

University of Wisconsin Eau Claire

Department of History

**“Can I go dearest Mother?”:**  
The Experiences and Transitions of Isaac Lyman Taylor of the First  
Minnesota Volunteer Infantry

History 489 Research Seminar

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to look at the transition from civilian to soldier as well as explore the wartime experience of Isaac Lyman Taylor, an enlisted man of the First Minnesota Volunteer Infantry regiment. Additionally the paper will put his personal experience into a broader context of the American Civil War as a whole.

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## **Introduction and Historiography**

There is a folk legend that exists in Minnesota History; when president Lincoln addressed the United States congress and requested troops to fight for the American cause, Governor Ramsey of Minnesota immediately sent a message to the White house and promised the first 1,000 troops from Minnesota to the union cause. While many versions of this story exist, it is a perfect example of the strong patriotism that existed in Minnesota at that time. Minnesota was still a young state at the outbreak of the war, only about a decade into statehood and growing. Living on the western frontier has made the average Minnesotan a hardy and resourceful individual. Many were farmers, lumberjacks, trappers, and tradesmen eager to start and build something new. A great combining and any number of reasons can be attributed as to why the 1<sup>st</sup> Minnesota Volunteer infantry was a fine fighting unit, to say one was the ultimate cause would fail to bring justice many of the other causes.

The first purpose of this paper is to explore the transition of a mid-western civilian man into a soldier. We will explore three areas specifically, his experience of soldier life at Camp Stone at Edward's Ferry, his experience in battle, and finally his experience as a prisoner of war. The second purpose, by way of the first, is to conduct a historical biography, to help retell his story in order to better understand the American Civil War and what it meant to the individual who fought it. It is not the purpose of this paper to prove that in some way the 1<sup>st</sup> Minnesota was "the best" there was, or that it single-handedly saved the union cause. It was the collective effort of thousands of individuals that did their part that can be credited to union victory in the end. Isaac Lyman Taylor was neither famous or a hero in the conventional sense. What made him

special was both his rank and position in the union army and his educational background. Isaac Taylor was an educated man, a rarity for men his age in that point of time. As a result, he left behind a record of his military experience in diary and letter form, the former being the primary source of this paper. Many personal accounts that can be found on the American Civil War belonged to the educated elite, more often than not among the military officers.

Isaac Taylor was a school teacher in 1861 who enlisted in the 1<sup>st</sup> Minnesota Volunteer infantry at the outbreak of the American Civil War. Using a number of different resources including diaries, letters, secondary Biographies, and scholarly works on the history of the 1<sup>st</sup> Minnesota. This paper will be able to follow Isaac's trek across the eastern theater. The main characters surrounding this project will naturally be Isaac Taylor and his brother Patrick Henry Taylor who enlisted in the 1<sup>st</sup> Minnesota shortly before Isaac did. Both had left extensive materials as diaries and letters.

Isaac Taylor was an educated man for that time and worked as a school teacher in Illinois. Higher education in the Midwest was more of a rarity than it is today, and both brothers had a higher education and were teachers. Henry Taylor was a teacher in Morrison County, Minnesota. At the outbreak of the war, Henry Taylor enlisted in Company E of the 1<sup>st</sup>, displaying great excitement and patriotism. Inspired by his brother, Isaac traveled west and enlisted in the 1<sup>st</sup> along with his brother, eventually being lucky enough to be assigned into the same company as his brother. Throughout the war, Isaac, along with his brother, participated in some of the most bloody and significant battles in the Civil War. A few examples are: Bull Run, Antietam, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, a number of smaller skirmishes, and finally at Gettysburg where the

First Minnesota faced its most crucial hour. The experiences of both brothers were well documented in the brother's diaries until July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1863 where Isaac was killed on the second day of the battle of Gettysburg. Henry survived the war and went on to leave documents that describe his look at the aftermath of the war.

Part of the purpose of this research is to examine the war experience of a regular enlisted man, and not an officer or N.C.O. Regular enlisted men often did not have the same education or life opportunities as the officers did, so deep reflections and diaries are a rarity among the core of the troops. Officers and N.C.O.'s (non-commissioned officers) tended to be of a more educated stock, coming from politicians, businessmen, and even some college professors like Colonel Chamberlain of the 20<sup>th</sup> Maine. Isaac Taylor, along with his brother, was exceptional as being both educated men and enlisted men. While it cannot be said that it is the case throughout the civil war that all enlisted men had no education, and that the Taylor brothers were the only ones, but it was a little less common.

