

The Bear Republic Heads East: Californians in the Eastern Theatre 1862-65

By *Brendan Harris*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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The Civil War is considered one of the defining eras in American History. The country that was created ninety years earlier nearly saw itself splintered apart due to different ideological and political ideals on states' rights and slavery. The first attempt at creating a political compromise to the slave issue was the Missouri Compromise of 1820. The goal of the compromise was simple, create a geographic dividing line between free territory to the North and slave territory to the South.¹ This first attempt at unifying the nation over a national problem kept the peace until the Mexican-American War of 1846.

The expansion of American-controlled land, however, created new problems for the country. The territories acquired would need to be added as states to the Union. The Missouri Compromise of 1820 would dictate how free and slave territories were organized. Since California was debated over as a free or slave territory in such close proximity to the Civil War, many felt the need to contribute in any way they could. The Californians that would eventually go east to fight were eager to do so to prove they would protect the Union. The California effort in the Civil War is written often as a footnote in the historical scholarship of the Civil War. This reflects both the timing and role that the state played during the war, but while the state may not have contributed a large number of troops to the war, California was a contributor to the Union victory.

Once California was secured from Mexico, the natural resources of

the area became apparent with the discovery of gold in Coloma, California. The nugget that was found in January 1848 initially triggered a mass migration from the rest of the territory.² News of the discovery eventually reached the rest of the United States. With this news, migration frenzy started towards California with people hoping to strike it rich.³ This migration brought settlers to the territory from the North and South. By late 1848, Southerners that came west to look for gold also brought their slaves with them.⁴ This would be the first time that Californians would have to deal with the issue of slavery and set the table for how Californians dealt with slavery twelve years later when the Civil War started in the eastern part of the country.


Some of the original settlers of California believed that since California was settled by Mexico and slavery outlawed in 1829, then California should be a free territory.⁵ This began a chain of events that would be felt across the country to the nation's capital.

Southern slave owners across the country believed that they had equal rights to settle territories as they saw fit, but the abolitionist movement in California was also strong. Because the Missouri Compromise did not address the situation in western territories, a new compromise was proposed by Senator Henry Clay to diffuse the tension over slavery. The compromise proposed stated it was up to individual territories to determine if they would be free or slave territories.⁶ The strong free territory movement would take over the California territorial legislature. The Constitution that was eventually drafted declared California a free territory.⁷ When California applied for statehood, it was granted as a free state in late 1850.⁸ The citizens of California with Southern roots and families, however, empathized with the rest of the South. When the election of 1860

picked up speed to be a referendum on the slavery issue, California became part of the solution.

The beginning of the Civil War was not the firing on Fort Sumter in April 1861, but in November of 1860, when Abraham Lincoln was elected as President of the United States. The vote was along the lines of North and South, free and slave states. In California, however, the vote was not as

Cavalry Company for the East.



THE UNDERSIGNED HAS BEEN authorized by the Secretary of War to raise a company of Cavalry for service in the East to make part of the Massachusetts quota.

A Roll of the company is at Assembly Hall, corner of Post and Kearny Streets, where persons desirous of joining can enroll their names.

No one need apply who is not a good horseman and in good health. Men from the country preferred. The Roll will be kept open a reasonable time before selections are made.

All responses will be paid as soon as accepted. Further particulars apply to Office, corner Post and Kearny street.

cc28 - 2pt J. SEWALL REED.

Daily Altra California Advertiser (Wikipedia)

clear cut. It took the Democratic Party splintering due to a duel for the Republicans to carry the state for Lincoln.⁹ During the winter months, Southern states began the secession plans that ended with the firing on Fort Sumter. During this period and the eventual start of the war, one question remained for Californians — how should they respond? The majority of the issues surrounding the war had to do with politics in the East, not the West. The closest Southern state, Texas, was over a thousand miles away, but Republican politicians began to beat the drums of war.

After the incident at Fort Sumter, Lincoln called to the northern states for 75,000 volunteers to join the Union army.¹⁰ Where many states east of the Mississippi sent troops, states to the west did not answer the call. The primary reason for this was because of the amount of time it took for information to reach the west coast. This, however, did not mean that California did not assist in other ways. To protect the Union, the state legislature agreed to the new national tax requested by President Lincoln for money to help support the Union war effort.¹¹ This allowed California to contribute to the war without having to raise troops or supply resources to the fight. California did raise troops, but most were for their own protection against any potential Southern strike.

