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# Frederick Steele

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## Frederick Steele

Frederick Steele was a soldier of two wars — the war with Mexico and the Civil War. Born in Delhi, New York, on January 14, 1819, he entered West Point Military Academy in 1839 at the age of twenty and was graduated in 1843, thirtieth in a class of thirty-nine. Among his associates at the Academy were Ulysses S. Grant, William T. Sherman, George H. Thomas, Nathaniel Lyon, George B. McClellan, Don Carlos Buell, John Pope, and William S. Rosecrans on the Union side, while "Stonewall" Jackson, George E. Pickett, and James Longstreet later won Confederate fame.

During the Mexican War, Lieutenant Steele served with General Winfield Scott, commanding a company of regular infantry. For personal gallantry in the battle of Contreras he was breveted first lieutenant on August 20, 1847, and less than a month later won a brevet as captain for his splendid conduct in the battle of Chapultepec, where he volunteered as one of the assaulting party. Later he fought at Ocalaca, Churubusco and Molina del Rey.

When the American army entered Mexico City on September 14, 1847, he marched at the head of his company. "As a triumphal procession the command looked rather strange." Battle-stained troops, decorated with mud and carrying their arms at quite hap-



hazard angles, trudged into the ancient city. Forming in line of battle before the palace, the officers took their places at the front, Captain B. S. Roberts of Iowa hoisted a battle-scarred American flag on the palace staff at seven o'clock, arms were presented, and the officers saluted. "Amid the involuntary applause of the Mexicans, Gen. Scott, dressed in full uniform and mounted on a tall, heavy bay charger, dashed with his staff and Harneys dragoons into the grand plaza — his noble figure, gold epaulets and snowy plumes, resplendent under the brilliant sun, fully typifying the invisible glory of his unkempt and limping army."

After the Mexican War, Steele resumed the rank of first lieutenant in the regular army and served with the Second Infantry at various posts in California until 1853. For six years he acted as adjutant of the regiment. In 1855 he was promoted to a captaincy and saw active service on the frontier in Minnesota, Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas.

Within a month after the Civil War broke out, Steele was made a major and assigned to the Eleventh Infantry in Missouri, although he never actually served with that regiment. In the battle of Wilson's Creek on August 10, 1861, his battalion, composed of two companies of the Second Infantry, fought side by side with the First Iowa. While he had only one commissioned officer under him his troops were handled so effectively that he won high praise. During the early part of the action, he had





MAJOR GENERAL FREDERICK STEELE



no opportunity of engaging the enemy except to assist in dispersing a body of cavalry that threatened the rear. After General Lyon fell mortally wounded, Steele was ordered to form in line of battle and advance to the front. Heavy firing by both sides followed without any decisive advantage to either. In the last desperate charge of the Confederates against Totten's battery and the main Union position, Steele's battalion did good work, the men firing away nearly all their cartridges. Just before the retreat began, Steele helped repulse another attack and enabled several other units to retire in good order. On the retreat to Springfield, after reaching the prairie, he commanded the rear guard.

In connection with his desire of selecting regular army officers as colonels of Iowa regiments, Governor Kirkwood scrutinized the conduct of the most conspicuous leaders in the battle of Wilson's Creek. He was particularly impressed with the work of Major Steele, and therefore commissioned him colonel of the Eighth Iowa Infantry on September 23, 1861. Steele assumed command when the regiment reached Benton Barracks about the first of October. After a fortnight of intensive training, the Eighth Iowa was sent by rail to Syracuse and thence marched to Springfield, Missouri, with Lieutenant Colonel James L. Geddes in command. Colonel Steele was detailed to Quincy and, in November, to Sedalia, Missouri, commanding a brigade. While his connection with the Eighth Iowa was very brief,



it was long enough to inculcate the essentials of military discipline.

On January 29, 1862, Steele was made a brigadier general and returned to St. Louis. A month later he was dispatched to Pilot Knob and placed in charge of all the troops in the Southeastern District of Missouri west of the St. Francis River with instructions to conduct an expedition southward into Arkansas, destroying Confederate supplies at various points and clearing the region of enemy troops. The ultimate objective was Helena, Arkansas. In May he joined forces with General Curtis and was given command of the First Division in the Army of the Southwest operating in eastern Arkansas. The campaign lasted practically all summer, but after Helena was captured in July the work was principally a matter of establishing a new base.

During the fall of 1862, Steele was in command of the District of Eastern Arkansas with headquarters at Helena, but in December he took active command of the Fourth Division of the Thirteenth Army Corps of General Sherman's Yazoo expedition. On Christmas evening the troops were gladdened by the announcement that early the next day the army would move on Vicksburg by way of Chickasaw Bayou. But on that very day Confederate raiders destroyed Grant's base at Holly Springs and ruined the whole campaign.

Utterly ignorant of these unfortunate events, however, Sherman and his army sailed down the



Mississippi and up the Yazoo River early on the morning of the twenty-sixth, officers and men enthusiastically confident of dining the next day in Vicksburg. The calamity which followed seemed all the more disastrous on account of the exuberant spirits under which the attack commenced.

Sherman's troops, consisting almost entirely of western regiments, disembarked on the south side of the Yazoo River and bivouacked for the night in the swamp beside Chickasaw Bayou. The level plateau across the Bayou was lined with Confederate rifle pits, while the bluffs beyond were crowded with batteries of artillery commanding every approach across the plateau. All night trains rumbled into Vicksburg bearing Confederate reinforcements.

