

GEORGE BERRY DAVIS

George Berry Davis was a private in Company F of the 4th Regiment in the Iowa Infantry in the American Civil War. As revealed in many letters that he wrote to his wife Catharine from the fields and camps, Davis experienced a number of battles, hardships, and injuries. Perhaps the most significant aspect of his time of service for the Union, however, was when he was captured and sent to the infamous Andersonville prison.

Davis spent a substantial amount of time serving in Missouri. Between October 2, 1861, and January 7, 1862, Davis spent time in and near Rolla, Missouri, where his regiment got into small skirmishes with Confederate forces, and did a considerable amount of drill practice. Davis described the conditions as being poor, with 95 men, most of whom were ill, packed into one small living space. In such conditions, a man died nearly every day. By January 7, 1862, forty men had died from the disease that flourished in the harsh conditions. From Rolla, the troops moved forward to Lebanon, Missouri. The stay in Lebanon was short and by February 9 the men were told to be ready for the march ahead of them.

By March 13, 1862, Davis had traveled to Camp Sugar Creek, Benton County, Arkansas. Prior to arrival at Sugar Creek, the 4th Iowa Regiment was involved in the Battle of Pea Ridge, also in Benton County. The battle concluded with 1,349 Union soldiers dead and 4,600 Confederates dead. Many more were wounded, including Davis himself, who was injured in the hand by a “flatend ball or a biece of a Bum striking it.”[sic] There were nineteen men killed and wounded in Company F alone, but the Union prevailed.

One letter in the collection seems inexplicable and out of context. Davis writes to his sister that he is in “Camp Butler New. Port-News. Head Quarters, March 21st, 1862, around eight miles away from Fortress Monroe.” Davis probably took this information from a press account and claimed to have been there.

Moving on from Missouri, the 4th Infantry traveled toward the area of Helena, Arkansas, where Davis was present between August 3rd, 1862 and November 23rd, 1862. No skirmishes appear to have taken place in Helena, but Davis writes of Confederate deserters moving over to their camp. This is an indication of poor conditions for both sides. By January 23, 1863, the regiment was near Vicksburg, Mississippi, and Davis mentions having been in two hard fights before their arrival (presumably the Battle of Chickasaw Bayou and the Battle of Arkansas Post). The 4th Regiment stayed around Vicksburg from January until June 17, 1863. The conditions do not appear to have been much better at this location. Davis once again elaborates on the poor health and injuries; between twelve and fifteen men from Company F were wounded at Vicksburg. From this location, Davis moved on toward Big Black, Mississippi, in late August of 1863. The conditions did not improve with the move, and many men, including himself, had been struggling with “camp fever”. In fact, Davis reveals that only 25 men out of the 125 in the battery were well enough to fight at the time.

Over two months later, the regiment arrived in Alabama. Within the state, Davis traveled to Woodville, and eventually to Claysville, where he wrote his last letter to his wife, on March 10, 1864. In the letter, Davis reveals to his wife that once he gets back to her that he will “appreciate the good things of home”. However, the toughest times were

still ahead; four days after the letter to his wife, Davis was captured and sent to Andersonville prison. The prison, in its time of operation, held 45,000 Union soldiers. Of those, 13,000 died from the horrid conditions, but Davis survived.

Throughout the hardships that Davis experienced, from poor health, injuries, and the many losses of his fellow soldiers to disease and battle, he remained an optimistic man. In one of his letters, he insured his wife that everything was going to be fine by saying, “the darkest hour is just before Day so hope for the best.” When the war concluded, Davis returned home to his family. He lived with his wife Catherine and their children, as a veteran of the most horrific war in American history, until his death in 1880.