

Dana C. Ayers (Ayres) spent almost twenty-five per cent of his life in Uncle Sam's army. He never married nor did he live long enough to collect a pension. He was a veteran but never an old man.

Dana was born about 1844 or 1845 in Brandon, Vermont. His father was Ira Ayers. His biological mother's name was Sally. Dana had four siblings: one older brother and three sisters in 1850. The family lived in Brandon, Vermont at the time. Perry was the oldest of the children at twenty in 1850. Dana, the only other boy, was six at the census taking. Hulda, the oldest daughter, was eighteen followed by Maryette, fifteen and the youngest girl, Emily, who was nine. ^[1]

Sally died before March 8, 1858 when Ira remarried to a woman named Julia Partlow Bump. Julia had also been previously married to one Isaac Bump in 1836. She was from Canada. Isaac and Julia were married in Berkshire, Vermont. ^[2]

In 1860, Ira's name changed to George because of the census taker. His new wife, Julia, had brought two children from her previous marriage into the Ayer household. Their names were Barton L. and Hannah W. Bump. The newly weds had added their own offspring to the blended family. There was a one year old infant living alongside of the Ayer-Bump clan. Everyone lived in Brandon, Vermont were Dana and his father, Daniel, farmed to support the growing family. ^[3]

The outbreak of the Civil War must have brought an attractive option to Dana. More than likely, it was the excuse he had been waiting for to get away from a step-mother and her brood of children that he must not have felt a great attachment to. Besides, it was an opportunity to get away from the monotony of chores and the boredom of rural living.

The fact that Dana was not yet eighteen and, therefore, a minor, did not prevent the young man from completing his enlistment papers. He must have looked old enough to the recruiter, or the recruiter did not care to question how old he was, because there was no evidence that Dana had to provide written consent to join the army. So on October 15,

1861, Dana became a member of Company C, Vermont Sixth Infantry Regiment. ^[4] Captain Spaulding enlisted the single "eighteen" year old farmer from Brandon in Holly, Vermont for three years. Dana was taller than the average 1860's male, standing five feet nine and seven-eighths inches in height. He was handsome, too, with black eyes and brown hair. ^[5] Private Ayer was mustered-in on October 15, 1861 at Montpelier, Vermont. ^[6] Dana had kept his enlisting a secret from his family, especially from his father. But even his older and very close brother, Perry, did not know what he was up to. No one knew until after Dana had already moved out of Vermont with the Sixth on its way to its first assignment at Washington, D.C.

In a letter to his brother Perry dated November 9, 1861, Dana informed him, and all the home folk as well, from Camp Griffin near Washington that he was "...doing guard duty from 2 am till 4 am the next morning..." and that he had "...to get up at six am, (do) Co drill at 9 am, squad drill at 10 more drill at 1 pm, dress parade at 4 pm, roll call at 9 pm...." Then on "...Sunday (there was) knapsack inspection, to meeting (church service) and then dress parade...." He also shared with everyone that he had "...stuffed my bed with rebel corn husks." ^[7] Dana was obviously learning to be a soldier.

On the seventeenth of November, 1861, Perry replied to his brother's letter of the ninth: "...he (Wilber Allen) told me he saw you to montpeler I was sorry to hear that you listed I think you ant old enuf I went down to let father no you had gon he swore all sorts he swore you should not go when he found out he cood not stop you without goin to your captin then he wood hav your wages....if I cood seen you before you went it wood of ben a grait consolation to me...." Perry continued the letter with brotherly advice to Dana; "... Obey your officers get the good will of them dont gamble & drink...be a good boy...one advise more & I will close that is to send your money to some one to me or lo or some one that you have confidence in keep what you need Volney does so mikel does so you are in more danjer it can be sent with a check & ut in the bank rite your feelins about that next time...." Before closing, Perry expressed concern over his brother's comfort away from home. He said, "...Dana if there is any thing you need footins gloves or any thing I

will send them we herd you was asistant cook clothe your self warm & be careful of your health...." [8]

The Regiment was immediately sent to Washington, D.C. arriving on October 22, 1861. It was attached to the Vermont Brigade and spent the winter there in camp. The Vermonters broke camp March 10, 1862 to take part in the Peninsula Campaign. It suffered severe losses at Savage's Station along with other Vermont Brigade units. The Regiment did its share of fighting during the Maryland Campaign and served an active role at Fredericksburg. It went into winter camp in 1862 at White Oak Church. When it broke camp in the Spring of 1863, it joined in the Chancellorville movement. There, and at Gettysburg and Funkstown, the Sixth distinguished itself in combat. After being a part of the Mine Run Campaign of 1864, the Regiment went into winter quarters at Brandy Station, Virginia. In the Wilderness Campaign of 1864, the Sixth was subjected to arduous and tragic work suffering terrible losses. It was part of the famous assault at Spotsylvania and was repeatedly in action at Cold Harbor. Soon after arriving at Petersburg, the Sixth Corps, of which the Vermont Brigade was a part, was ordered to the defenses of Washington. They rejoined the Army of the Potomac in December of 1864 for the remainder of the Petersburg siege. In October, 1864, the original members not re-enlisted were mustered-out. After Lee's surrender at Appomattox, the rest of the Regiment was mustered-out on June 19, 1865.

