

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

OF

LT. ISAAC BECKETT

OF THE

FIFTY-SIXTH REG'T, N.Y.S.V. (TENTH LEGION)

PREPARED FOR THE BUREAU OF MILITARY STATISTICS

BY CHARLES B. HALSTEAD

VIR FORTIS AMICIS ET PATRIAE DECUS EST.

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Isaac Beckett

BECKETT, ISAAC - Enrolled, August 1, 1861, at Newburgh, to serve 3 years; mustered in as second lieutenant, Co. D, August 16, 1861; as first lieutenant, August 6, 1862; mustered out, January 27, 1865. Commissioned second lieutenant, December 18, 1861, with rank from August 16, 1861, original; first lieutenant, December 30, 1862, with rank from August 5, 1862, vice E. Wheeler, promoted.

Information on this page is from the archival website of the 56th NY Volunteer Infantry
See <http://www.56thnyvi.com/thenpart6.htm>

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF LIEUTENANT ISAAC BECKETT

Lieutenant Isaac Beckett, son of Michael and Catherine Beckett, was born in the County of Mayo, province of Ireland, August 28th, 1838. His father was born at Turlough; his mother, Catherine Wilks, at Spring Hill, County of Mayo, Ireland. His parents and their family, consisting of three sons and one daughter, came to America in the year 1852 [*actually April 30, 1851*], and located at Newburgh, Orange County, in the State of New York.

Lieutenant Beckett, the subject of this sketch, who appears to have been of an active and persevering turn of mind, soon after arriving in this country found employment in a store in Newburgh. He afterwards traveled upon the New York and Erie Railroad, disposing of books, papers, etc., from which he was employed as a clerk in a book and news store in Newburgh, in which he remained until after the death of his father, which occurred on the 2d of April, 1854. On the first of May following, he went with Daniel Farmington, Jr., of Newburgh, with the intention of learning the painter's trade, with whom he remained for about two years. But becoming convinced that he was not calculated to learn any trade, he abandoned it, and again engaged in the service of the New York and Erie Railroad, running upon the train from Newburgh to Middletown. He continued in this service until the fall of 1857, when Dr. Charles Drake, of Newburgh, having been elected County Clerk, of Orange County, and knowing young Beckett to be a quick and accurate penman, he engaged him as a clerk for the record of deeds, etc., in the County Clerk's office. He remained thus employed during the Doctor's official term of three years and continued for about six months with his successor, Dr. David C. Winfield. On leaving the Clerk's Office, he acted for a short time as a canvasser or agent for the sale of some popular hooks, but soon after was appointed Freight Clerk at the Goshen Station of the New York and Erie Railroad, which position he held for about a year and a half, or until he entered the military service.

In April, 1861, Lieutenant Beckett was appointed by Colonel W~ R. Brown Sergeant Major of the Nineteenth Regiment New York State Militia. He resigned his position at Goshen and accepted the appointment. This was at a time when there had been a call by the President for volunteer regiments in the service of their country to put down the Rebellion. The service of this Regiment had been tendered to the Government, and it was prepared and held in readiness to move, when notified by Governor Morgan that they could not be accepted, as the President would not receive any but three years' troops. The Regiment, being composed of many of the first and business men of the County, were unprepared to make so great a sacrifice at so short a notice, and did not accept the conditions. He accordingly returned for a time to his old situation, but was not long to remain thus employed.

The threatened danger to the Government and free institutions of the country, the Government's call for aid in her time of need, and the sense of duty and obligation that rests upon every loyal citizen to maintain the supremacy of the laws and defend the honor, of an insulted flag, pressed heavily upon him, and he resolved to offer his aid and go forth in the service of his country and in defense of its Government.

Accordingly, after the memorable battle of Bull Run on the 21st of June, 1861, his military enthusiasm became aroused and he resolved to raise a company. Not feeling himself competent to take command, he cast about for a suitable person for Captain. This he found in the person of John Wheeler, since Lieutenant Colonel of the Fifty-Sixth Regiment New York State Volunteers. His whole efforts and energies were now devoted to raising men to fill up his company. This was in the latter part of July. On the 14th of August, the men raised, now amounting to forty, were sent to Newburgh, the place of rendezvous for the new regiment, for subsistence and instruction in camp drill. These men were principally raised in the towns of Warwick, Minisink, Wawayanda and Monroe. They were mustered into the United States service at Newburgh, on the 16th of August, 1861, and the company was recruited to about one hundred men. Honorable mention in this connection is due to Mr., Charles A. Reeve, of Goshen, for his efforts in raising funds for recruiting this Company, as well as to Captain Wheeler, who furnished means from his own private purse.

