

James H. Kierstead 73rd Indiana Infantry Article

Time Lapse

First Sergeant James H. Kierstead was probably thoroughly disgusted with the army's favorite beast of burden. It was May 3, 1863, and for sixteen days the 73d Indiana Infantry had pushed, pulled and cursed its way through the hills of northern Alabama, as part of Union Colonel Abel D. Streight's "Mule Brigade."

The scene would have been comical, were it not for the seriousness of the mission at hand. Kierstead and his fellow Hoosiers were members of a 2,000-man fighting force trying to reach Rome, Georgia. There, they were to destroy important Confederate rail links. But what had the army provided for the 1,000-mile raid? 800 stubborn, unbroken, draft mules, to be used as makeshift mounts.

The mules were trouble from the start, but on May 3, Kierstead witnessed how disastrous the mission had become. Confederate Major General Nathan Bedford Forrest, who had easily spotted the slow-moving caravan, bluffed Streight into surrendering to a cavalry force of only 600. Kierstead was a prisoner of war.

The young sergeant soon saw Richmond's Libby Prison from the inside – a prison so packed that at night, the inmates couldn't roll over on the stone floor unless they did it as a unit, on command. Kierstead spent only two weeks at Libby, after which he was paroled and sent to a camp in Maryland to await his exchange.

When, in December 1863, the 73d reorganized at Nashville, Kierstead was free from the infernal mules. After a brief term of guard and picket duty in Tennessee, the rest of his Civil War service would be served in Alabama, where his unit fought several skirmishes and guarded the Mobile and Charleston Railroad.

Faithful service in the latter half of the war, combined with able performance in earlier battles against Confederate General Braxton Bragg at Perryville [sic], Kentucky (October 1862), and Murfreesboro, Tennessee (January 1863) elevated Kierstead to the rank of captain by 1865. Though pictured here with no insignia of rank. Kierstead was an officer when this daguerreotype was made.

[image: photo of daguerreotype of Kierstead in his uniform]

After the war, Kierstead returned home to Indiana and married his sweetheart, and none too soon: during the war, the young soldier had had occasion to write his future wife, "And please tell that young man that has been causing you so much trouble that if he does not stop it, him and I will have to fight a duel."

The retired captain and his wife spend the rest of their days as pioneer settlers in Nebraska. One can only wonder whether Kierstead purchased mules or oxen to carry him westward.

W. J. Kierstead
Union, New Jersey