

Gen. Cowdin and the First Massachusetts Regiment of Volunteers

Robert Cowdin



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GEN. COWDIN
AND THE
FIRST MASSACHUSETTS REGIMENT
OF
VOLUNTEERS.

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PREFACE.

At the urgent and repeated solicitations of many friends, I have finally consented to give to the public a few statements concerning the treatment which I have received from a few high official dignitaries, representing the State of Massachusetts. I do not wish to be egotistical or extravagant in my expressions, but to state the facts simply as they are, leaving the public to decide whether one who has sacrificed his business, the comforts and pleasures of home, and friends, for the defence of his country, has deserved such unkind and ungenerous usage.

R. C.

BOSTON, October, 1864.



STATEMENT.

Immediately after the fall of Sumter, when the Capital seemed in imminent danger, I reported myself to his Excellency Governor Andrew, tendering him the services of myself and command, and expressing my willingness to go at the shortest possible notice. A number of other Colonels appeared for the same purpose, and after the matter had been thoroughly discussed, the Governor ordered Colonel Jones, of the Sixth Regiment, to report himself the next day, which he did with about four hundred men, some three hundred short of the requisite number for a full Regiment (as the regulations then provided). I then offered to the Governor one of my companies, under the command of Captain W. S. Sampson, which was accepted. This, with others that had previously been ordered, filled up the Regiment to its full quota, and it left for the seat of Government, April 17, 1861. I called at the State House daily, urging my claims, but his Excellency informed me that he must send out the Regiments first that could best be spared, and in a short time sent the following: Third, Colonel Wardrop; Fourth, Colonel Packard; Fifth, Colonel Lawrence, and the Eighth, Colonel Monroe. Finally, on the 27th of April, I received an order from Adjutant-General Schouler for my Regiment to be in readiness to march, and to report myself, in person, at the State House, and to select from the companies offered me those which I desired to fill up my Regiment to its full quota. I immediately left my business and devoted my whole time to preparing it for the service. The City of Boston, with the generosity which has always characterized her, appropriated \$200,000 towards fitting out the Boston troops, and furnished seven of my companies with uniforms, the Roxbury and Chelsea companies being furnished by their respective cities. I then made applications at the State House for arms and equipments for my men, but was put off from day to day until about the 8th of May, when orders were received from the War Department calling for 75,000 troops who would volunteer for three years or the war. Immediately on the receipt of this order the ten companies under my command voted unanimously to offer themselves to the Government, and at eleven o'clock of the same day my officers did likewise, and requested me to report to the Governor and tender him the services of myself and command, to be offered to the United States. In accordance with the wish of my officers I went to the State House, but the Governor seemed to assume an air of indifference to my offer. I then requested permission to proceed to Washington and offer my services to the

Government, to which he gave his consent, and directed Lieutenant-Colonel Sargent, one of his aids, to write me a leave of absence for five days. I left that afternoon for Washington, accompanied by my Major and Adjutant, and called upon General Scott, as General-in-Chief of the Army. He expressed a strong desire that my Regiment should be ordered, but referred me to the Hon. Mr. Cameron, Secretary of War. I waited upon him, and he informed me that the Government had ordered from each State a certain number of troops, but had left it with the different Governors which Regiments should be sent. I telegraphed to Governor Andrew the result of my interview with General Scott and Secretary Cameron, but received no reply. I then took the cars for home, and on my arrival called at his house, but on learning that he was at the Howard Athenæum I immediately went there, and at the close of the scene reported myself to him in person. I met with a cool reception from him, who, as I perceived by his countenance, did not like to be disturbed. I could have informed him that it was the duty of every officer to report himself to his superior immediately on his return to duty, but I judged from his treatment of me that he was entirely ignorant of that fact. I was kept in suspense until the 22d of May, when he appointed me Colonel of my own Regiment, and, as I have since learned, much against his will, and on the 25th of the same month we were mustered into the United States service. I then applied to the Adjutant-General and Quartermaster-General for arms and equipments for a full Regiment, as I was very desirous that Massachusetts should furnish the first three-years Regiment. On the 29th I was notified that the buildings at Fresh Pond, Cambridge, had been procured for me as barracks. On the first of June we marched out and took possession of our new quarters. My Regiment was temporarily furnished with old muskets of various patterns, which were hardly fit to drill with, some of them being very much out of repair. I soon found the location was an unhealthy one, and immediately applied for a change of quarters, which were provided me on the 13th of June, at North Cambridge.