1<sup>st</sup> Minnesota history is not a new thing in the History field, in fact several books have been written concerning its war endeavors ranging from collective experiences, memoirs written by ex-soldiers, and historical reports. The documents written and left behind by the Taylor brothers were used in many works and articles, however nothing seems to have been done that specifically describes their war experiences. Richard Moe, author of the Last Full Measure: Life and Death of the First Minnesota Volunteers, was one of the few that I have found that extensively went into the war experiences of the two brothers. Even so, Moe only used parts of their experiences to express a greater whole of the 1<sup>st</sup> Minnesota History.

Specifically, the paper focuses on the diary left behind by Isaac Taylor. A published copy of the diary is currently housed in the archives of the Minnesota Historical Society, along with several other documents including letters written to his sister Alma, with the original diary housed in the Morrison County Historical Society. Another work that could help out with my research would be the diary of Henry Taylor, unfortunately this diary is housed in the Missouri Historical Society and may be a lot more difficult to acquire without extensive travel. However, for this paper, the Isaac Taylor diary should suffice for now. Official records and papers for the 1<sup>st</sup> are also housed in the MHS archives. These papers will allow us to place the experience of Isaac into context with what is going on with the rest of the 1<sup>st</sup> Minnesota. Records, such as enlisted papers and rosters, will allow me to track the movements of the 1<sup>st</sup> and what is going on in an official sense.

Secondary sources will include the books as mentioned before concerning the 1<sup>st</sup> Minnesota itself as the memoirs, or collective experiences. What the secondary sources will accomplish is to establish a better picture of what the experience of the civil war is all about, and where Isaac fits into that. Ultimately, it is also the goal of this project to fit Isaac's experience in with the rest of the civil war soldier's wartime experience. Several secondary sources can be found in the UWEC library, a couple specifically concerning the Minnesota efforts in the civil war. EX: No More a Gallant Deed, by Wright, and Minnesota in the Civil War, by Kenneth Carly.

A big problem in research might be the habit of some people to glorify their subjects and begin to interpret things out of context. Some of the books follow that problem in that they praise the endeavors of the first to the point where they may have

“single handedly” saved the war effort. While it is not really a new thing, indeed many amateur historians and authors have a bad tendency to generalize and have a pretty unrealistic analysis of what happened. It is important to remember to have an objective analysis when looking at the research in a historical and analytical context; otherwise we may fall into the same trap as other authors. It is also important in my aspiration to become a good Historical writer.

The importance of my project resides in both a personal and historical manner. In a historical manner, it is a subject that has not been widely done in terms of looking at Isaac Taylor’s personal experience; it is something I hope to add to the historical arena with my research. On a personal matter, the first holds a special spot for me when I was a reenactor for that particular unit. 1<sup>st</sup> Minnesota history was a requirement for the members of the unit in order to portray them accurately. As historians, we need to bring to life the words from sources like the diaries of Isaac Taylor and his letters. As time goes by, and the people that lived through these times pass away, they begin to turn into mere numbers. As historians, it is important to remember these people, as a true testimonial to what they lived through and experienced.

The author has high hopes for this project in that it will be both significant in a historical text, and that it will contribute to the knowledge about the Enlisted man’s experience in the American Civil War. With specific sources, and the knowledge from several secondary sources, I hope to paint an accurate and lively picture of the experiences of Isaac Taylor.

The personal account of Isaac Taylor will help to give us a better understanding into one of Minnesota’s beloved military unit’s history. As we follow through the

timeline of Isaac's experience we hope to get a unique point of view of the War from a Midwestern perspective, from the common soldier's experience rather than that of an officer.

## The Man and The Unit

### *Isaac Lyman Taylor*

Isaac's story begins not in Minnesota, or in any other part of the Midwest, but in Massachusetts. Isaac was born on January 23, 1837 in Franklin County, Massachusetts. He was the fourth child of Jonathan Hastings Taylor and Alvira Johnson. Isaac spent most of his young life in Lawrence County, New York. In 1850, Isaac's family moved west to Fulton County Illinois, where his father worked on building a new farm, Isaac was sixteen years old.<sup>1</sup> His closest relationship, which is seen in his diary entries, was with his younger brother Patrick Henry Taylor. Separated by only a year, the brothers were very close, pursuing similar educational opportunities, careers in education as teachers, and finally serving side by side in the war.<sup>2</sup>

Isaac was described as being a compassionate and outgoing individual. He actively participated in the community as well as the church, part of the local choir, and worked on his father's farm. Education was held in great importance for Isaac's family. When he was old enough, at age eighteen, Isaac went further west into Iowa to enroll in Burlington University in Iowa. He entered an advanced course in science as part of the "Gentleman's program". After completing his courses at the university, he returned to Fulton county Illinois and became a teacher in the township of Lee.<sup>3</sup>

As Isaac was heading home to Lee, Patrick was continuing his studies at Burlington University. Patrick also graduated from Burlington University, but instead of

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<sup>1</sup> It is at this point unclear what Jonathon Taylor did before moving out to Illinois, but his ability to take care and provide for a family of 14, as well as provide for continuing educational opportunities for his children seem to imply wealth a little beyond your average American farming family.

