

John W. DeFord

John W. DeFord, son of John H. DeFord, for many years a prominent lawyer in western Pennsylvania, and his wife Harriet, was born on Nov. 7, 1835, at Uniontown, Fayette county, Pennsylvania. He had a thorough collegiate education, and, in one of the schools he attended, a military training. Late in 1857, soon after his graduation, he was offered the position of commandant of cadets and the professorship of mathematics, in a Southern military academy. As he was anxious to see slavery in its lair, for it was then the all-absorbing topic of thought and discussion, he accepted it. He spent two years at this work—1858 and 1859—at the end of which, the Civil war then being in sight, he returned home, and practiced his profession, the law, until April 18, 1861, when he entered the army, as second lieutenant of Company F of the Eleventh Pennsylvania reserves. This regiment formed part of the brigade of General Meade. It arrived in Washington a very few days after the battle of Bull Run. In August, 1861, by order of General McClellan, he, together with Lieut. E. J. Keenan of the same regiment, reported for "signal duty" to Maj. A. J. Myer, chief signal officer of the army. As these two lieutenants arrived in the "signal camp of instruction" some time before the many other officers detailed upon the same service, Major Myer, in the interval while they were assembling, personally instructed Lieutenants Keenan and DeFord in the "signal system" of which he was the inventor. When the new corps was finally formed, he appointed them, and Capt. S. T. Cushing, whom he had instructed at West Point before the war broke out, as instructors of the three classes into which he divided the corps. Not long afterwards, he appointed Lieutenant DeFord ordnance officer of the corps. In March, 1862, the new corps was fully drilled and equipped, and ready to take the field, and Lieutenant DeFord was ordered to report to General McClellan, for signal duty at his headquarters. He remained attached to the general staff in this capacity until McClellan was finally relieved, taking part in all the operations of the Army of the Potomac, except while he was a prisoner of war. On April 5, 1862, Lieutenant DeFord, then in camp near Hampton, Va., was ordered, with three other signal officers, to "report today to Captain Missroon on board the U. S. ship Wachusett, for duty with the naval forces under his command." The reason for putting army officers on duty in the navy, was that the naval officers had not yet been instructed in the use of the Myer system; and as it was far superior to the signals formerly used, where land and naval forces were engaged in combined operations, as they then were, Gen. McClellan sent this detachment on board the "York River Flotilla" to facilitate communication. Lieutenant DeFord was stationed on the flagship, Wachusett, in command of the naval detachment, as it was called, and all the communications between the general and the commander of the flotilla passed through his hands. He still has in his possession hundreds of the original despatches sent and received during the peninsular campaign. They show that, by means of these signals, General McClellan directed the operations of both the army and the navy, sometimes from the shore, and sometimes from the ships.

Lieutenant DeFord remained in this service until he was captured, on May 9, 1862, as will be seen later. He was in all the engagements between the gunboats and the rebel batteries, during the siege of Yorktown, which lasted a month. After the town was evacuated, and on May 7, he took part in the battle of West Point, at the head of York

River. Here he rendered services of great importance, in fact, saved the Federal army from a great disaster. This appears from the official history of the signal corps (at page 306), from which we quote as follows: "Part of the signal officers were already on shore, with the troops to which they were assigned, and those on board were everywhere on the alert. General Franklin, then on the Mystic, was summoned by signal. Lieutenant DeFord instituted a strict watch for signals from the shore, which was rewarded shortly by the appearance of a white flag on a tree top. As soon as recognized, it signaled an order from General Franklin to shell the woods. With a promptness impossible without this communication, the fleet was brought into position and threw the fire of its great guns to aid that of the army. The enemy's batteries were soon silenced, and their troops, repulsed and broken, fell back through the woods, followed for a long distance by the shells of the navy. To the rapidity of movement and concert of action secured through the signal corps was due the escape of our forces from imminent destruction."

About May 1, Captain Misroon was disabled, and was succeeded in the command of the flotilla by the celebrated Capt. W. Smith, who commanded the Congress in her famous battle with the Merrimac in Hampton Roads. On May 19, 1862, Captain Misroon wrote a letter to Lieutenant DeFord, in which he says: "I cheerfully state my convictions of the great utility of the system of flag communications, as practiced on board the Wachusett, under my command at York river, during the past month of April, in establishing and keeping up, in the most satisfactory manner, the necessary intercourse between the army and the naval forces; and that the above services were performed in the most prompt and intelligent manner by yourself as senior, and by your assistant associated with you in the duty."

On May 15, Captain Smith wrote a letter to General McClellan, from on board the Wachusett, then still at West Point, from which we have made this excerpt: "Lieut. J. W. DeFord, Eleventh infantry P. R. V. C., has been army signal officer on board this ship, during the operations of the gunboats in York river, and it affords me much pleasure to say that his services have been of great advantage to me in managing the movements of the squadron; and he has at all times been attentive and prompt in the performance of his duties; and particularly were his services very valuable in the engagement between General Franklin's division and the gunboats, and the rebel forces near this place, on the 7th inst."

