



Major General Edward R. S. Canby
(CDV Courtesy Perry Frohne)

On June 6, 1864, Major General Edward R. S. Canby authorized the 4th Wisconsin Cavalry's 1st Lieutenant Isaac N. Earl to "organize a Corps of volunteer mounted citizen scouts" for service in the division. Earl was to recruit only "reliable men" that were "specially fitted for this kind of service." "They will be paid," Canby further stipulated... "at rates from 40 to \$60 per month according to the value of their services, and one ration each. They will be organized into squads and their services accepted on the special condition that they will be held subject to strict military discipline, and all of the rules and articles of war. Written engagements to the effect will be entered into with each man. Commanders of squads will be allowed to increase pay in proportion to the importance of their commands. In cases where extra danger is incurred in the line of duty or specially valuable service is performed, extra compensation may be expected. If you know of any soldiers that are fitted for this

Canby's Special Scouts

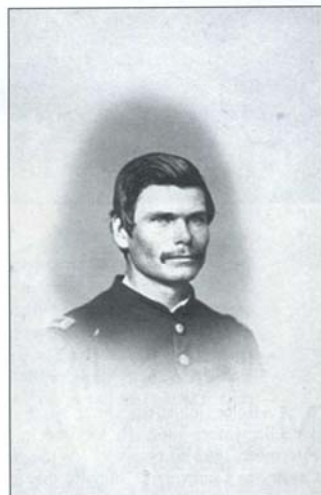
Each of them when fully armed was a small walking arsenal...

by Michael J. Martin

duty, they are ordered to report to you at Natchez, Miss. when furlough will be granted them with the understanding that they are not to draw any pay from their company while employed in this duty."¹

Though officially formed by Canby, the scouts were the brainchild of Major General Nathaniel Banks. Following his return from the disastrous Red River Campaign, Banks had directed Lieutenant Earl to enlist a full company of men, preferably from his own regiment, whose "fitness" as spies and scouts he (Earl) had tested. When Canby relieved Banks and assumed command of the newly formed Military Division of West Mississippi, he inherited the fledgling scouts, which were subsequently organized into a "corps" led by Earl.²

Banks' selection of Lieutenant Earl as the scouts' commander was based upon the latter's numerous demonstrations of resourcefulness. In addition to his miraculous escape and trek to free-



1st Lieutenant Isaac N. Earl, Company D, 4th Wisconsin Cavalry, and the intrepid leader of "Canby's Special Scouts." Also known as "Earl's Scouts," Isaac led the elite band of cavalymen until his mortal wounding at Fayette, Mississippi on November 29, 1864. (Carte de Visite courtesy of the Hughes Family Collection via author Michael Martin)

dom from the Rebel prison at Cahaba, Alabama, and another equally daring escape from the Confederate garrison at Port Hudson, Louisiana. Earl had also proven himself a most effective scout having "obtained more information and captured more prisoners than all the officers of his regiment combined." A 4th Wisconsin Cavalry trooper who had ridden under Earl's command before the scouts were formed recalled "the quickness with which he decided what to do on several occasions. [This] convinced me that he had that qualification, at least as a scout... I was well pleased to be with him."³

Earl developed the aptitude and instincts necessary for an army scout early in life. Born in what would eventually become Adams County, Wisconsin, and orphaned at the age of 11, Isaac Newton Earl and his two brothers, Joseph and William, were raised by uncles. The three brothers grew to manhood in the sparsely populated wilderness of north central Wisconsin and received little schooling. "Their winters," noted former Earl's Scout Newton Culver, "were spent in the lumber camps and their summers were passed driving and rafting logs on the Wisconsin River. Thus they grew up unendowed with the knowledge derived from books but were grounded in that of woodcraft."⁴

All three Earls joined the Federal Army at the Civil War's outset. William was the first to volunteer enlisting in Captain Joseph Bailey's Company D, 4th Wisconsin Infantry (redesignated the 4th Wisconsin Cavalry in September of 1863), on June 2,



Nelson Porter, Company G, 4th Wisconsin Cavalry. During his tenure as a scout, Porter served as Lieutenant Earl's clerk. (*Carte de Visite* courtesy of the Hughes Family Collection via author Michael Martin)

1861. Isaac followed William and enlisted in Company D three weeks later. Joseph joined the 7th Wisconsin Infantry's Company C on August 10, 1861, and was transferred soon afterwards to Battery B, 4th U.S. Artillery. Like Isaac, neither William nor Joseph would survive the war.⁵

