

American Indians in Confederate Territory

By RONALD S. CODDINGTON

On the morning of June 18, 1864, Pvt. Payson Wolf trudged through the streets of Petersburg, Va., with other battered and bloodied Union prisoners of war. The captives were herded into an old tobacco barn with hundreds of other bluecoats to await their fate in the hands of Confederate military authorities.

Only hours earlier, Wolf had come out on the wrong end of a rare nighttime assault, which put him and his comrades in an advanced position near the formidable defenses of the Cockade City. They had been attacked by veteran North Carolina troops and compelled to surrender after a brief and brutal fight.



*Payson Wolf of the 1st Michigan Sharpshooters, circa 1863-1865
Credit Burton Historical Collection of the Detroit Public Library*

The prisoners were quickly divested of their muskets; one company of Tar Heels jumped at the opportunity to trade their worn weapons for the captured guns. They soon noticed that the wooden musket stocks had been ornately carved with fish, snakes, turtles and other animals – perhaps their first clue that their captives were no ordinary Union soldiers.



*Company K is seen in May 1864, after seeing heavy battle in Virginia during the Civil War.
Photo from Library of Congress*

Wolf and his comrades served in all-Indian Company K, a unit of the otherwise white First Michigan Sharpshooters regiment. Recruited a year earlier from northern Michigan, they hailed from the Odawa, Chippewa and Potawatomi tribes.

Wolf was an Odawa. His father was Nayan Mi-In-Gun (“Wolf”), a gray-eyed, yellow-haired chief who inherited his looks from a white grandmother. Wolf’s mother, Kin-Ne-Quay, had the blood of a long line of chieftains coursing through her veins, though her grandmother was a French captive.

Mi-In-Gun and Kin-Ne-Quay named their only son Payson, or “I leave this thing behind.” Wolf might have followed the path of his forefathers. But the arrival of a Vermont-born missionary named George Nelson Smith and his family in 1849 brought change.

Smith heeded what he saw as God's clarion call to enlighten Native Americans, and taught absolute equality between the races. Yet his beliefs were sorely challenged when Wolf asked him for the hand of his eldest daughter, Mary Jane. Smith knew that a refusal to consent to the union would destroy his influence with the Indians, and end his life's work.

Smith gave his blessing, and Wolf and Mary Jane wed in 1851, when he was 19 and she was 16. They settled into a modest existence as farmers and started a family.

Then the war came, and with it Wolf's enrollment in Company K. The motivations that prompted him to join the Union Army are not precisely known. Raymond J. Herek, in his regimental history "These Men Have Seen Hard Service," explained, "Many of the Indians joined because they believed the South was out to enslave all of them. The young warriors were going to fight for their own freedom, their homes, and their lands, where the graves of their families were located." Similar to the race-based hierarchy found in African-American organizations, white officers commanded almost the entire company.

"The Indians were drilled and disciplined, in a way just like the other companies of the regiment," recalled Pvt. Charles D. Bibbins of Company E in a postwar letter, which also revealed an underlying and all-too-common bias against native peoples. "These Indians made fairly good soldiers, but could not be trusted with any special duty on account of their limited knowledge of English. They never associated with the other soldiers, always keeping strictly to themselves from the time they joined the regiment until they were mustered out."

Wolf and Company K were assigned with the rest of the Michiganders to the Ninth Corps of the Army of the Potomac in early 1864. They arrived in time to participate in Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant's huge spring campaign against Gen. Robert E. Lee and his Army of Northern Virginia.

The advance began on May 4. The Indians and the rest of their regiment proved their mettle over the next month in almost constant fighting that included the battles of The Wilderness, Spotsylvania and Cold Harbor. One officer observed that the men of Company K, while on the skirmish line, camouflaged themselves by rubbing dirt or mud on their blue uniforms – a practice that was soon adopted by the rest of the regiment.

By early June the Army of the Potomac had made serious gains against Lee's Confederates, who were dug in behind breastworks. Grant acted with characteristic aggressiveness. He ordered the army across the James River to capture the vital communications and supply hub of Petersburg, and then move against Richmond from the south. A coordinated movement by the Union Army of the James, commanded by Maj. Gen. Benjamin Butler, would strike lightly defended Petersburg from the east. The Michigan sharpshooters and other units in the Ninth Corps participated in the eastern attacks.

