The Siege of Cincinnati
by a Pearl Street Rifle

Edited by Louis L. Tucker

The war had been going badly for the Union in 1862. The few successes achieved by Ulysses S. Grant in the western theatre of operation were overshadowed by resounding Confederate victories in the main areas of conflict. Now, in September, a veteran Confederate force of some 10,000 troops was positioned on the Kentucky approaches to Cincinnati. A key economic bastion of the Union, Cincinnati appeared fated for capture, and the Northern war effort as a whole seemed destined for ignominious failure. Should the Confederates achieve a few more decisive victories, there was every likelihood that France and Great Britain would recognize the South as a nation, and recognition would place the "civil war" in a new perspective.

If Cincinnatians were distressed by the Union's military and diplomatic problems, they were terrified by the thought of occupation by "foreign" troops. Would the Confederates be content to destroy factories and military installations? Or would they sack the entire city, and thereby lay waste to over one hundred years of human achievement? The dark thought of imminent devastation swirled through the minds of Cincinnatians as they hurriedly marshalled available military resources and braced themselves for the impending onslaught.

William Howard Neff (1828–1902), who maintained a hardware business on Pearl Street, was one Cincinnatian who was determined to defend his city. Neff, however, was not a wild-eyed fanatic. A practical man by temperament, he first put his personal affairs in order before dashing off to war. He buried his silver, transferred bank deposits to New York City, stored away remaining treasures, dispatched his family to Yellow Springs, and then took his position in the line. As a member of the Home Guard, the thirty-four-year-old Neff had trained diligently and was sufficiently prepared to shoulder these sudden military obligations.

Neff's account of the siege period, which was written some thirty years after the event, gives a detailed picture of this critical and exciting era of Cincinnati's history. Perhaps its primary virtue is the richness of its minutiae. As one reads the document, he comes to an immediate awareness of the "personality" of the times. Descriptions of massive military preparations are balanced by a recitation of minor incidents, and it is the latter which gives meaning to the whole. To Neff, war was not merely a matter of logistics. Em-
bedded in his memory were those incidents involving man's personal reaction to the vicissitudes of war.

Some of the events are humorous and some are filled with pathos. Consider these few examples. As two armies stand poised for battle, a distressed father rides into the Union encampment and beseeches the officer in command to release his underaged son. With reluctance, the officer acquiesces in the plea, but the boy thereupon refuses to leave with the father — "I would be eternally disgraced now. I will not go."

Then there is the incident involving the regimental surgeon who meticulously sets up his hospital in full view of the troops preparing for battle, "all his knives and saws laid out ready for immediate use." Fearing a "stampede" by his raw-nerved forces, the Union commander orders the surgeon to set up his unit farther to the rear.

Military accounts of the "Siege of Cincinnati" invariably terminate with the statement that the Confederate forces suddenly left their positions during the night of September 11 and retired southward. Neff adds flesh to the story. Thus we learn that the news that the Rebels had "skidded" was followed by the sound of song. Somewhere in the neighboring hills of Kentucky, someone began voicing the words of the popular "John Brown's Body." Men standing and lying nearby picked up the refrain and, before long, some 80,000 voices joined in the grand chorus. "It reverberated from hill and valley," Neff recalled, "now dying, now coming back with increased volume and force, an occasion which comes but once in a lifetime, never to be forgotten."

Neff's account is studded with many such items of human interest. As cartoonist Bill Mauldin so graphically demonstrated during World War II, the civilian-soldier of the United States has always been the first to recognize his shortcomings as a professional warrior. The Civil War had its share of "Willies" and "Joes," and Neff's narrative gives testimony to this fact (Note the experience of Adjutant Carlisle). Humor, compassion, dedication — all of these elements were present among the Union defenders of Cincinnati.

There are three compelling reasons why Neff's story deserves a printing. Initially, September 1962 marks the centennial of the Siege. Secondly, the document has an intrinsic value for the historical information it contains. Finally, it should serve to remind researchers that the HPSO has a significant body of like materials in its holdings.
Caeser wrote his Commentaries on the war in Gaul, Grant, Sherman and Sheridan have published their Military Memoirs, why should not a Pearl St. Rifle write the Siege of Cincinnati?  