Lieutenant Earl's call for potential scouts yielded over 100 hopeful applicants "only 40 of whom were accepted." Though Newton Culver claimed that all but one of the scouts were from the 4th Wisconsin Cavalry, this was an exaggeration. At least four of the scouts were citizens with varied military experience. Two other scouts were from the 2nd Wisconsin Cavalry. Tri-monthly reports submitted by Earl to General Canby reveal that there were eight colored individuals that

occasionally served with the scouts as well.⁶

Selection of each scout was based on Earl's prior association and familiarity with the individual. As a result, a majority of the scouts came from Earl's own regiment the 4th Wisconsin Cavalry. The command typically numbered between 36 and 48 individuals and included seven non-commissioned officers all of whom had served in the 4th Wisconsin. Company D's Albert James and Lewis Hatch were the first sergeant and commissary sergeant, respectively, while Company G's Edward Harris and Byron Kenyon served as 2nd and 3rd sergeants. The scouts' 1st, 2nd and 3rd corporals were, respectively, Company C's Newton Culver, Company G's Charles Fenalson and Company I's Miller Graham.⁷

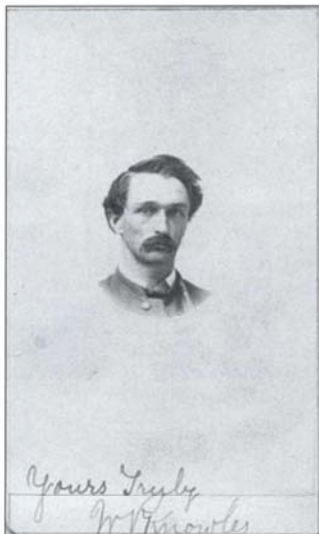
During the period of the unit's existence from June 1864 to June 1865, Sergeant Newton Culver recalled that the men "were habitually employed as scouts and frequently spies [and] nearly all of them had visited Rebel camps and posts in disguise or in Rebel uniforms." These activities were performed in accordance with a directive that was issued to Earl by General Canby on July 15, 1864:

Your operations will not be limited to any particular section of the country, but at all times you will assist the general operations of the army by deceiving the enemy, intercepting their couriers, carrying off detached parties, breaking up his mail and communications, &c. You will endeavor to give all possible information of the country as regards food for men and horses, securing guides, sending spies,

reconnoitering fords, passages, defiles, and positions; gain all possible information with regard to position and number of the enemy, their relative amount of infantry, cavalry, and artillery, the strength of their fortifications, caliber of their guns, position of their magazines and storehouses, strength and position of their guards and picket-lines, preparations to stop fires, &c.

In addition to reconnaissance, Earl and his scouts were responsible for "seizing supplies" that had passed "beyond the line of pickets of U.S. forces" and holding them "subject to the decision from these headquarters." They were also authorized to confiscate and turn over to the Treasury agents "all property which you have good reasons for supposing belongs to the Government of the so-called Confederate States."⁸

Service of this nature required stealth, secrecy, cunning and daring, attributes that Earl and his men possessed in abundance. When information furnished by his scouts was of sufficient importance, "it was," Newton Culver remembered, "acted upon by him [Earl] with his body of uniformed men." Earl and his scouts knew their business and quickly developed a reputation as individuals that were not to be trifled with. Often working alone and frequently behind enemy lines, the men were keenly aware of the risks and danger they faced and armed themselves accordingly. Sergeant Culver described a fully armed scout as a "small walking arsenal carrying a Spencer carbine, two Remington revolvers... a saber, and... a pocket revolver in addi-



1st Lieutenant (later Captain) Warren Knowles, Company G, 4th Wisconsin Cavalry. Knowles was given command of Earl's Scouts after Lieutenant Earl's death on November 29, 1864. (Carte de Visite courtesy of the Hughes Family Collection via author Michael Martin)

tion." Earl purposely kept the number of men in his command small. "He would rather have a small body of men upon whom he could depend," he once confided to Newton Culver, "than a larger number whose qualifications he did not know." Earl also felt that a small command allowed him to move quickly, gather intelligence and capture small parties of the enemy without being detected.⁹

While under Earl's command, the scouts, who were based in Natchez operated primarily in a rectangular area of Mississippi that roughly extended west from Port Gibson to St. Joseph, south to Fairview, east to Knoxville and north to Fayette. Though confronted daily by the Mississippi River and its swamps and backwaters,

Earl and his scouts easily traversed these waterways on the pocket steamers, *Ida May* and *Colonel Cowles*. The mobility these vessels provided played a major role in the success of Earl's operations as they enabled the intrepid lieutenant and his scouts to appear when and where they were least expected.¹⁰

