

**CIVIL WAR LETTER WRITTEN BY WALTER HUNTER**

*Walter Hunter was the son of John and Agnes Ferguson Hunter. Born in Scotland in 1835, he came to the United States with his parents and extended family in 1848. Before coming to Wisconsin Walter was engaged in the family occupation of coalmining.*

*Walter joined the 8th Regiment Infantry, Missouri Volunteers Missouri Regiment as a sharpshooter along with his friends James and Thomas Langston from the North Bend area in Jackson County. Another friend, John McDonald, who Walter refers to in his letter as "Mac", was also in the same unit. Enlisted in on Oct. 7, 1861 in La Crosse, WI, Walter was mustered in on Oct. 31, 1861 in Paducah, KY. The following letter was written Feb 19, 1862 from Camp Hymen in Kentucky and addressed to Walter's younger brother, Thomas who lived on Decorah Prairie.*

"My Dearest Brother Thomas: I now write to give you an idea how we got along in maintaining the US Constitution. We left Paducah on the 4<sup>th</sup> for the purpose of attacking this fort .(Hymen) and Fort Henry on the Tennessee. We landed about four miles below the fort . Our Regiment, under the command of our noble colonel, M. L. Smith and the 11<sup>th</sup> Iowa Zouaves, under Col. M. Gennes, were ordered on the advance of the Brigade for the purpose of taking our position. This portion of the expedition being under the command of General C.F. Smith of the USA-the same general who commanded us at Paducah, KY .After being up all night, we landed on a muddy bottom of the Tennessee, crossed two or three slough almost deep enough to wet our powder, and after about two miles march we heard the gunboats open fire on Fort Henry. Shot and shell flew thick for some time and after a bombardment of about half an hour the firing ceased. By this time we found that Ft Hymen, the fort that we had been sent to storm, had been evacuated. So great was their terror of the 4,000 men of Gen. Smith's command, that they left everything behind them and some of the boys ate their dinner hot from the kettles in the enemies' camp. That night it froze and blew bitterly and there we took it without a blanket: next day and night were the same, with only three crackers per man for 24 hours, and no cover. Next night it began to rain and our company was ordered on the advance as we expected a midnight attack, and our cavalry pickets had been driven in by the enemy. McDonald volunteered for the advance picket and I joined him. We came back in the morning—nothing to eat—stood under arms at the entrenchments for an hour or two and then went back to the place where we camped the first night. Next day we got our tents and grub, fixed up, and on St Valentine's Day at 2:00 in the morning, we were on the bank of the Tennessee , enroute for Ft Donelson on the Cumberland River where a battle had been going on for two days. Gen Smith, who had command of the right wing of the Union Army sent for the 8<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup>, and on we marched from the Tennessee to the Cumberland. We came within range of the enemies' guns about 4:00 PM –laid down on the ground which was now covered and frozen, nothing to eat but crackers and water to wash them down. That night the enemy crawled up on right wing, and in the morning the third desperate fight began. We were ordered into position behind a battery. We soon found we had the worst of it. Five regiments had been repulsed with great slaughter, and the 6<sup>th</sup> MO and 11<sup>th</sup> Iowa (both Zouave regiments) were ordered to advance by Gen Smith. (Col. Morgan L. Smith for the acting a Brigadier General of the 8<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup>.) As