Lieutenant Beckett at first took the position of Second Lieutenant in Company D, Fifty-Sixth Regiment New York State Volunteers. This Regiment was raised in the Tenth Congressional, District, composed of the Counties of Orange and Sullivan, principally through the efforts and instrumentality of Hon. Charles H. Van Wyck, Colonel Commanding, who was at this time Member of Congress from the district; and in honor of the District in which it was raised, it received the name of the Tenth Legion, by which it was and is familiarly known.

The Regiment, composed of many of the brave and patriotic fathers and sons of the first families of Orange and Sullivan, remained encamped on the banks of the beautiful Hudson, at Newburgh, perfecting themselves in the drill, until November 6th, 1861, when, in obedience to orders from the War Department, they left for the seat of war, and arrived in Washington on the 10th.

Lieutenant Beckett remained attached to his Regiment until December 30th, 1861, when he was detached therefrom to act as a Signal Officer. The order making this selection required the Colonel to select an officer from his Regiment of "integrity, sobriety, and courage." The known character of the Lieutenant at once pointed him out as a very suitable person for this responsible position and trust, and he was accordingly selected. He at once reported himself at the Camp of Signal Instruction; and such was his quickness of comprehension and tenacity of memory that he perfected himself in the system in the short space of three weeks, while others less favored failed to accomplish the same in as many months.

In February following he, with a number of others, reported to General Hooker, who was now encamped in lower Maryland, opposite Aquia Creek, and expected to cross the Potomac and attack the enemy on the other side, but the enemy retired and no attack was made. The party of the Signal Corps then repaired to Alexandria, where the Army of the Potomac was then embarking for the Peninsula. The Lieutenant was now attached to General Keyes' corps d'armes (the 4th), and left Alexandria March 27th, 1862, and arrived

at Fortress Monroe the following morning. On April 4th he reported to General Smith, with whom he remained till after the battle of Lee's Mills, which occurred on the 16th of April. In the meantime he was engaged in reconnaissances and scouting expeditions.

On one occasion, with General Smith's Chief of Staff, he passed a mile beyond the picket line to reconnoiter, and coming up with the enemy was fired upon, but made safe his retreat and rejoined the main body.

During the battle of Lee's Mills the lieutenant was stationed on the field signaling to General McClellan throughout the hottest of the fight. In this engagement he was exposed to great danger. His horse, standing under the tree from which he was signaling, was shot, but escaped uninjured. For his meritorious conduct on this occasion, as on some others, he received honorable mention, and testimonials, of which we hereafter more fully speak.

In the latter part of April he reported to General Franklin, whose division was then on board of transports at Ship Point, waiting for an order to go up the York River. He here remained till after the evacuation of Yorktown, and on May 7th went up the river to West Point, and disembarked. The next morning our forces were attacked, but repulsed the enemy after a fight of some three hours' action. During this engagement the Lieutenant was stationed on a house-top near the field of battle, but was not under fire. He advanced with the Army of the Potomac under General McClellan to within a few miles of Richmond, in the celebrated Peninsular Campaign, and accompanied General Davidson's brigade on the reconnaissance on the 23d of May, and met the enemy about a mile from Mechanicsville, a small place about five miles Northeast of Richmond. A brisk artillery engagement took place of two or three hours' duration, compelling the enemy to retire, our division sleeping on the field from which they had driven the enemy. At daybreak they again advanced, attacking the enemy with artillery, and by two o'clock in the afternoon succeeded in driving them from the field.

The enemy's loss, as afterward learned, was considerable, owing to the superiority of our artillery (fourteen pieces engaged), and the explosion of our shells; while our loss was but two killed, and four wounded, owing in a great measure to the non-explosion of their shells. In this engagement the Lieutenant was exposed, to the enemy's fire, and had some narrow escapes. In one instance, a cannon ball fired from the enemy's battery cut a haversack and blanket from the back of a horse by the side of which he was standing without injury to either horse or rider.