On or about the 12th of June I received notice from Assistant Quartermaster-General Stone, to send my companies to the Arsenal, and he would furnish them with Springfield rifle muskets in the place of the ones they then had. I did so, and they were provided with second-hand Springfield muskets, and with cartridge-boxes, belts, and knapsacks, which were composed of the poorest material. The knapsacks were so poor that I ordered a board of survey, and they were unanimously condemned and considered unfit for the service, a report of which I sent to the Quartermaster-General, but no attention was paid to it. On the 14th of June I received orders from the War Department to be in readiness to

march the next afternoon. I then called at the State House to procure a set of Colors, which had been promised me from time to time, and to which I was entitled, but was put off as before with the assurance that everything should be ready for me when I started, but they were never furnished me, and the Regiment left without them. On Saturday, the 15th, my wagons, horses, and camp equipage were transferred to the cars, and at half-past four o'clock we broke camp and started for Boston. Just before leaving, a letter, from one of his Excellency's Council, was handed me, of which the following is a copy:—

COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS,
Executive Department, Council Chamber,
Boston, June 14, 1861.

COL. ROBERT COWDIN:—

DEAR SIR: I hear very bad reports about your Regiment, and it gives me great trouble, as an old friend of yours. I understand that you are very much wanting in order, discipline, and dignity, and that the men and officers pay but little attention to rules and orders, and the Regiment is more like a mob than a camp, and unless you are more rigid and strict in enforcing military discipline and order, you will make a failure. I hope and trust that you will change your course, or you will, I fear, disgrace your name and State.

Yours truly,
OAKES AMES.

As I was blamed considerably at the time for giving my men so long a march, I will in justice to myself say, that I halted twice on the route from Cambridge to the Common, and had them wear their overcoats for the reasons that the knapsacks were so narrow and small that the coats could not be properly packed, and that some of the uniforms, though worn only about six weeks, were so ragged that they were not decent to march through the streets in. On my arrival at the depot, I was met by a joint Committee of the City Council, headed by his Honor Mayor Wightman, who presented me with a beautiful national color, which, together with the one used by the old First Regiment, was all that I had when I left the city. After taking leave of the many friends who had gathered at the depot to witness our departure, I stepped upon the platform, not without some emotion, and turned my back upon dear old Boston. As I entered the cars I found the Assistant Quartermaster-General of Massachusetts, who was exercising considerable authority, and on questioning him as to the cause of it,

was told he had been sent there by Gov. Andrew to superintend the Regiment until it should be turned over to the proper authorities in Jersey City. I informed him that I was Colonel of that Regiment, and that Gov. Andrew had nothing to do with me or my command. On arriving at Jersey City, I was met by a large assemblage of citizens, many of them former residents of Massachusetts, headed by Mr. Warren, who gave us a hearty welcome as the first three years' Regiment, and informed me that a collation had been prepared and was in waiting for us, which was readily and gratefully partaken of. I arrived in Baltimore on the afternoon of the 17th, and was received by a detachment of Nims' Battery, who escorted us through the identical streets that the 6th Regiment marched through and were assaulted on the 19th of April previous. Before marching through the city, I distributed ten rounds of ball cartridges to my men, loaded and capped my pieces, and was prepared for any assault that might be made upon us, and took up the line of march through the city. The streets through which we passed were thronged with people, whose countenances indicated the hatred they felt towards Massachusetts soldiers; but no insults were offered, and we marched through the city unmolested. I arrived in Washington at 6 o'clock of the same afternoon, and reported myself to Gen. Mansfield, who had charge of the troops then arriving, and on the 19th was ordered to Georgetown, near Chain Bridge. Soon after arriving in camp, an order was issued by Gen. Mansfield, of which the following is a copy:—

CIRCULAR.

