



## **John H. Kraft in the Civil War** Introduction:

The primary reference resources for this brief history of the involvement of John H. Kraft in the Civil War are within the National Archives of the United States in Washington, D.C. The Archives has his military service and pension records, as well as log and order books for the units in which he served, and general references providing regimental histories which were prepared between the end of the Civil War and the early years of the twentieth century. In addition to the printed materials available, archivists in the Military Reference Branch of the National Archives, principally William Lind and Michael Meier, provided invaluable assistance in identifying records of interest. Finally, since John Kraft fought in notable campaigns of the war and served under some truly remarkable generals, many current, publicly-available references exist, which provide assistance in putting the regimental and personal records in a historical perspective. A complete list of all reference materials is found at the end of this narrative under “Information Sources.”

### **John Kraft and the 21<sup>st</sup> Ohio Volunteer Infantry:**

In early 1861, last-ditch efforts to avoid the great conflagration had failed. Seven southern states had already seceded from the Union. But it wasn't until Fort Sumpter was fired upon in the pre-dawn hours of April 12, 1861, and fell to the Confederate forces the following day, that the inevitability of armed conflict between the states became apparent.

Shock waves rippled through the North immediately after Sumpter fell, and even Stephen A. Douglas offered unconditional support to his long-time rival, President Abraham Lincoln. As the North rallied around the flag and its President, Lincoln acted swiftly. On April 15, barely 48 hours after Sumpter fell to the Confederates, President Lincoln called upon the states to provide 75,000 men to defend the Union. The North – and the South, too- expected the war to be over quickly. Volunteers were only asked to serve for ninety days.

All across the land, the President's call was greeted with exuberant, almost boyish enthusiasm. The quotas established for each state were quickly met, and then exceeded. In the fertile farmlands of northwestern Ohio, ten companies were raised between April 19 and April 26. Each company had approximately 100 men. In Defiance County, Ohio, a company was organized by Captain Samuel A. Strong and mustered in on April 24, 1861.

One of the 100 citizen-soldiers from Defiance County was a young, unmarried farmer just 19 years old named John H. Kraft. He was a striking young man. He is described as having a fresh (healthy, youthful) complexion, blue eyes and light hair. And he towered over most of his contemporaries at 6 feet,  $\frac{1}{4}$  inches.

As the Union's recruitment effort snowballed, a snag of potentially major proportions soon developed. It quickly became apparent to the authorities that more men had volunteered, and already been mustered into service, than the President had requested. In Ohio, 22 infantry regiments were formed, nine full regiments more than necessary. For a variety of reasons, both political and practical, there 9,000 patriots could hardly be sent packing back home. The Defiance County men were in this group. The Ohio General Assembly swiftly came to the rescue. On April 26, 1861, the Legislature passed an act to cause a state volunteer militia to be created from the extra nine regiments. The roadblock now removed, John and the rest of the Defiance County contingent marched 160 miles to Camp Taylor in Cleveland, Ohio, arriving on May 14. One week later,

this band of citizen-soldiers was mustered into state service as Company K, 21<sup>st</sup> Ohio Volunteer Infantry. Its commander was Colonel Jesse S. Norton. (1)

A number of Ohio's volunteers were sent to the east, to protect the nation's capital and, later, to confront the rebels at the Battle of First Bull Run. But a large number of Ohio troops were to be engaged in battle just across the Ohio River, in western Virginia. John's 21<sup>st</sup> Ohio Volunteer Infantry was one of those regiments.

Immediately after being mustered into state service, the 21<sup>st</sup> departed Camp Taylor for Gallipolis, Ohio. En route, it passed through Columbus, where it received its arms and "accouterments." The regiment set up camp near Gallipolis. Rebels roamed just a few miles away, in Jackson County, West Virginia. On July 3, 1861, John's regiment was ordered across the river to Ravenswood, West Virginia. Their mission was to reinforce the 17<sup>th</sup> Ohio, which was expecting an attack from rebel forces. But the 21<sup>st</sup> didn't wait for an attack. Colonel Norton ordered a forced march in the dead of night to the Confederate lair at Ripley, 15 miles away. The rebels were routed by the 21<sup>st</sup>, which then returned triumphant by steamer to its camp at Gallipolis. No losses are reported for the regiment in this engagement.

