

by LARS AND KNUD OLSEN DOKKEN
translated by DELLA KITTLESON CATUNA
edited by CAROL LYNN H. KNIGHT
AND GERALD S. COWDEN

5 *Two Immigrants for the Union:
Their Civil War Letters*

LARS AND KNUD OLSEN DOKKEN were brothers who emigrated from Norway with their family in 1857 to settle in Perry Township, Dane County, Wisconsin. Lars was eighteen and Knud, fourteen. They were from substantial stock — landowners, teachers, and ministers, at least since the sixteenth century.¹ Why they left their homeland is unknown, but a member of the family noted that there was “a great influx of Norwegians at that time [into the Upper Midwest], and America was the Golden Land, the land of opportunity, and the Good Life.” They came to Wisconsin specifically because they had relatives already farming there. It was an affectionate and deeply religious family, as the letters reveal.²

Caught up in the patriotism and fervent Republicanism of the Norwegian immigrant community,³ Lars and Knud joined the Fifteenth Wisconsin Volunteer Regiment in December, 1861, and February, 1862, respectively. The regiment was organized by Norwegians in Madison, Wisconsin, with Colonel Hans Christian Heg



Lars and Knud Dokken

in command. Heg, himself an immigrant and a local politician, was well suited to lead his fellow Norwegians, about 3,500 of whom eventually joined his contingent. After training near Madison at Camp Randall, the regiment moved on March 1, 1862, to Chicago, where the Nora Lodge, a Scandinavian society, presented them a flag. They then moved on to Union City, Tennessee, which they captured from the Confederates on March 30. The next month they helped take Island No. 10 in the Mississippi River, where two of their companies remained on garrison duty. Meanwhile, Knud died of camp fever. In October the Norwegians moved southward. After long marches through Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama, and Kentucky, Lars was wounded in the Battle of Stone's River, Tennessee, in December, 1862. He died three months later in a Union hospital in Nashville.

The Fifteenth Regiment went on, suffering heavy casualties at the Battle of Chickamauga, where Colonel Heg and many other officers were killed. A remnant of the unit, reinforced by the companies who had remained at Island No. 10, followed General Sherman on his march to Atlanta. The three-year enlistment for most of the Norwegians ended in the autumn of 1864, and their regiment was disbanded, having lost more than a third of its members. Of the survivors, some went home; most of the others remained in service at various posts of duty.

Throughout the campaigns in which the Dokken brothers took part, they wrote regular letters to their "unforgettable parents" in Wisconsin. Their experience was that of the common soldier who followed orders and was not always certain of what was happening in the war. Their concerns were for their wages, their food, their clothes, and small amenities to make their ordeal tolerable. What sustained them was not only their belief in the Union cause, but also a strong and simple religious faith.



IMMIGRANTS FOR THE UNION

The Dokken letters, after remaining in the family for more than a century, were recently given to the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, which has granted us permission to use them. Written in Norwegian, they were published in large part by Waldemar Ager in his *Oberst Heg og hans gutter* (Eau Claire, Wisconsin, 1916).⁴ They deserve the wider audience made possible by their translation into English. Some editorial changes have been necessary. As all the letters were addressed to parents, brothers, and sisters, salutations and closing remarks have been eliminated. Material of a purely personal nature referring to family and friends has been greatly reduced. The editors are grateful to members of the Dokken family, who have anglicized their name to Kittleson, for their support of this project. In particular we thank Calvin and Catherine Kittleson, who first shared the letters with us and introduced us to their aunt, Della Kittleson Catuna, our translator, collaborator, and friend.

1. NO BATTLES YET

Camp Lyon, Birds Point, Missouri March 8, 1862

As we now have arrived, we must send a few words, dear parents, to let you know how our trip has been going. We left Madison on March 2 and came to Chicago the same evening at 7 o'clock. We were welcomed by the citizens there with cheers and applause when we marched through the city. We halted not far from the station where we were to board the train.⁵

We were presented with a flag that the Norwegian women of Chicago had designed and made for our regiment. When we had boarded the train, we were treated to coffee and cake, and at about 11 o'clock in the evening we left from there and arrived at Alton, on the Mississippi River, Monday evening. There we boarded a steamboat which brought us to St. Louis Tuesday morn-



Lars and Knud Dokken

ing. We stayed there until Wednesday and again got on a steamer that brought us here, a few miles from Cairo, on Thursday morning [March 6].⁶

From St. Louis it was quite cold on the boat, as we had to lie on the open deck. Lars became ill, presumably with a cold. He has been laid up for 4 days, but we hope he will soon be well again. He is now in the hospital, where he is in good hands, with nursing care, doctors, and medicines.⁷ Otherwise, we have it pretty good here at camp, since we have good houses or barracks to live in. Besides our regiment, there are also a couple of other infantry units as well as some artillery. There are no enemies in the vicinity, though they are close enough for our outposts to take 3 Southern soldiers prisoners yesterday.⁸

We sent \$35 home in a letter from Madison. Will you let us know when you receive it?⁹ We don't think we will take part in any battle soon, and possibly we will escape entirely. As for the South, it surely can not last very long. Also, there are many troops here who have been in the service longer than we, and they will be taken before us.¹⁰ So I will close with loving wishes from your devoted sons, Knud and Lars Olsen. We will be happy to get letters as soon as possible so that we will know if you have received the money.¹¹

Knud Olsen Dokken

2. THREE MILES FROM THE ENEMY

[No address]

March 18, 1862

I must write a few words now to tell you that to date I find myself in good health. On the 14th we left Birds Point on a steamboat down the Mississippi. Brother Lars was left behind as he was sick, but I hope he will follow in a few days; he was feeling better when we left.

