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Illinois Swedes at Shiloh

Civil War Sesquicentennial Reflections

BY JOHN E. NORTON

April 6th and 7th 2012 marked the somber 150th anniversary of one of the bloodiest battles of the Civil War, fought at Shiloh/Pittsburg Landing, TN. It began as a surprise attack by Confederate soldiers to protect their vital rail communications center of Corinth, MS, threatened by Gen. Grant's approaching Union army. Nearly 67,000 Federal troops and 45,000 Confederates met at Shiloh in the costliest battle yet fought in that war. It left some 13,000 Federal and 10,700 Confederate casualties, including nearly 3,500 dead. Among the fallen were young Swedish immigrant soldiers from the Bishop Hill/Andover area.

Senior officers wrote "big picture" after-battle reports, but they tell little of the private soldier.

U.S. Grant, in his 1885 narrative of the battle, reported: "...Shiloh was the most severe battle fought in the West during the war, and but few in the east equaled it for hard, determined fighting. I saw an open field in our possession on the second day, over which the Confederates had made repeated charges the day before, so covered with dead that it would have been possible to walk across the clearing in any direction, stepping on dead bodies, without a foot touching the ground."¹ But, a member of Swedish-born Col. Oscar Malmberg's 55th Illinois Volunteer Infantry Regiment described it from the soldier's viewpoint: "My chief memories are the battlefield horrors – mangled humanity, dead horses, deep mud, horrible stenches, and insufficient food."²

Oscar Malmberg was acting as an

immigrant agent for the Illinois Central Railroad in Sweden as the war approached.³ Upon his return to Illinois, Malmberg was appointed Swedish-Norwegian vice-consul for Chicago in November 1861, but resigned to join as an officer in the 55th Illinois Volunteer Infantry Regiment. His leadership played a key role in the Federal success at the battle of Shiloh. He was a controversial, but successful, officer, disliked by subordinates for his strict discipline, yet appreciated by his superiors for his unit's battlefield performance.⁴

Western Illinois Swedes at the battle of Shiloh

Early Civil War units were recruited locally for three-year enlistments by organizers who often became their commanders. They thus reflected their leaders' and regional populations, including immigrant communities, whether German, Scotch, Irish, Norwegian, or Swedish. In western Illinois, two predominantly Swedish units were recruited from the Quad Cities, Andover, Galesburg, and Bishop Hill areas.

They are memorialized today by post-Civil War statues in village and city parks, as in Bishop Hill, or in Andover, by a large plaque outside the entrance of the Augustana Lutheran Church. Both my great-grandfather, Lars Nordin (Lewis Norton), and his brother, Karl Nordin (Charles Norton), are recognized there. Lars served as a sergeant in H Company, 112th Illinois Volunteer Infantry, from 15 August 1862 until



Oscar Malmberg (1820–1880), photo from 1874. Swedish War Archives, Portrait collection (SVAR).

20 June 1865, and Karl, as an enlisted man in A and later, the Swedish C Company, 43rd Illinois Volunteer Infantry, from 24 February 1864 to 30 November 1865. Karl's Civil War British-made Tower musket remains a proud family possession, now in the care of descendant Jim Norton of Green Valley, AZ.

Of special interest to western Illinois are C Company, 43rd Illinois Volunteer Infantry, and D Company, 57th Illinois Volunteer Infantry, both almost completely Swedish, and both serving in some of the earliest and deadliest conflicts of the war, including the battle at Pittsburg Landing, or Shiloh, in April, 1862. It is said that more American soldiers were killed during that single en-

agement than in all previous wars fought by the United States. Its costly losses, about 23,746 killed, wounded, or missing, brought the horrors of modern warfare home to both the military and civilian populations, north and south. It also brought an end to hopes of a short war, and a realization on the part of U.S. Grant that he would have to put relentless military pressure on the entire Confederate war machine to be successful in defeating the insurrection. The war's ultimate cost was great, measured just in loss of human life. About 10% of all young northern males, and 30% of southern young men, are thought to have died during the war.⁵

Federal counterattack, supported by heavy reinforcements, yielded a costly victory. The regiment of 500 experienced 206 casualties, including 49 dead. They continued to the successful siege of nearby Corinth.

D Company, Illinois 57th Infantry Regiment at Shiloh.