Gen. McClellan afterwards gave the original of this letter to Lieutenant DeFord, and he still has it. The Wachusett then sailed for Fortress Monroe, to join the squadron under orders to open and occupy the James river. This it did in fine style, although it suffered a repulse when it attacked Fort Darling, a work the rebels had erected about seven miles below Richmond, at the head of navigation. It thereupon dropped down to City Point and came to anchor. Here, on the morning of May 19, Lieutenant DeFord was ordered to accompany a party of officers, which Captain Smith sent ashore at City Point. As the service was known to be a very dangerous one, the boat, which bore them, was left in charge of a masters-mate, with orders to keep it in readiness to put off in an instant, by directing one of the sailors to hold it to the wharf with a boat-hook, instead of making it fast. The tide was running out swiftly. The officers had scarcely left the boat, when a

detachment of the Fourth Georgia, lying in ambush, in the bushes, which then covered the river bank above and below the landing, fired on the men in the boat, killing every one of them, except a single sailor, whose left arm, however, was broken. Of course, as the man who was holding the boat to the wharf with the boat-hook was killed, the tide immediately carried the boat with its cargo of dead men down the river, leaving the officers on shore, in the midst of Huger's division of the Confederate army. On hearing the firing Lieutenant DeFord ran back to a point from which he could see the boat, to see what had happened. As he emerged from the bushes, the wounded sailor saw him, and called out, "Run, lieutenant, they are aiming at you." As the word "run" fell upon his ears, he sprang backwards, just in time to escape a handful of minie bullets. Running back to the party, he hurriedly told the officers the situation, and that they would have to surrender as they were surrounded by the rebel troops and there was no means of escape. He had scarcely finished his report, when a platoon of the Fourth Georgia, under Captain Albert, advanced from the thicket. When within about ten paces of the group of officers, he commanded, "Halt! ready! aim!". Of course if he had added the word, "Fire!" every man in the party must have been riddled with bullets; for there were fifty men in the platoon, and but six or seven of the officers. But he called out, "Gentlemen, you may surrender, if you see fit; but be damned quick about it." And they were "quick about it;" because fifty loaded rifle muskets bearing upon one, at ten paces, are not to be argued with.

Lieutenant DeFord remained a prisoner of war until sometime in August, 1862, at Petersburg, Salisbury, on Belle Isle, and in the Libby, from which he was exchanged at Aikin's Landing on the James, and arrived in Washington August 30. He was granted a leave of absence of ten days, after which he was to report to General McClellan for signal duty. He was engaged in the battles of South Mountain and Antietam, and remained with McClellan until that officer was relieved by President Lincoln's order of Nov. 5, 1862. Then Lieutenant DeFord was ordered to return to Washington, settle his accounts as ordnance officer of the signal corps, and "await orders."

While he was a prisoner, the following order was issued:

"Headquarters, U. S. Signal Corps;
"General Orders, No. 42. Camp near Harrison's Landing, Va.,
(Extract.) "July 22d, 1862.

"The following named signal officers, having gallantly carried and used their signal flags in action, will hereafter bear, as a mark of honor, battle flags inscribed with the names of the battles, as follows:

* * * * *

"Second Lieut. J. W. DeFord—Yorktown, West Point.

* * * * *

"By order of Major A. J. Myer.
"Wm. S. Stryker,
"Adj. Signal Corps."

In due time these flags, made of silk, were issued to him. He used them during the remainder of his service in the army, and still has them. At the same time, the government gave him a copy of the celebrated Brady's picture of the signal corps, taken by him in 1861 at the signal camp of instruction near Tennallytown, Md., and which now hangs in the lieutenant's law office at Ottawa.

On Nov. 10, 1862, he was promoted to the rank of captain; and on the 24th of the same month received an order of which the following is a copy:

"Office of the Signal Officer, Washington,

"Special Orders, No. 54.

Nov. 24, 1862.

"I. Captain O. H. Howard and J. W. DeFord, acting signal officers, will proceed without delay to Cairo, Ill., to arrange with the Commanding General at that point for the organization of a signal party to serve with the forces engaged in the combined land and naval operations now pending.

"II. They will be accompanied by four enlisted men, and will carry with them their signal equipments complete.

"By order of Major A. J. Myer.

"Adj. Genl's. Office, Nov. 24, 1862.

"Approved. By order of the Secretary of War.

"E. D. Townsend, Asst. Adj. Genl."