The Civil War impacted politics in California. Gerald Stanley's

"Civil War Politics in California" agrees with Richards' in that Californians reacted to national politics like the rest of the country. The article discusses how the Californians believed the war should have initially been fought over preserving the Union, but nationalism was only part of the argument for fighting a Civil War. Californians began to also realize they were fighting to help save an entire group of people as well. These contributing factors are discussed by Leo Kibby in "Union Loyalty of California's Civil War Governors." Kibby's thesis is even though California was thousands of miles from Washington; the state had the ability to affect issues being faced in the capital.



Capt. James Sewell Reed, California Recruiter. (California Historical Society)

The amount of men that California contributed to the war was small. The major reason for this was because of the slow-moving travel between California and the east coast of the country. The units that made it to the fighting, however, were able to distinguish themselves in the conflict. In an article by Kibby, "California Soldiers in the Civil War," the author maintains Californians felt it was their duty to fight. Their contribution can be viewed in nationalistic terms because the war was so far removed from the state itself. A book that discusses this directly is *California Sabers: the Second Massachusetts Cavalry in the Civil War*, by James McLean. McLean detailed how one thousand men from California paid their way to Massachusetts to fight against the Confederacy. In each of these works, the successful engagements of the 2nd Massachusetts Regiment demonstrated that a state of origin had no ill effect on the fighting effectiveness of a unit.

Once engaged in Virginia, the Californians were primarily pitted against Confederate cavalry as well as local partisan units. One of the larger partisan units they often met was under the command of Col. John S. Mosby. In *Mosby's Raids*, by William Connery, the men of the unit fought for the same reasons the Californians did. They fought for their own nationalistic ideas. The thesis of this book is that the Confederacy fought against soldiers they believed to be a foreign invader—the Union army. The tactics they used—primarily hit and run—are discussed in "Guerrilla Warfare, Democracy, and the Fate of the Confederacy" by Daniel Sutherland. The men from California would have their hands full with the enemy, but their background on the frontier and their determination to fight for their country helped to prepare them to overcome the odds of battle.

Using the idea of nationalism to describe why California joined the fight was a new way to look at the war because many felt that it was the right thing to do. By looking at these secondary sources and examining the primary sources, however, an individual can see that bigger reasonings behind sending troops from afar was important to preserve the Union. A feeling of nationalistic pride did not start in California at the beginning of the Civil War. Instead these nationalistic feelings began even before California became part of the Union.

To protect its southern border, California began to mount a defense against the Confederacy. If the Confederacy could mount a sizeable force and move west from Texas, then California would be in serious jeopardy.¹² To counter this possible threat the Department of the Pacific was created to coordinate military movements. Californians raised almost 15,000 men for this endeavor.¹³ In late 1861, many across the country realized that the war being fought could go on for a long time.

By the beginning of 1862, many Californians were frustrated with reports from the East about the war's progress. The Union Army was moving slowly against the Confederacy, but the casualty rate on both sides remained high. Men signing up from California demanded that they be sent to the East so that they could prove their fighting prowess.¹⁴ Their pleas for fighting, however, were not heard by the politicians. The reason for this was because Washington had not requested men from other parts of the nation. Californians were ready to prove their worth because they wanted to show how important preserving the Union was to them.

The summer of 1862 was a period of discontent for the United States. The rebellion of Southern states that was supposed to be handled in one battle had turned into a total war that gripped the entire nation. Troops had been pouring into Washington, D.C., to protect the capitol and to be sent out to defeat the Confederacy. One of the areas of concern for the Union was the area of northern Virginia that was directly across the Potomac River from Washington, D.C.

Lincoln requested and was granted another 150,000 men for service from several states.¹⁵ Several of the Northern states, however, especially those in the Northeast, were running short on men to send to the front. The government began to look west and found men in California to supplement the Union army. California had pledged Union loyalty since the beginning of the war.¹⁶ Pledging loyalty, however, and providing troops were completely different matters. It was not until the war entered its second full year that Californians realized that they might need to fight to protect the country.