In the spring of 1861, soon after the surrender of Fort Sumter, the merchants of Pearl St. organized a Military Company for home defense. George B. McClellan, then Superintendent of the Ohio & Mississippi Railroad, was elected our Captain, but unfortunately for us, that same afternoon he was commissioned by Governor Dennison, Major General of Ohio Volunteers. Our thoughts were then turned to W. S. Rosecrans, a distinguished civil engineer who had received a military education at West Point, but he at once was made a Brigadier General by President Lincoln, and we were then deprived of his services. No wise disconcerted by these marked approvals of our judgment, we elected John B. Groesbeck, afterwards the gallant Colonel of the 39th Ohio Volunteers, our Captain, and proceeded at once to complete our organization and equipment. 80 Colt's Revolving Rifles were purchased by subscription for $50 each, and soon we were uniformed and accoutered in all the pomp and panoply of war at the expense of the business firms on Pearl Street between Main and Race Streets. We drilled incessantly and soon made our first public appearance. That was a proud day for Cincinnati. Our example was speedily followed by the Burnet Rifles, which afterwards contributed many valuable officers to the volunteer service, by the Winfield Rifles and other organizations. We kept on drilling and filling up our ranks as business engagements called our members from the city, so that in a year’s time we had about 200 young merchants and merchants clerks well drilled in marching and facings, and the manual of arms.  

Colonel Groesbeck soon raised a regiment and took the field. Peter Rudolph Neff was then elected Captain, and Adolph D’Visy First Lieutenant and I. P. Lytle Second Lieutenant. Many members of the company entered into active service, all as officers, but the organization was maintained, as it was intended for home defense. A fortunate arrangement for Cincinnati, as the sequel proved.  

Early in September 1862, the gallant General Wm. A. Nelson, to whose efforts we are greatly indebted for retaining Kentucky in...
the Union, was defeated with great loss at Richmond, Kentucky by General Kirby Smith, a West Pointer of distinguished military ability with a well disciplined army estimated at 25,000 men. Nelson's force consisted principally of raw recruits, and although brave men and most gallantly led, they were unable to resist the fierce attack of veteran troops. Two Indiana regiments especially who had never been under fire lost heavily. Nelson himself was severely wounded, and his army completely routed. Those not captured were dispersed. Nelson was brought to Cincinnati, and most kindly cared for at the residence of Mr. Larz Anderson, who had three sons in the service. Not an armed man was left between Kirby Smith's victorious army and the City of Cincinnati, where a very long supply of army stores had been collected for the use of the Western armies, a most tempting prize, as well as the plunder of a wealthy city, to the ill clad, poorly fed, Confederate troops. An advance brigade of 5,000 men under the command of General [Henry] Heath, was pushed forward as far as Latonia Springs, a distance of five miles from Cincinnati, and Kirby Smith with the remainder of his troops was within supporting distance. While it would have been impossible to have held the city for any length of time, twenty-four hours possession would have enabled them to obtain the army stores, the money from the banks, and to destroy the city by fire. The moral effect of this success would have been most inspiring to the Confederate cause, and equally disheartening to the National troops, while the acquisition of the army stores and money would have enabled the Confederate troops to have kept the field during the winter. Twelve large warehouses were filled with boots and shoes alone. Overcoats and blankets were stored here in very large quantities. It is not too much to say that the moral and material effects of the capture of Cincinnati might have turned the scale at this critical time, and resulted in the dismemberment of the Union. The situation at Cincinnati was not at all reassuring. The Mayor of the City was a democrat, of doubtful proclivities, and was strongly suspected of a desire to find a good pretext for the surrender of the city. In fact on Sunday evening a meeting was held at the Burnet House at which the subject of discussion was the propriety of surrendering the city to avoid pillage and destruction. But it was not so to be. General Horatio G. Wright was the commander of the district, with headquarters at Louisville. He sent General

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3Neff's statement is somewhat exaggerated. There were two Union regiments positioned on the Lexington Pike, but admittedly they offered no match for Heath's seasoned forces.