The two captains and their men accordingly proceeded "without delay" to Cairo, where they found that the commander-in-chief, General Grant, had gone to Memphis, leaving Brigadier-General Tuttle in command. They received orders, however, to instruct and equip officers in the navy and marine brigade (then lying at Cairo). They divided the duty, Captain Howard taking the navy, and Captain DeFord the marine brigade. General Ellet, commander of that brigade, detailed a class of his young officers including his nephew, the famous young colonel, Charles R. Ellet. These officers were fully instructed by Jan. 1, 1863. Captain DeFord then proceeded to Memphis, and reported there to Gen. U. S. Grant early in January. He at once detailed a corps of forty lieutenants and captains, to report to Captain DeFord for signal duty. This they did in a few days; a camp of instruction was pitched in a beautiful grove near the city; and by the first of April the new corps was instructed, equipped and ready to go into service. On that day, Captain DeFord received orders to report for duty, with his command, to Maj. Gen. U. S. Grant, at his headquarters, near Vicksburg, Miss. This was speedily done; and on April 3 General Grant appointed him chief of the signal corps of the Army of the Tennessee. We here give a copy of the order, as it shows the great importance of the duties it devolved on the young captain:

"Headquarters, Department of the Tennessee,

"Special Orders, No. 93.

Young's Point, La., April 3d, 1863.

"Captain J. W. DeFord is hereby appointed chief of the signal corps of

this army, and will be obeyed and respected accordingly.
"Captain DeFord will make such distribution of his corps as will enable the General Commanding to communicate with corps commanders as far as practicable, and with the navy and marine brigade; also to enable corps commanders to communicate with division commanders.

"By order of Major General U. S. Grant.

"Capt. J. W. DeFord, Jno. A. Rawlins,
"Chief of Signal Corps. Assistant Adjutant General."

Under this order the captain took an active part in all the operations of the army, navy and marine brigade against Vicksburg. Any attempt to relate them in detail would swell this sketch to a book of considerable size, as his journal and military papers show. Indeed, as the result of suggestions he made to General Grant, in a conversation had with him, when he first reported to him at Memphis, the duties of the signal corps were much enlarged in labor, danger and importance, during the great campaign around and against Vicksburg. The corps was, in addition to its special duties, employed in reconnoitering. This is shown by a report made by Captain Howard to his chief, dated June 6, 1863, published in the United States Government War Records, page 130, Series I, Vol. 24, Part I, Reports—where we find the following: "The party was divided into four detachments, one of which was kept at General Grant's headquarters, and one at each of the three corps headquarters. From the detachment kept at general headquarters an officer was sent each day to each of the corps headquarters, with instructions to obtain the results of the observations made the same day by the detachments assigned to the respective corps d'armee, and to report the same each evening to Major-General Grant in person.

"The detachments with the various army corps were engaged each day in reconnoitering in advance, and reported by signal or courier, as was found most expedient, the result of all observations worthy of notice to the general commanding the corps. Thus each corps commander was kept well informed as to his own command, and General Grant as to the whole army. The credit of this arrangement is due to Captain DeFord."

The excessive use of the signal glasses by day and night during this glorious but terrible campaign, caused the captain to be relieved from duty, on May 25, 1863, by reason of inflammation of his eyes, so severe as to completely disable him from further service, upon surgeon's certificate to that effect, which is still in his hands. And on the next day, by advice of the surgeon, and of General Grant himself, he resigned and returned to his home where, after his recovery, which required some months (his vision being still imperfect), he practiced law until 1866. On leaving the service he received from Capt. O. H. Howard, chief signal officer of the Department of Tennessee, and his immediate superior, a letter endorsed, "Approved, U. S. Grant, Maj.-Gen.," and containing, inter alia, these sentences: "This is to certify that Capt. J. W. DeFord, late of this corps, has been under my command in this department since Nov. 24, 1862; that, during that time, he has performed his duty as chief of signal corps, army in the field, with fidelity, energy and ability. He has done service of importance in the field, during the campaign against

Vicksburg He is a thorough soldier, first class officer, and worthy of promotion. He has had much and varied experience in the field."

In 1866 he and his two brothers, the late Dr. H. S. DeFord, a surgeon in the United States navy, and Daniel DeFord, now of Denver, Col., a soldier in the Federal army in the Civil war, came to Ottawa, Kan. There he has resided, practicing law ever since, except three years, when he lived in the city of New York, as general counsel of a financial corporation, under a contract to transact its legal business for that period. Their affairs were scattered in many parts of the country, causing him to travel extensively, so that he has tried causes in thirty-eight states and territories. After the expiration of his term of this service he returned to Ottawa, and has since remained there in the practice of his profession.

Mr. DeFord is a widower. He has two children—a daughter, Miss Martha B. DeFord, who lives with him, and a son, W. A. DeFord, who in his early youth was county attorney of Franklin County, and during the Spanish war was adjutant of the Twentieth Kansas. Later, he removed to New York City, where he is now one of the leading lawyers. He has been deputy attorney general of the State of New York, and is at present first assistant district attorney of the city and county of New York.

Pages 1337-1343 from volume III, part 2 of *Kansas: a cyclopedia of state history, embracing events, institutions, industries, counties, cities, towns, prominent persons, etc. ...* / with a supplementary volume devoted to selected personal history and reminiscence. Standard Pub. Co. Chicago : 1912. 3 v. in 4. : front., ill., ports.; 28 cm. Vols. I-II edited by Frank W. Blackmar. This volume is identified at the Kansas State Historical Society as microfilm LM195. It is a two-part volume 3.