This unique unit, known as the "Swedish Union Guard," was organized *before* the war, in the summer of 1860, at Bishop Hill, as a home guard drill unit, by Eric Forsse, a 12-year veteran of the Swedish Army. It was first made up almost completely of Bishop Hill Swedes.

To fill remaining vacancies after mobilization, Capt. Forsse recruited in the 16 October 1861 issue of the Swedish-language newspaper *Hemlandet* of Chicago, in a lengthy article, written from their training site at Camp Bureau, near Princeton, IL. The appeal was simple: "Countrymen and brothers! You, who feel your obligation to both our adopted country and the Scandinavian name in this important hour, come and unite with us, and let us march off, side by side, in this most proper of all wars, to win renewed honor for the noble Scandinavian name." The unit thus entered the war with recruits from Altona, Andover, Berlin, Bishop Hill, Galva, Galesburg, Geneseo, Gillson, Henry,

Moline, Nekoma, Princeton, Wataga, Victoria, Iowa City, and Swede Point, IA.

While still at Camp Bureau in training with the 56th Volunteer Infantry, they were talked into attempting to join a sharpshooter unit downriver, probably Birge's Western Sharpshooters.⁶ On 27 October 1861, the Swedes and others simply went AWOL, secretly boarding the steamer *Musselman*, only to be stopped near Alton when Federal artillery fired across its bow. After brief arrest, D company and the 56th were freed, and consolidated into the Illinois 57th Volunteer Infantry. The incident never appeared in official records, but was reported later by a unit member, Capt. Eric Johnson, in his history of the unit.⁷ Unit member Eric Berglund also told that story in his Civil War daybook, detailing efforts in Springfield of their Captain and Peter Wikström to get them released for active duty, after their apprehension for what appeared to be desertion.

On 26 March 1862, they were ordered upriver to Pittsburg Landing, attached to Col. T.W. Sweeny's 3rd Brigade, in Brig. Gen. W.H.L. Wallace's 2nd Division. The 57th assembled on 6 March in response to distant firing, and marched into battle along the Corinth Road. They moved that afternoon to their left, closer to the Tennessee River, in support of Gen. Hurlbut's division, but were forced to retire under fire. They endured a night of miserable rain, then participated in the victory of the second day, thanks largely to reinforcements from Maj. Gen. Buell's fresh forces arriving from the north. Those simple facts hide many stories, told best by the soldiers themselves.

