

Lewis E. Ijams (Nov. 21, 1841- Feb. 8, 1919)

Wounded, weak and exhausted, Lewis Ijams struggled relentlessly on. For weeks, at first leading a group of fellow escapees, and then alone, Lewis determinedly pushed on to secure his freedom. It was the great adventure of his life and it was in the middle of the Civil War.

Lewis E. Ijams was born in 1841 in Hopewell Ohio, the second of seven children. Ten years later, the family moved to Bloomington, IL where Lewis's father farmed.

When President Lincoln called for enlistments after the fall of Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861, Lewis was among the first from McLean County to answer the call. A short, "glorious war" was expected, so these first tours of duty were only for 18 months. Lewis was posted to the 68th Illinois Regiment. He was part of a company nicknamed "Lackey's Zouaves" after its commander, Major George Lackey. The Zouaves units were modeled after French Foreign Legion units known for their colorful uniforms and expert fighting. Lewis's unit was sent to Washington D.C. and while there, marched in review for President Lincoln. But in September, they were sent back to Springfield, IL, and mustered out of service.

Anxious to be "part of the great contest between the union and slavery forces," Lewis quickly reenlisted. He joined Company M of the 16th Illinois Cavalry in May, 1863. The 16th was ordered east to Kentucky and then on to Tennessee during the Knoxville Campaign. Company M was then sent to the Powell Valley where Tennessee, Kentucky and Virginia border each other, and then north toward Jonesville, Virginia.

Both the North and the South used Jonesville as a center for supplying their troops, and for communication. The roads leading both to the Union and Confederate strongholds connected at Jonesville. In January, 1864, as the 16th fought to control the town, Sergeant Ijams and his men set up their artillery on a hill west of Jonesville. During a surprise rebel attack, much of the 16th were captured or killed. When Company M's captain was injured, Lewis took over. Company M stood its ground to the battle's end. Finally, surrounded on all sides, they were forced to surrender. Unfortunately, Sgt. Ijams was seriously wounded during the final attack. A musket ball pierced his naval, perforated one of his intestines, shattered the top of his hip bone, and exited near the spine. Although taken to a makeshift field hospital in a nearby home, he was thought to be fatally wounded.

But, as he lay there, bloodied and barely attended to, he did not die. A kind rebel guard gave him some water. On the second day, a rebel surgeon examined him and treated his wounds. For two weeks, a nurse poured water daily over his wound to allow it to heal. Conditions in the hospital were deplorable. The rooms were filled with the sick, wounded and dying. Terrible smells and sounds filled the air. With no proper nutrition and loss of blood, Lewis became weak and emaciated. But he continued to heal and hope. He also had a terrible fear as did all the captured Union soldiers. If they healed enough, they would be sent to that dreaded confederate prison, Andersonville, from which few survived.

Lewis plotted his escape. The guards were lax as such severely wounded were not considered a flight risk. Late on a Sunday in March, Lewis and six others slipped out and headed for Union lines. They headed for the mountains, with their goal being the Cumberland Gap, forty miles away. Slowly, led by Ijams, the wounded soldiers made their way across the mountains, hampered by spring snows, boulders, and tattered roads. They were aided on their way by union supporters as they passed from one mountain cabin to the next traveling mainly at night. They most feared guerillas, men who had deserted the rebel army to become outlaws and

preyed on Union supporters and soldiers. After ten days, Lewis and his group made it to a Union hospital in the Cumberland Gap.

Although he was still weak and his wounds were not healed, Lewis greatly feared recapture by Confederate scouting parties visiting the hospital. Recapture meant being sent to a Confederate prison. So he traveled on alone, this time aiming at Mt. Sterling, Kentucky, the nearest Union post. It was 120 miles away on a road marred by the destruction of war. Dead animals, starving horses and debris from both armies littered the entire way. Taking advantage of what he could find, Lewis scavenged supplies, made a rough saddle, and mounted an abandoned horse which was in as bad a condition as he was. Sleet, rain, loneliness, and the constant fear of capture made it a long, miserable journey. Late in April, he spotted the first blue of a union uniform and in the distance, the “starry flag.” He remembered later that “completely overcome, he wept like a child.”

At Mt. Sterling, Lewis reconnected with his regiment. He received treatment and then was sent home to Bloomington on furlough to recover. What a joy his return was to his family, who had been notified that he was mortally wounded at the Battle of Jonesville and presumed dead.

After 30 days at home, Lewis Ijams returned to battle, fighting in the Hood Campaign and the battles of Columbia, Spring Hill, Duck River, Franklin and Nashville. He was promoted to Captain based on his previous record as a non-commissioned officer.

After the war, Lewis came home to Bloomington. He was twice elected Treasurer of McLean County, serving for 12 years. He was involved in the real estate business, belonged to the William T. Sherman Post #146 of the Grand Army of the Republic (a fraternal order of Union veterans) and was a member of the First Methodist Church of Bloomington. He died February 8, 1919, at his home on McLean Street at the age of 78. He had never married, but left behind extended family and many friends who remembered him as a quiet, unassuming man who served his country gallantly.

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Discussion Question: What personal qualities or character traits did Lewis Ijams have that enabled him to survive, escape and lead again?