On the morning of December 27th, the Union army began to advance in four columns, Steele's division forming the extreme left. All that day and the next were spent in reconnaissance and light skirmishing. At noon on the twenty-ninth the signal for the assault was given and two columns crossed the Bayou a mile apart under a terrific fire. Thayer's brigade of Steele's division, composed of five Iowa regiments and a battery of light artillery, crossed the Bayou and charged the rifle pits. The first line was carried, and the second, with the gallant Fourth Iowa in the lead. But the concentrated musketry of the enemy was too hot for human endurance. Unable to press on up the bluffs against the terrible fire, the Iowans remained for a time



waiting for support, scores of them falling, and then, obeying the command to retire, retreated steadily. About eight hundred of the three thousand men who made the attack were killed or wounded.

Immediately after this unsuccessful campaign, Steele proceeded on the expedition against Arkansas Post, a strong fort on the left bank of the Arkansas River, forty miles above its mouth. On the evening of January 9th, the Union army landed from transports and proceeded to surround the place. Steele was ordered to push forward one of his brigades along the Bayou on the right and cut off escape in that direction. Heavy cannonading began at one o'clock and the grand assault started a half hour later, led again by Thayer's Iowa brigade. After three and a half hours of hard fighting a white flag appeared above the fort and Steele's men swarmed over the ramparts. The fort, seventeen pieces of artillery, and ammunition and subsistence stores were the rewards for their valor.

About April first, Steele's division moved up the Mississippi River to Greenville, Mississippi, and thence marched thirty-five or forty miles eastward threatening to approach Vicksburg from the rear. The expedition diverted the attention of the enemy from Grant's main movements, resulted in the collection of large quantities of supplies throughout the wealthy and fertile region traversed, and culminated in the capture of Jackson, Mississippi. Thence Steele's Iowans returned to participate in the siege



of Vicksburg. As soon as that Confederate stronghold fell, Sherman's army was released to pursue General Johnston, and again Steele's division marched to the capture of the State capital of Mississippi. After the evacuation of Jackson, General Steele returned to Vicksburg and was immediately appointed to the command of the Army of Arkansas.

This was his first independent command. Being a man of action, he conducted a campaign around Helena and Little Rock which, for brilliance in conception and success in execution, surprised the North no less than the South. In the short space of three months, Steele recovered nearly the entire State of Arkansas. In January, 1864, he was placed in command of the Department of Arkansas, a position that he held until the end of November, participating meanwhile in several important engagements. During the closing months of the war he captured Pensacola and Mobile. After peace was declared he remained in the army, serving in Texas and the far West until relieved in 1867. Frederick Steele died in San Mateo, California, on January 12, 1868, old in service but not yet fifty years of age.

Though never a resident of Iowa, Steele is entitled to a permanent place in the annals of the State. His service as colonel of the Eighth Iowa was not long, but his career from the beginning to the end of the war was in command of Iowa troops. At Wilson's Creek he fought with the First Iowa and several Iowa regiments stormed Fort Blakely at his com-



mand in the last hard battle of the war. With Iowa troops he marched from southeastern Missouri to Helena in 1862 and thence to Chickasaw Bayou; again with Iowa troops he captured Arkansas Post; as one of Grant's most trusted generals he helped take Vicksburg with Iowa troops; and his favorite Iowa regiments formed a large part of his army of Arkansas on the Little Rock expedition.

General Steele was a man of striking individuality. Small of stature and spare of build, he was nevertheless wiry and enduring. His gray eyes had a snappy way about them that puzzled a stranger, but scarcely more than the peculiar shrill sharp notes of his voice. His grizzly hair and beard seemed in harmony with his military character.

Very social in his inclinations, he knew a fund of stories which he told in a manner to rival Lincoln himself. But he could be keenly sarcastic as well as humorous on occasion. One day after the Mexican War he was dining alone at a hotel, when several other officers came in and took seats at another table. Among them was W. J. Hardee, who, through carelessness, had been captured with his company at Thornton's Field by a detachment of Mexicans. The incident was well known in the army. After a few minutes Steele joined the others.

"What is your name?" inquired Hardee and, upon Steele's answer, blurted out, "I never heard of you in Mexico."

"I have heard of you, sir," Steele replied.



“Indeed, and where was that?” asked Hardee innocently.

“At Thornton’s Field”, said Steele, and the silence that followed became oppressive.

Being a confirmed bachelor and having no immediate family ties, he lavished a good deal of affection on his horses and dogs. He was a superb horseman and one of his greatest bereavements in the Mobile campaign was the loss of his splendid black Morgan horse “Sigel” who broke away from the orderly and ran straight into the enemy lines.

Frederick Steele stood high in the esteem and confidence of his West Point classmate, General Grant. Perhaps the friendship of Grant had something to do with his promotion to the rank of major general, though the two men were not associated in the war until the Vicksburg campaign. Not only in the “Memoirs” of General Grant, but in the official reports of other officers, the soldierly qualities and strategic ability of General Steele were highly praised. The hostility of the whole State outside the Union picket lines made the task of restoring loyal civil government in Arkansas extremely difficult, particularly for one so humane as he. Against non-combatants he could not be severe. Lincoln understood the situation and approved of his conciliatory methods.

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