

Lincoln: Captain or Private?

If you are a history buff, as I am, you may have read somewhere that Abraham Lincoln was once demoted from the rank of captain to the rank of private because of poor military performance.

That is fiction, according to author Dale L. Walker in his book *Abe Lincoln, Indian Fighter*. Walker is a former president of Western Writers of America and author of several books on Western history.

Contrary to common folklore, Walker wrote that Lincoln was never demoted from the rank of captain to a private. The military didn't work the same way then that it does now, he said. Lincoln had voluntarily enlisted for short periods on a few different occasions to serve in the Black Hawk War effort. He was elected captain among the ranks of the first company with which he served. Ranks were not permanent appointments of duty as they are today. Upon his last voluntary enlistment, Lincoln entered a scouting company as a private.

Here is what Walker wrote:



The Black Hawk War, among the earliest and least remembered of America's Indian wars, took place between April 5 and August 2, 1832, in northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin (then a part of Michigan Territory) ... A gangly 23-year-old store clerk from New Salem, Illinois, also joined the war effort – Abraham Lincoln, the future U.S. president. In April of 1832, Lincoln volunteered for service in the 31st Regiment of the Illinois Militia. He was elected captain of the 69-man company – much to his surprise, apparently. His men drew rations and smooth-bore flintlock muskets at Beardstown on the Illinois River and marched north to the Rock River, the scene of Black Hawk's "invasion" of Illinois and of some of the early fighting.

Late in May, Captain Lincoln reenlisted for 20 days into a mounted company of Independent Rangers and, on June 16, enlisted for a third time as a 30-day private in the Spy Corps, undertaking mounted scouting and reconnaissance work and helping to bury the dead.

In 1848, during his single term as a U.S. Congressman from Illinois, Lincoln mentioned his military service in a speech on the House floor, joking that "in the days of the Black Hawk War" he had been "a military hero."

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“Yes sir” he is quoted to have said. “I had a good many bloody struggles ... with the mosquitoes.”

We can draw enduring truths from this portion of Lincoln’s life:

Abe Lincoln knew what it was to serve *when* and *how* he was needed. He didn’t let pride lock him into the role of captain, nor lock him out of the role of private.

The truest mark of a real leader is to know both when to lead and when to follow.

Jesus said: *But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant* (Matthew 10:26 NLT).

– Beecher Hunter