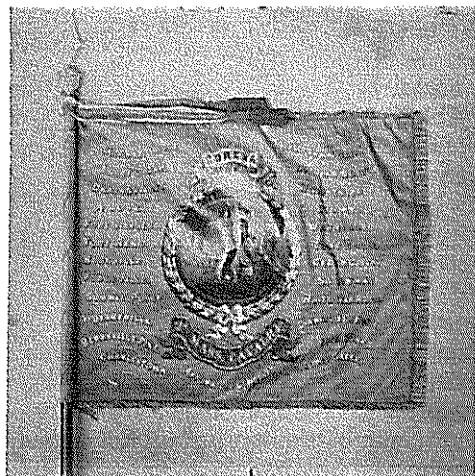
Many of the citizens in California understood that the secession of the Southern states from the Union meant that the United States was no more. Like many in the rest of country, the beginning of the war was not about freeing slaves but protecting the institution of the nation itself.¹⁷ The United States had grown immensely between the Revolution and the first shots fired in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1861. The increase in population, industry, and transportation networks should not be destroyed because states could not agree over an



Charles Lowell, Commander 2nd Mass. Cavalry

issue that had been a part of the country since the signing of the Declaration of Independence.¹⁸ The minds of Californians began to change from a nationalist perspective of the war to also include a human element, with the passage of the Emancipation Proclamation.

After President Lincoln enacted the Executive Order for more troops in June 1862, he understood that more was needed in order to entice states to send more troops. In order to do this, he wanted to not only appeal to people's sense of national duty, but their humanity as well. Lincoln drafted a proclamation that freed all slaves in the United States, thus making almost everyone in the country a free person.¹⁹ With the introduction of the proclamation, came another reason for the war to continue. The North was fighting to keep the country together and to help free a



Battle Flag of the 2nd Massachusetts Cavalry
(Wikipedia)

group of oppressed people. Once news of the proclamation reached California, the view point of slavery and the war changed.²⁰ Not only did the nation need to be brought back together again, but the institution of slavery needed to be destroyed and the slaves freed. This social reaction invigorated enlistments to the Union army across the country. It also made the California government realize that only providing money and resources to the war was not enough. The legislature began to discuss how to send men to fight in the conflict in late 1862.

The second call-up of troops by Abraham Lincoln motivated the California Legislature into action. Republican leaders began to organize enlistment centers for men to fight, but the government in Washington made a decision that surprised many. States trying to send troops to the East under the quota system were told they did not need to because of the expenses needed to be paid by the government to move troops.²¹ This was 1862; the trans-continental railroad was still several years from completion. There were two possible routes of travel from San Francisco to Washington, D.C. The first was a land

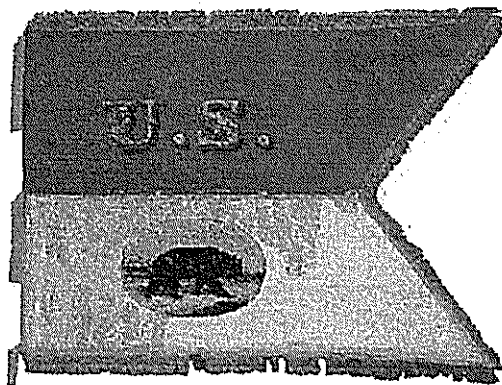
route, utilizing wagons. This was a long route over land and through Native American territory. This route could take anywhere from three to six months to complete. The second route was by ocean. This route took a ship on a southern route around the tip of South America. The Panama Canal was not built until forty years after the Civil War ended. This, however, did not deter California from trying to assemble men to send east.²²

While California was still mulling over sending troops, eastern states were having a difficult issue creating new regiments. These states were having a hard time coming up with the quota needed from the government to create regiments for the war. One of these states was Massachusetts. The Massachusetts governor began to plead with other states who wanted to send men to send them to his state. The governor's pitch was simple—for Massachusetts to fill out its quota, it needed men from other areas.²³ This tapped into many Californians' sense of duty and patriotism. With agreements between the two states, California would create a battalion-size unit that would transfer from San Francisco, California, to Boston, Massachusetts, by the water route. Instead of an infantry unit, however, it would be raised as a cavalry battalion.

It was important that the skills of the recruits matched the branch of service. The reason why is that many of the men that would be picked were skilled horsemen that were comfortable shooting and moving on horseback from years on the frontier. Another positive for picking men from California was they wanted to fight. Soldiers coming from the West did not have the pressure from family and friends to fight like in the East.²⁴ This meant that the likelihood of desertion was low. Instead, the men coming for the unit would be eager and ready to fight.

By December 1862, the initial group of men was ready to ship from San Francisco. The men that would leave from California for the East had no idea they would end up being the only California men to fight in the Eastern Theatre of Operations for the entire Civil War.²⁵ Those battles would come later once the journey to Boston had been completed. The men were responsible for putting up money for their own passage to Boston.²⁶ After the money was collected, the new recruits were to meet on the Northern California coast to head east.