On another occasion, when on signal duty, he was singled out as target for the enemy's cannon and fired at, the shell striking and exploding within a few feet of him, throwing the dirt and stones about him, but without doing any personal injury.

The next battle, or rather series of battles, in which Lieutenant Beckett was a participant or actor, were those known as the seven days' battle, occurring on the last and eventful week in June and the first of July, 1862, in the withdrawal or retreat of the Army of the Potomac from before Richmond, to a safe position on James River, under cover of the

gunboats. He was in most of the battles of that eventful week, and on several occasions rendered very essential signal service in giving useful information of the movements of the enemy, keeping up communication with our commanding officers, and thus controlling our own army movements. On several occasions he was exposed to the enemy's fire, at one time losing his horse and walking three miles to the place of rendezvous. At another time during this retreat he went three days without food, and when worn out with fatigue and excitement, hunger and thirsty, he threw himself on the bare ground and slept soundly until the roar of artillery aroused him from his slumbers at the early dawn the next morning.

For his gallant conduct, noble bearing, and essential services rendered on different occasions, during these series of battles, he received honorable mention, and the flattering commendation of his superior officers, and was also awarded a set of Signal Flags (now in the possession of the writer), four in number, with a large star occupying the usual square block in the center. One flag is of beautiful silk, and in the corners of the star are inscribed the names of the battles in which he rendered special and meritorious service.

His services at Mechanicsville and Malvern Hill are particularly noticeable. During the engagement at the latter place the Lieutenant was sent on board the Mahaska, to direct the firing by signals in consequence of the high banks of the river, which prevented the gunner on the vessel from seeing the enemy. A signal officer stationed on an eminence inland communicated with another on the war vessel and thus directed the fire with an accuracy scarcely conceivable. The Lieutenant served as a signal officer with the navy, until the Army of the Potomac was withdrawn from Harrison's Landing, and finally from the Peninsula, serving on board the Mahaska, Port Royal, Dacotah and Tioga. While on board the Port Royal, the second battle of Malvern Hill was fought about July 24th. This ended his Signal service in this Department.

His services were first commended in an official report made by Albert J. Myer, signal officer, and Major, United States Army to Brigadier General S. Williams, Assistant Adjutant General, Army of the Potomac, in communication bearing date: "Headquarters Army of the Potomac, Camp Lincoln, Virginia, June 22, 1862", in which he says: "I have the honor to state the following acting signal officers have been exposed under fire while in the discharge of their duties during the present campaign. Engagement at Lees Mills, Second Lieutenant Isaac Beckett, Fifty-Sixth Regiment New York State Volunteers. Skirmish at Mechanicsville, Second Lieutenant Isaac Beckett, Fifty-Sixth Regiment New York State Volunteers. For services in engagement at Lee's Mills maintaining communication across a field swept by the enemy's fire, Second Lieutenant Isaac Beckett, Fifty-Sixth Regiment New York State Volunteers."

The name of the Lieutenant alone appears in the copy of the communications addressed to him. We also find the following report made by the signal officer of the corps, Albert J. Myer, to General S. Williams, under date of "Headquarters, Army of the Potomac, Camp near Harrison's Landing, Virginia, July 11th, 1862, in which he says:

"I have the honor to submit the following preliminary report of service rendered by

officers and men of the Signal Corp since my communication of June 22, 1862. The following officers have been exposed under fire in the discharge of their duties during the recent movement of this army, and in the engagement of June 25th, 26th, 27th, 29th, 30th, and July 1st, 1862.

“In each case these officers have well performed the duties on which they were ordered, and often under circumstances of dangerous exposure: At Mechanicsville, June 26th, Second Lieutenant Isaac Beckett, Fifty-Sixth Regiment New York State Volunteers. During the battle of Malvern Hill, July 1st, and the operations of that day and the ensuing night, constant communication was kept up between our forces on land, and our fleet, cooperating at various points on James River. There was communication also between different vessels of the fleet. This communication was maintained by officers on the field, some of them exposed to a heavy fire. The position occupied by officers wherever stationed on that day and night were those requiring arduous labor, and involving serious responsibility; on this day, as on the preceding, the fire of the Navy was directed and regulated almost entirely by the Signal Officers from the battlefield, and from ship to ship. For their services, during the battle, among others, we mention Second Lieutenant Isaac Beckett, Fifty-Sixth Regiment New York State Volunteers.”