4The mayor was George Hatch. It would seem that fear for the safety of the city, and not disloyalty, prompted Hatch's consideration of surrender.
Lewis Wallace at once to Cincinnati to take command with ample powers. General Wallace arrived on Monday night. Early Monday morning the City was surprised, and all patriots greatly encouraged by a proclamation placing the City at once under martial law. The banks were to be open for one hour, from 9 until 10 o'clock. At 10 o'clock they and all places of business, factories, stores and shops, were to be closed; all able bodied men were to repair to their place of organization if they belonged to any organized body, if not to their place of voting to be at once formed into regiments for the defense of the City. After this time all persons found upon the streets were to be arrested. We obtained this order at 9 o'clock. My father, Peter Neff, directed me to draw money at once for immediate use, and to send the rest to the Bank of America, New York City. My brother, Peter Rudolph Neff, went direct to the armory of the Pearl St. Rifles, of which company he was Captain. After telling him to reserve a rifle for me, I went to the Bank of the Ohio Valley, where we kept our Cincinnati account. On the steps of the bank I met Mr. W. W. Scarborough, President of the Bank. Looking around to see if anyone was within hearing distance, he said to me in a low voice, “Tell your father that I sent that money last night to Lebanon, Ohio, by George Eustis.” My father was chairman of the Hamilton County Finance Committee. The money referred to was two hundred and fifty thousand dollars which had been subscribed and collected
to relieve Hamilton County from the draft. George Eustis was the receiving teller of the bank and the money had been deposited there. The bank business was soon attended to and I went then to the armory at Greenwood Hall, corner of 6th and Vine Sts. At the door I met my brother waiting for me. "I have a full company upstairs of the old members, all well drilled men. We have the full quantity of Colt Revolving Rifles, with cartridge boxes. I wish you would go at once to Capt. Dickerson, the U. S. Quartermaster in charge of the army stores at Cincinnati, and get the rest of the equipment for the men so that I can report forthwith to Gen'l Wallace for marching orders." I went at once to Capt. Dickerson and stated the case. He gave me an order on the store [keeper?] for the articles needed, blankets, blouses, caps, haversacks, knapsacks. I pressed three drays into the service, and in a few minutes was back at the armory with the equipment. How the men cheered when they saw us coming. My brother said to me, "there are eighty men more here, who were all members at different times, all well drilled, enough to make Company B Pearl St. Rifles. I have Springfield muskets for them, of which a large quantity have been sent to Miles Greenwood to be rifled, they being smooth bores, but I want the full equipment for them also." I was somewhat dubious about getting them, but told him I would try. I went again to Capt. Dickerson, but he shook his head. "Six other companies have been here since you left for equipment. I dare not give them. I can only give you haversacks and the rifled muskets and cartridge boxes." With these I had to be satisfied and returned to the armory. Meanwhile my brother had gone to Gen'l Lewis Wallace's headquarters at the Burnet House. It was just half past 10 o'clock in the morning, half an hour after martial law had gone into effect. "Gen'l Wallace, I have 80 men, armed with Colts Revolving Rifles, well drilled, uniformed and fully equipped, ready to march." "Sir, you are Company A of the 1st Regiment. If your people respond in this way your city is safe." In another half hour he went again to report Company B Pearl St. Rifles, well drilled, armed with Springfield rifled muskets. It was made Company B First Regiment. By noon the 1st Regiment was complete. Thomas R. Roberts, an experienced army officer, was appointed Colonel, my brother in recognition of his promptness and ability was made Lieutenant Colonel. This necessitated a change in the company organization. Adolph D'Visy was made Captain of Company A and Judge Avery Captain of Company B with Gen'l

Greenwood was one of the great industrial pioneers of mid-nineteenth century America. See his biographical sketch in the Cincinnati Times-Star, Nov. 6, 1885.
Goshorn, afterward the Director General of the Centennial Exposition at Philadelphia, 1st Lieutenant. I was Quartermaster of Company B, with a confidential position as Assistant Quartermaster of the regiment. By this time the City was fully roused to action. Regiments were formed with great rapidity, and in two days time 14,000 men from Cincinnati alone, many of whom were well drilled, and some of whom had already seen service with the three months troops, were organized, officered, and armed with the rifled Springfield muskets. Our own companies had arranged to sleep at the armory, but it was thought best for the men to go to their homes, to assemble as soon as the great bell of the Mechanics Institute tolled the signal.