<sup>2</sup> Campaigning with the First Minnesota, biographical information edited by Hazel Wolf.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

treading back home, Patrick traveled north to Minnesota. Relatives of the Taylor's were living in Minnesota at the time. Aunt Elizabeth and her husband taught Ojibwa Indians at a Missionary. Another, Aunt Lucy Taylor Hamilton, managed a boarding house for Missionary teachers. In Belle Prairie of Morrison County Minnesota, Jonathon Taylor, the older brother of Isaac and Patrick, farmed alongside a cousin from Massachusetts. When Patrick moved north to Morrison County at the age of 21 he already had a place for him with his relatives.<sup>4</sup>

Two years later, the American Civil War broke out. Across the nation, on both sides, patriotic young men were feeling the pull to join the cause and the Taylor brothers were no different. By the time Patrick decided to enlist he was told that positions in the Regiment had been filled. Disappointed by the thought he would not get to go, a new opportunity came in a traveling recruiter. He immediately enlisted in the 1<sup>st</sup> Minnesota's Company E, and informed his family by letter on May 31, 1861.<sup>5</sup>

Isaac was no less envious of his brother's opportunity. A few months later, he packed up and traveled to Morrison County to take over Patrick's teaching job in Belle Prairie. Another opportunity came to Isaac little more than eight weeks later when a recruitment opening came. He enlisted as well in Company E on August 21, 1861.<sup>6</sup> The battle of Bull Run had occurred one month earlier on July 21<sup>st</sup>; both Patrick and the rest of the first Minnesota had already had their first taste of real combat. Isaac finally met up

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<sup>4</sup> *Minnesota History*, Biographical information of Isaac Taylor, 1944, Vol. 25

<sup>5</sup> *Minnesota History*, Biographical information of Isaac Taylor, 1944, Vol. 25

<sup>6</sup> Isaac was never mustered in or noted to be enlisted according to record. While his name was written down as part of roll on the registry, it is blank under enlistment and mustering.

with the rest of the First Minnesota on September 12<sup>th</sup>, 1861. Just in time for campaigning to wind down for the season. Isaac's war diary begins on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1862.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Minnesota's Regiment***

Minnesota's first jump into military swing found it was lacking in almost everything. Firstly was the decision as where they were going to train 760 recruits. In the end, it was decided to reclaim Fort Snelling for military purposes. Fort Snelling's short history began as the furthest military outpost of the United States following the acquisition of the Northwest Territories. Used mostly as a trading/military outpost for passing fur traders and Indian relations, it out lived it's usefulness and went into decline as U.S. borders began to push further westward. When war broke out and the decision to commit troops to the union, the Fort was renovated and reinstated as a training center for Minnesota's regiments.

With one troubling question out of the way other problems began to come into full bloom. The number one troubling issue for the state was how to pay for financing the regiment. Government finances were stretched thin as it is; with an annual total budget of only about \$100,000<sup>8</sup> the economy and population were simply not strong enough to support any kind of vast expense. Much of the initial expenses were supported by private donations from wealthy individuals or county fundraisers.<sup>9</sup>

Along with the problems of expenses naturally comes to the problem of the regiment being under equipped. Uniforms were ordered, but with the issue of payment,

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<sup>7</sup> *Minnesota History*, Biographical information of Isaac Taylor, 1944, Vol. 25

<sup>8</sup> Moe, Richard; *The Last Full Measure*.

<sup>9</sup> Moe, Richard; *The Last Full Measure*.

the order could not be fulfilled until well after the first battle of Bull Run<sup>10</sup>. Except for company E, which was supplied with suits from the county<sup>11</sup>, the rest of the regiment had to settle for clothes from another supplier. The state purchased for the regiment black pants and black felt slouch hats and a blanket for every man. Shirts were initially supplied to every soldier upon arrival to the Fort, or were brought from home.

Weapons were issued to every man including one rifle and one socket bayonet. Side-arms were not issued but not uncommon for the foot soldier. Weight meant a lot for the man who had to carry his life on his back. Trains were always accessible or even taking one to the proper destination of a battlefield, marching on foot was the primary mode of transportation. Marching being what it was, it was not uncommon for the foot soldiers to shed equipment they deemed unnecessary: packs, extra clothes, food rations. Side-arms required ammo, so we would have to add the weight of both the side arm and the extra ammo for it.<sup>12</sup> What that meant is that side-arms often went the way of extra equipment one does not need.