*Headquarters, Department of Washington,
June 25, 1861.*

Fugitive slaves will, under no pretext whatever, be permitted to reside or in any way harbored in quarters and camps of troops serving in this Department. Neither will such slaves be allowed to accompany troops on the march. Commanders of troops will be held responsible for the strict observance of this order.

By order of

BRIG-GEN. MANSFIELD.

In a few days after receiving this order, I was informed that a colored man had come inside of my lines who did not belong to the camp, and in accordance with the above I ordered the officer of the day to send the man outside the lines, as I should have done to any white man, or any person there without permission. A

correspondent of the *Traveller*, from the First Massachusetts Regiment, wrote a most pitiful and affecting story regarding it, but I can only say in reply that his statement was *incorrect* in nearly every particular. On the 29th of June, I received a letter from Hon. Charles Sumner, requesting me to call at his office in Washington, which I did, and on arriving there was presented by him with a letter from Gov. Andrew, of which the following is a copy:—

COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS.

Executive Department, Boston, June 27, 1861.

COL. ROBERT COWDIN:—

MY DEAR SIR: I am compelled earnestly and emphatically, though with entire friendliness, to call upon you, without delay, to resign your commission as Colonel of the First Massachusetts Regiment. The testimony is so unanimous and constant and overwhelming that the Regiment has suffered every day, for want of competent management, that I am compelled to this step, which I take with the utmost regret.

Yours very truly,
J. A. ANDREW.

I inquired of Mr. Sumner what it all meant, and he informed me that the Governor was very much dissatisfied with me, and had written to him and Senator Wilson, asking them to urge my resignation. I told him I was then an officer in the United States service, and that if the Governor, or any one else, had any charge to prefer against me to present them to proper authorities, and I would willingly be tried by a court-martial and abide the result without a murmur. I then returned to camp, and wrote to Gov. Andrew, in substance, what I had stated to Mr. Sumner, and that I should *not* resign.

Not satisfied with this result, I was honored, in the course of a few days, with a visit from His Excellency, who informed me that he had come to inspect my horses, wagons, and other camp equipage, of which there had been so much complaint. I showed them to him, but he appeared perfectly indifferent to all that I said. I invited him to dine with me, which he did. I then invited him to stay and witness my drill, but he very abruptly declined. I was informed, and from the best authority, that, during his visit in Washington, he called upon the President and urged my removal, but was told by him (the President) that he could not remove me before having the advice of Gen. Scott and Secretary Cameron. He

then called upon Gen. Scott and asked, as a personal favor, that he would recommend to the President my removal. He was asked for what reason, but being unable to give any satisfactory one, was told by the General that his request could not be complied with. The next morning he was to start for Boston, but before leaving he called upon Senator Sumner, who had not risen. He was shown to his chamber, when he again requested him to call upon me and urge my immediate resignation. Consequently I was, in the course of a few days, *honored* by a visit from Hon. Mr. Sumner, Hon. John B. Alley, and Dr. James W. Stone, since deceased. I conducted them around my camp, entertaining them as best I could, when Senator Sumner then broached the subject and again urged me to resign, intimating that I *might* be removed. I replied, as on a previous occasion, adding that I had spent too much time and money for the militia of Massachusetts to be driven out in such a disgraceful manner. Mr. Alley then made a few remarks relative to the subject, as did also Dr. Stone, but I assured them that I was more than ever *determined not to resign*. And, furthermore, informed them that I had had trouble enough from the interference of outsiders, and if any one called again for the same purpose, they should see the inside of my guard-house.

About this time my Regiment was inspected by Gen. Tyler, commanding the Division, and he pronounced the men in good condition, and the Regiment has stood number one at every inspection since. In a few days after we were ordered to the front, and the conduct of the First Massachusetts Regiment on that occasion is a matter of history. One brave man, however, upon whose banner was inscribed “three or five years, or during the war,” melted like *Snow* before a hot fire.