Meanwhile I arranged to send my family to Dayton, 60 miles distant and thence to Yellow Springs, a famous, local resort, belonging to another branch of the family, where they would be safe and
comfortable. Packing up under such circumstances was a trying affair. The silver was buried. Family portraits stored away. With a mother's provident care, Mrs. Neff took full stores of clothing. The children entered into the spirit of it, and were very active in collecting toys and dolls. When all ready the difficulty was how to get the baggage to the Railroad Depot. James Morrison, our confidential clerk, was equal to the emergency and pressed a dray into the service "for Government duty," and after a hurried and anxious leave taking, the dear ones were off. Luke King, the colored waiter, was to remain in charge of the house. It was a great relief to get these arrangements made, for those who knew the situation best, realized that at any moment trouble might come. Orders were sent for three regiments of veteran troops just through the terrible battle and glorious victory of Pea Ridge, Ark. to return to Cincinnati. Trains of empty cars were sent up all the railroads, into the interior of the state, to bring down volunteers, and soon the brave "squirrel hunters" of Ohio began to respond. A train would be sent far enough to be filled; as soon as the men were brought to the City, it would be sent back for more reinforcements, and it was steadily continued until the City began to assume the appearance of a camp. The ladies took charge of the work of providing food and refreshments for the men. The market houses were set with long tables, and each regiment as it arrived was directed to the nearest place for refreshment, after which the men made themselves comfortable on the sidewalk or in the yard and gardens of the private residences until they were assigned to their respective stations. But I am anticipating events.

On Thursday evening marching orders came for our regiment, the First Reserve Regiment of Cincinnati volunteers. We were to cross the Ohio River on the pontoon bridge, constructed the year previous. At the outbreak of the war Gen'l Ormsby McKnight Mitchel had been placed in charge of this department with headquarters at Cincinnati. He proceeded at once to fortify the City by a chain of forts on the Kentucky hills, about three miles south of the Ohio river. The most prominent and important fort was named Fort Mitchel in honor of its founder.

Gen'l Mitchel was one of the most intelligent and accomplished officers who offered up his life upon the altar of his country during the War of the Rebellion. He was my old Professor of Mathematics at the Cincinnati College, afterward director of the Cincinnati and Dudley Astronomical Observatories. He was educated at West Point, and at the beginning of the war offered his services and was stationed at Cincinnati. He first pierced the shell of the Confederacy at Huntsville, Alabama, and spread consternation throughout the
very heart of the rebellion. He was a most gallant leader, second to none in ability or patriotism. I saw him in New York the evening before he sailed for Charleston, his last assignment for duty. He felt that he was sacrificed.

"I am a Major General in the army of the United States," he said, "and am entitled to a Major General's command, 30,000 men. If they will give me 20,000, I will take Charleston, but what can I do there with 5,000 men." In a short time he died of yellow fever on one of the Islands in front of Charleston. No nobler spirit was offered up in that great sacrifice. But this is a digression. We were ordered to the rifle pits near Fort Mitchel. We assembled in the evening in the Eighth Street Park, now Garfield Place. Gen'l Lewis Wallace with his staff reviewed us there. Then there was a solemn pause, and with uncovered heads we took the oath of allegiance, and were mustered into the service of the United States.

Just at this moment Captain Avery of Company B Pearl St. Rifles came to me. He said, "I have no confidence in the statement that provision has been made for the men on the other side of the river. We will have to sleep on the ground tonight without tents, and Company B have no blankets." I said, "I will see what can be done," and went to Mr. N. W. Thomas, one of our most public spirited citizens who lived on Eighth Street and stated the case to him. "I will soon remedy that," said he, and at once asked the ladies along the square for blankets. They ran upstairs, stripped the blankets from the beds and came to the front doors with great armsful of choice white blankets. How the men cheered them. The ladies blushed and bowed but looked so handsome and happy as they made this sacrifice for the defenders of their homes.

Then came the word of command, "Forward march," and amid deafening cheers and hurrahs, the regiment moved down Vine St. to the river. The march was an ovation. The windows were filled with ladies, handkerchiefs waving, and amid tears and many "God bless you boys" we passed through the streets and crossed the pontoon bridge into Kentucky. Here a very different reception awaited us. The sidewalks of Covington were lined with crowds of rebel sympathizers, who jeered and hooted as we passed. Taunts and curses loud and deep were heard on all sides. "Steady boys, steady, forward march. Pay no attention to words," and we passed on, through the city and climbed the beautiful hills which complete the twelve miles circuit around the three cities of Cincinnati, Covington and Newport. We passed Fort Mitchel, and halted on a beautiful ridge of rising ground just beyond. The men laid down on the grass, wrapped in their blankets, their arms by their sides and soon were
Troops leaving Cincinnati, en route to the front

asleep, for many their first sleep on the ground in the open air, the Colonel full anxious respecting the situation. We were on the Lexington Road, without support, liable from the intelligence we had to be attacked at any moment, and this was one of the routes the enemy might take to reach the city. Adjutant John Carlisle was sent to find the rifle pits and occupy them with the troops.