The best the military had to offer in 1861 was the .58 caliber Springfield rifle, a muzzle weapon with a rifled barrel that fired the .57 caliber minne` ball. Developed in France, the ball was created with a hollow skirt and placed into the barrel. When the powder exploded, the skirt of the round would expand and catch in the rifling to spin the round making it a more accurate shot. Unfortunately, there were only enough to supply three companies of the regiment. The rest were equipped by the lesser .69 caliber rifled musket<sup>13</sup>. Actually, the first Minnesota faired better than many other regiments that

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<sup>10</sup> Moe, Richard; *The Last Full Measure*.

<sup>11</sup> Moe, Richard; *The Last Full Measure*.

<sup>12</sup> Wiley, *The Life of Billy Yank*

<sup>13</sup> Moe, Richard; *The Last Full Measure*.

fought in the war in ways of weapons. There are many accounts of regiments on both the north and the south that were still using old smooth bore muskets and flintlocks.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The greatest weapon development prior to the mine ball, which incorporated the modern bullet design for the first time, was the percussion cap. Flintlock design called for a small portion of gunpowder to be ignited outside of the barrel to ignite the powder on the inside. Unfortunately, this made it almost impossible to fire the weapon in wet conditions. The percussion cap used a small amount of fulminate of mercury in a tin cap that when struck, caused a spark to ignite the powder inside. It eliminated the need to carry a powder horn when caps could be carried in a small case. As well as being a convenient carrying item, it also allowed the weapon to be fired in wet and rainy conditions, giving a significant edge over units still using outdated flintlocks.

## Camp Stone

The step in Isaac's transition, heavy introduction in daily soldier's life at Camp Stone. Isaac's diary begins during his time at Camp stone, the winter encampment for the army of the pattomic. Isaac, along with the rest of the men, spent a seemingly long and boring winter. With little to do or even discuss, most topics in Isaac's diary covered the varying state of the weather. It was warmer during the day and caused whatever snow fall or precipitation that may have occurred the night before or in the morning to melt and make the ground extremely muddy. During the night it would become cold and went below freezing point, hardening the ground. Muddy conditions it seemed, determined whether or not there would be drill in the mornings or afternoons. Aside from drill that occurred twice a day, the other official duties were picket duty, guard duty, and dress parade.<sup>15</sup>

Guard duty was a simple squad based action. Broken down, one man or two would be responsible for protecting a specific area. Should something happen, the guard would raise the alarm for the rest of the guard detail, a group of reserve troops in the guard station that would provide support wherever it was needed. Picket duty was handled by Company, approximately one hundred men, spread in a sentry line as the first defense against enemy advance. The picket line acted more of a feeler for the rest of the army; it had little defensive capability and was hardly able to repel an enemy advance of a serious sort. Should an attack come, the sentry line would retreat in an orderly fashion back to the main line and alert the rest of the army of the presence of enemy troop

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<sup>15</sup> Isaac Taylor Diary

movement. Finally, dress parade handled the affairs, orders, and news during military life.<sup>16</sup>

Much of Isaac's spare time was spent out walking, reading, and eventually a new favorite for him became playing chess. Education being a part of his background, Isaac was always willing to learn and experience something new. Some of his accounts describe an attitude almost as if he was on vacation, but never was this feeling overshadowed by the reason for him being there in the first place. Sightseeing gave Isaac a chance to get out and take in his surroundings, sometimes not so legally. A regular stroll through camp was a regular way for Isaac to put aside his boredom. On other occasions when given a pass, Isaac would travel into a nearby village or township and spend the day seeing the town, occasionally enjoying a meal at a local tavern.<sup>17</sup>

Other units did not conduct themselves in a nearly so constructive way however. The first Minnesota was a part of Dana's Brigade along with the second New York, the thirty fourth New York, and the fifteenth Massachusetts regiments, the fifteenth being assigned on February 25, 1862<sup>18</sup>. Isaac and the rest of the first Minnesota did not hold the other units in their brigade with as much esteem, especially the units from New York. The Fifteenth Massachusetts was still relatively new to the brigade and the members of the first were more simply unaccustomed to their neighbors just yet. On the other hand, the regiments from New York were extremely disliked by the first. Their military record was mediocre at best, more often than not breaking and running, or advancing with

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<sup>16</sup> Isaac Taylor diary

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

<sup>18</sup> Official Reports of The War with the Rebellion

confusion and reluctance<sup>19</sup>. If it was not bad enough that they performed poorly on the field, they appeared to be the brigade's troublemakers during the winter at Camp Stone.