Soldier's tales

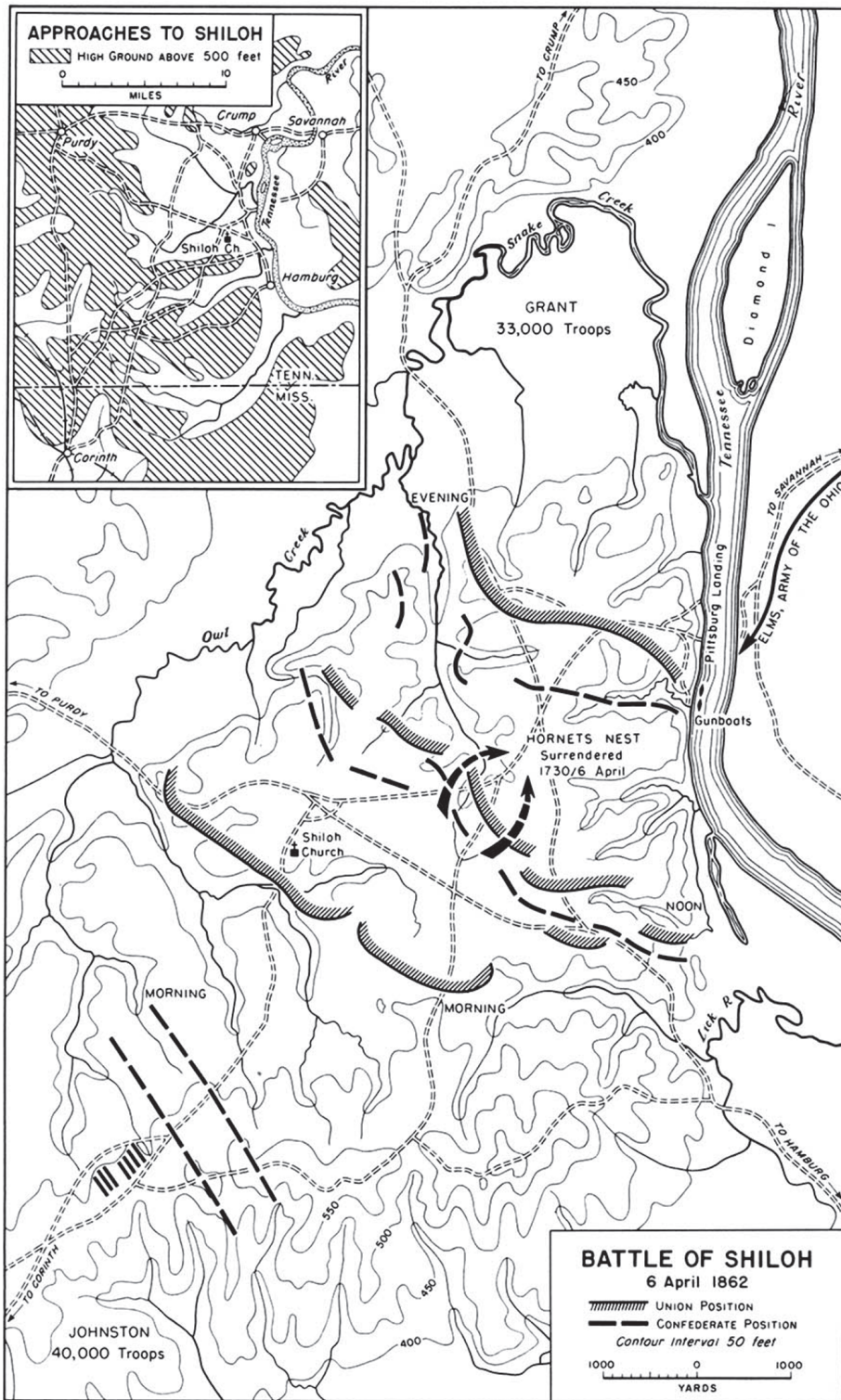
Lt. Eric Johnson recorded his experience of the battle, published as "Lieut. E. Johnson's Journal" in the *Henry County Chronicle*, 29 April 1862, Cambridge, IL. Another enlisted member, Charles Valentine, wrote home to Sweden about his experiences in a letter published by *Hemlandet*, Chicago, IL, 6 August

1862, describing the everyday problems of the soldier.⁸

Lt. Eric Johnson's published journal details conditions under which the unit fought at Shiloh. The day before the battle, Lt. Johnson sent \$1,278 in funds from unit members' *first* partial pay of 4 April, back to families and friends in Bishop Hill, which was delivered to Olof Johnson for distribution, in anticipation of the pending battle.

Enlisted soldier Charles Valentine reported in his letter published in *Hemlandet* 8 June 1862 that Olof Johnson responded from Bishop Hill by sending the unit "... half a barrel of pickled whitefish, along with other necessities of life. That pleased us well, and even we who did not belong to the Colony, nor came from there, also got a lick of the spoon..." Valentine noted that "... The majority of our soldiers are at present rather sick-looking and pale, and not because of any wasted living... because the no-good sutlers are often not at all ashamed to demand all of 25 cents for a cup of beer, and for butter they usually charge 40 cents per pound, and everything else in proportion at such unheard-of prices, so living here in the forest is no paradise... Our provisions have been rather meager for some time, so for such a long time now we have not had anything but rather disgusting and inferior bacon, a kind of smoked pork sides; and we have been forced to eat only such inferior pork, fried and boiled, in the severe heat, with bad crackers, until we just recently at least put into operation an oven and a person reasonably skilled in the art of baking, who furnishes us with bread, so at least we do not just plain starve to death. The money we had previously received in pay we have had to spend on articles of food, because it has been completely impossible to live off the food we received as rations."

On a more positive note, Valentine wrote: "On the 19th of this month our whole regiment was in full parade formation. They had to do their drills for a rather grand flag, which would be presented to the company in the regiment most skilled in war games.



ses, the pounding sounds more distinctly, making it evident the enemy was gaining ground, and by 8:00 a.m. the sound of musketry became distinct....never, through the whole day, from daybreak until dark was there one moment's rest or cessation of hostilities, rather a continuous roar that cannot be described by the pen. But, we heard that, all around, the enemy was gaining on us by their superior numbers, though we disputed every inch of ground, and about 5:00 p.m. things began to look very bad, the enemy had taken most of our batteries and almost had possession of our (Pittsburg) landing. A kind of Bull Run (defeatist) spirit had taken hold of some of our troops, and if it had not been for the Tennessee River, it would have become a second Bull Run (panic).

