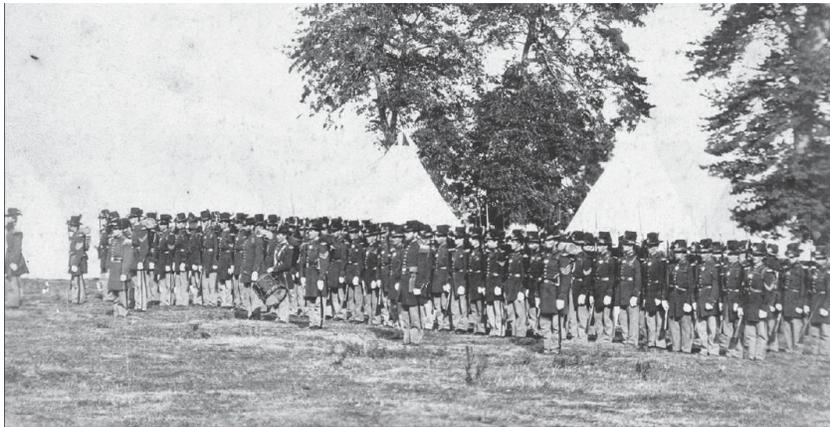




Erie County goes to war - Locals answered President Lincoln's call to arms

BY RANDY KOCH



The Hoffman Battalion at Johnson's Island Prison during the Civil War.
Provided photo



Provided photo
The monument of Lt. Horace Harper Bill stands in Oakland Cemetery in Perkins Township.

SANDUSKY

Lightning flashed and thunder exploded across South Carolina's Charleston Harbor in the pre-dawn darkness of April 12, 1861. Within hours, the roar reverberated throughout the land. The war had begun.

Since December 1860, Southerners and Northerners had been strategically positioning themselves in a dangerous chess game, anticipating their opponent's next move. Ultimately, rebel aggression shoved the Union into the conflict it so long avoided. Decades of placating the slave states could not stave off the war.

Rather than immediately replying with his meager standing army, President Abraham Lincoln called for 75,000 90-day volunteers, consisting of 94 regiments. He asked for 21 regiments from the Union's eight remaining slave-holding states. Kentucky Gov. Magoffin's emphatic reply: "Kentucky will furnish no troops for the wicked purpose of

subduing her sister Southern States.” Gov. Harris proclaimed that Tennessee would “not furnish a single man for purpose of coercion, but 50,000, if necessary, for the defense of our rights and those of our Southern brethren.”

Northern states, however, replied enthusiastically. The normally reserved Ohio Gov. William Dennison proudly answered the request for 13 regiments. “We will furnish the largest number you will receive,” Dennison reported to Lincoln. “Great rejoicing here over your proclamation.” Telegraph wires hummed with Ohio Adjutant Gen. Carrington’s appeal for men.

Sandusky’s volunteer militia brigadier general, Horace Bill, received a call for 75 local men. Hiram DePuy immediately commenced forming a company, as did Louis Traub from his German Jäger militia. Elsewhere in Erie County, John Sprague gathered men from Huron and surrounding townships. Volunteers eagerly raced to enlist, fearing the grand adventure would culminate after several days of glorious fighting. They wanted to arrive in time to share in the fame.

On April 18, 1861, Sandusky community leaders announced an evening gathering at the courthouse to consider the country’s impending danger. Attracted by the Jäger band’s martial music — and engulfed with injections of patriotism — a swelling crowd forced the gathering to adjourn outside. Cheers erupted during rousing speeches from Oran Follett and Joseph Root, further inspiring men to defend the flag. With company rosters filled, troops prepared for their April 24 departure.

The previous morning, in front of W. W. Wetherell’s East Washington Street home, companies led by Capt. Traub and Capt. DePuy received the flags carefully sewn by Sandusky’s ladies. During a lengthy oration, F. W. Cogswell referenced “the stars and stripes, emblem of our country’s pride, dishonored and trailed in the dust.” Late that afternoon, from the east portico of Eleutheros Cooke’s home on the northwest corner of Columbus Avenue and Washington Row, Mayor Pierson addressed the crowd during the sword presentation. The city unsheathed glistening blades for DePuy and Traub. Huron’s Capt. Sprague received like recognition from Sandusky’s citizens.

The following morning, the recruits formed at 5 a.m. for roll call. At 7 a.m. clanging firehouse bells beckoned the townspeople to the rail station to bid farewell to their departing warriors. At 9 a.m., a cannon belched forth the signal for the men, in full uniform, to parade past friends and family before boarding the train at the Water Street depot for their journey to Cleveland’s Camp Taylor. Exactly two months later, these same units faced the choice of returning home without facing battle or enlisting for a three-year stint.

A significant number chose to return to civilian life, already tired and disgruntled with the army way. Those who remained mustered in for three years, starting June 26. DePuy’s men joined the 8th Ohio, while Sprague’s joined the 7th Ohio. Traub’s Jägers gravitated to the ranks of the 107th, although some landed with the 8th or the 128th.

None of those exuberant men responding to Lincoln’s call that April could have fathomed the four-year ordeal ahead, which not only preserved the Union but also abolished slavery.

In 1861 excited troops clad in blue marched off to the rhythmic blare of “Hail Columbia,” and the pulsating beat of “Yankee Doodle.” Within months these memories faded, replaced with more somber songs.

The melancholy melody of “When This Cruel War Is Over” and the heart wrenching lyrics of “The Vacant Chair” floated through military camps and civilian homes alike.