When available, whiskey would be distributed among the troops more for morale than much other value. However, given the opportunity, some soldiers began sneaking extra rations or were prone to public intoxication among the camp. Isaac noted many times during the winter of the arrest of many New York men for intoxication. On the first of February, twelve members of the second New York were arrested and detained in the First Minnesota's guardhouse due to the circulation of beer within the camp.<sup>20</sup> Five days later, Isaac estimated from reports between sixty and seventy members of the second New York had deserted within the frame of two weeks<sup>21</sup>. Some were caught by guards on duty or the pickets and brought back to the guardhouses, many it seemed however escaped the immediate lines of the brigade. The final nail in the coffin for the reputation of the New York regiment was an occurrence prior to the moving out of the army from camp. Before moving out, one full company mutinied against orders and refused to march. The mutiny came about due to a disagreement over seniority in the marching order. The entire company was taken under arrest, and the captain was court-martialed.<sup>22</sup>

Command politics were one of the hot topics among the enlisted men, more so than the politics going on in Washington. The retirement of General Winfield Scott left a demand for a new Military commander for the Union forces, an event that left a power vacuum for a competent military commander throughout the war.<sup>23</sup> By the time Isaac made it to the front and joined up with the rest of the First Minnesota, the union army

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<sup>19</sup> *Official Reports of The War with the Rebellion*

<sup>20</sup> Isaac Taylor Diary

<sup>21</sup> Isaac Taylor Diary

<sup>22</sup> Isaac Taylor Diary

<sup>23</sup> Jones, *Civil War Command and Strategy*

was under the command of General George B. McClellan. It seems natural that the enlisted man was more concerned with who was leading them into battle over who was calling the shots in Washington; a competent commander would be the deciding factor for who would live and who would die.

Ironically, McClellan was not a competent commander tactically, often time losing ground due to over-speculation of the enemy forces. What ever lack of confidence McClellan displayed on the field, he made up for in Military organization. There truly was no other General that could organize and train the union army in the same way McClellan did. He was favored by the men as he was able to maintain supplies. With winter quickly approaching, steady supply was a comfort for the men. Rare was there a time when Isaac complained for lack of anything during his winter encampment.<sup>24</sup>

Military politics take a more personal turn when taking place a little closer to home. Two regimental commanders from the First Minnesota, Gorman and Dana, were promoted to General and many of the men felt proud of their former commanders. “He [Dana] will make a good one” Isaac had stated in his Diary when Dana was promoted to Brigadier General.<sup>25</sup> Other officer movements did not go over so well with the men. Isaac made note of an event while Company E was out on duty that upon return discovered that their lieutenant had been promoted and in his stead was replaced by a lieutenant from Company C. Isaac recalls: “Great commotion and tall swearing in Company E. The boys think it an *imposition* to take an officer from another Company to fill a vacancy in this”.<sup>26</sup> A little later that day the transfer was explained to the men of Company E, the emotions were split between some being satisfied with the explanation and some not. Isaac in the

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<sup>24</sup> Jones, *Civil War Command and Strategy*

<sup>25</sup> Isaac Taylor Diary

<sup>26</sup> Isaac Taylor Diary

end let it pass, feeling that it was useless worrying about something that he had no control over.<sup>27</sup>

Present company aside, the living conditions of the camp could have been worse. As stated previously, the camp was well supplied thanks to the organization of General McClellan. Shelters were made from a short stack of wood logs and dug earth. Other units extended to build larger structures called block houses. The fifteenth Massachusetts was noted by Isaac for having built such a structure; he drew a diagram in his diary of its simple floor plan and dimensions. It consisted of five blocked rooms, four surrounding and one center. Each block section was about twenty feet long and twenty feet wide, with small rifle openings that would allow men to fire out from the inside.<sup>28</sup>

With the changing of the weather, expectations for moving out were also on the rise. Marching a large army was no easy task, after order was determined; there was placement with everything taking hours. On one occasion, late at night the order to march was given towards a picket line. After scrambling around, moving placement, starting and stopping on arrival they were told they were no longer needed and returned to camp. Never before had Isaac displayed so much contempt for his officers as he did that day. On February 24, 1862, the first Minnesota and the rest of the Brigade marched towards Adamstown to catch a train that would take them to Harper's Ferry.<sup>29</sup>

Harper's Ferry is a town located in West Virginia that was a crucial point of interest for both armies throughout the war. Its importance stemmed from its armory and arms production capability. However, after being occupied, taken over, and retaken about a dozen times throughout the war, the town was left in near disaster. Isaac wrote in his