Between September and November of 1864, Earl and his scouts skirmished with small parties of Confederate cavalry on several occasions, captured numerous Confederate mails, one of which provided the first "hint" of Major General Sterling Price's raid into Missouri and took over 30 prisoners. The scouts also seized several wagon-load's of cotton, wool, hats, knives and even cigars all of which were bound for Rebel troops east of the Mississippi River and countless numbers of horses and mules. With the aid of his steamer, the *Colonel Cowles*, Earl and the scouts found time in early November to make a lengthy reconnaissance up the Mississippi River to the mouth of the White River. After proceeding as far west as Dewitt, Arkansas, Earl and the scouts returned to Natchez where the lieutenant provided Canby with remarkably accurate intelligence regarding the numbers of Confederate troops at Alexandria and Shreveport, Louisiana and Camden, Arkansas. "I learned this," Earl later wrote, "from a Confederate officer who mistook me for one of their own officers on account of my uniform."¹¹

Earl's greatest accomplishment as leader of the scouts, however, occurred on October 8th, when he and his men captured a Confederate ambulance and its

five occupants near St. Joseph, Mississippi. Among the prisoners taken were the Chief of the Confederate War Department's Secret Service, Major H.F. Springer and the Chief Quartermaster of the Trans-Mississippi Department, Major Pendleton. A search of the ambulance, which the scouts learned was on its way to Richmond, Virginia, revealed six bushels of valuable mail, nearly one million dollars of Confederate money, and all the Federal regimental and garrison flags that had been captured west of the Mississippi River by the Confederates over the past two years. The cache of flags numbered 14 standards and included those lost during the Red River Campaign.¹²

On November 25, 1864, General Canby sent a request for Earl's promotion to the rank of major, by brevet, for "gallant, meritorious and valuable services to Major General Henry Halleck." Though the request was approved, Earl would never receive his gold embroidered major's oak leaves. Late on the evening of November 29th, he and a small party of scouts were ambushed as they rode through Fayette, Mississippi. Earl was mortally wounded by a fatal shot from a trooper, James Smith, who was a member of Lieutenant Buckley Bacon Paddock's scouts. Paddock and his scouts were part of Brigadier General Wirt Adams' command and had recently been stationed in Fayette just prior to Earl's arrival. After capturing Earl, Paddock had the wounded lieutenant taken to Union Church 35 miles distant where he died the following evening.¹³

Earl's death did not end the

scouts' service. On December 5, 1864, Major General Canby assigned the 4th Wisconsin Cavalry's Lieutenant Warren P. Knowles to take over command of the "special scouting party." Knowles would lead the scouts until their official disbandment at New Orleans on June 8, 1865.¹⁴ ●

References

- 1) *Official Records of the War of the Rebellion* 34, Pt. IV, 243 (hereafter cited as OR)
- 2) Culver, N. Isaac N. Earl, *A Noted Scout in the Department of the Gulf*. Proceedings of the 64th Annual Meeting of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, October 19, 1916, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, pg. 318-319 (hereafter cited as Earl)
- 3) *Ibid*, 311-312.
- 4) *Ibid*.
- 5) *Ibid*.
- 6) *Ibid*, 319.
- 7) *Ibid*, 319, 338.
- 8) Culver, Newton. *Diary/Papers*. Wisconsin Historical Society, Call No. Micro74 (hereafter cited as Culver *Diary/Papers*); Earl, 320; OR 41, Pt. II, 196-97.
- 9) Earl, 319, 338.
- 10) Culver *Diary/Papers*.
- 11) *Ibid*; Earl, 328-329; OR 41, Pt. III, 264.
- 12) Culver *Diary/Papers*; Earl, 334; OR 39, Pt. I, 829.
- 13) OR 41, Pt. IV, 755-756; OR 45, Pt. 1, 1234; OR 41, Pt. IV, 756-757, 810; Culver *Diary/Papers*.
- 14) OR 41, Pt. IV, 766-767; Culver *Diary/Papers*.

About The Author

Michael J. Martin is the author of a forthcoming regimental history of the 4th Wisconsin Cavalry. The book is being published by Savas Beatie and is scheduled for a June 1, 2006 release. Mr. Martin's great-great grandfather, Charles B. Comey, served in Company A, 5th New Hampshire Infantry and was wounded at Gettysburg on July 2, 1863.



A post-war (1898) image believed to be Charles Baker, a member of Earl's Scouts and Company I, 4th Wisconsin Cavalry. Baker participated in the scouts' first assignment, which was the clandestine evaluation of the strength of the Federal picket lines surrounding Natchez, Mississippi. After landing at the city attired in "citizens' clothes" on June 15, 1864, Baker and the scouts "passed around among the people and quietly reconnoitered our own picket lines which we found to be very open...." Below is a close-up of a ribbon, inscribed "Canby's Special Scouts." (*Author's collection*)