It is now 3 days since we arrived. We are 3 miles from the enemy. Our cannonboats fire at them every day, and



IMMIGRANTS FOR THE UNION

they fire back at us. So we are not safe at any time. We think we will attack when we are all assembled. We don't know how many [Rebels] there are, but there seem to be a great number. They are on an island [Island No. 10], which is surrounded by our troops. Of our men, there were 5 killed and 4 wounded. How many the enemy lost, we don't know. We land troops have not fired a shot as yet. Whether we see one another again we do not know. That remains in the Lord's almighty hand. He guides us on our way.¹²

Knud Olsen Dokken

3. I HAVE BEEN VERY ILL

Camp Lyon, Birds Point, Missouri March 26, 1862

As I have a few moments now, I must greet you with a few lines to let you know how I am getting along down here. Since I came to this place I have been very ill, but now, with God's help, I am improving. I hope that in a short while I will be well again.

Our regiment got marching orders to leave on March 13 to New Madrid, which is about 40 miles away down the Mississippi. Those who were well left, as did my brother Knud. Those who were sick, along with a few others of the regiment, remained here at Birds Point; I believe there were over 100 men, some from each company. The regiment is now in 3 places. We don't know when we will follow them. Perhaps it will be a long time before we reassemble again. But I don't think we are in any danger from the enemy so long as we are here. Many became sick soon after they arrived, due, I think, to the unfamiliar climate and the dirty Mississippi water that we have to use. New Madrid was deserted by the enemy the same morning our regiment arrived, and our men did not take part in any battle. They are lodged in the same boat that brought them down the river. They are said to find the nights very nasty and cold.



Lars and Knud Dokken

From my brother I have not heard since he left.

There is an island in the Mississippi called Island No. 10, which is stoutly held by the Rebels and which the North has tried to capture with their cannonboats, but it is so strongly fortified they have not been able to take it. It lies a ways down from New Madrid. They cannot use land troops, therefore not our regiment.¹³

Your loving son,
Lars Olsen Dokken

4. WE TAKE ISLAND NO. 10

[The top part of this letter is missing; the date is apparently April 18, 1862.]

On April 2, I again joined my regiment, which was encamped farther down the Mississippi River. There I met my brother who is full of vigor and in good health in all respects.

We see by your letter that you received the \$35 we sent from Madison and that you paid back the person whom we owed. But we don't know when we will get our pay. Surely, as soon as we receive it, we will send some home. We should have it on May first, but it is not certain. Certainly we should get it at regular periods.¹⁴

And now I must tell you about an engagement we had on March 31. We were about 500 men from our regiment and 7 companies of the 27th Illinois Regiment, a company of cavalry, and one of artillery. So we were about 1,400 men. We left our camp on the 30th and marched part of the way that day. That night we encamped in a grain field. The next morning we were out early and reached the enemy camp when they were about to have breakfast. Our cavalry and artillery began fire, which surprised them so that they took flight like bewildered sheep. They left everything behind, guns and clothing and many other things. But the enemy was pretty strong; we believe about 3,000 or 4,000. . . . [Top of letter page missing.]



IMMIGRANTS FOR THE UNION

And now Island No. 10 is captured with 5 or 6,000 men taken prisoners. It was taken on April 6. There was no battle; hordes of our troops merely came up from behind, and the enemy gave themselves up quickly. Our cannonboats had lain there about 3 weeks and had fired at their batteries. We did no damage to their batteries until our troops came up behind. Our regiment arrived on the island on April 8. Five companies are now on the island and 5 are on the other side of the Mississippi River. They are Cos. C, D, G, E, and B. They stand guard and do miscellaneous work, cleaning up after the Rebels. The companies on the island are doing the same. We are strengthening the batteries for a possible future breakthrough by the Southerners. All around us are many cannonboats and all kinds of ammunition which the Rebels had to leave behind when they were taken prisoners. We think we will remain here for some time, for the general has said there is little indication of our going into battle. But we may do guard duty at some place or other. As for the war itself, we know nothing. I believe you hear much more than we do. We only know what happens here around us. You receive *Emigranten*¹⁵ before we do. . . . [Half of a letter page missing.]

I must tell you that the woods are in full leaf and the fields and meadows are filled with flowers. The weather is quite warm. We are afraid it will be very hot here this summer. Please write to us as soon as possible so we can hear about this and that in the neighborhood. . . . [Torn letter page.]

Lars Olsen Dokken

5. FORTIFYING THE ISLAND

Island No. 10, Tennessee

May 4, 1862

I am sorry to have to tell you that brother Knud has been ill for some time of typhoid fever and has been bedridden for over a week. But I am, praise God, well these days, for which I thank the Lord. We hope to hear



Lars and Knud Dokken

the same from you, that you are all in good health. There are many sick of nerve fever in our regiment. Some died last week. There are so many sick here. Let us hope the Lord will heal all the sick and grieving people in this enemy land. For all of us, it is the greatest wish to tell you that we are in sound health. Other friends and relatives are well, and they ask us to send their greetings.

We are still working on the fortifications and will soon be finished with the trenches. They are six feet deep on one side and a good 10 to 12 feet on the other, and filled with dirt. On the inside of the battery is a wooden fence 6 feet high, put up so that the earth does not slide down on the cannon that will be placed there. We have set up 4 cannon but there will be about 50 in all. The fortification lies straight across the island. It will be the best place to blockade the Mississippi River. Every boat that comes up the river has to give a signal, or we fire upon them with our new cannon. Regarding the war, I have no news, though we have heard that New Orleans has been seized and many of the South's gunboats. Some of them escaped up the river, and these we fear will try to take our boats, now lying about 30 miles down the river. Therefore, we are hurrying to get our forts ready, in case that should happen. However, they say it is not certain they will attempt to come up the river again as there are bulwarks on all sides.¹⁶ As for our pay, we have not received any, but as soon as we do, we will send home as much as we can.

Lars Olsen Dokken

6. A DISORDERLY CELEBRATION

Island No. 10

June 4, 1862

Since I now have a moment's leisure, I really must take pen in hand to let you know how I am getting along these days. Since I recovered from my illness, I have been in pretty good health, for which I thank God. . . .



