of the battle before that city, "Old Abe" soared up into the air, and remained there from early morning until the fight closed at night, no doubt greatly enjoying his bird's-eye view of the battle. He did the same at Mission Ridge. He was, I believe, struck by Confederate bullets two or three times, but his feathers were so thick that his body was not much hurt. The shield on which he was carried, however, showed so many marks of Confederate balls that it looked on top as if a groove plane had been run over it.

At the Centennial celebration held in Philadelphia, in 1876, "Old Abe" occupied a prominent place on his perch on the west side of the nave in the Agricultural Building. He was evidently growing old, and was the observed of all observers. Thousands of visitors, from all sections of the country, paid their respects to the grand old bird, who, apparently conscious of the honors conferred upon him, overlooked the sale of his biography and photographs going on beneath his perch with entire satisfaction.

As was but just and right, the soldier who had carried him during the war continued to have charge of him after the war was over, until the day of his death, which occurred at the capital of Wisconsin, in 1881.