By this time it was approaching midnight. The moon shone brightly on the ridge. The long lines of sleeping men, wrapped in their blankets, resting on the green from their first march, the shadows of the trees, the gathered council at headquarters, formed a novel and most interesting scene. Soon Adjutant Carlisle returned. He was then and is yet a handsome man, very particular in his dress, but he now presented a most comical appearance. He wore glasses — one lens was gone, he was covered with mud from head to foot, and presented so great a contrast to his former self, yet withal as gamey and determined as ever, that he was greeted with a shout of laughter. “Colonel, I am ready now to take these men to the rifle pits. I know just where they are, I have been in them.” A statement which his appearance fully confirmed. Everything seemed quiet. The men were tired and asleep and it was thought best not to disturb them needlessly.

A hurried supper from our haversacks, and soon we too sought and speedily found our coveted repose. The Colonel carefully placed his pickets, took every possible precaution against surprize, and soon we were enjoying our first nights bivouac. The next morning
we made our first acquaintance with soldiers' fare, "hard tack" biscuit, salt pork and coffee without milk, graced in some of the messes with a stray chicken from some of the adjoining poultry yards, which was not considered a matter of vital importance as the residents were all "secessionists." Soon after breakfast our attention was attracted by the approach of a motley crowd which we soon recognized as the "shovel brigade," under the leadership and command of Milton Sayler, afterwards Congressman from the 1st Cincinnati district. Every man had his choice of weapon. He must fight either with a musket or a shovel, whichever he preferred, but it must be one or the other. In the enforcement of this order in the city some amusing incidents occurred. Mr. Jacob Elsas a large manufacturer of clothing went to the Quartermaster's office to get his vouchers signed. A patrol saw him enter, and waited for his reappearance. He was then told to "fall in." The command given to "Forward March," and Mr. Elsas was escorted to the fortifications where he labored faithfully with his shovel for a day or two.

In the rear of the shovel brigade was an assemblage of negroes. We asked and obtained permission to halt them and to select cooks for the regiment, as the morning's experience had inspired some distrust of the amateurs among us who had prepared that meal. All we had ever learned of physiognomy was brought into requisition and soon a hundred colored men found an avocation they much
preferred to digging rifle pits. Regiments now came rapidly forward and in the afternoon Col. Roberts was promoted to a Brigadier Generalship, with two regiments besides our own under his command.

My brother was made Colonel of our regiment with Geo. M. Finch who had seen service with the three months men as Lieutenant Colonel. Drilling went on incessantly, squad, company, battalion, regimental drill, concluding with a dress parade. We were moved from the Lexington Road to the left to a beautiful grove, and learning that this would be our camp the men set to work to construct booths for shelter and soon had improvised quite a nice encampment. But they were only permitted to enjoy their handiwork one night. Regiments were rapidly taking position, and at dress parade in the afternoon it was evident that an important movement was contemplated. Gen’l Roberts whose headquarters were still with our regiment ordered me to serve twenty rounds of ammunition to each man, and to be ready to move with our supply of ammunition which was quite large. “What shall I do for transportation, General?” “Take anything that is on the ground.” A number of persons had come out in carriages and wagons, but one [ ? ] wagon was an especial object of interest. He had been selling cigars and tobacco at exhorbitant prices and the boys were quite disposed to average the account. “Unload this wagon and fill it with ammunition.” Twenty sprang to obey the order and in a twinkling the tobacco was on the ground, and the ammunition in the wagon. We were to execute a flank movement in the very face of the enemy and might be attacked at any moment. The Supply train was left behind, to afford as little inducement as possible to the enemy, and Gen’l Roberts’ brigade was to move to the left to the Bank Lick turnpike, on which at Latonia Springs, about three miles distant Gen’l Heath’s brigade of Confederate troops were encamped. It was a hot afternoon in September, the march was for several miles, and soon men began to drop out of line from heat and fatigue. One officer, Capt. Thos. A. Logan, was greatly prostrated by sun stroke. We placed him in the wagon and marched on. It was remarkable that the men of our regiment, merchants, clerks and those accustomed to indoor employment really stood the march better than country lads more used to exposure. We made the march without molestation, and encamped on the east side of the Bank Lick turnpike, right resting on the pike. It was a very exposed position. No rifle pits or protection for the men. A steep hillside, quite slippery, looking down

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6The role of Cincinnati's Negroes in the Siege is described in Peter Clark, *The Black Brigade of Cincinnati; Being a Report of its Labors and a Muster-Roll of its Members* (Cincinnati, 1864), 4–5.
Incoming troops converge on Fifth Street Market for a meal.