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<sup>27</sup> Isaac Taylor Diary

<sup>28</sup> Isaac Taylor Diary

<sup>29</sup> Isaac Taylor Diary

diary: “If Harper’s Ferry is a fair sample of what secession has done for Virginia, God help her! For she is past help from any *human* source”.<sup>30</sup> Although secession cannot be blamed for the state of Harper’s Ferry, both sides took their toll on the town. Upon arrival, the entire town was taken over by enlisted men, some moving into deserted housing. The First Minnesota was placed in a building that was originally designed for state officials and employees.<sup>31</sup>

Harper’s Ferry was a short stay of a week and soon the brigade was out again. Excitement grew again with a new Commander for the First, Col. Alfred Sully. He was an older man in comparison to the rest of the First Minnesota’s age demographic of eighteen to twenty-five. One significant distinction that differed Sully from the other officers was his military service. Sully was a graduate from West point and served in active duty during the Mexican war, and in Minnesota at Fort Ridgley.<sup>32</sup> The men took a respect for him quickly, admiring him and his ability to command. Isaac Taylor describes his excitement in his entry: “No we are ready for a fight, having an officer in whom we can have confidence”.<sup>33</sup>

It was here the stage was set, and beginning soon would be General McClellan’s march into The Peninsular campaign. Isaac along with the rest of the men had little understanding of their next objective or their destination other than from their orders to march or anything they heard in the grapevine.

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<sup>30</sup> Isaac Taylor Diary

<sup>31</sup> Isaac Taylor Diary

<sup>32</sup> Moe, Richard; *The Last Full Measure*.

<sup>33</sup> Isaac Taylor Diary

## The Peninsular Campaign

On a personal note, the campaign got off to a rocky start with Isaac. His brother Patrick had taken ill with a fever at the beginning of the march. On March 28, Isaac took his brother to the hospital, where Patrick would remain until he had recovered from his illness. Isaac described the hospital as being relatively neat and clean, and was convince that his brother was in good care. Isaac and the rest of the first, however, moved on without Patrick, and loaded up onto a small fleet of river boats that would take them south to the tip of the peninsular. The boats were small and crowded according to Isaac a few being ferry boats, others were small barges with tugs, the men were packed on tighter than cattle.<sup>34</sup>

Trains were still a relatively new innovation in the world. Much of the American infrastructure was already making some great strides in converting tracks of land to railroad usage. However, the waterways were still the primary mode of mass transportation in the U.S.. Key points on the original Anaconda plan were to hold the water ways in order to disrupt all traffic and supplies going into the south. The larger navy boats used for the open sea were far too big to take up river. As a result thousands of smaller river boats like the tugs and ferry's transporting Isaac and the rest of the union army, were confiscated and converted to military use as either transports or patrol boats.<sup>35</sup> Some accounts along the Mississippi told of Ferry boats with mounted cannon on them. Both sides used the water ways to their advantage during the war.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Isaac Taylor Diary

<sup>35</sup> Jones, *Civil War Command and Strategy*

<sup>36</sup> Jones, *Civil War Command and Strategy*

The ragtag navy carrying Isaac and thousands of troops soon headed down river towards Fort Monroe. It was from here that General McClellan began to launch the Peninsular Campaign. The Campaign was the first major attack towards the confederate capitol of Richmond, Virginia. With the Confederate army entrenched up north, it was the hope of McClellan that the movement south would bypass the main army. However, caution proved to get the best of McClellan and he lost valuable time, time taken by Confederate forces to create an effective barrier between the army of the Potomac and Richmond.

Isaac was relieved to be on the move again. The reality of battle would soon become a shadow over much of his everyday life.

## Prisoner Of War

On June 29<sup>th</sup>, the regiment was ordered to Savage Station as part of the Union army's retreat. As part of the Union army's rear guard, the First Minnesota was constantly harassed by confederate shelling and skirmish fire. However, due to some spare amount of luck, they were spared from main attacks and skirmish fire that was directed toward neighboring regiments. The Roads were a mess, cluttered by abandoned equipment, stragglers, and pockets of wounded and sick men barely able to make the trip. At one in the afternoon, the regiment and the rest of the rearguard had reached Savage Station.<sup>37</sup>

Chaos ensued without delay, beginning with the destruction of railroad equipment as well as the bridge itself that was spanning the river. as Lieutenant Lochren described in his report:

“The rest of the army had passed on, and a large amount of material at the railroad bridge was being destroyed. When the bridge, with engines and trains upon it, was blown up, an immense body of dense smoke arose assuming perfectly symmetrical, and continually changing forms and colors, beautiful and grand to view, in whatever form it took, like the changed in a kaleidoscope, and observed by all for several minutes before it was dissipated.”(Lochren, pg. 22)

Heavy artillery, mounted on rail cars, was brought up by the confederate army and began firing on the union positions. Followed quickly by an attack composed of infantry and artillery, the confederate army advanced on Savage Station. The union rearguard immediately assembled and counter attacked the assault. The defense was a success, driving off the confederate line.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Lochren, *Narrative of the First Regiment*, pg 22.