IMMIGRANTS FOR THE UNION

There are many sick in our regiment and they are in the hospital. Five men from our company have died since we came to Island No. 10, and now there are 6 of them in the hospital, and also about 10 men are still unable to work. Our company, along with Co. K, moved from the island on May 19 to the other side of the Mississippi River. We are about one mile from the other companies that have remained here. We are inside a fort, which has deep trenches on all sides; so we cannot go out or come in without a pass from our captain. There is one gate with a bridge over it, which is guarded day and night. The fort is in a square, about 20 rods on each side.

Since we came here, we have had to stand guard every other day, as there are so many gates to watch. So we who are well and able have a lot to do. It is pretty rough, because we do not get enough sleep. Although we can rest on our day off, there is still plenty work to do, such as polishing our guns and other things. In the morning before we go on duty, our captain comes to see us. We now have a new captain named George Wilson from Madison. He is a very nice fellow. Our former captain was disqualified and sent home. Also, our Colonel Heg returned this evening after a short trip to Madison, which you may have heard about.¹⁷ And I must tell you that on May 26 we got new uniforms, which are very good looking. We got black hats decorated with a bugle and an eagle and a black feather set on the side. Also black frock coats, black trousers of the same material, and white woolen undershirts and shoes; all of this we got new.¹⁸ But we have not received our pay, and we do not know when we will get it either, perhaps not until July.

I must also tell you that our officers voted to give us the 17th of May [Norwegian Constitution Day] as a holiday, so our regiment could have a little fun. Our company got some beer which we sent to Cairo for. But some



Lars and Knud Dokken

of the men in Co. A got quite drunk and rowdy and started a fight. They were put in the guardhouse. But several of their friends set out for the guardhouse, shoved the guard out of the way, and freed the prisoners. But then our captain, who was officer of the day, arrived and he tried to get these fellows under control. But there was one chap who struck at our captain, and the whole company went wild. Then came an order that our 4 companies should bring them to order. The command "Fall in, fall in" was called out, and so we assembled as quickly as possible. We were told to load our guns quickly and were marched to the guardhouse in formation. Company A was lined up and we ringed them in. The major came to question them. All of them had to turn in their guns to the major and 6 of the men were put under arrest. Their lieutenant was also arrested. They have not yet been sentenced and so we don't know what will happen. I am afraid it will go hard with them.

Another man of our company is under arrest for falling asleep at his post while standing guard. He is Ole Olsen Neregjorde.¹⁹ He has not come to trial yet, but I know it will be hard, for there is a death sentence for those who sleep at the post. Another man was punished because he refused to tidy up his tent. He was hanged by the hands as long as they thought he could stand it. So you have to obey your officers — or else!²⁰

As for the war, we don't know anything new except that the Rebels have deserted Corinth²¹ and I have heard that MacClelland [*sic*] has begun to bombard Richmond, which I believe has been taken. But I also heard that they have begun to recruit men again in the North to replenish the regiments. I don't see how that can be true, because I thought there would soon be an end to this war, and that we could come home. But it does not look like it, if they are enlisting more men. We must hope that we can come home soon.



IMMIGRANTS FOR THE UNION

Regarding my brother's death, I believe you have received my last letter stating that he passed away on May 7. He was in a clear state of mind until he drew his last breath. But it was sad for me to be parted from him in this enemy land, but the Lord does all for the best. He knew what was best for him, that he no longer had to struggle in this evil world. So we hope that he has it better than we do, we poor weak sinners. May God help and guide us on the right path and may He shield us all from sudden and abrupt death, which can come quickly upon us poor sinners.

As for my brother's clothes, I will try to have them sent home, but I am afraid it will cost very much. I think our captain will have an opportunity to send them. I don't know just how to get his pay, but I believe our captain will check on this and see that it will be sent to you at home. I, myself, can do nothing about it. As soon as I receive my pay I will send some home.
Lars Olsen Dokken

7. THE DEATH OF A BROTHER

Island No. 10, Tennessee

June 11, 1862

I see that you got the news of the death of my brother Knud, which was a great sorrow for you. But we have to accept it and let the Lord's will be done. You asked me to tell you a little more about his last moments. He was quite resigned to his fate, except that he wished that he could speak to you again, but it was not the Lord's will that he should come home. He prayed that the Lord would be merciful to him. I read to him quite often, which pleased him. He was calm and at peace to the last. He was resigned to God's will and prayed that we could all meet again with our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

We have also received marching orders to go up the river to Kentucky, and so we are standing ready to march to the boat that will take us up the Mississippi. We do not



Lars and Knud Dokken

know where we are going, but as soon as we stop, I will write to you. I must tell you also that the river has been cleared of Rebels way down to New Orleans; so boats can now come up with all sorts of Rebel goods, clear to Cairo, Illinois.

Lars Olsen Dokken

8. WE REBUILD RAILROAD BRIDGES

Union City, Tennessee

June 18, 1862

We finally left Island No. 10 the evening of June 11 and arrived at Hickman at 7 o'clock the next morning. We stayed there till noon, then marched about 12 miles and lay over in a field overnight. The next morning we were off again and came to Union City at 11 a.m. We set up our tents and have been here since. We guard a railroad and are working to rebuild some bridges that the Rebels had burned at several places. We have repaired a railroad crossing, which is now ready for use. No trains have been able to run since the Rebels were driven off this spring, when we were here and burned all their tents and the town. The town is almost deserted and all the houses stand vacant.²²

Now we have received marching orders to leave here tomorrow at 5 a.m., to move ahead for more railroad work and repair. I think all the regiments will be together as we are under the same general.²³ I don't know how far forward we will go.