The first real battle for the regiment was soon to follow, and John Draft's company would be in the thick of it. On July 11, General Jacob D. Cox took command of a brigade that included five infantry regiments (including the 21<sup>st</sup> Ohio), on battery of two guns and one cavalry regiment. General Cox's objective was to move up the Kanawha River and take Charleston. But Confederate forces commanded by Brig. Gen. Henry A. Wise, a former Governor of Virginia, meant to block the Union advance.

Moving cautiously up the Kanawha, Cox's brigade eventually encountered rebel pickets in a little village church on Scarey Creek (aptly named), where it emptied into the Kanawha River. The tiny burgh was called Scareytown. It was Sunday morning, July 14, but the rebel soldiers were not in a peaceable mood. Just across the creek, Confederates under General Wise occupied a strong position, with a full battery of guns. The rebel pickets fell back across the creek, and the advance party of Cox's brigade, headed by John's regimental leader, Colonel Norton, withdrew two miles to await the arrival of the main body of troops.

The entirety of Cox's brigade was in place on July 15. On the morning of July 17, a Union attack column was formed, to include all of the 12<sup>th</sup> Ohio volunteer Infantry, two cannon, and part of Cox's cavalry. Their job was simple – drive the enemy from its position. The only problem was that the Confederate

position was extremely strong. The Union attackers would have to slog their way through the water, under fire, and then scale the creek's steep banks on the other side – right into the face of the Confederate guns.

(1) **Narrative in the Official Roster of the Soldiers of the State of Ohio in the Rebellion** misspells Colonel Norton's name as Colonel Morton.

Colonel Norton proposed to attack the enemy's left flank, as a diversionary tactic to distract attention from a main charge to the center. He did not intend to rely on the short-range, inaccurate smooth-bore muskets, issued to his men in Columbus, to

overwhelm the Confederates. Norton proposed a bayonet charge, meant to put fear foremost in the minds of the defenders.

At the appointed time, John Kraft and four hundred other Ohioans thundered across Scarey Creek. Colonel Norton did not watch passively from the other shore. He led the charge. The bayonets had the desired effect, and the left flank of the rebel defenders was penetrated. But the expected support of the rest of the attack column for some reason never materialized, even though Colonel Norton sent three messengers back across the creek to plead for support. The rebels ultimately reinforced their position, and drove the Union boys back. Colonel Norton, who had been seriously wounded in the hip, was captured, as were the other wounded. Nine Ohio men died, and twenty-six others were wounded that day. Two of the dead and two of the wounded were from Company K. John Kraft escaped without injury. The Battle of Scareytown was over. The men of the 21<sup>st</sup> would see no further action before being mustered out on August 12 1861 at Columbus.

### **John Kraft and the 68<sup>th</sup> Ohio Volunteer Infantry-Early Days.**

Even before the initial terms of the ninety-day volunteers had expired, President Lincoln recognized that more resources would be required to return the secessionist states to the Union. On July 4, 1861, he asked the Congress, assembled in special session, for an additional 400,000 men and \$400 million, an incredible sum for those days. When the terms of most of the ninety-day terms expired, the men volunteered for an additional three years.

John Kraft was no exception. After returning home to Defiance County, John enlisted for a three year term on October 8, 1861. He was mustered in as a private in Company B of the 68<sup>th</sup> Ohio Volunteer Infantry. Company B, commanded by Captain Sidney S. Sprague, was composed of 104 officers and men

from Defiance County. But most of the men in the regiment (composed of a total of ten companies) were from Henry County. Consequently, the regiment was formed at Camp Latty (also sometimes spelled "Latta") in Napoleon, Ohio, starting November 21, 1861. Like most of these regimental camps, Camp Latty, not a permanent facility, rather just tents thrown up in a field, where the men could drill while waiting to be mobilized.

Soon after the men started to arrive at Camp Latty, John was promoted to the position of 4<sup>th</sup> Corporal in his company, on December 4, 1861. This was the first of a series of rapid promotions that would eventually result in John becoming Sergeant for Company B.