<sup>38</sup> General Burn's Report, Official Records of The War with the Rebellion series I vol II part II, pg 91

The first Minnesota organized on the left of the Union army and unfortunately took a heavy price. Isaac remembers the first forming on “the right of the Williamsburg road in an open field, [we] move across it towards the enemy under the fire of his artillery” (I. Taylor, June 29<sup>th</sup>, 1862). According to Lochren, the first took the heaviest part of the assault. The extreme left flank of the union line, Lochren described the confederate army as moving into a flanking position around the First and began to attack from different angles. With a flanking attack upon them, as well as concentrated canister fire from confederate artillery, the First took 48 killed and wounded during the attack. Near sundown, a Vermont Brigade had arrived to reinforce the flank, and together they pushed back the rest of the confederate line. The fighting over, the union army continued their retreat.<sup>39</sup>

It was quickly realized that care for the wounded was going to be a problem. The railroads being destroyed and no craft capable of carrying them, it was decided that the wounded would be gathered together into a field hospital and, with volunteers staying behind to care for them, were left behind.<sup>40</sup> Isaac personally felt the weight of the day’s casualties. His brother Patrick Henry had been wounded as well as his cousin Ed Taylor during the fighting. From his descriptions, Isaac seemed to imply that Patrick Henry was not seriously wounded since movement and capable judgment was still apparent on Patrick’s part.<sup>41</sup> Both brothers elected to stay behind and care for the wounded. As the union army beat a hasty withdraw, there was little to do but make the wounded as

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid

<sup>40</sup> Ibid

<sup>41</sup> Whether Patrick Henry was capable of making a retreat with the rest of the army or not is not made clear in Isaac’s writings; but perhaps may have been a reason as to why the brothers volunteered to remain and care for the wounded. A reluctance to leave behind comrade and relative Ed Taylor may have also contributed to their reasons, but neither was stated in Isaac’s diary. Of course general human compassion and desire to help friends may have also lead them to remain as well.

comfortable as can be and anxiously wait the impending confederate advance. Around midnight, Ed Taylor died of his wounds.<sup>42</sup>

On the morning of June 30<sup>th</sup>, the confederate army advanced on the small field hospital. The wounded was cared for almost immediately by confederate surgeons. A hospital was set up in a nearby barn, where sixty soldiers were quickly brought and cared for by medical staff and volunteers. Isaac was relieved to find that they were not guarded as prisoners, and were treated kindly by the CSA troops. For two weeks, the brothers cared for the wounded, trading northern money for southern money. Often times the brothers would leave to find newspapers and food for the wounded, traveling into the country for eggs or milk. Patrick Henry was placed in charge of their small branch hospital by the Confederate authorities. According to Isaac, he played the roll well. Both brothers worked hard and made every attempt to find enough supplies for them. Trade was often the main resource to get much needed supplies and money was pooled among the men in order to buy them. On July 12<sup>th</sup>, the brothers received each, a certificate that recognized their status as volunteer prisoners.<sup>43</sup>

The significance of the certificate comes from a newly set agreement between the U.S. and the CSA detailing the procedures of prisoner exchange. Isaac's certificate personally labeled them voluntary, as they chose to remain to take care of the prisoners. This did not entitle them to any kind of special treatment; however it did seem to bump up their chances for parole. On the evening of July 16<sup>th</sup>, the wounded were taken to new facilities in Richmond. Isaac and his group were moved into an old Tobacco factory that had recently been renovaded into a hospital/prison. The conditions were deplorable,

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<sup>42</sup> Isaac Taylor Diary, June 29<sup>th</sup>, June 30<sup>th</sup>.