Lars Olsen Dokken

9. NO CHANCE FOR LEAVE

Humboldt, Tennessee

July 3, 1862

The next morning we set out again and marched to Humboldt, where we now have our camp in an apple orchard, which is very pleasant. There are many troops around this town. The Rebels find us in all parts of the state. Much damage is done to the farms as the Union



IMMIGRANTS FOR THE UNION

troops advance, especially when they find a Rebel-owned farm. Many of the farmers have come into town and swear loyalty to the Union, as they dare do nothing else. Those who do not join up are put under arrest. I stood watch at a house here the other night where they had six of those men and I saw one whose hands were tied. Our troops scout the countryside for them and bring them into town, where they are questioned by our officers.²⁴

How long we will be here we do not know. We have received no pay and we don't know when we get it either. Things look pretty grim, but as soon as it comes, I will send some home to you, as I know you are waiting for money from me. It is over four months since we were paid.

By your letter I see that you have spoken to a man from our regiment who was home on a short leave. You wish that I, also, could come home, but that is impossible when I have no money. Besides, I think that those who are well cannot get leave, only those who are sickly or have been ill. I certainly wish I could come but it is hard to get away now.

Lars Olsen Dokken

10. WE SCROUNGE FOR BETTER RATIONS

Camp Iuka, Mississippi

August 18, 1862

Every day I hope for a letter, as I want to know how you are getting along in Wisconsin this summer. I have heard through others that it was a poor year for wheat. Also, I would like to hear about the recruiting in the state, whether they are getting enough volunteers, or have they begun to draft in order to get enough men? It certainly is hoped that more troops will come in quickly so that there will be an end to this war.

The last time we moved was to a small town about 18 or 19 miles on. It is on the railroad line from Corinth



Lars and Knud Dokken

[Mississippi] to Alabama and is named Iuka. We are not far from the state line between Alabama and Mississippi. I have heard that we will go farther toward the Southeast, but just where we are headed we don't know. We have not seen any Rebel troops yet, but they say they are in flight southward as fast as they can go.

I must tell you about an order that was announced at dress parade one day. We should scout around the country and round up all the Negroes we could find and we could then place one Negro for every eight men to cook and wash for us and to do clean-up duty around the camp. We have not found any yet. But our regiment has quite a few [Blacks] who are cooks for the officers, and there are some in other companies.²⁵ We also go around the country gathering corn and apples, as much as we can use every day, and also chickens and other things that the soldiers like to eat. Many farmers have deserted the land. They are in a sad state in many places, because when the soldiers find that the owner is a Rebel, they take all he has. Also he loses his Negroes, who are set free. They now work for the regiments at a salary of \$8 to \$10 a month.

Lars Olsen Dokken.

11. WANDERING THROUGH THE SOUTH

Nashville, Tennessee

September 5, 1862

Now I must tell you about our wanderings through the land. We have covered about 180 miles since we left Iuka on August 21. We left shortly after noon that day and marched to the Tennessee River to a small town named Eastport. We crossed the river with all our gear on a steamer — both the First and Second Brigades — so we were not ready to leave there until the afternoon of the 23rd. On the 24th we arrived at Florence, Alabama, where we lay over for one day. On the 26th we marched



IMMIGRANTS FOR THE UNION

again about 18 miles, and on the 27th arrived at Lawrenceburg, Tennessee. On the 28th we came to a small village called Mt. Pleasant, and on the 29th we arrived at Columbia. On the 30th we marched about 25 miles and lay over in some woods. On the 31st we marched to a town named Franklin and, when we stopped in the afternoon, we were mustered for review. On September 1 we marched to Murfreesboro, where we set up camp close to the town. We were on guard duty through the night, and in the evening of the 3rd we set out again on the road to Nashville, marching until midnight. We rested a while but set off again early in the morning and marched 15 miles to where we are now camped, about 3 miles from the city of Nashville. The whole army is camped here in the woods.

As for our food and victuals, they have been very poor; we have got nothing but bacon and crackers on the way. Sometimes we get a little coffee but most often not. It is pretty hard to hold up like a man on such poor fare, with so much marching. Milk we hardly ever see. Now and then along the way we may be able to buy a canteenful, which is a pint, but it costs 15 or 20 cents. It is very difficult to visit the farms, for whenever we stop to camp for a day, guards are placed around the camps and the farms, even if the owner is in the Southern army. We have never seen such rambling among the Rebel states as we have here. If they [Union officers] don't change their campaign and get ahead any faster, this war will never be over.²⁶

We have heard that the Rebels have advanced far into Tennessee and Kentucky. So it seems this war is going no better than when it started. I hear we are going to retreat even farther here in Tennessee. There are guerilla bands all over the state that elude capture.

Lars Olsen Dokken



Lars and Knud Dokken

12. SERIOUS FIGHTING AT GREEN RIVER

Louisville, Kentucky

September 28, 1862

As I now have a little time to spare, I will take pen in hand and send you a few lines to let you know that we have just arrived in this city and that I am, praise God, in good health to date, for which I thank the Lord. But we are extremely exhausted from the long marches we have had for over a month. We have marched about 400 miles since August 21, when we left Iuka, Mississippi. We marched to Florence, Alabama, then to Columbia, Tennessee, from there to Franklin, to Murfreesboro, then to Nashville, where we stayed 5 days. On September 11 we left there and went to Bowling Green, Kentucky.

From there on the way to Louisville we met up with the enemy who lay by Green River. We came in combat there on September 14. The Southern troops took about 4,000 of our men prisoners. We then camped about 12 miles from the enemy and stayed there two days. While we were laid up there, the enemy had time to withdraw, but before they left, they burned a railroad bridge behind them; this cut off the mail route between our troops and Louisville. So we have neither received mail nor been able to send any home.