Those first few months at Camp Latty were relatively uneventful and, by army standards, quite comfortable. John and the other men were quartered in Sibley tents. A Sibley tent was essentially a large cone of canvas 18 feet in diameter that tapered upwards 12 feet, very much like a tepee. The top of the tent was open for ventilation. In the middle was a stove. From 12-20 men would sleep in each tent, their feet facing the stove, and then spreading outward like the spokes of a wheel. John was still close to his family in neighboring Defiance County, and so he probably was amply supplied with produce, meats and cakes from home.

John was promoted to 3<sup>rd</sup> Corporal on January 16, 1862, a little more than a month after receiving his first promotion. After two months at Camp Latty, the 68<sup>th</sup> was finally ordered to move out. On January 21, 1862, the regiment began to move from Camp Latty to Camp Chase in Columbus. Company B left on January 23, arriving on January 24. There the men were outfitted. The Order Book for Company B shows John signed a receipt for one knapsack with strap (for his clothing), one haversack (to carry rations), one lantern and strap, one Enfield rifle (2) and bayonet "complete", one bayonet scabbard, one gun sling, one waist belt and plate (buckle), one cartridge box, and various eating utensils. Most men found very early on that carrying all of this was extremely cumbersome and noisy, and discarded what they could.

Two weeks later, on February 9, 1862, the 68<sup>th</sup> moved south. The regiment was attached to the brigade of General Charles F. Smith. Smith's boss was Ohio-born Ulysses S Grant, who had moved swiftly up the ranks from Colonel to Major General. The Union plan, which Grant intended to implement, was to cut the Confederacy in half by divesting the South of control of the Mississippi. He had already made substantial moves in that direction, taking Fort Henry, straddling the Tennessee River just south of the Kentucky state line, February 6. And he had

already begun the attack on Fort Donelson, twelve miles east of the Cumberland River, on February 13. The battle for Fort Donelson was well under way when John and the 68<sup>th</sup> arrived on February 14. The 68<sup>th</sup>'s sole involvement in the two days before Donelson fell on February 16 was in skirmishing.

John's unit remained camped at nearby Dover, Tennessee until early March. On March 15, the regiment was on the move with Grant's Army of the Tennessee, this time moving up the Tennessee River aboard the transport ship **Minnehaha** to Pittsburgh Landing, not too far from a little country church called Shiloh. The 68<sup>th</sup> was now assigned to the Third Division headed by General Lew Wallace (the future author of Ben Hur). At 5:15 a.m. on April 6, 1862, while Grant's 63,000 men were either asleep or cooking their Sunday breakfast, 40,000 Confederates came storming out of the woods and the Battle of Shiloh was underway. "Bloody Shiloh" finally ended as a Union victory the afternoon of April 7, with nearly 24,000 men on both sides killed, wounded, captured or missing. The 68<sup>th</sup>, which had been decimated prior to the battle by sickness, disease and poor rations, was consigned to guard duty in the rear. So far, John had managed to avoid battle injury and disease. His military service records indicate he was "present" and fit for duty this entire time.

For the rest of 1862, the 68<sup>th</sup> was woefully under strength. Nearly 300 men in the regiment had been sent home on sick leave, but not yet returned, prompting the 68<sup>th</sup>'s commander to detail four men to go back to Ohio and round them up. A large number of men were also sick in camp. (But John still remained hale and hearty.) For example, on July 30, only 27 privates (out of nearly 90 initially on the company roster) are reported on

(2) John was issued an old musket when he first received a weapon as a member of the 21<sup>st</sup> Infantry. Steven D. Harris, great great grandson of John, now has possession of an old musket made by "Seeman" of Lancaster, PA. This is believed to be the musket John Draft carried during his 90-day enlistment. the morning report for Company B as being fit for duty. Things had improved by year end, with the return to camp of many of the men. Still, on December 10, 1862, with regimental strength up to 680 men, 67 men on the regimental rolls were reported as being absent without leave, and one officer was sent to "procure and return them."