We also find by official General Order No. 42, issued from Headquarters U. S. Signal Corps, Va., July 22, 1822, that “The following named acting Signal Officer, Lieutenant Isaac Beckett, having gallantly carried and used his signal flag in action, will hereafter bear, as a mark of honor, battle flags inscribed with the names of the battles of Lee's Mills and Malvern Hill.”

Lieutenant Beckett was promoted from Second to First Lieutenant, August 5th, 1862, and in the early part of September repaired himself in Washington, and was ordered to the West to report for Signal service to Major General Wright. Cincinnati was at this time threatened by the enemy under Kirby Smith. He reported to General Lew. Wallace, with whom he remained until the threatened danger was over, and then reported in Louisville, Kentucky, to General Nelson. The next morning after he had reported, while stopping at the Gait House, General Nelson was shot in an altercation, by General Jefferson C. Davis. He then joined the command of C. C. Gilbert, then acting Major General, since reduced to the rank of Brigadier. General Bull's army had at this time just reached Louisville, after its retreat from Alabama.

On the 1st of October, 1862, he started on the Kentucky campaign, under General Buell, the enemy steadily retreating - our advance skirmishing with their rear until October 7th, when they made a stand in front of Perryville. Next day was fought the battle of Perryville. He was engaged for a short time in this battle, but not under fire.

After the Rebels had been driven from Kentucky, General Gilbert's Corps was broken up, and he was assigned to the command of a Division. The Lieutenant was then ordered to report to General Buell, who was soon after relieved by General Rosecrans. The latter officer transferred him to Major-General A. McD. McCook's Staff in December, and he

accompanied the Army of the Cumberland on the campaign which opened December 26th. This campaign was a short but vigorous one. The ground was sharply contested on either side, but the main point, a victory, was gained. The enemy were routed and driven from the position which they had selected for their winter quarters, and retreated, disheartened, and discouraged, leaving behind in our hands in killed and wounded between nine and ten thousand. General Bragg had led them to expect a repulse of our army, which would be followed by an advance upon, and the capture of Nashville. But the gallant and heroic conduct of General Rosecrans and the noble army under him, as exhibited on this occasion, decided the contest in our favor, and covered the General and his brave followers with merited and distinguished praise. Our troops suffered much during the fight. It rained nearly every day, and the poor soldiers, drenched to the skin, were not permitted to kindle fires at night, lest it might aid the enemy. They were also during the greater portion of the time without food. Corn was issued to a few regiments, three ears being allowed to a man. This was parched and greedily devoured.

In other cases, soldiers killed the wounded horses and ate their flesh. Yet in the face of all this privation and suffering, the soldiers, without murmuring, being animated by the true spirit of patriotism and resolved to defend and perpetuate the "Unity of our country and the integrity of the Republic," stood nobly up to their work, valiantly fought, routed and drove the enemy and secured the victory. Lieutenant Beckett was an active participant in the stirring and eventful scenes of this campaign, but escaped without personal injury.

Our army, strongly fortified, remained in front of Murfreesboro, and the winter passed amid the routine and monotony of camp life broken only by an occasional raid or incursion in pursuit of the enemy and the capture of a few prisoners.

In May, 1863, Lieutenant Beckett made application to be returned to his regiment, and on June 6th he received an order from the Secretary of War to rejoin his regiment, the Fifty-Sixth New York State Volunteers, then stationed on Seabrook Island, off the coast of South Carolina. He soon after bade adieu to his fellow Signal Officers, and the military commanders in the Army of the Cumberland, with many of whom he had formed personal friendships and warm attachments, and left for another field of action, and the discharge of other duties.