"But, thank God, there was no way to get across, and at just the opportune time, Gen. Buell came and saved us, for had he not come, we would now have been prisoners...nobly did the 57th do its duty, standing on its ground for a long time, unaided, against three times their number. The first position they occupied was in defense of one of our batteries. Here, they lay flat on the ground (took cover), and here, the bullets flew like hail, and shells passed overhead by the thousands. Here, Corporal Warner was wounded. From here they moved a little further and took cover, but because the enemy was trying to flank them on the left, they were ordered on, and advanced nobly, crossing gullies and ravines, engaging the enemy and forcing their

And the great honor of being the winner there, and taking that prize, went to our company...For that, we had our Major (Forsse) to thank, who had made it his highest priority that we should be the most outstanding in the drills."

Lt. Eric Johnson's own narrative of the two-day battle and its after-

math deserves special attention, showing skills which later served him well as a writer and newspaper publisher in Swedish-America. He writes of Sunday morning 6 April. "To Arms! To Arms! Fall In! sounds from mouth to mouth, and the distant roar of heavy, rapid cannonading proclaims that the enemy has attacked our defenses. As each moment pas-

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retreat, but as our regiment advanced, they were flanked on three sides by three different enemy regiments, and they became exposed to terrible crossfire, but they still stood their ground until they received orders to fall back.

“It was here that Chas. M. Green fell. He was brave among the brave, and fell nobly, an honor to his ancestry, his adopted country, and his numerous friends. Major (Norman B.) Page (Adjutant, 57th) also fell here, cheering on the men while shooting away at the enemy with his revolver...when our prospects were darkest, Gen. Buell came to our aid with what little he could get cross the river. Then we drove the enemy back a short distance, after a most terrible fight, when night came and put a stop to the bloody work of the day, both sides glad for the rest. But our gunboats shelled the enemy the whole night, wreaking terrible havoc among them.

“Monday, April 7th. Immediately at daybreak, the battle commenced again in earnest. During the night, Gen. Buell had crossed (the Tennessee River) with his forces. The troops were now fresh, and the enemy began to yield ground, but fighting with great perseverance, disputing every foot. But at last, after seven hours of the hardest fighting ever witnessed by mortal eyes, they were forced to retreat, and the flight became general, our forces pursuing...though victory crowns our efforts and struggles, and the air is rent with our cries of rejoicing, we cannot shut our eyes to the sad sight that meets our vision – the misery and pain of the wounded. Here ought to be hundreds of surgeons where there is but one.

“Monday, April 8th. Today has been the saddest one for me. War is a terrible thing. But nothing is worse than to walk over the battlefield after the fighting. Today, I went out with the party detailed to bury the dead. We buried all of the regiment together, right where our flag stood during the fight. The slaughter on both sides is terrible...The place is marked so it can be easily found by those who in the future may wish to see where

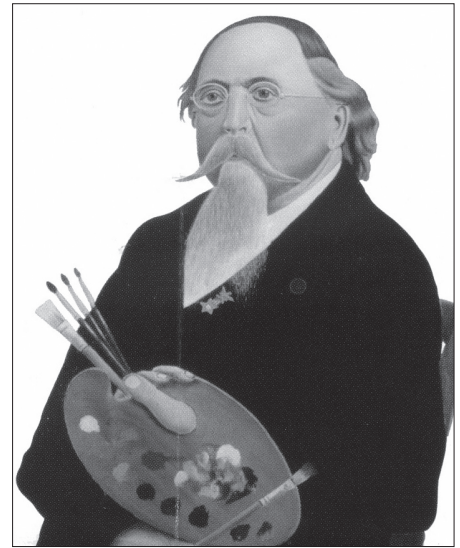
their friends or relatives stood, nobly fighting for *their* liberties – and where they met a hero’s death and grave. All this is glory for a soldier, and what we must be prepared for every minute.”