Most of the summer and fall, John's regiment was in camp at Bolivar, Tennessee. Boredom set in, and the men lusted for action. The regiment's Field

and Staff Muster Roll (Record of Event Card) for July and August 1862 contains the following illustrative entry: “Since last muster the Regt. has been stationed at this place, garrisoning the fortifications and patiently waiting for something to turn up.” The fact that the regiment had not yet seen combat, while others around them had tasted victory at Ft. Henry, Ft. Donelson and Shiloh, obviously caused agitation.

The regiment apparently spent a lot of time on patrol in the Bolivar area with little, if any, action. The Company Muster Roll (Record of Event Card) for John’s Company B is illustrative: “On the 9<sup>th</sup> Oct. 1862 Co. with the Regt. Marched from Bolivar, Tennessee to Grand Junction, Tennessee, a distance of 20 miles and returned to Bolivar the next day. Oct. 30, 1862 Co. with the Regt. Marched from Bolivar, Tennessee to 4 miles west of Whiteville, a distance of 15 miles and back to Bolivar the same day.” It is hard to imagine marching up and down the hills of Tennessee along rough dirt roads for thirty miles in one day, but the regiment would find these skills useful in the coming campaign.

During the period of doldrums, there was some action in John’s company. John was promoted during July or August, this time to Second Corporal. And on August 31, 1862, his company commander, Captain Sprague, was placed under arrest and instructed to turn over the company’s books and his sword. He was court-martialed on two counts: (1) conduct unbecoming an officer, by bringing a keg of ale into the camp causing several of his men to become intoxicated and cause a disturbance (he himself also became intoxicated); and (2) habitual abuse of his men and the use of threatening language toward them, in particular by threatening Private Freeman E. Derby that he would “blow his (Derby’s) brains out if he ever met him in the woods alone” and by continually using abusive and insulting language to his men. Captain Sprague was acquitted of both charges on November 26, 1862 (but was apparently so stigmatized by this action that he subsequently resigned his commission and left the army on June 22, 1863).

### **The Vicksburg Campaign:**

In November 1862, General Grant set in motion the opening thrust of the Vicksburg campaign. The 68<sup>th</sup> and other Union forces moved toward Abbeville, Oxford and Holly Springs in northern Mississippi, but the loss at Holly Springs on December 20, 1862 of his forward supply depot - - where a small Confederate force destroyed ammunition, provisions and equipment estimated to be worth \$1,500,000 – caused Grant to withdraw his forces, including the 68<sup>th</sup>, to Memphis.

Meanwhile, in Company B, John Kraft was promoted again, on December 13, 1862, to First Corporal.

Grant changed his tactics, and decided to approach Vicksburg from the west side of the Mississippi River – through Louisiana – away from the main body of Confederate forces. Part of Grant’s plan was to open up the Mississippi River by cutting canals across the swampy bayous of Louisiana. The Company Muster Roll (Records of Events Card) for Company B provides some detail: “Since last Muster the Co. with the Regt. Has marched from Abbeville, Miss. By LaGrange, Tenn. to Memphis, and from there by transports to this place [Providence Lake, Louisiana]. Since the Co. arrived here it has been engaged in doing General Guard duty and furnishing Men to assist in cleaning out Bayou Baxter for Gun Boat Navigation.” From February through April of 1863, John and the 68<sup>th</sup> were actively engaged in work on the Lake Providence Canal, and later at Bayou Tensas and then Walnut Bayou. Heavy rains led to flooding. The engineers could not find a navigable route through the bayous. The canal building projects were abandoned.

General Grant and his subordinate officers maintained firm military discipline. General James B. McPherson, one of Grant’s Corp Commanders, (3) issued an Order on March 8, 1863, at Lake Providence, Louisiana, noting that “evil designing persons” had been taking liquor on boats into the lake and disposing of it to the soldiers, in violation of express orders. While the General was “loath to deprive the men of the pleasant amusement of boating upon the lakes,” he noted that if the problem continued, all boats would be seized, and no more would be allowed to be built.