From Whitelaw Reid, *Ohio in the War* (1868), opposite p. 192
into a ravine, the other side of which was thickly wooded, while our camp ground was entirely bare. We were to support a battery of artillery on the height immediately above us. Gen'l Roberts was not pleased with the appearance of affairs. He sent out some experienced scouts under the leadership of his brother who had had much work of this kind on the frontier, and posted his pickets with good care. He then returned to headquarters in a fence corner, with two rails laid across the top to support the covering of blankets. When morning came the supply train had not arrived and the men had nothing to eat. I went to the city, saw Col. Robert W. Burnet, President of the Sanitary Commission, told him the state of affairs, and he sent out at once two wagon loads of provisions. The men had a late breakfast but the quality compensated for the delay. Soon our attention was attracted to the highway. The rebel sympathisers of Covington and Newport were marched out under guard to dig intrenchments. The chain of forts were to be connected by a line of rifle pits. They did not relish the work assigned them. It was bad enough for hands unused to toil to dig at all, but to throw up intrenchments against their friends was adding insult to injury. There was no help for it. It had to be done. Curses loud and deep expressed their anger, but the guards had been ordered to pay no attention to words, but to keep them at work. In passing along the line, one of our men asked permission to prick one of them with his bayonet. "He is so abusive. Flesh and blood cannot stand it. I will only give him an inch. It will do him so much good." "No, the order is positive. Pay no attention to words." The offender was Col. T. L. Jones, afterwards member of Congress from the Newport district. With his gloves on he was at work with his shovel, but expressed his views of the situation very emphatically. It was of no use. The work must be done, and soon a formidable line of rifle pits gave assurance of protection to our troops and materially changed the situation. The men were good marksmen, well drilled and now could resist the foe. In the evening the supply train came over. It was long after dark when all the arrangements were made, and tired out, I wrapped my blanket around me and laid down in a corner of the quartermaster's enclosure of barrels and boxes, and slept the sleep of the just. A drizzling rain in the morning awoke us, and I found I had thrown my blanket down on a heap of seed potatoes, which, however, had not disturbed my slumber. It is astonishing how refreshing and delightful it is to sleep in the open air with nothing but your blanket around you. For some time after our return it was difficult to sleep in the house. The oppression was very uncomfortable. Now the enemy began to make demonstrations.
In the good providence of God, when we were unprotected, no attempt was made, although there were several days when but little resistance could have been offered, but now things were very different. The Pea Ridge regiments had arrived. The evening they reached the City the Colonel commanding went to Gen. Lewis Wallace's headquarters at the Burnet House to report to him and ask for orders. Gen'l Wallace was almost exhausted. The whole of Ohio was coming down upon him. Trains constantly running were bringing in troops by thousands and tens of thousands. It was an easy matter to know what to do with them. The ladies had taken possession of the market houses, and kept tables well supplied to give the troops a meal as they arrived and as fast as possible they were sent over to the intrenchments. The Colonel reported and asked for orders. “Go to the Market House and get something to eat, and rest wherever you can find room,” and then Gen’l Wallace turned away to attend to something else. Provoked at his reception after the exertion made to arrive as speedily as possible, the Colonel turned away. “Right shoulder shift, right wheel, forward march.” Gen’l Wallace heard the familiar words of command. He sprang to the window. “What troops are those?” “Such and such regiment from Pea Ridge.” Then there was a reception and a jubilee. When they took their places in the line there was general rejoicing. All we had to do, was to do as they did, and all would be well. Seven times in one day we were drawn out in line of battle, expecting an attack. Sometimes it was laughable. One day the General's brother, the old scout, said to him, “In a few moments you will receive an order to form line of battle to resist an immediate attack.” I was out in front and saw a foraging party of the enemy come out. I watched them carefully until I saw them return, but a squad of Wolford Cavalry saw them also, and without delay they put spurs to their horses to convey the alarm to headquarters. Sure enough in a few minutes an aid-de-camp galloped up, his horse all covered with foam. “Form line of battle at once, General Roberts, the enemy are upon you.” “All right,” said the General, keeping his own better information to himself and soon the line of battle was formed. In half an hour the aid returned. “It was a false alarm. All is quiet now.” “All right,” again said the General, and the men were dismissed. Knowing all the circumstances, they enjoyed the episode. One day the old scout came in. “I do not wish to alarm you needlessly,” said he, “but yonder battery of artillery is trained directly upon your headquarters. The Captain has gone to the City. The Lieutenant is nervous, and it would not take much to blow you beyond the Southern Confederacy.” He was right. We could look into the muzzles of the guns. An orderly was
forthwith dispatched, and soon the guns were elevated, with proper range over our heads. It was a constant scene of excitement. Yet it was astonishing how cool and composed the men were. In the City all was rumor and turmoil. Every little while a story would come of an engagement, 1st Regiment cut to pieces, and so forth. But in camp the men were cheerful, even jolly, ready at a moment’s naming, but enjoying to the full the delights of a soldier’s life. The camp stories, the gossip, the ludicrous situations, the bracing air, the food seasoned with hunger sauce. Every day my father came out to see how we fared. His buggy and “Billy” the pony were well known to the men. He always had something for them, and generally the latest news. His confidential position with Gen’l Wallace gave him every information and without betraying confidence we knew what was going on. One day a movement of our camp gave him a drive of twenty miles to reach us and return. Billy never entirely recovered from its effects. One morning Captain Avery and Lieut. Goshorn summoned me to a council of war. “Company B is in a state of mutiny. They declare they will not go on dress parade again in citizens clothes with white blankets. If something is not done they will all be back in town by night.” “I will see what can be done,” I said. My father, brother and myself agreed to furnish the blouses for the men, 80 at $2.60 each, and we obtained them from Mr. L. C. Hopkins who had orders to fill, and was glad of an excuse for delay.