On the 13th of August I was Brigaded under Gen. Hooker, at Bladensburg, and on the 14th of October was assigned by him to the command of the First Brigade. On the 23d of the same month he gave me a recommendation for Brigadier General, of which the following is a copy:—

*Headquarters, Hooker's Division,
Camp Union, Oct. 23, 1861.*

BRIG.-GEN. S. WILLIAMS,
Adjutant-General, Army of the Potomac.

GENERAL: After giving the subject the deliberation it requires, I respectfully name Col. Robert Cowdin, 1st Regiment Massachusetts Volunteers, for promotion to

the rank of Brigadier-General, and request that he may be assigned to the command of the First Brigade of my Division. He is at present exercising that office. I recommend Col. Cowdin for the following reasons:—

He is the senior officer of the Brigade.

He displayed great courage while in command of his Regiment, in the skirmish at Bull Run, on the 18th of July, 1861.

He was the first Colonel in the United States to tender a Regiment for three years, already armed and equipped for the field, to the Government, at the hour of its greatest peril, and his promotion will place Lieut.-Col. D. G. Wells, an officer of uncommon merit, in command of his Regiment.

Very respectfully,
Your obt. servant,
JOSEPH HOOKER,
Brigadier-General, commanding Division.

“Official Copy,”
WM. H. LAWRENCE, *Aid-de-Camp.*

I was told by General Hooker that General McClellan had informed him that any one he should recommend for Brigadier-General should be appointed, and that I might expect mine in the course of ten days. It so happened that Gov. Andrew in a few days after made it convenient to be in Washington; and there was a prevalent rumor in camp at that time that he was there to oppose my nomination, but whether or not I am unable to say, but will leave the public to decide as the appointment was not made at that time, and I did not receive it for more than eleven months after. About this time Senator Wilson, in command of the 22d Regiment at Halls Hill, Va., one Sunday afternoon, called on one of his Captains, and, in course of conversation, my recommendation by General Hooker was discussed, when Senator Wilson said: “Col. Cowdin will never be confirmed by the Senate.”

On hearing of my recommendation by Gen. Hooker, the Mayor, Aldermen, and Common Council, in both branches of which I had been a member, very kindly forwarded a petition from their respective Boards to the President, urging my appointment. A short time after this three more petitions were gotten up, one by the Honorable Senate and House of Representatives, one from the leading men of Boston, and one from the War Committee; these petitions were all sent to a

Massachusetts Senator to be presented to the President, but in my heart I firmly believe that he (the President) never saw them. It is presumed that they were either destroyed or kept in abeyance. On the 8th of January, Mayor Opdyke of New York wrote the following letter in my behalf:—

Mayor's Office, New York, January 8, 1862.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN, *President of the United States*:—

SIR: The friends of Colonel Robert Cowdin of the First Massachusetts Regiment, now acting Brigadier-General of Hooker's Division, are very desirous that he should receive the appointment of Brigadier-General of Volunteers. He is so highly recommended by General Hooker upon purely military grounds, and by the Mayor and City Council of Boston, who have long known him intimately, and with whom he has served in both branches, that there can be no question as to his character or capacity. Added to this testimony is the practical commentary furnished by the high character for discipline and efficiency attained by Colonel Cowdin's Regiment, and which it is understood characterizes the entire Brigade of which Colonel Cowdin is now in command. The appointment of Colonel Cowdin to a Brigadier-Generalship would seem to be from public consideration one of the best that could be made. This is a consideration which at this time cannot fail to prove potent with Your Excellency. I take pleasure in requesting your special attention to General Hooker's letter, of which a printed copy is appended. The appointment of Colonel Cowdin will be to me *personally* a source of high gratification.

Very respectfully, your obedient servant,
GEORGE OPDYKE.