Lt. Johnson closed his report with some simple soldiers’ thoughts ...“Cheer up friends! Not as bad, after all, as it might have been. We expected to go through all this and expect still more similar scenes. But, then, look at the blessings we are handing down to prosperity. Say, then, is it not worth dying for?... Another big fight, and then another, and so on, until the rebellion is crushed. Then, if we live, we will come home to enjoy the fruits of our labor. If not, then you must go on without us.”

The “Swedish Union Guard” continued to the siege of Corinth 29 April - 30 May, where they lost others,⁹ then to fighting later at Vicksburg. At the end of their three-year enlistment, they were rewarded with 30 days’ reenlistment leave, and were welcomed home to a grand reception in Galva’s Norton Hall on 29 January 1864. They then returned as “veterans” to participate in Sherman’s devastatingly effective “march to the sea,” and, finally, in the Grand Review before President Johnson and his generals in Washington on 27 May 1865. They mustered out at Camp Douglas, IL, on 7 July 1865.

Olof Krans

Among members of D Company was a truly unique sergeant, Olof (Ers-son) Krans, whose family emigrated from Västmanland, Sweden, in 1850. He became an ox boy in Bishop Hill, joined Company D, but was released from Civil War duty in June 1862 because of poor health. He returned to the Bishop Hill area where he became a photographer, house- and sign painter, and portrait artist in Galva. For the Bishop Hill Colony’s 50th anniversary in 1896, he was commissioned to do a series of paintings, depicting Bishop Hill life and colonists as they began their American adventure. His subjects either loved or hated those paintings, but



Olof Krans. Selfportrait. From Bishop Hill, by Olov Isaksson & Sören Hallgren (1969).

most were kept and treasured. His work was recognized in a jointly-released commemorative stamp by both Sweden and the United States



in 1988. A documentary video on Krans was produced by Athenafilm of Sweden in 1996. A major book on Krans is now being prepared by Illinois folkart historian Merle Glick, jointly with the Lakeview Museum of Peoria.

Krans’s paintings are now recognized as some of America’s best primitive art. Many are housed in their own museum at the Bishop Hill State Historic Site. They give a view not only of pioneering life on the prairies around Bishop Hill, but of Swedes in the Civil War. They depict Krans himself in bivouac with D Company, and later as a proud veteran in the Grand Army of the Republic. He also painted Capt. Eric Johnson in civilian attire, plus a uniformed portrait of Maj. Eric Forsse, who in 1869 led a group of 50 settlers to found the town of Falun, Kansas. The exhibit contains photographs of Maj. Erik Berglund (Eric Bergland), who had the distinction of becoming the first Swede to graduate from the

U.S. Military Academy, after Civil war service as a staff officer in the 57th. He later returned to the Academy as instructor, then continued a distinguished military career as an engineer officer.¹⁰

A special Civil war display is part of that museum. It shows not only weapons and musical instruments used by D Company, but a collection of translated Civil War letters written by members of the unit.

In 1967, researchers at Bishop Hill from Sweden's Museum of National Antiquities [*Nordiska Muséet*] recovered and re-recorded Edison wax cylinder recordings of its fife and drummer playing "Yankee Doodle," a Bishop Hill quartette singing "Dixie," and a Swedish-language adaptation of Henry Clay Work's 1865 classic, "Marching through Georgia," (*Ox-pojkarnas sång*).¹¹ They add impact to the museum's collection and its interpretation of that terrible war.

For more reading:

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Hannings, Bud. *Every Day of the Civil War, Chronological Encyclopedia*. 2010.

Kvist, Roger. *The Swedish Union Guards of Bishop Hill During the Civil War, Swedish American Genealogist (SAG)*, Vol XVI, No. 3, September 1996.

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Olson, E.W. & Engberg, Martin J. *History of the Swedes of Illinois, Part 1*, Chicago, IL 1908.

Endnotes:

- 1) U.S. Grant, "The Battle of Shiloh," *The Century Magazine*, vol. XXIX, Feb. 1885.
- 2) Lucien B. Crooker, Henry Stedman Norse, and a committee of the regiment, *The Story of the 55th Regiment*,