I took my brother’s horse “Dick” and went to the City, returning across the pontoon bridge at night, the horse narrowing watching every shadow, and repeatedly suggesting a cold bath in the Ohio. “Dick” survived the war many years and died honored and respected, aged nearly 30 years. I went first to Mr. John Shillito, told him what we had done and asked for blankets. He pointed to a pile of gray army blankets. “I will have 80 gotten out for you and you can have my wagon to take them over.” Then to Mr. Pollock Wilson for knapsacks and to May & Brothers for caps with equal success. In a short time the equipment was complete, at an expense of about eleven hundred dollars, all donated. That afternoon at dress parade, Company B appeared in good form and won merited applause for perfect drill and soldierlike appearance. On Sunday Archbishop Purcell and Hon. W. I. Groesbeck came over to address and encourage the men. Just then a performing elephant, escorted by a keeper, Corporal Seely, Company A, was making the rounds of the camp, and appeared at headquarters to do honor to our guests. The keeper stated that the elephant was well trained, and at the word of command the unwieldy animal knelt down, rose again, raised the right foot, then the left, and finally reared up on
his hind legs. The keeper was quite encouraged and said, "The elephant will now stand upon his head," but this interesting performance was indefinitely postponed in consequence of a portion of the elephant remarking in a stage whisper that "when he got from under the cover he would thrash that keeper." The elephant passed on, followed by an admiring escort, and the distinguished visitors, evidently believing that the boys were doing as well as could be expected under the circumstances, returned to the City.

Finally on Wednesday night word came that the long expected attack would be made at daylight next morning. Everything was in readiness. At three o'clock Thursday morning the long roll sounded and the entire army, now numbering eighty thousand men, was under arms and in line of battle. No attack was made. In the afternoon we were again ordered out in full assurance of an immediate attack. Rev. Dr. Thompson, Pastor of the Second Presbyterian Church, came out, as he said, "to see a battle." "You will probably soon be gratified, for the enemy are in yonder woods and we expect a shell at any moment. What is your duty?" "To see that those men have everything they need." "Dr., this is no place for you." Just at that moment as General Roberts was mounting his horse, an excited individual rushed up and said to him, "I want my son. He is not of age. His mother is nearly distracted. You have no right to keep him. I want him at once." "You cannot have him. I suppose my mother thinks as much of my brother and myself as your boy's mother can possibly think of him, and we are not defending our own homes but are aiding you." "It makes no difference. I want my son and must have him." Fearing the man's loud language and exciting gestures might at that critical moment have a bad effect on the men, Gen'l Roberts said, "Go take your son, and if you are both not off the ground in five minutes, I will send you to the guard house." He went for his son, and found him in the regimental line. The boy would not budge an inch. "I would be eternally disgraced if I left now. I will not go." The father left without him.