Less than three weeks later, more discipline problems developed, this time involving the Second Brigade under General Leggett (which included John’s regiment). On March 27, 1863, a cotton gin and mill and a large amount of cotton that had been seized to the use of the United States government were burned and destroyed at Vista Landing, Louisiana. Leggett appointed a committee to investigate. The following day, the committee reported \$2,000 in damage had been done. Leggett ordered the damages be assessed against three of the four regiments in the brigade; one was exonerated. The 68<sup>th</sup>’s share of damages was \$600, to be withheld proportionately from each man’s pay. Even though John Kraft was assessed just like all the other men, he must not have had anything to do with the scandal, because he was promoted to Sergeant just three days later, on March 31, 1863.

By now, Grant was under fire from his own superiors and an increasingly war-weary and hostile press for apparently lounging away the winter digging ditches and cruising around lakes in the South. Grant abandoned his plan to build canals around Vicksburg, and launched an offensive that would ultimately lead to the fall of Vicksburg, the “Confederate Gibraltar,” and his own rise to prominence.

**(3) The military hierarchy during the Vicksburg campaign was as follows:** Army of the Tennessee – Maj. Gen. U. S. Grant XVII Corps – Maj. Gen. James B. McPherson Third Division – Maj. Gen. John A. Logan Second Brigade – Brig. Gen. Mortimer D. Leggett 68<sup>th</sup> Regiment, Ohio Volunteer Infantry – Col. Robert K. Scott Company B – Capt. Sidney S. Sprague

On March 29, Grant ordered the first contingent of troops to move south to reconnoiter a route to find a suitable place to cross eastward back across the Mississippi. John’s 68<sup>th</sup> Ohio moved out about two weeks later, working on construction of a military road. Finally, on April 23, 1863, the regiment began its march that would ultimately lead to Vicksburg, albeit by a very indirect route.

Union Admiral David Porter had moved his gunboats down the Mississippi past the Confederate batteries at Vicksburg and Grand Gulf, Mississippi to a spot on the Louisiana side of the river from which the massed federal troops could be ferried. John Kraft was one of the first 22,000 Union soldiers waiting anxiously to cross into unknown dangers. After months of unrelieved boredom, he and the other men of the 68<sup>th</sup> ay have relished the opportunity to finally be in the war. Then, finally, on April 30, 1863, the Union troops were ferried across the Father of Waters to Bruinsberg, Mississippi aboard scores of barges and transports, “covered till they are black with troops,” in the largest American amphibious operation up to that time. The landing was unopposed by the rebels. By noon that day, Grant’s Army of the Tennessee was on Mississippi soil.

Grant moved his army to the northeast, encountering some Confederate resistance at Port Gibson on May 1, then later on May 12 at Raymond and May 14 at Jackson. All of these battles resulted in Union victories, in large part because the Confederates never offered more than a few brigades at one time to hold Grant’s juggernaut. John’s regiment is reported to have “sustained considerable loss” in all of these engagements. From Jackson, Grant’s army now turned back westward to cover the 40 miles to Vicksburg. The Confederates would be squeezed in a virtual pincer movement between his gunboats on the Mississippi and his own advancing infantry. While the battles of this campaign had not been

without casualties, it was at Champion Hill on May 16 that Grant would encounter his firmest and most determined Confederate resistance. And it was at the Battle of Champion Hill that John Kraft would encounter firsthand the agony of war.

Located just 18 miles east of Vicksburg, Champion Hill is a ridge about 75 feet high, located on the plantation of Sid and Matilda Champion. Its lower slopes were snarled with thick underbrush and a dense labyrinth of tall trees draped in Spanish moss. By the time Grant's force (now numbering 32,000 men) arrived the morning of May 16, 1862, 23,000 Confederates under General John C. Pemberton had already dug in along the ridge.

At 10:30 a.m., the Union attack began. John's regiment was in the division commanded by the famous "Black Jack" Logan. Black Jack was fearless and somewhat eccentric; he was also exceptionally proficient at swearing and drinking. He acquired his nickname perhaps from his appearance; he was described by one of his contemporaries as "a swarthy, black-bearded man of slight figure and transparent egotism." Or perhaps Black Jack got his nickname from his reputation. One war reporter described a scene which lives on all these years: "I saw him [Logan] on one occasion .... with nothing on him in the way of clothing but his hat, shirt and boots, sitting at a table on which stood a bottle of whiskey and a tin cup, and playing on the violin for a lot of darky roustabouts to dance." In any event, Grant considered Logan's Third Division one of his best, and gave it his most important assignments.