Since Iuka, we have marched on the heels of the enemy. They retreated toward Louisville and we after them. About 15 miles from that city, they took another route to avoid our troops. Many of our men have followed them — about four divisions, I think. As for our rations, they are very poor. We have not received more than half-rations and that has been scanty. We have gotten some flour instead of crackers; so as soon as we have stopped we begin to make pancakes, as there is no other way to use it. We butcher some animals which we cook and eat as fast as we can. We get a little cured ham sometimes, but not often. We hope things will be better from now on, as we have gotten full rations since we arrived. . . . But they say that our supply wagons were



IMMIGRANTS FOR THE UNION

captured by the Rebels and were burned and many of our regiment left behind. If that is true, they must be prisoners. Our knapsacks and clothes would also be lost, and we would have to buy new clothing again.

So far as the war goes, I know nothing new. But it seems like it will be a long time before we can come home again. As long as we can hold on to life and good health, we still have hope of seeing each other again. I do so wish I could be home, if only for a short while. I am so terribly tired of these long marches. I long for a little peace and quiet, if only for a little while. But I am afraid we must be off again — where, I don't know.

Lars Olsen Dokken

13. UNSCATHED IN FIERCE BATTLE

Perryville, Kentucky

October 10, 1862

In this moment of leisure I must take pen in hand and write you a few simple lines to let you know that I am well, for which I thank God. I was glad to have the same news from you in your letter of September 3 and also in one from A. Sanderson of September 12, that you are all in good health at the present time. These letters arrived on September 29, in Louisville. I read them with great joy; especially was I glad to hear that the money I sent had arrived safely. I see that you have sent many letters to me that I have never received. I hope they will reach me yet.

I sent a letter to you from Louisville in which I told you about the long marches we had after the Rebels. We did not stay long in Louisville. On October 1 we were ready to decamp again. We marched for 7 days, following the Rebels, then made bivouac about 6 miles from Perryville, which lies about 60 or 70 miles southeast of Louisville. We marched through the towns of Mount Washington, Bardstown, and Springfield, then to a small town where we engaged in combat.²⁷

It began shortly after noon on October 7. It was a fierce



Lars and Knud Dokken

battle all that day and far into the night. The next morning we started in again as fast as we could. Our division and several of our troops were held back as reserves. About 3 p.m. our brigade and division began to drive forward and we fought as hard as we could. We attacked the enemy's right wing and the 2nd Minnesota Battery began to fire upon them. The enemy fired back. We were ordered to lie low in a small depression, and so the bullets from both sides flew over us. This went on for an hour. Then the Rebels began a fast retreat, with us in pursuit. We took 150 prisoners, 11 ammunition wagons, with powder and bullets for cannon — all taken by our brigade from the right wing of the enemy line.

In the central and left wings the battle was fierce that day, but our troops drove the enemy back. They retreated as fast as they could, and as soon as it became dark, everything was still. At 3 a.m. we were roused and assembled in fighting lines and marched forward. But we saw nothing of the enemy. When we found that they had moved away from there, we were ordered back to our camp, where we are now. It is near a Confederate hospital. There are many Rebels wounded and dead. Today, October 10, our men are burying the Rebel dead. Many are lying in the nearby woods and it is a gruesome sight to see. We have not heard exactly how many are dead and wounded on our side, but they say many have fallen on both sides. Our regiment escaped unscathed. We must thank God whose hand was over us and protected us from the bullets. It is terrible to see so many dead and wounded.

However, they say the enemy is not more than ten miles from here and we stand ready any minute to go after them. I cannot tell you more than that. . . . Our regiment has decreased greatly in size. In our company there are only 39 men left. Many are sick and have been left behind here and there, some in every town we have



IMMIGRANTS FOR THE UNION

passed through. We have heard that some Southerners from around here have enlisted in our army.

Lars Olsen Dokken

14. COLDER WEATHER — AND NO TENTS

Crab Orchard, Kentucky

October 19, 1862

We left the battlefield [near Perryville] on October 11 and marched forward after the enemy again. We went back and forth and all through some woods hunting for them. We came to a small town named Danville, then to another place called Lancaster, where we met some of the enemy, and there we had a little skirmish. We began to fire upon them, and they made a fast retreat. So we bivouacked in a deep valley until morning and got ready to take after them. But there was no trace of them, as they had left. Then our whole division marched forward in a line through the town. We raised the Union flag and rested for a while, until we could find out where the enemy had gone. We then marched on to the little town where we have been encamped since October 16. Our brigade is about a mile from the town. Our regiment got orders to stand patrol guard in the town and surrounding area. Yesterday our company stood guard, and I was placed in front of a large house that had once been a tavern, now partly destroyed. Some old people lived there. There are several such places that we must guard. We have about 100 Rebel prisoners to guard also. We think the enemy is about 20 miles from here and we are waiting for orders to march to Cumberland Gap.

I don't know how soon we will leave, but we must be prepared at any moment. As for the battle at Perryville and Chaplin Hills, I believe you have read more about it in the newspapers than I can tell you. I have no more news to relate at this time. I do wish I could be home, if only for a short while. Now it is beginning to get colder and colder at night, and to lie under the open sky can be



Lars and Knud Dokken

pretty rough. We have had no tents to sleep in since we left Iuka, and we have had a lot of rain and cold weather on our marches. Neither do we have any more clothing than that we are wearing and one wool blanket, which we carry with us. Our other clothes and knapsacks were to be sent to Louisville, but we don't know when they will reach us.

Lars Olsen Dokken

15. NO PAY FOR FOUR MONTHS

Bowling Green, Kentucky November 3, 1862

I will now take the opportunity to write you a few simple lines to let you know that we have returned to the same town we left on September 17. We arrived here on November 1. We left Crab Orchard on October 20 and marched to Lancaster, from there to Danville. We camped for a couple of days near a small town called Lebanon. On the night of the 26th about 4 inches of snow fell on us, which lasted about a day. It was very cold for us without tents. We rigged up some brush huts under which we lay at night. On the 27th we took to the road again and on the 31st arrived here, where we were mustered for inspection, the first in two months. But we have not received any pay, so we have 4 months' due us, which we hope to get soon. We don't know how the war is going and cannot tell you anything about that. But we did get our knapsacks back, with all our clothing. We left them when we went to Louisville.

