

Joseph H. Spencer

Joseph H Spencer was born in Barton, Orleans County, Vermont, on July 26, 1835. Sometime in the 1850s, he moved to Faribault, MN, where he worked as a clerk in the store of Skinner & Brothers in nearby Northfield.

When the first call for volunteers was sent out, Joseph was the first to volunteer from Rice County. On the morning that he volunteered he was quoted as saying, "Those colors never looked so brilliant in my eyes before; draw up a paper for volunteers and I will sign it myself."

On April 29, 1861, he was mustered as the 1st sergeant in Company G of the First Minnesota Volunteer Infantry. He was 26 years old, stood 5' 6 3/4" tall, had a light complexion, blue eyes and brown hair.

Joseph wrote a letter in May of 1861, about his activities during those early days at Fort Snelling, as the regiment was forming:

"My duties... are such that I have no spare time. I have to get the boys all up every morning to call the roll at 6 am, have to make my report to the Colonel's office at 7 am. Drill from 9 to 12 and 2 to 5. The balance of my time is occupied in keeping the boys strait and answering ten thousand questions that I don't know any more about than they do themselves."

At Bull Run the Union Army commanders saw how unprepared their army was and how determined the opponent was. While the First Minnesota fought fiercely and well, many did not. To their left stood the 14th New York, immobile until scattered by a few Rebel cavalymen. After the battle, Spencer wrote a letter to his sister saying, "If we had been properly supported we would have gained the victory." Of his unit he said, "I know what it is to have shot and bomb shell falling in every direction. I know what it is to have our lines broken and our men scattered, and to have them rally again around the good old stars and stripes. I know it is to have our forces defeated, but thank God not a cowardly or shameful defeat."

On August 1, 1861, he was discharged to accept a commission as a 2nd lieutenant in Company G. However, that same month, he was detached to serve with the Signal Corps at Poolsville, Md. With him went Asa Abbott, also of the First Minnesota. Abbott later stated that while serving in Maryland, Spencer was taken sick and left behind at or near Clear Springs, MD. His sickness was supposed to be malarial fever, which he believed came about by overwork and exposure at night while working on signal stations. It was several weeks before Spencer rejoined 2nd Lt Abbott and the rest of their detachment.

Joseph remained in Maryland until Feb 24, 1862, when he was assigned to duty in the Div. of Gen. Banks en route from Frederick, MD to Harpers Ferry, West VA, whose purpose was to operate against the enemy under Stonewall Jackson in the Shenandoah

Valley. After leaving Harpers Ferry and previous to the battle of Winchester, VA, Lt Spencer occupied and operated signal corps stations at Maryland Heights, Charlestown, VA, Bunker Hill and Snickers Gap.

At the Battle of Winchester, VA, on March 23, 1862, the signal detachment with which he was serving rendered such valuable and efficient service as to receive the commendation of Generals Burnside and Shields. The Following is a partial extract from a general order issued by Major Albert Myer, Signal Officer of the Army:

"Washington, D. C., June 24, 1862, the following named Acting Signal officers having gallantly carried and used their signal flags at the battle of Winchester, VA., March 23, 1862, will hereafter bear as a mark of honor, battle flags inscribed 'Winchester'...2nd Lieut. J. H. Spencer, 1st Minnesota Vols., Acting Signal Officer..."

Lieut. W. Rowley in a letter dated June 27, 1862, from the Signal Camp Dept Headquarters for the Department of the Shenandoah gave a list of men who rendered meritorious service during the retreat of Gen. Banks and especially on May 24, 1862, at Winchester, VA, said, "I would especially mention Lt. Spencer...Lt Spencer barely escaped capture and nothing but dauntless courage upon his part saved him with his men".

Major General Pope mentioned Lt Spencer in General Order #24 dated Aug 21, 1862. "The Major General commanding takes occasion to acknowledge the very valuable services rendered by the Signal Officers of the Army and the parties under their charge during the recent operations of this command against the enemy and the engagement with him at Cedar Mountain."

"Second Lieut. Joseph H. Spencer, 1st Minnesota Volunteers, who, during this period, was stationed on Thoroughfare Mountain overlooking the camp of the enemy, was at one time driven with his party from that post by a regiment of Rebel Cavalry, but returned thereto at great personal risk and reestablished his station within two hours thereafter. The information furnished by him from this station was of an important nature and assisted materially in the prosecution of operations".

On June 2, 1863, he was assigned to duty at the office of the Signal Officer of the Army, Washington D. C. He was in charge of the records of the Signal Corps and the receipt and issue of signal equipment and signal stores. He remained there until March 25, 1865, when he was ordered to report to the commanding general, Department of the Cumberland, to assume charge of the Signal Detachment serving in that department. Capt Spencer assumed command of the Signal Detachment, Army of the Cumberland, on April 28, 1865. He remained in Knoxville, TN, through the months of May, June & July, 1865. Though on detached service, Spencer was still carried on the regimental rolls of the First Minnesota for almost two years. He was transferred (on paper) to Company F on Oct 28, 1862. However, he was formally discharged from the regiment to date from May 29, 1863, to accept an appointment as a captain the US Signal Corps, where he had been serving for the past year and a half. He was appointed to the rank of major on Oct 7,

1865, for faithful and meritorious services and was honorably discharged from the service on Oct 12, 1865. Later, retired 1st Lt Asa Abbot, who served with him from 1861 to 1865, stated that Joseph Spencer was "one of the most faithful and energetic officers that I ever knew."

At the end of his military service he returned to civilian life and his home town of Northfield. There he worked as Financial Secretary for Carleton College. On June 18, 1866, he married Ann L Skinner in Northfield. They had three children. Etta died in May, 1868. Lynn was born in Wisconsin. Lillian was born in Minnesota on Aug 27, 1868. The 1870 census records that Spencer was working as an insurance agent. He moved to Stillwater in September 1872, to establish an insurance agency. Unfortunately, he died in Stillwater on March 25, 1873, of an enlargement of his liver caused by malaria he contracted while in the service. He was buried in Northfield.

Sources:

The Telegraph, Northfield, Mn, July 10, 1861, p 2.
The Telegraph, Northfield, Mn, Sept 18, 1861, p 2.
The Central Republican, Faribault, Mn, Wed, April 26, 1865, p 2.
US Census, 1870.
1890 Veterans Schedules, Ann Spncer, widow of Joseph H Spencer.
Descriptive List of the Men of Company G, First Minnesota Association papers, Minnesota Historical Society, page 615, box 2.
Roster of the First Minnesota Infantry, 1910.
History of Rice and Steele Counties, p 201.
The Last Measure, Richard Moe, Henry Holt & Co, NY, 1993, p 62.
Military Pension File, Joseph Spencer, National Archives, Wash DC.