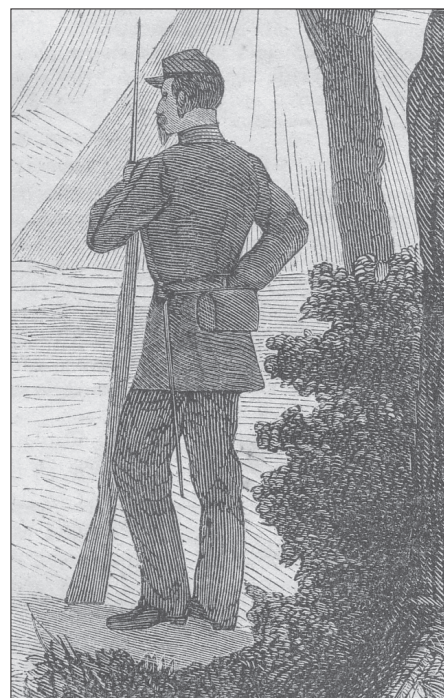
Illinois Volunteer Infantry, 1887. p. 116.

- 3) Paul W. Gates, *The Campaign of the Illinois Central Railroad for Norwegian and Swedish Immigrants*, Norwegian-American Historical Association, vol. VI, Northfield, MN.
- 4) Lucien B. Crooker, *The Story of the 55th Regiment Illinois Volunteer Infantry in the Civil War 1861-1865*, 1887, contains a frank appraisal of Malmborg, including dismissed court martial charges brought against him as commander of the 55th. His unit's service at Shiloh on 6 April 1862 was vital to Grant's successful defense of his threatened lines on the first day. Malmborg's regiment, using the European "hollow square" formation, held the Federals' vital left wing near Pittsburg Landing, despite being nearly surrounded. They participated in the second day's successful counterattack. The 55th suffered 1 officer and 51 enlisted killed, and 9 officers and 190 enlisted wounded, with another 26 captured, out of a total unit strength of 512 men.
- 5) John Huddleston, *Killing Ground: Photographs of the Civil War and the Changing American Landscape*. 2002, Johns Hopkins University Press.
- 6) Birge's Western Sharpshooters were training at Benton Barracks, MO. Its C and F companies were already being recruited largely from western Illinois and eastern Iowa. It later became the 66th Illinois Volunteer Infantry Regiment. Eric Bergland's diary for 27 October notes: "The Captain got orders to march at daybreak today and made ready. Accordingly at 4 o'clock in the morning (we) marched out to town and from there to Trenton, a distance of about 12 miles, where we got on a boat and steamed down the river for St. Louis." On 29 October he wrote: "We arrived at Alton about 11:00 o'clock and we were stopped there by a cannon ball which struck the boat in the bow and made us make for the shore, where we were taken prisoners...to the old penitentiary at Alton till night, when we went on the train to Camp Butler." On 7 November he wrote: "The officers came back at about 9:00 last night with a petition to the Governor to let us go to St. Louis right away, which the boys signed, after which the officers went back to Springfield again. They are gone today, hard at work at Springfield." On Friday, 8 November he noted: "The Captain returned tonight with the news that

we are to go to Chicago to fill up the regiment, and after that to go to St. Louis..."

- 7) Eric Johnson & C. F. Peterson, *Svensk-arne i Illinois*. Chicago 1880, pp. 55-58.
- 8) Illinois Historic Preservation Agency historian Mark Johnson, Springfield, IL, has provided translated copies of the Eric Forsse recruiting letters, the published journal of Lt. Eric Johnson, and letter of Charles Valentine.
- 9) D Company deaths at Shiloh were only Charles Green (Myrtengren) of Bishop Hill and Adolf Johnson of Princeton, but over the next several months at Corinth, deaths were Andrew Anderson 4 October, Otto Peal(sic) 3 October, Jonas Westhund(sic) 9 July, and Olof Wixtrum(sic) of Bishop Hill 7 October, Eric Hedberg of Galva 10 July, Jonas Moberg of Andover 24 August, and George Rodeen, 7 August 1863.
- 10) The Major Eric Bergland Collection (Hayes-30), Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Center, Fremont, Ohio, contains copies of his Civil War diaries and letters, and researcher Phillip Stoneberg's interview about Bergland's memories of life in Bishop Hill.
- 11) Sweden's Royal Library, (*Kungliga Biblioteket*), in Stockholm, holds a database of those Bishop Hill recordings, titled "*Svensk mediedatabas Bishop Hill: Edison 6*". A listing of recordings may be accessed at website:

<http://smdb.kb.se/catalog/id/001540642>



A Union soldier on guard duty. Illustrerad Tidning, Sweden, 1862 Apr. 26.