The total number of members in the Sixth amounted to 1,681. Of that number, one hundred eighty-nine were killed in action or died of wounds; one hundred eighty-nine died of disease; twenty died while in Confederate prisons; and two died accidentally. [9]

For Dana, his battle experience did not come from fighting Confederates; rather his came from battling diseases and attending ailments. While at Camp Griffin, only two months after enlisting, he began getting sick. In a December 4, 1861 letter to Perry, Dana revealed that he had had a fever, but felt better. [10] In another letter dated April 3, 1862 from "Camp near Bell Plains landing, Virginia", Dana claimed his health to be poor: "...knee 'broke out' and made him lame...grew 'poor as a crow'...teeth bothered...had three

pulled...dysentery wracked him for three weeks...all this left him weak...." ^[11] On or about April 16, 1862 Dana was slightly wounded at Lee's Mills. He received a gun shot wound to his knee. ^[12] It may have been the same knee that lamed him up earlier or it may have been the other knee. Irregardless, he was sent to the hospital at Fort Monroe for treatment. ^[13] The Muster Roll for May/June reported him "...Absent Sick in Vermont..." ^[14] He had been sent to a hospital in Burlington, Vermont for recovery. He was still there on July 25, 1862. ^[15]

Dana stayed healthy enough for active duty from September, 1862 to April 10, 1863. After that, he was back in the hospital in camp sick again. ^[16] Around May 31, 1863, he was sick enough to be transferred to Lincoln Hospital in Washington, D.C. On June 14, he wrote home that he was feeling "...a little better...." He felt well enough to ask Perry to send him \$5 in greenbacks "...as no other money is any good 'down here'...." ^[17]

As the weather warmed that 1863 spring, Dana's health slowly improved. He spent weeks in the Lincoln Hospital before he was transported to Marine Hospital in Burlington, Vermont. He was now close enough to Goshen to be visited by family in person which apparently happened now and then. Yet Goshen was still a far piece from Burlington when the only way to get there was by wagon, horse, stage or foot. So Dana continued to keep in touch with his relatives through the mail system. In a July 28, 1863 letter to Perry, Dana spoke of "general inspections" being done on the patients in Ward 16. He said that after some of those visits by the doctors, some men were sent back to their regiments and others were put into the invalid corps. In the same letter, he mentioned that thirty-five new patients had arrived from Brattleboro. He also described how the hospital had guards. He referred to the New York draft riots and spoke of being told by a so-called eye witness to the event, that as many as sixty bodies at one time had lain in the city streets. On a more personal level, he reported that he was feeling better and was getting fat. ^[18]

September 5, 1863 still found Dana in the hospital in Burlington writing to his brother, Perry, in Goshen. In the letter bearing that date, Dana mentioned that the doctors had been around to examine him. They had approved of twenty-five men to be sent back to

their regiments. He did not reveal what his fate was to be. ^[19] The Muster Roll records for September/October of 1863 contained an interesting remark concerning Private Ayers: "...Gained from desertion Brattleboro, Vt...." ^[20] Now, the Army usually does not throw the word "desertion" around lightly. There were no documents uncovered in Dana's official military records that mentioned anything about a court martial for desertion or even any formal charges brought against Dana for being AWOL. So it was something of a shock to see it retained in the official ledger. What exactly transpired the public record did not specify. But apparently, Dana went missing for a while, was returned and reinstated without further action. Maybe Dana was feeling too good and decided to go on an unauthorized furlough home for a short time. I doubt that the Army temporarily misplaced him. It seemed that the situation was amicably resolved to the satisfaction of all parties, because Dana was back at the Brattleboro Hospital by October, 1863.

On the twenty-first of October, 1863, he was attached to Fort Wood USA Convalescent Hospital at Bedloe's Island, New York Harbor. ^[21] On December 2, 1863, Dana wrote to Perry that he had been examined by the doctors and put into the invalid corps. He was placed in the First Battalion. He didn't know yet where the company would be sent but would let him (Perry) know when he got settled. ^[22] It seemed that Dana had to be discharged from his initial enlistment of October, 1861 and then re-enlisted into the VCR. Dana's official military records indicted his transfer occurred February 15, 1864. ^[23]

On March 10, 1864, Dana wrote Perry from near Alexandria, Virginia that "...I went to the hospital 8 weeks ago last monday and I was hard sick then but about well now. The doctor said I had the brain fever and I think I did so I thought I would keep it to my self but when you wanted to know what I had to do I thought I would tell you you may think that I am a queer chap but no difference...." ^[24] Brain fever today is called encephalitis or meningitis. If severe enough, it can be fatal. The condition, in the 19th century, was thought to be caused by severe emotional stress. Usually the patient suffered from a fever and disorientation as well as some hallucinations. If Dana had brain fever, he might have been acting weirdly, which might explain his reference to being a "queer chap". The 19th century cure for brain fever was rest and relaxation.