<sup>43</sup> Isaac Taylor's Diary.

according to Isaac, the hospital was dirty, no supplies were available, and food was difficult to attain. On the first day food was not given until about one in the afternoon, and then it was barely a quarter of a loaf of bread and one pint of rice soup. Isaac gives us no indication that the treatment they received was on the basis of cruelty. Many accounts of confederate prisons, the most popular being Andersonville, describe a much more difficult and horrible experience than the one Isaac had lived through. It might be more accurate to say that the confederate attitude toward the prisoners was more of neglect. Food was the greatest problem next to the lack of doctors.<sup>44</sup>

It was at this point that money begins to run low for Isaac and his companions. On July 16<sup>th</sup>, he notably sold his watch to confederate soldiers in order to get money for food. Isaac also heard of rumors that prisoner exchange would begin soon for the wounded in the worst shape. On July 22<sup>nd</sup>, five hundred of the worst wounded prisoners were sent back north, not including Isaac or his brother. The shipping continues over the next few days, on the 25<sup>th</sup> both brothers were relieved from caring for the wounded. Now they simply had themselves to look after.<sup>45</sup>

No sooner had they been relieved from their medical duties, the Taylor brothers were moved to new facilities on Belle Isle on the James River. If their first prison was bad, Belle Isle turned out to be worse. Belle Isle was not a building but an encampment, and no tents were available for the prisoners. Blankets were issued and many of the men, including Isaac and his brother, turned to creating a half shelter with them. Provisions were scarce, at one point Isaac noted that a few men and he bought a barrel of flour for twenty dollars, and then proceeded to sell pancakes for twenty five cents each. Finally,

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid

<sup>45</sup> Ibid

Isaac was forced to sell his overcoat and rubber blanket for one dollar from a sentry. Forbidden newspapers, Isaac had taken to reading the bible and playing chess. On September 14<sup>th</sup>, Isaac and his brother were relieved from Belle Isle and taken by mail ship down river to the exchange point. From there, the brothers would once again return to their regiment and to the front lines.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Isaac Taylor diary

## Conclusion

The last entry of Isaac's diary was written by Patrick, making note to whoever reads the diary that the writer had been killed on July 2, 1863. The sacrifice of Isaac was one so many have made in defense of this country. If we learn anything from Isaac's account we can learn that there was nothing remarkable, no secret genius, in his writing. He did not contain a secret that could unravel some mystery of insight into the whole affair that was the Civil War.

Isaac's transition is difficult to pin down. He begins as a quiet, thoughtful man and continues to be so throughout his experiences with the first. At what point can we say he truly became a soldier? Earl J. Hess made it a point to talk about in his book that the transformation of a soldier, in many ways, was a "source of pride, awe, and satisfaction" (The Union Soldier in Battle Pg. 157). But it was not just the becoming of a soldier, but the ability to come back which made it possible for men to feel this way. We will never know how Isaac would have done upon returning from the war, but throughout his experience he always maintained an identity of what he once was before the war. Instead of losing himself into the insanity that is war, he continued to feed his personality drives of knowledge, striving constantly to better himself or keeping up with family and relationships he had before the war.

The three parts in his development really show a temperament for the whole situation on Isaac's part. One could not say he did well, because how can we measure that? Nor does it show he was more of a soldier than others who went raiding for trinkets in the night, or looted the bodies of the dead. Throughout his diary he displays his own way for mischief, but always kept a good head on his shoulders. He did do a lot of

growing, taking on new kinds of roles in leadership and human compassion despite everything that was going on.

What does Isaac's experience tell us in the end? Do the last few remaining years of his life give some kind of proof as to the right way on how to be a soldier? Let us consider these questions in the realm of another: Why are there rules in warfare? Many argue the absurdity in the idea of war as having rules, and indeed many today argue that warfare has no rules. Vietnam was a war where the rules were thrown out, and many brave soldiers never came back the same. Perhaps the rules were meant in some naive way to protect our own humanity. It was never about how to conduct warfare, it was about coming home. According to Hess, soldiers protected that home ideal, that trace of their old identity that they hung on to like some kind of train ticket home. Isaac was an example of what every soldier had to deal with during the war. He dealt with the harsh reality of battle, the reality of soldier life, what it means to be a prisoner, and the ever present realization that that moment may be your last on earth. Had Isaac known he was going to die in the charge at Gettysburg would he still have gone through with it? It is the author's feeling that he already knew. Research shows that most soldiers or just people in general, when exposed to the reality of death on a daily basis more easily accept one's own mortality. It was probably the case that most, if not all of the men of the First who charged, knew that they were not coming back from that fight and Isaac was no exception.

The Midwestern soldier was a success in their own right. The greatest success stories have a group mentality, meaning that the ones that fought as a whole unit had a greater success rate than the ones that did not. Pioneer upbringing required one to work

for their family and community, not simply for themselves. Taking this mentality into the field only strengthened the unity of the regiment. This, coupled with their patriotic fighting spirit, made many units, on both sides of the war, a force to be reckoned with.

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