

A MUTINEER'S BULLET

Charles Russell Lowell was not one to stand by quietly and ignore insubordination. On this April morning, in 1862 he had his hands full as an unruly mob of Irish recruits, made bold by drink, were threatening to assault a pair of his officers in the Boston recruiting office. Sabers were already drawn and furious cursing filled the air as Lowell stepped into the melee, determined to stand his ground.

Although he had been raised in a wealthy family and among Boston's elite, Lowell had been a scrapper as a young man who traded his share of fisticuffs with boyhood rivals. While attending Harvard at the age of fifteen, he mastered two languages and studied the art of the saber. As he matured and entered the military Lowell developed a strong sense of duty and patriotism which heightened his expectations of those who were to serve under him. A soldier prone to disorderly conduct would not find Lowell's command a pleasant stay.



While assigned to the staff of George McClellan in 1862 Lowell was offered command of a new regiment of cavalry to be raised in Massachusetts. Its ranks were to include an odd mixture of savvy Californians and volunteers from his home state. The Californians, around 500 in number, enlisted out of a desire to be involved in the war and under an agreement whereby they were to be mustered into a Massachusetts regiment in return for payment of their passage from the West. To Lowell fell the task of uniting these rough-and-ready Californians with an equal number of Bay State troopers and then to train them to fight as a cohesive unit. Many of these New England volunteers were well intentioned, yet inexperienced in the ways of horsemanship and gunplay. However there were others from Massachusetts who were bounty men off the back streets of Boston and itching for a scrap.

Early in the morning of April 9, 1863, Massachusetts recruits bound for Company G of the new 2nd Massachusetts Cavalry were gathered to muster into the service. Only a few paces from the state capital, the downstairs drilling room of the recruiting office on City Hall Avenue was crowded with men, now numbering 68 in all. But before the process could begin, something went badly wrong.

Several of the men were drunk and became uncontrollable. The sergeant in charge, Ansom Burlingham tried to put one of the offenders in irons. Another recruit, William Lynch accosted the sergeant, and after punching him in the face angrily threatened him. Tempers rose and shouts of "Kill the son-of-a-bitch!" and "Kill the sergeant, damn him!" filled the room.

Burlingham was able to make his escape up the stairs where he found Lieutenant Archibald McKendry, originally from the Cal Hundred who had been promoted to Lieutenant and singled out to raise the company. McKendry and the recruiting officer, George Quincy went downstairs and found the mob still seething. They had already been issued their sabers and the situation was agitated and dangerous. McKendry ordered Burlingham once again to put Lynch, the most vocal of the group, in irons. With this, tempers exploded and sabers were drawn. But McKendry coolly ordered the men into line and began a drill routine. The distraction seemed to calm things a bit and the whole matter might have concluded here. But Lieutenant Quincy who had earlier fled the commotion now returned with four policemen. The sight of the police was more than the angered men could tolerate and once again sabers were drawn and they rushed the police who fled in disorder back up the stairs.

Suddenly into this scene appeared Colonel Lowell. The presence of the colonel brought a momentary quiet to the men, and Lowell ordered them into line. Once they were formed he ordered Lynch to step forward and be ironed. Shouting erupted and sabers were once again drawn. Lowell, who was unarmed, asked for a pistol and over the shouts of the men cried out, "The order must be obeyed! After it is obeyed, I will hear what you have to say and will decide the case on its merits, but it must be obeyed first." The reaction was further shouting and Lowell braced himself and then raised the stakes. "God knows, I don't want to kill any of you, but I shall shoot the first man who resists!"

To the miscreants in their agitated state, this was the final insult and they rushed the officers. In the midst of the melee, as some of the officers received saber slashes to their arms and wrists, Lynch was somehow ironed. Another conscript, William Pendergast lunged at Lieutenant McKendry with his drawn sword. Colonel Lowell stepped into his path and fired a Colt pistol directly at his breast.¹

The shot rang out through the room like a thunderbolt, momentarily bringing a stunned silence to the uproar. Pendergast fell to the floor and never moved. When the men regained their senses, they began shouting taunts at Colonel Lowell. The handcuffed Lynch threatened that he would kill the Colonel. Another recruit, James Thompson shouted, "Colonel Lowell is a son-of-a-bitch, and a coward for shooting Pendergast!" Then as the junior officers drug the shouting Lynch from the room, the rebellion ended as suddenly as it began. The men fell into line on McKendry's orders and Lowell left the room. Lynch was removed to the city jail until an inquiry could be made. The balance of the company was then mustered in as planned and then transported by rail to Camp Readville.²



Pendergast's body was taken to the coroner where the bullet was extracted. The examining physician was James K. Oliver³, a military surgeon. Curiously, Oliver felt constrained to retain the bullet in a small wooden vial with a scrawled note explaining the