The initial compliment of California men headed to Boston to join their new regiment met in San Francisco for passage. The men boarded a ship named the *Golden Age* and disembarked on 11 December 1862.²⁷ The hope by many on board the ship was that the journey would go by quickly, which would take the *Golden Age* and its passengers south along the coast of Mexico, across the Isthmus of



The guidon of Company A, 2nd Massachusetts Cavalry. Top red, with gold letters. Bottom white with a bear in the oval. (*Militarymuseum.org*)

ually, the ship made it to Panama, and the men crossed over land to board another ship and head to Boston. By the time the men made it to port, they were tired and weary from their travels. This ability to deal with the dangers of the journey and to be so far from home helped show the Bostonians that Californians were ready to fight to make the United States whole again.

The Californians arrived on the east coast of the United States in early 1863. The men arrived in Boston on 15 January to much fanfare.²⁹ This would be the first example of men coming together in the name of nationalism to fight the enemy. This event was also marked by a welcome from the Massachusetts Governor John Andrew. In his address to the Californians and other dignitaries, Andrew asked the men had the country ever faced a moment "when a common hope, a common pride, a common joy, and an interest in common to us all stands imperiled?"³⁰ With this in mind, the men from California joined their Massachusetts counterparts to begin training as one unit.

The integration of Californians and Massachusetts men was initially considered a difficult proposition. Finding common ground other than fighting a common enemy would be challenging due to the different areas of the country in which the men lived.³¹ Finding this commonality would not be an issue specific just to fighting units in the Civil War. In conflicts facing future generations; this issue would persist when bringing large groups of men together. It would be up to the officers charged with leading this new integrated unit to bring

Panama. The men headed north again into the Atlantic and eventually ended in Boston.

The trip itself, however, would be an example of the Californian fortitude in dealing with stressful situations. During the trip south to Panama, a tropical storm caused damage to the ship and destroyed most of the supplies needed for the journey.²⁸ Even-

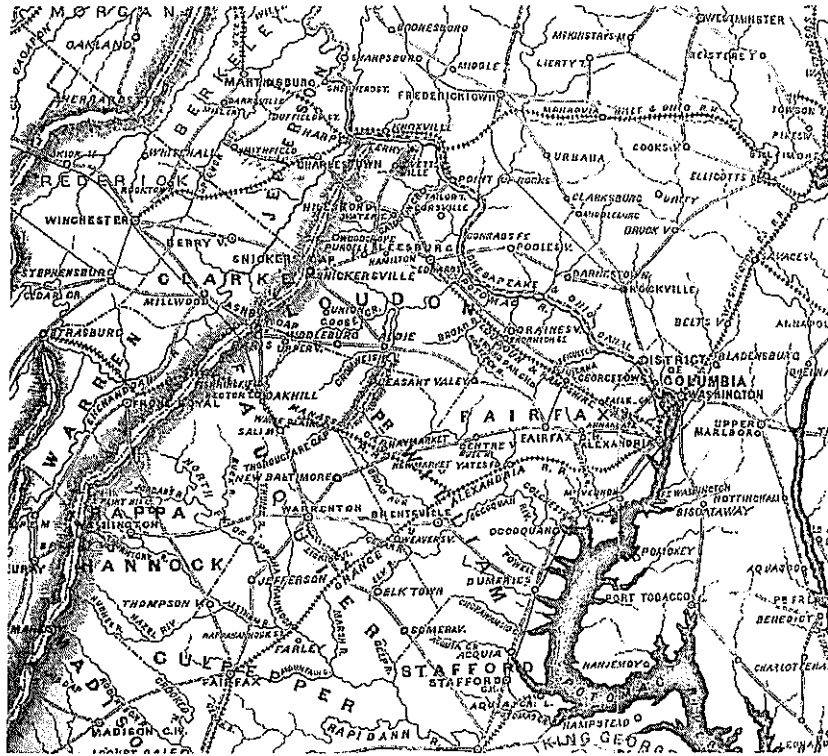
men together in order for them to work as a group. One of these officers was Charles Russell Lowell.