During the Union attack, John joined 10,000 Union soldiers surging 600 yards up Champion Hill, with bayonets fixed. Combat was fierce, had-to-had, and incredibly bloody. Logan's Division smashed through the Confederate lines, driving them down the hill. After the Union took the hill, John was working feverishly to refortify the breast works taken over from the rebels, in anticipation of a counterattack, and it was probably during this time that he was injured. The rebels regrouped at the bottom of the hill, and counterattacked at 2:30 in the afternoon. The Union troops dropped back to a defensive line just six hundred yards in front of the plantation manor, where Johnny Reb was finally stopped. What has been referred to by noted Civil War historian Edwin Bearss as the Civil War's "most decisive battle" was over. Pemberton withdrew his battered heels. Grant had casualties of 2,500, while Pemberton lost nearly 4,000 men. The bold Union plan to split the Confederacy was now unstoppable, and the fate of Vicksburg was sealed.

The performance that day by Logan's Third Division, of which John was a member, had been described by one historian as "outstanding." Another indicates that Logan "clearly was the hero of Champion Hill." In fact, because of their "good behavior in the fatiguing march and hard fought battles of the recent campaign," Gen. Leggett rescinded the penalty assessed against John's regiment (and two others) in March for burning the Vista Plantation. But for Sergeant John Kraft, Champion Hill was also the place where he acquired a serious, painful injury which he would have to endure the rest of his life.

Seventeen years later, John described how he was injured in an affidavit filed in support of his application for an invalid pension. In 1880, he stated that he was injured on May 16, 1863 at Champion Hill "by receiving a fall while constructing breast works in front of the enemy while chapping off a log for said breast works some distance from the ground. The log fell from under him which caused him to fall in a manner to injure his back or spine by striking on the log with great force which rendered him insensible for a time." William H. Palmer, John's immediate superior and a lieutenant during Champion Hill, filed an affidavit two years later corroborating John's injury claim. Lieutenant Palmer's affidavit was in error as to some of the details regarding the date and place of the injury, but otherwise fully confirmed John's story. Palmer noted further that the injury rendered John "crippled" such that the captain (Sprague) ordered that he be excused from duty. Palmer stated that John "was ever after while he knew [him] more or less disabled from the said injury and always claimed of weakness and disability of back."

To make matters worse, as the Union army was laying siege to Vicksburg, John contracted chronic diarrhea in June. This was no laughing matter. During the Civil War, disease killed more than twice as many men as died in battle, over 150,000 on the Union side alone. On June 22, 1863, he is reported sick in the hospital where he remained until August 21, two months later.

After Vicksburg capitulated on July 4, 1863 – just a day after the final day's battle at Gettysburg – Grant's army occupied the city. Many of the men were now allowed to go home on furlough. Because of his "faithful service," chronic diarrhea and "feeble back," John was sent home on thirty days furlough on September 15, 1863. John recuperated at home in Defiance County under the care of Dr. Jonas Colby, his family's doctor.

Having sufficiently recovered, John finally rejoined the 68<sup>th</sup> in Vicksburg on March 17, 1864, just before the regiment returned to Ohio. He arrived back in

Ohio, at Cleveland, on March 26. John's military service records report that he had initially been considered to be absent without leave (AWOL) after expiration of his thirty-day furlough. In 1912, nearly 40 years later, the War Department finally added annotation correcting John's records, stating that the prior AWOL notations were erroneous. (In reviewing the Regimental Order Books, I noted that many men were charged with being AWOL. John's name is not among them.)

While John was recuperating, General Grant had been promoted in October 1863 to head all Union forces between the Mississippi River and the Appalachian Mountains. He was further promoted in March 1864 to Lieutenant General and given command over all Federal forces. Grant was the first officer since George Washington to hold this rank. His successor as commander of the Military Division of the Mississippi was William Tecumseh Sherman. **The Atlanta**

### **Campaign and War's End:**

At the conclusion of the veteran's furlough, John and the rest of the 68<sup>th</sup> boarded the train at Cleveland on May 7, 1864 and headed south. En route, at Cairo, Illinois, the entire regiment received new Springfield rifles. The 68<sup>th</sup> now numbered 700 men. John marched from Clifton, Tennessee, where the regiment left the train, to Acworth, Georgia. The 68<sup>th</sup> joined Sherman's main army there on June 10. The Atlanta campaign was about to get underway. Sherman's force of 100,000 men was up against a gritty group of 64,000 rebels.

