

Helge Christopherson Ellingboe

Served with the Wisconsin 15th Volunteer Regiment when the Confederate blockade of the Mississippi was broken

Submitted by Jim Ellingboe

My great-grandfather Helge emigrated from Vang i Valdres at the age of 12 with his two brothers, two sisters, and their parents, Christopher Helgeson Ellingbøe and Berit Andersdotter Norland. They left the family farm (Nordigarden Ellingbøe) on April 14, 1852 and sailed from Bergen on the bark Juno on May 12th. A month later they arrived at the bustling port of New York. Continuing their long and difficult journey, they traveled to Manitowoc, Wisconsin, by way of the Erie Canal and the Great Lakes, settling first in Two Rivers, then Gibson, just west of Manitowoc.

Only nine years after Helge's immigration, Fort Sumter was taken and the Civil War had broken out. A group of prominent Norwegians met in Madison and recommended to Governor Randall that a Norwegian regiment be formed under the command of Colonel Hans C. Hegg. The original roster of Colonel Hegg's 15th Regiment Infantry included about 850 officers and enlisted men, mostly Norwegian. Altogether it is believed that about 3,000 Norwegians from Wisconsin served in the Union forces.

The following events are extracted from Helge's Civil War diary, written during his first term of service as an infantry private, supplemented by information from other sources. His short diary, written in Norwegian, provides a matter-of-fact description of the events and experiences that were probably typical for young men drawn into the conflict. At the age of 21, he enlisted on November 8, 1861, in Company F, 15th Regiment, Wisconsin Volunteers, commanded by Captain Charles Gustafson. Most of the company were Norwegians from

Manitowoc County. Because so many of the men were originally from Valdres, it was sometimes called the Valdres Company.



Helge C. Ellingboe (ca. 1865)

Helge was mustered in at Camp Randall in Madison on January 14, 1862. On February 28th he was paid \$48.50 in U.S. bills and gold.

The regiment departed from Madison by train at 10 o'clock on the morning of March 2nd and arrived in Chicago at 8 o'clock in the evening. They marched around the city in the rain and then left by train at midnight, bound for St. Louis. Helge wrote that the cold wind was almost unbearable. At the harbor in Alton they went aboard the steamer Alton where they remained overnight. The next day they continued to St. Louis and marched up into the city on dress parade. Another

steamer brought them to Bird's Point, Missouri. Here they were lodged in log cabins for about a week. On the 14th, the regiment traveled on the steamer Silver Wave to Columbia, where they transferred to the Rob Roy, which delivered them to a point above Island No. 10. There they boarded a larger ship, the G.W. Graham, on which they slept, but did their cooking on land.

To prevent Union ships from sailing further south, Confederate forces held fortified positions on Island No. 10 (located in a double bend of the Mississippi River at the borders of Missouri, Kentucky and Tennessee) and on bluffs east of the island. The 15th Regiment had become part of the Flotilla Brigade, a large operation to break the Confederate blockade of the Mississippi.

On March 15th the regiment's gunboat began to fire into the enemy's battery on Island No. 10. Although the Confederate forces returned fire, no damage was done. On the 30th, orders were received to prepare rations for one day. The soldiers walked for 12 miles and slept in a cornfield. The next morning at 4 o'clock they continued, marching four miles further, reaching the enemy's camp at 7 o'clock. By then the Union artillery had already driven out the enemy. Both the artillery and cavalry pursued the Confederate troops past Union City and set the city on fire. The infantry burned all the tents and other things left in the camp. They took 150 mules and 20 prisoners, as well as a wagon and everything they could carry, and then returned to Hickman, Kentucky, where they boarded the G.W. Graham and sailed down the Mississippi again.

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Helge Ellingboe

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Until the 6th of April the regiment camped on a large rebel farm, then went down to the point to do picket guard duty. That night, during a terrible thunderstorm, one of the Union's iron-clad gunboats, the Carondelet, ran the blockade and the Confederate forces began to open fire from Island No. 10. Helge wrote that they could hear cannon balls whistling past their ears. Because the gunboat was so close to the island, the Confederate cannons were aimed too high and overshot their target. This was the first breach in the blockade of the Mississippi.

On the 8th, at 3 o'clock in the morning, orders were received to take down the tents and make ready to take Island No. 10. When the Union soldiers arrived, they found that the enemy had fled and they were able to occupy the whole area without firing a shot. The cavalry brought in many secessionists as prisoners.

Company F set up tents and lodged on land until the 11th, when they joined Companies A and H to do watch duty on Island No. 10. Here, on April 12th, they buried Knud Syversen. He was the first from Company F to die since they left Camp Randall.

The weather turned nice again on April 13th and the Company was in good spirits. On the 14th they began to build the battery on Island No. 10. On the 17th it rained without stopping and no one worked. Another man in the company died.

On the night of Maundy Thursday, Helge was taken ill with mumps. The doctor said he had no medicine for this illness. Helge walked back

to his tent and didn't feel very sick until the night of Easter when he was overcome by typhoid fever. In May he was brought to the hospital. Many men were ill in the hospital and two from Company F died while Helge was there. Helge left the hospital on June 10th. He had been healthy for about three weeks, but was still so exhausted that he could hardly walk a mile. Just after Helge returned to Island No. 10 and had begun to eat a little, O Company was ordered to make ready for a march to Union City. Ten sick and malnourished men from Company F, including Helge, remained on the island with Company I to stand guard.

Helge was discharged for disability on August 19, 1862. Two years later, he reenlisted as a private in Company K of the 27th Regiment. From July through December 1864, Company K was at Little Rock, Arkansas. They were stationed at Mobile Point, Alabama in January and February of 1865, at McIntosh Bluff, Alabama, in March and April, and Clarksville, Texas in May and June. Company K was involved in the siege and capture of Mobile City, Alabama from March 27 to April 12, 1865, among many other actions. Helge was discharged at Clarksville on July 14, 1865. The diary did not cover his second period of service.

Six years later, at the age of 31, Helge married Ingeborg, age 21, daughter of Knudt Thompson Sannes (Sandness) and Anne Torgeirsdotter Strande, both from Østre Slidre. Ingeborg's family was on board the steamship Atlantic when it sank after a collision with the Ogdensburg on Lake Erie, August 20, 1852. Many emigrants drowned in this tragic accident, but Ingeborg's family survived. Her father served for a short time during the Civil War in Company H of the unassigned 22nd Regiment, stationed at Camp Randall.



Wedding Photo

Helge and Ingeborg had thirteen children, all born in Gibson, where they owned a farm. When Helge joined the Valdres Samband in 1908, ten of their children were still living. Their youngest child, Nona, died in 1996 at the age of 100. Throughout Helge's life he was plagued by chronic respiratory problems that began with his illness at Island No. 10. Ingeborg died of diabetes at the age of 58 in 1909 and Helge died of heart failure in 1913, at the age of 73.

Photos courtesy of Jim Ellingboe.

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