The man who would eventually lead the 2nd Massachusetts understood that men from all over the country would be needed for victory. Charles Lowell himself was a Bostonian from a wealthy family.³² Lowell was a businessman in Maryland before the war broke out. He saw first-hand how the war would tear the state of Maryland apart and watched Union troops being attacked by pro-Southern sympathizers in Baltimore in 1861. For this reason, he decided to return to his home state to offer his services. Initially, Lowell was given an assignment in a cavalry unit with the Sixth U.S. Cavalry.³³ After a brief stint on the battlefield, Lowell was asked to help his home state recruit more men. Lowell understood more men were needed than Massachusetts could provide. When he heard that there was "a battalion of Californians who had brave young riders ready to fight,"³⁴ he jumped at the chance to include them. The reason for this was because Massachusetts was having an issue with desertion from their enlisted ranks and could not keep their quota of men high.³⁵ The use of these Californians was instrumental in keeping the 2nd Massachusetts in one piece and together as a fighting unit. The regiment left for Virginia in early spring of 1863.³⁶

Starting in 1863, a new Confederate unit began to cause havoc for the Union. The unit was created and commanded by John Mosby. The unit that Mosby created was not considered the stereotypical fighting unit that was used during the Civil War. Mosby wanted a unit that could strike at the enemy, protect their own homes, and then disappear back into the population without the enemy knowing.³⁷ Mosby's reasoning was simple, if his troops could constantly be on the move and attack Union positions without being detected, then perhaps they would pull back from northern Virginia. The Union forces would be trapped in the friendly confines of Washington, D.C. Mosby did not believe that the Union would continue fighting if they were constantly being attacked and harassed. Mosby did not believe that the Union would want to continue a long war to keep the country whole.³⁸

Mosby and his men were able to keep thousands of men in blue pinned in the Washington, D.C., area due to their attacks on supply routes and depots for the Union Army. Mosby's area of operations was close to where his soldiers lived, which became known as "Mosby's Confederacy."

These attacks delayed offensive operations against the Confederate army operating in the area, the Army of Northern Virginia.³⁹ In order to counteract this move, the Union army needed units that could



"Mosby's Confederacy" (Wikipedia)

track and fight the enemy on their own terms.⁴⁰ The Union army also needed men that would fight and not run at the first sign of trouble.⁴¹ This brought the 2nd Massachusetts to northern Virginia in order to face Mosby. The 2nd Massachusetts began operations against Mosby with one goal in mind, defeat him as soon as possible. Mosby had already caused havoc in the Union supply chain due to his ability to "attack the lines of communication from the forces in the field to the capitol."⁴² The constant attacking and counter attacking of Mosby on the Union lines would show the resolve of the 2nd Massachusetts. Several Union units broke under the sudden violent attacks that Mosby's men were famous for, but the 2nd Massachusetts held firm and did not allow Mosby to crack their lines.⁴³ The poise of the regiment showed that a blended unit could fight just as well as regiments that only had men from one state. The idea of men working and fighting together from different parts of the country was

beginning to pay off. The commanders of both units, Mosby and Lowell were especially impressed with the fighting ability of the California units.

Lowell believed that if he did not have the California units, then the entire command would not succeed. Lowell wrote that the "Massachusetts men were proud to have Californians in their unit and helped serve the cause well."⁴⁴ Mosby also has positive things to say about the unit. Mosby wrote in his own papers that the Californians with the 2nd Massachusetts fought well and were stubborn on the field.⁴⁵ One of the battles between these two commands would actually start a friendship between the two combatants.



Col. John Mosby (Virginia Historical Society)

The Battle of Aldie (also known as the action at Mount Zion Church) between the 2nd Massachusetts and Mosby's Rangers would become a rallying point for the acceptance of the Californians attached to the Massachusetts cavalry. The skirmish started as an ambush by Mosby on the Union cavalry during the late afternoon of 6 July 1864.⁴⁶ Mosby was able to push the majority of the Union force back, but the Californians were able to hold the line. Eventually, the Californians were able to help push the skirmish from a catastrophic defeat to a draw between both sides.⁴⁷ This battle secured the position of the Californians as a fighting unit within the 2nd Massachusetts and also helped prove that men from all over the country were willing to fight thousands of miles away from

home in order to protect what they believed in.

The end of the Civil War saw a period of reconstruction and healing for the nation. This included the men from California as well. The Californians in the 2nd Massachusetts fought in over fifty different engagements from the middle of 1863 to April of 1865.⁴⁸ The 2nd Massachusetts disbanded in July 1865. The men of the regiment would go their separate ways, with some eventually going back to California and the rest staying in Massachusetts.

The Civil War saw men from all over the country fight on both sides of the conflict. This sense of national pride to fight to preserve

the Union was felt in California as well. These men were then allowed to return home after their military service had ended to continue living the lives that they had before the war. This ability to go thousands of miles away from home and fight for something that they believed in and then return home without having to continue military service would eventually become a hallmark of many who joined the armed forces in later wars fought by the United States.



A Grand Army of the Republic reunion of the "California One Hundred" in the 1880's. (California Historical Society)

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