As the Atlanta campaign began, the line of command was:  
Army of the Tennessee – Maj. Gen. James B. McPherson  
XVII Corps - Maj. Gen. Frank P. Blair, Jr.  
Third Division – Brig. Gen. Mortimer D. Leggett  
Second Brigade – Col. Robert K. Scott  
68<sup>th</sup> Regiment, Ohio Volunteer Infantry – Col. George Welles  
Company B – Capt. Robert Masters

John quickly found himself in the middle of the action. As Sherman marched southward toward Atlanta, Union forces first engaged the rebels on June 27 in battle at Kennesaw Mountain, 20 miles northwest of the city. It was a major battle, with the Union suffering nearly 3,000 casualties. But the 68<sup>th</sup> was only nominally involved, and saw little action.

The South had superficially won the Battle of Kennesaw Mountain, with losses only 1/4<sup>th</sup> that suffered by the North. However, Sherman outflanked the

Confederates and pressed on toward Atlanta. There, the rebels had built a complete series of trenches and fortifications completely surrounding the city. Sherman moved cautiously, choosing to envelop the city, severing its rail and road links and supply lines, rather than launching a bloody onslaught against its heavily-fortified defenses.

A change in Confederate commanders on July 17 brought on a change in the defenders' tactics. Because of the way Sherman had positioned his troops, Confederate General John B. Hood saw a tactical opportunity to attack, and immediately decided to take it. Union and Confederate soldiers tangled on July 20 at the Battle of the Peachtree Creek, north of the city. The Confederates lost 3,000 men and the Federal forces about 1,700. John's regiment, positioned southwest of the city, was not involved in this battle.

The fighting continued the next day at nearby Bald Hill, so called because it was barren of any trees. The Union captured the hill from the rebels. Now they were able to lob cannon shells into the heart of Atlanta. Hood could not let that stand. Another tactical opportunity to attack Sherman presented itself, and Hood again pursued it. Gen. Hood ordered one of his corps commanders, General Hardee, to make a fifteen-mile forced march that night, so that the Union forces on Bald Hill could be attacked the next day from the rear.

On Friday, July 22, 1864, the Battle of Atlanta took place. A number of soldiers who remembered that cataclysmic event called it the Battle of Black Friday because it cost so many young lives, including a prominent and popular Union general.

It was an unusually hot Georgia summer day. By 10 a.m. that Friday morning, the temperature was well over 90 degrees. Seasoned soldiers were dropping from heat exhaustion. John's unit had been positioned in the stifling heat with the rest of General Leggett's Third Division around the base of Bald Hill, occupying the far left of the Union line.

Concerned about the possibility of a Confederate flanking maneuver, the 68<sup>th</sup> was sent to the rear to perform picket duty. John and his regiment soon stumbled onto the main line of advancing rebel forces. Because of the position it occupied, the 68<sup>th</sup> found itself sandwiched between two advancing Confederate forces. Col. Welles, regimental commander, waited until one of the rebel lines was in front of it in an open field. The unit then moved forward "on the double-quick," dropped behind a fence for cover, and poured a deadly volley into the exposed Confederate forces. It was about noon.

John's regiment was greatly outnumbered. But the now-seasoned soldiers did not panic. The exchange of fire alerted the main Union forces to the location of the advancing Confederate army. The nearest Union troops, part of General Fuller's brigade of the XVII Corps, quickly moved to support John's regiment. In so doing, Fuller drew rebel fire, allowing John and the 68<sup>th</sup> to extricate itself from what would otherwise have been an untenable position. The 68<sup>th</sup> rejoined its brigade, which by now was also "hotly engaged" in battle.