Lars Olsen Dokken

16. HEARTY THANKS FOR THE STAMPS

Camp near Nashville, Tennessee

November 10, 1862

Your welcome letters of August 1 and 22 arrived yesterday. For them you are dearly thanked; also for the one



IMMIGRANTS FOR THE UNION

I received on November 3 which was dated September 26. I was happy to see that you were all in good health. I also am well to date but extremely footsore often, after these long marches which we have had now for a long time. I wish we could get a little time of quiet so we could rest up and recover a bit. Also I want to acknowledge the six 3-cent stamps that you enclosed in the letter dated August 1, and the ten 3-cent stamps I found in another letter. You are heartily thanked for both. It is very hard to get hold of postage stamps here in the South, as we seldom get enough liberty to get into a large city. Also they are not available in all towns. We were able to send some money with the chaplain one time this summer and he bought some for us. Since I came here I have sent letters to you and Helge that have amounted to 75 cents in stamps, but I don't know if you have received them all. The mail service is very unreliable here in the South.

I must also relate that we left Bowling Green on November 4 and marched toward Nashville. We arrived here on November 7 and are camped about 10 miles from the city. I believe we will take it easy for a while and rest up after the long marches. We cannot go any farther south as we lack provisions. The railroad between here and Bowling Green has been cut off. Provisions are brought in by wagons hitched to three teams of horses per wagon. The roads are very poor, and so it is difficult to get through. There are many troops encamped on all sides of Nashville.

I see by your letter that the threshing is done and that my share amounted to 54 bushels of wheat. I was glad to hear that I got that much, because I've heard that this was not a good year around there, so we could not expect more.

Lars Olsen Dokken



Lars and Knud Dokken

17. REBELS MAY ATTACK SOON

Camp near Nashville, Tennessee

December 12, 1862

We got two months' pay on December 8. I am sending A. Sanderson \$20 which I owe him for my brother's overcoat. I should have paid him long ago, but I did not have the money. This money I have a chance to send by express order from Nashville to Madison. How reliable it is I don't know, but many of the men have sent their money that way. We are still due 4 months' pay. If you pay what I owe T. Skarton, you may sell enough of my wheat to cover that amount. When we get more pay, I will send some home to you as soon as I get the chance. On November 28, we moved camp to about 5 miles south of Nashville. I have no idea of how many men we have, but not far from here lies a large force of Rebels; so we expect an attack at any time. The rumor is they want to recapture Nashville.

There is no more news to tell you at this time. I had to leave my brother's clothes in Corinth and I have not seen them since. I don't know when I will be able to get them. I must tell you the prices of things here. A pound of butter is 75c, tobacco is \$1.50 a package, black thread is 25c and a 1-1/2-pint bottle of brandy is \$2. As for coffee and sugar I don't know. Our Colonel Heg returned to the regiment on December 7 — with a whole case of items for Co. C — things that had been sent to them from their homes, like hose, boots, and shoes. He said he had gotten some new recruits from Madison who will join us soon.

Lars Olsen Dokken

18. WOUNDED AT MURFREESBORO

Hospital near Murfreesboro, Tennessee

January 10, 1863

I must now, in my sad condition, try to take pen in hand to let you know how I am getting along.



IMMIGRANTS FOR THE UNION

We left our camp near Nashville on the second day of Christmas [December 26] to drive the Rebels from Murfreesboro. We marched a long distance through rain and mud that reached almost to our knees. In the evening we met in combat and had a sharp set-to. We took a cannon and 5 Rebels prisoner. The rest fled from us. That night we rested but the next day we pursued them again, through rain and bad weather. We did not meet up with the enemy again till December 30. We had a battle that day,²⁸ and several in our regiment were wounded or killed. In our company, one was killed and two wounded. All was quiet until the next morning, when the Rebels were ready again and opened up with terrible firing. They got the upper hand over us and we had to retreat. I got a bullet through my thighs. The bullet went in one side and was removed from the other; so I have a wound through both buttocks. But I am thankful to God, who saved me from a hasty death, which happened to so many of our men there.

I was left behind on the battlefield. The Rebels came around me from all sides. One cursed and said, "Here lies a damn Yankee." I lay still, but first they had to take some things from me. So they stole my blanket, my canteen, and a red-leather wallet that held all my letters from you. They also took a little case that contained needles and thread and other little things. They also stole my Double Explanation [of the Catechism], and that I miss the most. I thought surely I would be taken prisoner, but two days later our troops drove the enemy back many miles and our men returned, which made me very happy. How many men our regiment lost I do not know. There were many killed and wounded. Our lieutenant-colonel was killed. As for my wounds, they are painful but bearable, and I hope that, with God's help, they will heal soon. I expect to be sent to a general hospital in Nashville.

Lars Olsen Dokken



Lars and Knud Dokken

19. RECOVERING IN THE HOSPITAL

Nashville, Tennessee

January 20, 1863

Today I must try to write a few simple lines to you to let you know that I am now in the general hospital in Nashville. I came here on January 12. I wrote to you on January 10, in pencil, and told you how I was wounded on December 31, 1862. I will retell it, in case you did not receive my first letter. I believe you have already heard of the battle that took place at Murfreesboro, which began on December 30. On the morning of December 31, I was wounded in both buttocks. The bullet was removed from the right side, close to the surface; so it passed almost clear through. The pain has been hard to bear sometimes. I cannot stand on my feet at all, and so I am bedridden. But I hope, with God's help, I will be myself again. How soon it will be, I cannot say. But we hope that in time we will see each other again. If it is the Lord's will, so let His will be done.²⁹

Lars Olsen Dokken

20. I HAVE MY BOOK OF HYMNS

Nashville, Tennessee

February 5, 1863

I am in the same hospital. There seems to be no improvement in my wounds so far, but I hope that with time they will get better. It seems to take a long time for them to heal. The pain is very severe at times, especially at night, when I cannot sleep; so the hours drag for me. I have my book of hymns, which I read as often as I am able, when there is not too much ache and pain in my wounds. I hope that God will grant me good health again, for He helps all those in want and need. I hope He will help me also.