An aid remarked, "That surgeon of ours will stampede the regiment. He has improvised a hospital just in the rear and has all his knives and saws laid out ready for immediate use." He was wisely sent a little further off. No attack was made. The opportunity had passed. There had been days when an assault could have been made with success, but not now. Gen'l Heath from the roof of Mr. John W. Coleman's residence carefully inspected the line. That night the whole of Company A was ordered out for picket duty. We were in the most exposed part of the line. The enemy was drilling in front of our position. Company A was well drilled, armed with Colts
The night was cold and rainy. The men were much exposed. Knowing what their condition would be in the morning, I went to Mrs. Wallace, my mother-in-law, who resided in the neighborhood. I stated the circumstances and she made two large buckets of nice coffee, which we carried to the camp. I then went to the Brigade Quartermaster. A supply of underclothing had arrived the day before. In a few moments the lids were removed from some boxes, camp fires lighted, and when Company A returned from the picket line wet bedraggled and looking quite forlorn, good fires, a change of under garments, and a good breakfast with hot coffee with sugar and milk awaited them. It saved many of them from a spell of sickness and in an hour, Company A was bright and happy, ready for anything that might occur. That night I had to go to the City before the countersign was given out. I returned about midnight, and suddenly heard the click of a musket. "Who goes there?" "A friend." "Advance and give the countersign." "I am a friend but without the countersign. Take me to the officer of the guard."

It is unpleasant in the dark to hear the click of a trigger, to know that the musket is levelled at you, perhaps in the hands of a nervous or inexperienced man. But it was all right. He marched me to the officer of the guard who was an old friend, and all was experienced in a moment.

We made still another move to the left, to a beautiful location in the rear of Newport. But the trouble was really over. In the morning we heard the inspiring note of the famous campaigning song "John Brown's Body lies mouldering in the grave, But his soul is marching on." It was sung by the entire army of eighty thousand men. Nothing could be more inspiring or beautiful. Regiment after regiment caught up the strain, and joined in the grand chorus. It reverberated from hill and valley, now dying away, now coming back with increased volume and force, an occasion which comes but once in a lifetime, never to be forgotten.

Soon General Wallace with his staff rode up to headquarters. "Boys they have skidaddled. The danger is over. We will leave troops enough to man the forts. Tomorrow you can return to the City." Never were words more welcome. General Wallace was most heartily cheered, as he richly deserved to be. Now preparations were made for the return home. It was a triumphal march. No consul ever entered Rome with more honor and applause than were given to our improvised army. They had crossed the Ohio River, an undisciplined mass of brave men. After ten days incessant drill they returned in column of four, rifles at "right shoulder shift,"
with the easy swinging tread of veteran troops. When the van reached the Fifth Street Market space, now Government Square, where they were to be disbanded, the rear had not left the line of the fortifications. On the day that Kirby Smith retreated, 83,000 men answered to roll call in the intrenchments around Cincinnati. All Ohio was there. The next week all Indiana would have been there, and the next week all Illinois. It was a grand sight to see the army of “squirrel hunters” as they have passed into history, winding down from the Kentucky hills, crossing the pontoon bridge, reaching up until lost to view in the streets of the City. One day there were a disciplined army, the next they disappeared as if by magic, and the next day they reappeared, on farms, in factories, shops and stores, in all their accustomed avocations.

General Wallace has been criticized for his order placing Cincinnati under martial law, and suspending all business for ten days. But it was the salvation of the City and averted evils, as we have suggested, of unknown magnitude. He received the thanks of the City government, and the approbation of all loyal men.

Amid the many gallant acts of an heroic life, none redound more to his credit, nor show more sagacity and good judgment, crowned with the approval of success, than his defense of Cincinnati.

Cincinnati, January 23, 1891

Wm. Howard Neff

7Military records reveal that there were Indianans among the “Squirrel Hunters.”