This letter was given to Senator Sumner, with the request that he should immediately present it to the President in person, which he agreed to do; but it was kept back by him, from his own acknowledgment, for more than eight months; the reason is best known to himself; but it is presumed, however, that Senator Wilson advised him not to present it, and informed him, as he had two of my personal friends, (he taking them to be otherwise,) that my case was closed, and that *he* had closed it for me. During the winter, Senator Wilson was in Boston, and the subject of my promotion was discussed in the Republican Headquarters, when he made a public declaration, in the presence of several gentlemen, that I could not be confirmed by the Senate even if I was appointed. I continued in command of the Brigade until the 19th of February, when I was

relieved, by Brig.-Gen. Henry M. Naglee, an officer of distinguished ability. He has since, as I am informed, been mustered out of the service for his political opinions. On or about the 20th of September, Hon. John P. Hale, Senator from New Hampshire, seeing the injustice that had been done me, laid my case before the President, and requested him to appoint me. The President told him that no more appointments could be made, except for distinguished conduct in the field. Mr. Hale then related the engagements I had been in, and particularly mentioned that of Williamsburg; and in about four days from that time I received my appointment, of which the following is a copy:—

War Department, Washington, Sept. 26, 1862.

SIR: You are hereby informed that the President of the United States has appointed you, for distinguished conduct at the battle of Williamsburg, Brigadier-General of Volunteers in the service of the United States, to rank as such from the twenty-sixth day of September, one thousand eight hundred and sixty-two. Should the Senate, at their next session, advise and consent thereto, you will be commissioned accordingly.

Immediately on receipt hereof please to communicate to this Department, through the Adjutant-General of the Army, your acceptance or non-acceptance, and with your letter of acceptance return the oath herewith enclosed, properly filled up, subscribed and attested, and report your age, birthplace, and the State of which you were a permanent resident.

You will report for duty to the General-in-Chief, U. S. A., in person for orders.

EDWIN M. STANTON, *Secretary of War.*

BRIGADIER-GENERAL ROBERT COWDIN, U. S. Volunteers.

On the 30th of September I was sworn into office as Brigadier-General of Volunteers, and immediately assigned to the 2d Brigade, Abercrombie's Division, composed entirely of new troops, which I continued to drill and discipline until the 30th of March, when I was relieved of my command by the following order:—

*Headquarters, Abercrombie's Division,
Arlington House, Va., March 30, 1863.*

General Order No. 13.

1. Brigadier-General Robert Cowdin is hereby relieved from the command of the 2d Brigade of this Division. Col. Burr Porter, 40th Mass. Vols., will assume command.

2. In parting with Brigadier-General Cowdin the General commanding the Division desires to compliment him on the efficiency to which the troops under his command have arrived. He feels assured that soldiers so well managed in camp would have been equally well led in the field, where he regrets that he must be deprived of General Cowdin's valuable services.

By order of BRIG.-GEN. ABERCROMBIE.

J. A. SLIPPER, A. A. G.

Official.

C. H. LAWRENCE, A. A. G.

As the time for confirmation drew near, I had occasion to visit Washington on business for my Brigade, when I met a distinguished Senator, and I made inquiries of him concerning my case. He informed me that there was not the least doubt as to my confirmation, and that no name stood better before the Senate than mine. Another Senator also informed me that my name, with others, had been sent forward and canvassed, and not a single objection brought against it; and added, that I should receive every vote with possibly the exception of the two Massachusetts Senators. It appears, however, that there were a large number of politicians to be confirmed, many of whom had not seen a day of real service; therefore fighting men, who had seen nearly two years hard service, were set aside to make place for them.

The day after I was relieved of my command I received the following letters from my superior officers, Generals Heintzelman and Abercrombie:—

*Headquarters, Department of Washington,
Washington, March 30, 1863.*

BRIGADIER-GENERAL ROBERT COWDIN:—

GENERAL: I am happy to be able to say that after serving some time under my command both on the Peninsula and in the defences here commanding a Brigade, your conduct has merited my warm approbation.

