

# Wisconsin Veteran's father met Abe Lincoln

By

James Therese

3<sup>rd</sup> place Honor Award

2009 VHA Communications Awards



When you shake hands with William "Bill" Upham Jr., you can't help but feel the history. At 92 years old, this World War II veteran has lived through some remarkable experiences. He traveled the world aboard an ocean liner in 1932, a trip which culminated with a personal audience and blessing by Pope Pius XI in Rome. Two years later as a recruit in Wisconsin's famed 32<sup>nd</sup> Red Arrow Division, his company quelled a riot in Kohler, Wisconsin which killed two and injured forty. Then, in 1944, as a junior officer, he met Gen. George S. Patton in England. That same year, he was wounded in France, and awarded two

Bronze stars for valor. After the war, he returned to Wisconsin, worked for Northwestern Mutual Insurance Company for 49 years, was married to his wife, Betty Ann, for 71 years, had three children and ran for Governor in 1974.

It is difficult to imagine a personal history more rich and rewarding. Then Bill talks about his father, who met President Abraham Lincoln nearly 150 years ago.

"My father was born in 1841..." says Bill pausing for dramatic effect.

William Upham Sr., had traveled cross country from Westminster, Massachusetts to Racine, Wisconsin, with his family in 1853. After the Civil War broke out in 1861, the youngest of five brothers and two sisters, he enlisted in Racine's Belle City Rifles, which later became Company F, 2nd Wisconsin Infantry – part of the famed "Iron Brigade."

"My father was wounded at the **First Battle of Bull Run** (Manassas) in 1861 and left for dead," Bill says. "A minie ball had pierced his chest above the heart and left an enormous exit wound." Minie balls were large-caliber, soft lead bullets that caused terrible wounds throughout the Civil War.

The battle took place July 21, 1861, and claimed the lives of about 850 Union and Confederate soldiers. Upham was one of 2,706 men wounded in the fight. Three days later, scavengers at the battlefield came upon a motionless Upham and took off his shoes. Suddenly, the wounded soldier spoke to them: "I hope to use those shoes some day."

“He must have startled the crap out of those thieves,” Bill says.

After recovering at a Confederate hospital, Upham was shipped to the infamous **Libby Prison** in Richmond. A few months later, he was paroled during a prisoner exchange and had a personal audience with President Lincoln, who asked to see the young man’s wound.

“When my father was old, I used to help him get dressed and would place both hands on his back trying to cover the wound. I couldn’t cover the whole thing,” Bill remembers.

Lincoln was so impressed with Upham that he appointed him to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 1862. Graduating four years later, Upham became officer of the guard at Fort Monroe, Va., responsible for guarding **Jefferson Davis**, former president of the Confederacy. He got to know Davis well, recalls his son, playing chess and talking with Davis until the wee hours of the morning. Davis was familiar with Wisconsin, having spent time there as a young officer.

Upham resigned his commission in 1869. “My father returned to Wisconsin and became one of the founders of the town of Marshfield,” Bill says. “He owned many businesses, served as mayor and was very much loved by his neighbors.” In the great Marshfield fire of 1887, the town burned to the ground save the Upham home.

“After the fire, Marshall Field—founder of the Chicago department stores--, who was a friend, sent my father a check for \$25,000 to rebuild the town. My father took that check to mean one thing—get to work,” said Bill. The Upham mansion still stands today and has been converted into a museum.

In 1895, Upham was elected **governor of Wisconsin**, running on the strength of the Grand Army of the Republic support. During his only term, he commissioned the state historical building on the University of Wisconsin-Madison campus and signed into law the state’s first civil rights legislation.

In 1915, after the death of his first wife, 75-year-old Upham married a much younger woman and had two sons, William Jr., in 1916, and Frederick in 1921. Upham Sr. died in 1924 at the age of eighty-three.

“I grew up idolizing him,” Bill says of his father, the man who met **Abraham Lincoln**. “I remember sitting on his lap listening to stories of the war. I think about my father every day. I still miss him and love him.”

Bill has spent all of his adult life sharing his father’s legacy with middle schools, high schools and a myriad of veteran’s service organizations. His passion for Civil War history led him to serve three years as the national commander-in-chief of the Military Order of the Loyal Legion, descendants of Union Officers and as former president of the Wisconsin Civil War Roundtable. Bill has belonged to the VFW in Milwaukee and Marshfield and the American Legion, Post 411 for 63 years. He is still an active member of the Tripoli Shrine Temple in Milwaukee, Wisconsin part of the International Shriners, best known for its network of specialized hospitals that treat children with orthopedic problems, burns and spinal cord injuries.

Story by

James Theres  
Public Affairs Officer  
Tomah VAMC

Tomah, Wisconsin