In another letter dated April 14, 1864 written from Washington, D.C., Dana told Perry he had just returned from Camp Chase in Ohio where he had delivered some prisoners. Then, from Camp Bliss near Alexandria on May 21, 1864, Dana wrote to Perry that he, like most of the other men he knew, were going to vote for Lincoln in the next election. On April 8, 1865, Dana told his brother about receiving new sharp's rifle (\$40) that was breech loading and three times faster to shoot than the old muzzle loaders. Being in Winchester, Virginia at the time and the weather being very warm, he told Perry about sending back all their overcoats and dress coats for winter storage. By July 21, Dana reported to his brother that he had been moved to Baltimore, Maryland to Elmer's Island and to Fort McHenry. ^[25]

It was not until November 21, 1865 in his letter of that date that Dana mentioned being at Hick's Hospital in Baltimore. Dana shared many interesting things in his letter home. For example, he had been having troublesome nose bleeds for a while. These may or may not have had something to do with his bout of brain fever. He mentioned that the Government had decided to hold on to the General Hospital. Starting November 4, 1865, the Government had been advertising an auction of Hick's medical supplies, equipment and furnishings in the local newspaper, the Baltimore Daily Commercial. Citizens of Baltimore had been petitioning the city's officials to negotiate with the Government to transfer ownership of the buildings in the hospital complex to civilian use as an orphan's home and facilities for disabled veterans. Dana said he was doing guard duty at the main gate of the hospital and hoped he could retain his health long enough for his short term of service to expire. Dana wrote Perry again on December 8 and told him he had thought about shipping some things home by express, but that it would be too expensive. So he thought he would just wait and bring the items with him when he left Baltimore. ^[26]

Dana had no way of knowing just how short his time was. Dana had seen his last birthday. The exact date of Dana's death is in dispute at the moment. Most sources said he died on January 1, 1866 at Hick's Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland. However, in the Dana Ayers' letter collection at UVM, there is one last letter written by Dana to his brother Perry dated

March 28, 1866 in which he told of being on guard duty three times in the same week. [27]
He couldn't have been guarding the main gate of Hick's Hospital after he had died. So, exactly when Dana passed is not conclusively known at this time. It is certain that it was sometime in 1866 when he was only twenty-two years old.

NOTES

1. Ancestry.com, 1850 U.S. Federal Census under Dana Ayers and Ancestry.com/King/Flanders Family Tree.
2. Ibid., Vermont, Vital Records, 1720-1908 for Julia Partlow and Jenisha Bump.
3. Op cit., 1860 U.S. Federal Census under Dana Ayer.
4. Op cit., U.S., Civil War Soldier Records And Profiles, 1861-1865.
5. Fold3.com, Compiled Service Records of Volunteer Union Soldiers Who Served in Organizations from the State of Vermont, p. 2, image 311550748. Hereinafter referred to as Compiled Service Records....
6. Ibid., Compiled Service Records..., p. 3, image 311550751.
7. Dana Ayers letters, Special Collections, Bailey-Howe Library, University of Vermont. Hereinafter referred to as Dana Ayers letters....
8. Ibid.
9. Vermont in the Civil War/Units/1st Brigade/Sixth Vermont Infantry.
10. Dana Ayers letters, December 4, 1861.
11. Ibid., April 3, 1862.
12. Fold3.com, Compiled Service Records..., pp. 28 & 30, images 311550850 and 311550863.
13. Ibid., Compiled Service Records..., p. 8, image 311550772.
14. Op cit., Compiled Service Records..., p. 7, image 311550770.
15. Op cit., Compiled Service Records..., p. 7, image 311550770.
16. Op cit., Compiled Service Records..., p. 14, image 311550795.
17. Dana Ayers letters, June 14, 1863.
18. Ibid., July 28, 1863.
19. Op cit., September 5, 1863.
20. Fold3.com, Compiled Service Records..., p. 18, image 311550316.
21. Ibid., Compiled Service Records..., p. 21, image 311550826.
22. Dana Ayers letters, December 2, 1863.
23. Fold3.com, Compiled Service Records..., p. 26, image 311550843.
24. Dana Ayers letters, March 10, 1864.
25. Ibid., April 14, 1864; May 21, 1864; April 8, 1865; July 21, 1865.
26. Op cit., November 21, 1865 and December 8, 1865.