Hoping to meet you again in service under more favorable circumstances,

I remain, yours truly,
S. P. HEINTZELMAN, *Major-General*.

Headquarters Arlington, April 1, 1863.

MY DEAR GENERAL: In parting with you, I take this occasion to express my deep regret that so valuable an officer should be lost to this command, and at a time, too, when his services might prove of much importance, and aid very materially in the defence of the city against the threatened raid by the Rebels along the line of our defences. As evidence of your efficiency, I am satisfied there is not a Brigade under my command better calculated to do good services by its discipline and instruction than your own. I trust you may be restored to your command at an early day.

Your obedient servant,
J. J. ABERCROMBIE, *Brig.-Gen.*

BRIG.-GEN. R. COWDIN, Washington, D. C.

On my returning home as a citizen, the people began to inquire the cause of it, when one of the senators called on several of the daily papers in this city, as I have since learned, and dictated to them what answer to give the people. One of the number was very particular to give as a reason that there were two more nominations from Massachusetts than she was entitled to, and they supposed the Senate selected for promotion those that were considered the best qualified, (or words to that effect,) carefully concealing the fact that two of the candidates who were on the Massachusetts list did not represent Massachusetts. One went out in command of a New York Regiment, and the other, as I am informed, was an engineer from Pennsylvania, and has since been discharged.

Some time after my return home, I called on Senator Sumner, and inquired of him why I had been thus treated; what qualifications, if any, I was lacking, which should cause them to promote junior officers over me? But he did not give me any reason, but in substance intimated that we must submit to higher authority whether we liked it or not. Nearly every question I put to him was answered evasively, and my previous opinion, that he had used his best efforts to defeat me, were then confirmed. About the 21st of August I received an appointment as

Paymaster of Volunteers, at the instigation of Senator Wilson, which I respectfully declined, not feeling quite willing to step from the rank of Brigadier-General to that of Major. Since that time I have had several interviews with Mr. Wilson, and he informs me that he has never opposed me directly or indirectly, evidence to the contrary notwithstanding. If such be the case, *why* am I out of the service? Can either of these gentlemen answer?

During a recent visit to Washington, I called upon the President, and presented him with my letters of recommendation. He informed me that I needed no recommendation, that my conduct in the field was a sufficient guarantee of my fitness for the office of Brigadier-General, but that there were no vacancies at that time. He then indorsed my papers and referred me to Secretary Stanton, who informed me that no man stood better in the army than I did; he said that there were no vacancies at that time. It cannot but be plain to the public that my not being confirmed by the Senate was the work of the Massachusetts Senators, as one of them informed me that it was by *his own personal exertions* that a Massachusetts General had been confirmed. That I have been treated with neglect and contempt by them from the beginning is plainly visible, let them say what they will to the contrary.

And I am not the only officer who has been thus shamefully treated, hundreds of others have been served in like manner. Men who have fought bravely in defence of their country, for the advance of its interests and the maintenance of its laws, have been withheld from promotion, simply because they differed in political opinion, or were not in favor with those high in power; while others, who have not a thought or care for the country, whether it be lost or saved, are rapidly advanced far beyond their knowledge and ability. And I think I may safely assert that many a "Major-General's" strap has been worn, when, if the wearer were *thoroughly* and *fairly* examined, could not boast a Captain's commission; and it is this inefficiency, together with the intemperance of many of our Generals, that has been the sole cause of so many disgraceful defeats; and until a change is made, and men who are competent placed in command, we cannot and must not expect anything different.

In conclusion, I would say, that I shall ever be ready and willing to respond to the call of my country when I can be restored to my rightful position, one that I feel I have fairly earned by many a hard-fought battle and by the recommendations of all my superior officers. And I feel that at this time, when the country needs and demands the services of every man, we should lay aside all party feeling and unite in one brotherhood in supporting the Union, and in

defending that glorious Constitution so dearly purchased by the blood of our fathers, and which, descending to us as our birthright, claims our undivided and hearty support.

Very respectfully,
ROBERT COWDIN,
Late Brigadier-General, U. S. A.

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