Meanwhile, Col. Robert K. Scott, former head of the 68<sup>th</sup>, but since promoted to brigade commander, was in the company of Maj. Gen. James B. McPherson, an Ohio native, and was one of the more popular generals in the Army, both with the men he led and with his own commanders. Just thirty-six years old, he was a favorite of Grant and also of Sherman, who loved him like a son. He was an extremely good-looking man and a real charmer. Even the Yankee-hating Southern belles in Vicksburg found him appealing. He was a man of high moral principles and tremendous courage.

From a hill north of the fighting, now raging in earnest, McPherson was able to observe General Dodge's XVII Corps (which had come to the rescue of John's 68<sup>th</sup> Ohio) repel repeated Confederate assaults. But McPherson was still concerned about the vulnerability of the XVII Corps, which he had previously commanded, and to which John's regiment was attached. This concern was no doubt heightened by the presence of Col. Scott, who was at the General's headquarters to report on the fighting in which the 68<sup>th</sup> and the other regiments in his brigade were now viciously engaged.

At about 2:00, McPherson decided to size up the situation himself. In the company of Col. Scott, a Federal signal officer, and his aide, the general unwittingly rode straight into a squad of Confederate pickers. Ignoring the rebels' demand that he halt, McPherson lifted his hat politely in a salute, wheeled his horse around, and attempted to escape. Col. Scott and the other officers in McPherson's contingent followed. The General galloped away hugging his horse tightly around the neck, in an attempt to make a low profile. The Confederates let loose a volley. Col. Scott's horse was shot from under him, but he was unharmed. The General was not so lucky. A bullet ripped through his back, exciting near his heart. The beloved general died 20 minutes later. The Confederate whose men brought down McPherson could tell from the blood-soaked uniform that he had a high-ranking Union officer, but he didn't know who. He asked Col. Scott who the general was. The Colonel responded, with tears in his eyes, "Sir, it is General

McPherson. You have killed the best man in our army.” (McPherson was replaced temporarily during the battle by General Logan, and, on July 27, by General Oliver Howard.)

General McPherson’s concern for the units in General Blair’s Third Division, including the 68<sup>th</sup>, was well-founded. John and the 68<sup>th</sup> and other regiments in the brigade were attacked by rebels “from front and rear, and the men fought first on one side of the works and then on the other. At one time a portion of the brigade was on the other side of the works, firing heavily in the other direction.” The fighting was intense, so intense that one Union officer remarked that “every direction was a front.” Federal forces continued to hold Bald Hill (also called Leggett’s Division), and, after a final assault at 6 p.m., the Confederates withdrew back into Atlanta. The fighting claimed about 8,000 Confederate casualties and 3,800 Federals.

John’s regiment was also involved in subsequent battles during the Atlanta campaign at Jonesboro (August 31 – September 1) and Lovejoy’s Station (September 2-6), south of Atlanta. General Hood withdrew from Atlanta on September 1, leaving the city in flames. The Mayor surrendered the City to General Sherman on September 2.

Following the fall of Atlanta, John’s 68<sup>th</sup> Ohio was part of a contingent in hot pursuit of General Hood’s forces. While at Gaylesville, Alabama, John’s term of service expired on October 29. Because of his impaired physical condition, he was refused for re-enlistment. Sergeant John H. Kraft and a number of other men from the 68<sup>th</sup> were sent to Chattanooga, Tennessee, where they were formally mustered out and sent home on November 4, 1864.

The 68<sup>th</sup> would continue to follow Sherman, and would participate in his famous March to the Sea that winter. The remaining members of the 68<sup>th</sup> Regiment, Ohio volunteer Infantry, were mustered out at Louisville, Kentucky in July, 1865. Between the organization of the regiment in October 1861 and its termination nearly four years later, 300 officers and men died, 50 in battle and 250 of disease, a 30% mortality rate. The regiment’s 5 to 1 ratio of losses to disease vastly exceeded the 2 to 1 ratio. Even though he would suffer through the rest of his life from injury and disease acquired during the war, John Kraft was one of the fortunate members of the regiment.

**Prepared June 1991 by Steven D. Harris for his father, Kenneth Dale Harris (a great-grandson of John H. Kraft), in honor of Father’s Day and his 63<sup>rd</sup> birthday. Information Sources Regarding John H. Kraft:**

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