

ALEXANDER BIRD, 154th NEW YORK VOLUNTEERS

by Mark H. Dunkelman and Michael J. Winey

In the course of doing research for a regimental history, (The Hardtack Regiment: An Illustrated History of the 154th New York State Infantry Volunteers, East Brunswick, N. J., Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1981), the authors especially sought, along with diaries, letters and other first hand accounts, portraits of members of the regiment. (Our search continues. We invite M I readers who possess such images to please contact us.) Thus far we have located and copied photographs of 91 individual members of the 154th New York, including 49 wartime, in uniform portraits. The total is less than ten percent of the number of men who served in the regiment, <sup>although</sup> ~~and~~ a majority of them were undoubtedly photographed at some point in their lives. So each new find is a unique, satisfying way of "meeting" one of those soldiers.

Three wartime portraits of one member of the 154th are known to have survived. In them one can see the maturation of a rather typical young officer who saw some hard service in the Union Army.

Alexander Bird was born July 21, 1842 in Cranesville, Montgomery County, New York. When he was six, his family moved west to Ellicottville, in Cattaraugus County. <sup>There</sup> ~~Here~~ Alex passed his childhood, and on March 31, 1861, just before the outbreak of the war, he was married to Melissa Ada Hyde. After President Lincoln's call for 300,000 three years volunteers, in the summer of 1862, Alex decided to leave his young wife, his blacksmithing and farming, to join the army. He enrolled at Ellicottville on August 6, and on September 24 he was mustered in as Corporal, Co. G, 154th New York, at the regimental

rendezvous at Jamestown. He stood five feet, six inches tall, with a light complexion, blue eyes and auburn hair. Alex's brother, James W. Bird, was in the same company, and another brother, William, was also in the army.

Alex was with the regiment when it reached Washington in October, 1862. The 154th moved to Fairfax Court House and joined the 1st Brigade, 2nd Division, 11th Corps of the Army of the Potomac. In November the regiment participated in a desultory movement to Thoroughfare Gap and back, and in December they arrived in Falmouth soon after the Battle of Fredericksburg. On Christmas Day, Richard McCadden, another *member of* Co. G man from Ellicottville, noted in a letter, "our Co. reports 40 men for duty Jim & Alec Bird are well feeling fine." In January, 1863, the 154th endured the Mud March and went into winter quarters. On February 18, McCadden noted, "I believe Alic & Jim & my self are as tough as any in the Regt." Alex was promoted to Sergeant, Co. G on March 1.

In mid-April, 1863, the 154th New York and its brigade moved up the Rappahannock River to Kelly's Ford. Here they were the first to cross the river in Hooker's movement which resulted in the Battle of Chancellorsville. On May 2 the 154th suffered severely in its first fight when routed by "Stonewall" Jackson's famous flank attack. Alex and Jim Bird safely survived Chancellorsville, but in their old camp after the retreat, ten days after the battle, Alex was stricken with typhoid fever. He spent a month in hospitals at the front, and from June 11-27 was at Stanton General Hospital, where he was treated with whiskey and a full diet. Alex rejoined his regiment in July after it had been further decimated in the first day's fight at Gettysburg.

Shortly after the 154th New York re-entered Virginia they reached New Baltimore. Here, early on the morning of July 24, Sergeant Alex Bird roused five enlisted men from their tents and reported at regimental headquarters. There they and three officers were detailed on recruiting service. This interlude in Alex's life as a soldier took him to Elmira, N. Y. via rail, where he and the detail remained for about nine months. They did duty as recruiters, guarding conscripts and delivering the drafted men to the front, and frequently had troubles with bounty jumpers. During his stay at Barracks No. 3 of the Elmira camp, Alex was promoted to Sergeant Major of the regiment. He also managed to reunite with Melissa and have their portrait taken.

By April, 1864, when Alex and the detail rejoined the 154th, the regiment had been transferred to the West and participated in the Chattanooga and Knoxville campaigns. He had been missed by his comrades, because as Dick McCadden put it, "he was always full of fun." On May 8, 1864, the 154th fought its first battle of the Atlanta Campaign. They were ordered to assault Dug Gap, on Rocky Face Ridge in northern Georgia. Alex and the rest of the regiment bravely stormed the palisaded heights but were repulsed. During the retreat down the mountainside, a boulder rolled by the Confederates from the crest crashed into Alex, forcing his right knee out of joint and bruising his leg. His injury was serious and resulted in synovitis, but Bird refused to go to the hospital when ordered to and stayed at the front. Riding in an ambulance and hobbling with a crutch, he was present with the regiment as it went on to battles at Resaca, New Hope Church, Lost Mountain and Peach Tree Creek. Atlanta was besieged and fell, and the 154th, now a part of the 2nd Brigade, 2nd Division, 20th Corps, settled down

outside of the city to await General Sherman's next move. On October 15, 1864, Sergeant Horace Smith noted in his diary, "Guy Waterman, Dell Ames, Alex Bird and myself all got our Commission this evening." Two days later, Alex was mustered in as First Lieutenant of Co. F. At the end of the month a new recruit from Ellicottville, Levi Bryant, mentioned in a letter, "Ellick is not coming home this fall he has been promoted to Lutenant & got on the Sholder Straps so you can guess how Big he is." At some point between his promotion at Atlanta and the close of the war, the proud new lieutenant, resplendent in his shoulder straps, 20th Corps badge and sash, posed for a tintype.

Lieutenant Bird was with the regiment during the March to the Sea, the siege and occupation of Savannah, and the Carolinas Campaign. On April 26, 1865, darkness had fallen when Bird went tearing up and down the company streets yelling madly, "Johnston has surrendered!" The war was over, and after marching to Washington and in the Grand Review, Alex Bird and the 154th New York were mustered out on June 11 near Bladensburg, Maryland. From <sup>there</sup> here the regiment proceeded to Elmira, where it camped from June 14-23 before disbanding. At Elmira, Lieutenant Bird and other officers had cartes-de-visite taken by a local photographer.

The climactic experience of his life having passed, Alex Bird returned to the quiet village of Ellicottville. For twelve years he blacksmithed and then ran a grocery and meat market. He and Melissa had five children. Memories of the war were abundant for Alex- he was a member of Post 232 of the Grand Army of the Republic, and he was lame for life from his Rocky Face Ridge injury. He became increasingly disabled and confined to his house, but in 1880 he managed to tour his old

battlefields. He returned with a walking stick he fashioned from a hickory stick from Rocky Face and a grape shot from Resaca. In 1884, by special orders from the War Department, the dates of his muster in as sergeant major and first lieutenant were changed to July 1, 1863 and August 7, 1864, respectively. Melissa died in 1914 and two years later Alex married Ellen Bird. An operation by an eye specialist failed to halt Bird's increasing blindness. Finally, aged, crippled and blind, the veteran moved to the Soldiers Home in Bath, New York. Lieutenant Bird died there on January 11, 1927.

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### Illustrations

#### Captions and Credits

1. Sergeant Major Alexander Bird with his wife Melissa. Albumen photograph, 6 3/8" x 9", with corners cut to fit an oval frame. Photographer unknown, taken between September, 1863 and April, 1864. Courtesy of Donald K. Ryberg, Jr.
2. Bird as First Lieutenant. Sixth-plate tintype, photographer and date unknown. Courtesy of Donald K. Ryberg, Jr.
3. Carte-de-visite by Moulton and Larken, Photographers, Water Street, Elmira, New York. Taken in June, 1865. Courtesy of William C. Welch.









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