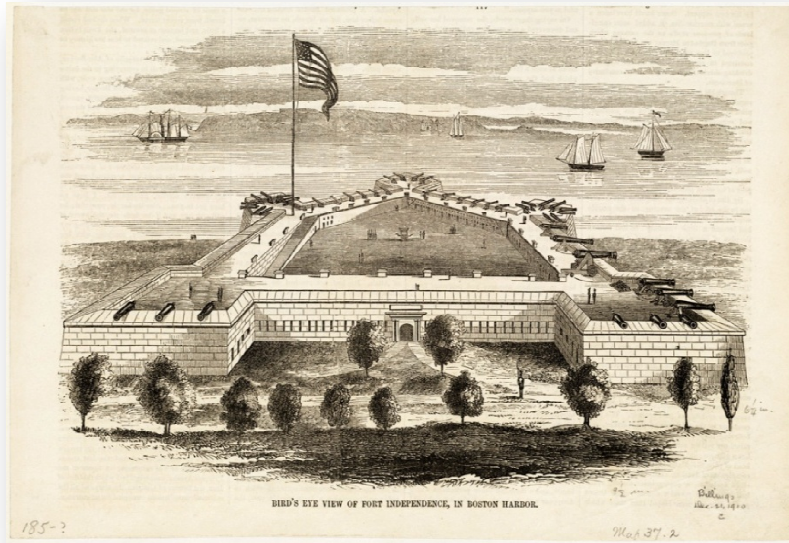
nature of the event that had just transpired. An inquest was scheduled for the following day to review the events and determine what action should be taken, either against Lowell or the enlisted men involved in the uproar.

Lowell seems to have been noticeably affected by the whole affair. Although he had now been in the military for two years, he had not yet fired a weapon in anger. Now he had actually killed a man at point blank range, and one who was preparing to serve in his command at that. After the shooting, he strode across the street to the capital building and reported to the provost marshal general of Massachusetts who refused to take him into custody. He then went to the office of Governor John Andrew with whom he was acquainted. In a sentence Lowell explained what had happened and departed, the governor having decided to take no action against him. Said Governor Andrew to a bystander who had appeared in his office, "I need nothing more, Lowell is as humane as he is brave."⁴

The inquest held on the following day included testimony from the coroner and eyewitnesses (from the officer's corps only). Lowell was exonerated and the matter was dropped. But Boston's newspapers were not so understanding. The Boston Journal printed most of the transcript of the inquest and was supportive of the Colonel. But the Courier, an anti-war paper was critical of his actions, claiming officer elitism and demanding further testimony to be obtained from the enlisted men. With the Governor behind Lowell and the power of his own reputation, the matter was dropped as far as Lowell was concerned.⁴ But not so for the mutineers.

At 2:00 p.m. on the afternoon of the shooting, after muster was completed, four additional men from Company G who were deemed the most vocal of the agitators were arrested and taken to Fort Independence, a military bastion on Boston harbor. Here, they joined William Lynch who had been taken in irons earlier in the day. Lynch, a 26 year old Irish laborer, was the drunken subject of the whole affair who had threatened Lowell after the shooting. Sentenced to be executed, Lynch was shot at Fort Independence on June 16, 1863.

The second and third detainees were William Johnson and Daniel Riley. Johnson was a 21 year old sailor, Riley a 19 year old shoemaker. They were found not guilty by the General Court Martial and released to their Company where they served faithfully for the balance of the war and mustered out on July 20, 1865.



The fourth trooper among those arrested was Sylvester Riley, a 21 year old machinist. He died at Fort Independence three days after the disturbance. Mysteriously, the cause of his death was unknown.

And the fifth prisoner was a young man named Francis Dew. He was an 18 year old apothecary (pharmacist) and like Lynch was found guilty and sentenced to be shot. But before the sentence could be accomplished the young man's punishment was commuted by Abraham Lincoln to hard labor for the balance of the war. Dew was dishonorably discharged on July 25, 1865.

Whatever introspection was going on within the mind of Colonel Lowell during the days after the shooting was soon forgotten, as the following week the California Battalion arrived from California. And Colonel Lowell turned his mind to making the regiment ready for war.

Notes

¹ *Evening Transcript Boston, Thursday April 11, 1863*

² *Evening Transcript Boston, Thursday April 9, 1863*

³ The medical officer referred to may have been James Oliver, a 28-year-old surgeon from Athol, Massachusetts who was associated with the 21st and 61st Massachusetts Infantry. For some unknown reason Oliver felt inclined to retain the bullet he had extracted from Pendergast's body. He kept the .36 cal pistol ball in a wooden vial along with a note written in his own hand. The note reads "*Bullet recovered by me from the dead body of the ringleader of the revolting recruits of the 2nd Mass Cavalry who was shot by the Col. (Charles Russell Lowell) Apl. 9th, 1863. (see Harvard Memorial Biographies, 1866, Vol I, page 313 for an account of the affair.) The bullet entered the left chest striking the lower edge of the collar bone by which it was deflected, cutting the main artery. The impact of the bullet on the bone caused flattening seen in the middle.*" It is signed Ja. K. Oliver, M.O.

⁴ Emerson, The Life and Letters of Charles Russell Lowell, p. 375

⁵ William Pendergast does not appear anywhere on the company's muster roll or regimental records. However, he was not new to the enlistment process. A few months earlier he mustered into Co. A, 43rd Massachusetts Infantry (October 29, 1862), received his bounty payment and deserted from Camp Readville three days later

Eighteen months after this incident Colonel Lowell was killed at the battle of Cedar Creek. Upon the Colonel's death, Lowell's widow Effie made a determined effort to locate the rumored wife of William Pendergast, but without success. She ultimately came to believe that reports of Pendergast's marriage were groundless and the whole affair was closed for good.