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we advanced we passed several regiments drawn up along the road, and saw many dead and wounded men. However, trusting in our gallant Colonel Smith we went on chatting, talking and singing as if nothing were ahead of us. We were ordered to hold close by the hospital where they were taking in our wounded men. Orders were given to throw off our blankets, a guard was put over them and we were marched along at the foot of a hill, with a clearing on one side. Our captain, by a left face, ordered us to deploy as skirmishers as also Companies A and L. The three companies were spread along in groups of four men each—when these groups get 20 yards apart they spread in line five paces apart and commence to fire. If attacked by cavalry they rally together again and bring their bayonets to a charge. When deployed, McDonald, myself and two others went up the hill; no sooner did we reach the top of the hill than a perfect shower of bullets fell around us—down went Mac like any old Indian fighter, and up again without ever firing a gun but as he rose some of our own men behind began to fire. Mac damned them for firing as he could see no one and he was sure they could not. On he went and got behind a big oak—down he went with muzzle of his gun waiting for secession to show its head. I came in behind him along with another man of our group, the third one being wounded. Still on the watch, Mac fired. I and the other man fired. I fired three rounds and Mac, two, and in trying to load again he found that his gun, where the bayonet comes on and the bayonet, were smashed by a rifle ball. By this time we were ordered to fall back. I brought in a wounded man. Mac got another gun and fell in with ten or twelve of our men and went on with the rest of the regiment. When I was going on, Henry Hunter, who was being carried wounded to the hospital called to me and I went back with him. Soon our company began to count its losses ( the enemy, four regiments strong, having run from their entrenchments). In picking up our wounded we found that our Captain and three men were killed and 18 wounded—some desperately. We went into battle with 62 men so you may think that the battle was hot. The enemy was taken by surprise—they could not understand our drill. While 2,000 or 3,000 men in ambush would fire, we were flat and the storm of death passed over us—up again, we gave it to them and they thought they were oppressed by two or three regiments, in place of 180 men. Mac went on and the 11<sup>th</sup> IA had by this time sent a shattering volley into the enemy who began firing shot and shell at them. Our Colonel was determined to take the nearest trenches at a charge that night but was ordered to wait until morning.

Our two regiments slept on the ground we had won, without a fire and it was so cold that Mac, who had his canteen or water for pillow had it frozen under his head. The enemy tried us once in the night but in an instant each man was in his place. Next morning we were prepared to storm the Fort but in the meantime Gen. Smith of our division had also made an attack on another battery about 2 miles from us which he carried. We fell in about eight in the morning to attack the batteries. We passed across a ravine where the regiment lay while the shot and shell passed over them. In that place friend and foe were piled thick. There some of the shell burst over and wounded some of our men. But they were carried off by the boys. While in the ravine waiting to know whether we should storm the battery Col. Smith who was horseback smoking a cigar, asked the boys if he should sing for them and at the same time the shells were bursting around him and from his height the rifle balls were singing around his head. Lucky for us, the enemy met us with a flag of truce and on Sunday we entered the fort as victors. In the first fort on the Tennessee we took seventeen pieces of large artillery, all the ammunitions, arms, mules, the General Tillman and his staff, and about 200 prisoners with tents for

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300 men. In Ft. Donelson, which is on the Cumberland at Dover, we took about 126 cannon, 20,000 prisoners and arms, with Generals Buckner and Johnston, Pillow having made escape. Also horses, mules, wagons and ammunition and provisions for that number for three months. The enemy, when we found them in the bush, were dressed in home-spun oak-tanned clothes and we could not tell them from the withered leaves. We stacked our arms in the fort. Our army lost, I should think in killed and wounded, about 1,000 men. Our regiment, and the nine other companies lost about as many killed as our one company did, and the whole regiment did not have three more in wounded than our company did, and the whole regiment did not have three more in wounded that our company did. The fact is, our company being deployed, drew the enemy's fire, showed their ambush and gave our colonel a chance to give them fits with the balance of the Regiment. Floyd, they say was shot by one of his own men while going off on a steamboat.

Your affectionate brother,

Walter Hunter

*(Private James Langston of North Bend ( Jackson County) was killed at the storming of Ft. Donelson. He was the son of Thomas Langston and was in the same regiment as Walter Hunter according to a piece in the Galesville Republican March 10, 1932. Another Langston brother, William, marched with Sherman and later married Mary Oliver, sister of Robert A. Oliver.) Walter Hunter served until Sept. 13, 1862. He returned to Wisconsin and eventually moved to What Cher, Mercer County, Iowa. He married Martha Guthrie and they had nine children. Walter did small scale mining although he was injured in a fall of slate. Walter passed away in 1892 and is buried in the Oklahoma Cemetery, Mercer Cty, IA.)*