He embraced the opportunity thus offered to make a visit to his home and may friends in Orange County New York, and then sailed in the steamer "Fulton" from New York, on Thursday, July 23, 1863, and reached the headquarters of his regiment, which was now situated on Folly Island, off the coast of South Carolina, in, four days thereafter, and met with a hearty and joyous welcome from the officers and his companions-in-arms, and was again identified for a time with the fate and doings of the regiment, participating in siege and picket duty in erecting batteries on Morris Island under direction of General Gillmore, and at times harassed by the enemy's fire, until January 20th, 1864, when, having been recommended as a competent and suitable person to act as Commissary of Subsistence, he was again detached from the regiment, and repaired to Beaufort, South Carolina, to receive instructions and make himself familiar with the duties of his new

office, and was soon after appointed Post Commissary, at St. Helena, on the coast of South Carolina, where we leave him at the present writing, April, 1864, in the prompt and faithful discharge of the duties pertaining to his office.

In personal appearance Lieutenant Beckett is of full medium size, well proportioned, firmly and compactly built, good features, full face, fair complexion, blue eyes, dark brown hair, agreeable, and courteous manners, easy in conversation, and of fine military bearing. He is high-toned and honorable, yet modest and unassuming, and appears to blend the character of duty with that of propriety, in the discharge of his official acts. Early thrown upon his own resources to act for himself, his resolution and perseverance overcame every obstacle; and he succeeded when and where others of less firmness of purpose and determination of will would have failed.

A close observer of men and movements, a ready and easy writer, his graphic correspondence was eagerly sought for, and ever welcomed by the different papers and journals of the day to which he was a contributor.

Prompted by a sense of duty and patriotism to his beloved country, he, in common with thousands, volunteered in defense of its rights, and to evolve the true spirit of American independence which has given not only to millions of American freemen, but has circulated impulses of human rights that are permeating the whole world and raising a beacon star of hope to the downtrodden and oppressed of all nations. And we can but believe that when the clash of arms and the resound of battle shall have passed away; when the roar of the cannon shall give way to the sweet swelling strains of peace; that when the supremacy of the Government shall have been fully established on a basis never more to be moved; when the Stars and Stripes shall again triumphantly float over a happy, united and free people; then will the great struggle through which we are now passing have written out for us a glorious page of advancement on the world's tablets, and then, too, shall those who have fought and triumphed have secured for themselves imperishable monuments in the hearths of a grateful posterity, and be garlanded with wreaths of victory and renown, and their names shall be enrolled on the brightest pages of American history, while the strains of the poet and the eloquence of the orator, of future ages shall celebrate their deeds of valor and hymn their requiems of praise. Honored, thrice honored then, will be he whose head, heart, or hand, shall have been found to have contributed to the consummation of so great and glorious an end.

“O soldiers of the battle plain!
How pure and high the hope that leads you,
As firmly gazing on our slain,
You think yet more your country needs you!
Then,
Go on, go on! Our God will see,
Though man should not, each deed of valor;
And though your earthly need may be
A brow where death shall spread his pallor,
In distant homes and distant times,
Each man shall live, a household story;
And, told in tales and sung in rhymes,
Shall stir young hearts to deeds of glory.
O blood-red stripes! O golden stars!
O glorious flag that floats above you!
Its truth shall lead you through these wars,
And teach all human hearts to love you.”

The above was transcribed from a copy of a pamphlet I have, as reprinted by the Daily Record Co of Savannah in 1913. The author was Charles B. Halstead (he was a teacher living in Newburgh, New York, in 1864, based on some entries in Mary Amarintha Beckett’s diary and the Newburgh city directory). It was apparently originally written in April 1864 (that is the point where the author states that “we leave him at the present writing”). The author also refers to having Beckett’s Signal Corps flags in his possession.

Please note one correction: According to immigration records found at Ancestry.com¹⁸, the Beckett family arrived on the ship William, which sailed from Westport, Ireland, arriving in New York on April 30, 1851, not 1852 as noted in the sketch. The passenger list includes parents Michael age 40, Catherine age 30, siblings John age seven months, Mary age ten, William, age three, and Isaac, age twelve.

*Thomas G. Weiss, Jr.
August 18, 2005*

In the Second Annual Report of the Chief of the Bureau of military Statistics, State of New York, dated February 2, 1865, pages 46-47, Charles B. Halstead, Esq., is identified as the deputy Provost Marshall of the 11th district (Newburgh) and as a contributor to the report covering volunteers for the town of Newburgh.

Thomas G. Weiss, Jr.

March 1, 2013