I am poor and full of trouble.
O merciful Jesus, come
And let my weak heart taste
Your sweet gospel,



IMMIGRANTS FOR THE UNION

That I even here in life
Must rich and blessed be.

And I hope that in time we will see each other again.
How soon it will be is hard to tell.

So I will close my short and humble writing for this time. I ask you to greet all relatives and friends. But first and last, you are lovingly and sincerely greeted from your devoted son. Live well in God; that is my wish.

Lars Olsen Dokken

21. I AM A LITTLE BETTER

Nashville, Tennessee

February 26, 1863

I have been quite ill for some time, and that is the reason I have not written before. Now I am a little better, but my wounds are open and draining day and night. The pain is not quite so severe now, for which I am glad and thank God. I see that you have heard that there is poor nursing care in the hospitals here. It is probably not too good, but I do not lack for anything. I have not been able to eat much. Sometimes I get a little milk which is the best for me. I have bought a few things that I can eat, but everything is so high-priced, and now my money is gone . . . and no pay in sight. You ask me if I can come home. That I cannot tell you yet. I think it will not be for a long time, because I cannot get out of bed and on my feet. When my bed is made, they lift me from one bed to another. But with God's help I hope I will continue to improve, which happily I seem to be doing. At the time I was wounded and lay out at night, I did have some help, because the Rebels built a fire near me which kept me warm day and night. I had some provisions with me, and so I had something to eat, but the time dragged by slowly those days.

Excuse my poor writing, as I am flat on my back and it is very difficult to write this way. So live well in God.

Lars Olsen Dokken



Lars and Knud Dokken

22. I HOPE TO SEE MY HOME AGAIN

Nashville, Tennessee

March 16, 1863

I will now take pen in hand and send you a few simple lines to inform you that your letter of February 27 came, for which I thank you with all my heart. I was happy to hear you were all in sound health, for which I thank God.

I am happy to inform you that I am beginning to feel a little better, as my wounds seem to be healing a little, so I hope, with God's help, I will soon be well again. But I am afraid it will take time, as I cannot help myself yet. I am still bedridden. It is hard, because time passes so slowly. I must be patient, as I know God will sustain me. He will not place bigger burdens on me than I can bear. Regarding my wounds, the bullet went in the left side and the bone was shattered somewhat on the right, but not enough to do permanent harm. The doctor removed some small pieces of bone a few days ago.

As for care, it has been quite good up to this time. But I do crave so for dairy foods, which we do not get. As long as I had money, I was able to buy some [milk] every day. Now my money is gone and I see no pay forthcoming. It is now 6 months overdue. Milk costs 10c a pint, so it is very dear. The food here in the hospital is mostly meat and potatoes, sometimes some applesauce, coffee or tea. The bread is so dry I can hardly chew it. How I wish I were at home with you! Only God knows when I can come home. It is hard to say if they will let me go home when I do get well again. It is my wish that, with God's help, I shall be able to see my home once more. There is no one here in the hospital that I know, only Yankees and Irish. Many are wounded and some are ill with other diseases. There are over 100 men in this ward; it is a very large room. Others from our regiment are in other hospitals here in the city. Those who have been able to get around have come to visit me.

I hope I will get my pay before the interest is due. Just



IMMIGRANTS FOR THE UNION

as soon as I receive it, I will do my best to get it off to you. I would also like to keep a little for myself.

[This was Lars's last letter. He developed an infection and died on April 1, 1863, at Hospital No. 8. He was buried in the Union Cemetery, Nashville, Tennessee, Section E, Grave No. 255.]

NOTES

¹ Family history was supplied by Della Kittleson Catuna.

² In addition to this list of motives for Norwegian migration to America, see Theodore C. Blegen, *Norwegian Migration to America, 1825-1860*, 167 (Northfield, 1931).

³ Theodore C. Blegen, *Norwegian Migration to America: The American Transition*, Chapter 13 (Northfield, 1940).

⁴ This book contains nearly one hundred letters, a journal, a diary, and an account of life in Andersonville Prison, all written by members of the Fifteenth Regiment.

⁵ While the letters of the Dokken brothers and the Fifteenth Regiment reflect the Norwegian immigrant's view of the war, thus bringing a special perspective to the conflict, they also reflect the common experience of all Union soldiers. These experiences are also told by Bell Irvin Wiley in *The Life of Billy Yank, the Common Soldier of the Union* (Garden City, New York, 1971).

⁶ The trip from Cairo to Birds Point was described by Ben Nelson. After arriving at Cairo, Illinois, at 7 o'clock a.m. on March 6, 1862, "we received orders to continue to Birds Point, Missouri. We marched three miles in battle formation, as here was a regiment of the enemy. We stormed forward; but when we were close enough to give fire, the enemy took flight, as fast as he could. We had no chance to shoot but followed them seven miles and took two prisoners." See Waldemar Ager, *Oberst Heg og hans gutter*, 18 (Eau Claire, Wisconsin, 1916).

⁷ Nearly all the letters from the men of the Fifteenth Regiment mention illness, hospitalization, and death. In the earliest months disease took a greater toll than battlefield injuries. See Paul E. Steiner, *Disease in the Civil War: Natural Biological Warfare in 1861-1865*, 9-26 (Springfield, Illinois, 1968). For a description of diseases of military importance and training-camp contagion of the new recruits and inexperienced soldiers, see Ager, *Oberst Heg*, 141.

⁸ Birds Point lies at the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers above Cairo.

⁹ Nearly every letter contained references to sending money home, many of them particularly mentioning the debt to Anders Sanderson. To conserve space, most of these statements have been eliminated by the editors, but that fact should in no way diminish the sense of deep concern the brothers had about this obligation. Della Catuna explained that Lars, being twenty-two when he went off to war, may well have had a financial interest in the family farm.