The assault on Petersburg began on June 14 and continued over the next four days. But the Confederates managed to reinforce their lines before the federals could mass enough firepower to break through, and the momentum stalled. Union forces finally scored a breakthrough before dawn on June 17 after a division commanded by Brig. Gen. Robert Potter captured a mile of enemy lines along a salient near a local farmhouse. But supporting attacks intended to exploit Potter's gains were not launched until the early afternoon, and they were uncoordinated and ineffective. Failures here allowed the Confederates to rally and reform behind the house.

At 6 p.m., a new Union attack was launched against the reformed Confederate line, and the Michigan sharpshooters participated. Positioned on the far right flank, they charged with their comrades and pushed back the enemy. The firing ended after sunset with Union forces occupying an advantageous position.

Wolf and Company K set up a defensive perimeter along with the rest of the regiment. They had a quick bite to eat and prepared to snatch a few hours of rest before the fighting resumed the next day.

But at 10 p.m., about 500 North Carolinians launched a surprise attack against the 200-strong Michigan unit. The firing was so close that uniforms were singed with gunpowder blasts. The sharpshooters managed to hold the line and captured about 80 rebels. Still, the fight took a heavy toll in casualties. About 100 sharpshooters, including Wolf, were left to maintain the position. Then the North Carolinians launched a new attack and overwhelmed the sharpshooters on the front, left flank and rear. The Michiganders were forced to surrender.

Wolf and 14 other Indians in Company K numbered among the prisoners who arrived in Petersburg with other captured Union soldiers. They were held there for three days, and then loaded onto trains bound for prisoner of war camps.

Grant meanwhile settled in for what would be a long and costly siege.



Detail of a view of Andersonville, or Camp Sumter, as it appeared on August 1, 1864, was drawn from memory by Pvt. Thomas O'Dea of the 16th Maine Infantry, circa 1885 Credit Library of Congress

Company K and other members of the sharpshooters were sent to Georgia and imprisoned in the hell that was Andersonville. Private Bibbins, who had been captured about a week earlier at Cold Harbor, was also there. He recalled an incident between Company K and the notorious Andersonville Raiders, a group of rogue Union captives who preyed upon their fellow prisoners. The Indians, Bibbins recalled, possessed watches, chains, rings and earrings. "They came into Andersonville with plenty of these trinkets," he recalled, "and the famous 'raiders,' who ruled Andersonville at that time, proceeded to relieve them of their jewelry the second night after their arrival, but the Indians, back to back in a bunch, cut and slashed the 'raiders' until they were obliged to quit the fight, with two killed and several wounded. They were not bothered after that."

Wolf had his own recollection of the horrors of Andersonville. According to his father-in-law, George Smith, "He says they suffered terribly in prison, going sometimes 2 to 3 days and a number of times 4 days without eating at all. They were robbed of their blankets and overcoats & lived and slept in the open weather."

Smith continued, "He says that the men got so weak they could not keep their rations down and would vomit beans as soon as swallowed," and added, "Sometimes the boiled rice would be alive with full grown maggots."

Wolf's health declined during the summer months and autumn of 1864. His captain, James S. DeLand, remembered, "He was attacked with diarrhea first and then with scurvy, his gums swelled, a part of his teeth fell out, his legs & arms swelled to a monstrous size, his muscles contracted badly so that it was difficult to move at all." One of his fingers was infected with gangrene.

In December 1864, after five months in Andersonville and another month at Camp Oglethorpe in Millen, Ga., Wolf was released and sent to the North. Union authorities gave him a 30-day furlough and sent him to Michigan. "He returned home a half killed victim of 'our dear Southern brethren's' worse than Savage Cruelty," wrote one friend who saw him after he arrived.

Wolf was one of the lucky ones. Of the 15 Indians from Company K imprisoned in Andersonville, seven died there.

Wolf was out of commission for months. He finally returned to Company K in May 1865. While he was away, the surviving Michigan sharpshooters became the first regiment to occupy Petersburg after Confederates evacuated the city on April 3, 1865.

The sharpshooters mustered out of the army in July 1865. Wolf returned to Michigan and rejoined his family, which grew to include 13 children. Soon after the birth of their last child, Mary Jane divorced Wolf, citing his bad habits acquired in the war. He did not remarry, and lived until about age 67. He died in 1900.