Lars and Knud Dokken

¹⁰ In the beginning of the war, many of the letters from men of the Fifteenth Regiment reflected this optimism.

¹¹ The letters of the Dokken brothers are not unusual in their frequent requests for word from home. Running through the letters from the Fifteenth are many pleas for such news.

¹² A pietistic faction of the Lutheran church in Norway led by Hans Nielsen Hauge established its first outpost in 1839 at Muskego, Wisconsin, one of the parent settlements of the Norwegian migration to the Middle West. Many of the immigrants in the decades before the Civil War, including the Dokken family, shared in its fundamentalist, low-church orientation.

¹³ On April 7, 1862, the Union Army under the command of H. W. Halleck succeeded in isolating and capturing Island No. 10 in the Mississippi, thus causing A. S. Johnston's Confederate forces to lose control of the middle Mississippi. See *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, 1:430-452, 460-463 (New York, 1956).

¹⁴ The boys each received a \$100 bounty for enlisting and \$13 a month pay; they complained constantly of the irregularity of pay days.

¹⁵ A pro-Republican Norwegian-American newspaper published at Inmansville and Madison under the editorship of Claus Laurits Clausen. The paper lasted, with changes in location and name, from 1852 into the twentieth century.

¹⁶ Opposite page 102, there is a good map of the area in John Fiske, *The Mississippi Valley in the Civil War* (Boston, 1901).

¹⁷ Major George Wilson, later lieutenant colonel, was wounded at Chickamauga. Hans Christian Heg, colonel of the Fifteenth Wisconsin Volunteer Regiment, was later named brigadier of Third Brigade in Jefferson C. Davis' division; he was killed at Chickamauga.

¹⁸ John Johnson Thoe to L. L. and family, June 6, 1862, also commented on the clothing issue and lack of pay. See Ager, *Oberst Heg*, 128.

¹⁹ He was later imprisoned for being absent without leave; he deserted on March 31, 1863.

²⁰ Sergeant Nils J. Gilbert, Company F, described the brawl and predicted punishment in a letter to his brother. He reported on May 20, 1862, that "six or eight of them were put in the guard house. The others got their guns back today. Six were sent to the regiment's headquarters to be heard. Today it was rumored they would be shot; not all of them, I doubt." Ager, *Oberst Heg*, 78.

²¹ Corinth, Mississippi, was an important junction of the railroads connecting the Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico with Virginia and the Carolinas. Fiske, *Mississippi Valley*, 69. John Johnson Thoe, July 8, 1862, reported the campsite near Corinth to be about five miles from town. "It is very nice as it lies on high ground and has very good water. There is a good spring near our camp." Ager, *Oberst Heg*, 130.

²² Union City was a northwestern Tennessee town. Oscar Thompson wrote to his father from a camp three miles north of Island No. 10, April 7, 1862, and described the surprise attack on it. "We had not reached the town when we spied the Rebels' tents in the woods; their outposts fired at us a couple of times, then ran off; but at the same time our artillery opened fire, and soon the whole [Confederate] regiment was on its way. . . . They had run away from it all." Ager, *Oberst Heg*, 236.

²³ Ormsby Mitchel was in command of one of the divisions of the Army of Northern Kentucky. He commanded 7,000 Union troops at Huntsville, Alabama, before Chattanooga. Fiske, *Mississippi Valley*, 54, 143.



IMMIGRANTS FOR THE UNION

²⁴ Albert Emerson speaks of the same thing in a letter of August 1, 1863, to his brother: "We have not seen any Rebel soldiers at this place. The people come in here with rotten apples and things like that to sell, but they do not want pay in anything but silver money, so when they refuse to take our paper money, we take their wares without giving them a cent." Ager, *Oberst Heg*, 145.

²⁵ Thomas Emerson wrote on May 15, 1862, to his brother from Island No. 10: "All the Negroes run away from their masters and come to our camp, where they can be safe and outside the reach of the cat-o-nine-tails. They are very happy that we came here to free them from the hard slavery." Ager, *Oberst Heg*, 140.

²⁶ Many letters reveal the increasingly high prices of food and staple commodities during the war. Lieutenant Svend Samuelson wrote to his brother in Norway on July 8, 1861, quoting such prices as: 200 pounds of wheat flour at \$4.00; pork 5¢ or 6¢ a pound, butter 6¢, coffee 18¢, sugar 10¢, a milk cow \$15 or \$16, and a young and good work horse \$60 to \$80. Wages were considered high at \$15 a month and at harvest time \$2.00 a day with board. Ager, *Oberst Heg*, 240, 242.

²⁷ On October 8, 1862, Braxton Bragg and his Confederates attacked D. C. Buell's Federals. What looked like a victory turned to defeat, and Bragg retreated into eastern Tennessee. Buell did not pursue Bragg but went to Nashville. The fiercest battle fought in Kentucky took place at Perryville, where each side suffered almost 5,000 killed and wounded. Fiske, *Mississippi Valley*, 153; *Battles and Leaders*, 3:14-48.

²⁸ The battle at Stone's River, Tennessee, lasted from December 30, 1862, to January 3, 1863. It was a hard-fought battle with high casualties. Union troops under the command of W. S. Rosecrans finally managed to turn defeat into victory, forcing Bragg to retreat. This battle kept the Confederate troops from interfering with the campaign against Vicksburg; *Battles and Leaders*, 3:610-611, 613-634.

²⁹ Sergeant Nils J. Gilbert was wounded at Murfreesboro and later hospitalized at what he called "a house, called the White House Hospital on the Nashville-Murfreesboro turnpike." In subsequent letters he reported: "This is a poor hospital and it is impossible for those who are seriously wounded to get well." He later wrote: "This hospital is the worst robber's den I have been in since I came here. Our doctor and steward are of the sorriest lot you can imagine." Ager, *Oberst Heg*, 87, 88.

