



**Pvt. Abashe Cowen**  
**Company L**  
**62<sup>nd</sup> Pennsylvania Infantry**

On July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1861, Secretary of War Simon Cameron granted authority to Attorney Samuel W. Black of Pittsburgh to recruit an infantry regiment for three years service. Black, who had served with distinction during the Mexican War, completed his recruiting by the end of August. Most of the men, with the exception of a handful of Ohioans, came from Allegheny County.

One of Black's recruits was a 23-year old glassblower with the unusual name Abashe Cowen, a member of Company L. Cowen was probably unaware of the high level disputes over control of his regiment: it had been enlisted in Pennsylvania but under Federal authority, not that of the state governor. Until the resolution of this administrative wrangle in the autumn of 1861 the unit was referred to as the 33<sup>rd</sup> Independent Regiment of Scott's

Legion No. 2. Eventually the permanent designation of 62<sup>nd</sup> Pennsylvania Volunteers was made, long after the men had become part of the defenses of Washington, D.C.

The 62<sup>nd</sup> drilled incessantly at Black's insistence, but with the happy result that it was one of three regiments awarded French chasseur uniforms for their proficiency on the drill field. A photo of Cowen wearing this prize was published in *MI*, Vol.VIII, #4, page 14, lower right. (*Editor's note: the caption is reversed with the photo in upper left.*) One of the complaints about the imported uniforms was their small dimensions, and in the photo of Cowen note that the bottom three buttons are left undone.

On January 9, 1862, another enlisted man of the 62<sup>nd</sup> wrote home that "Your request about my picture I fear cannot be complied with at present as I think it would be impossible to get out of camp with one of the new uniforms on. The Colonel had ordered them to be packed up some time ago and not to be worn any more at present..."

A month later the same man sent a newspaper clipping home which read as follows:

#### *THE NEW FRENCH UNIFORMS*

*A correspondent thus alludes to the new zouave uniforms recently furnished Colonel McLane's and Colonel Black's regiments – "On my way home from McCall's to Colonel Black's regiment on Miner's Hill, I found the road lined with Erie boys, coming out to show their new uniforms brought from France – real zouave dress. It is blue. The breeches are about three feet across the hips in width, tapering down to the ankle; a sort of blue monkey jacket, a large cape down to the knees with a hood fastened to the back of it; one tight cloth skull cap with a tassel, and a dress parade cap which very much resembles our old patent leather cap. This cap has a plume of red, white and blue feathers. There was a great*

*competition for these uniforms and equipments. Colonel Black and Colonel McLane were the victors. The Erie boys (83rd P.V.I. – Ed.) got theirs one day sooner than Colonel Black. The consequence was they were nearly crazy with joy. If you would ask them anything, they would say, "Everybody thinks it's a big thing." I am sure it is the ugliest garment on the banks of the Potomac. All day Sunday Colonel Black's men were busy getting up their new tents which came with the uniforms. The tents are pure linen, circular, some eighteen feet in diameter, and will accommodate sixteen men; they have a pole in the centre around which is a complete rack for guns, etc."*

Apparently the fine distinctions between zouaves and chasseurs were as confused in 1862 as they sometimes are today.

The 62<sup>nd</sup>, as part of the V Corps, took part in the Peninsula Campaign in the spring of 1862 and lost their Colonel, killed at Gaines' Mill, and 298 men killed, wounded or missing. Later that year the 62<sup>nd</sup> displayed heroic but futile effort at Fredericksburg, where they lost seven killed and sixty-three wounded.

Beginning in 1863, the personality and character of Pvt. Cowen are more readily seen in the surviving diary of a comrade; Jacob Shenkel, a musician in Company L, began his diary entries in April 1863, and on April 21 stated, "Cowen and Bagley were released from the guardhouse by Col. Sweitzer." The details of Abashe Cowen's transgression against military order are explained in his records from the National Archives, which show that he was court martialled in March, 1863 for breaking into the regiment's medical stores "and several bottles containing whiskey were abstracted therefrom."

The 62<sup>nd</sup> participated at Chancellorsville and at one point their entire brigade was cut off. Only the opposition of Col. Sweitzer

prevented the surrender of the brigade. The men in the ranks were confused as to what happened to Hooker's great offensive. Shenkel's diary comments only that in a heavy rain the 62<sup>nd</sup> was the last regiment to cross the pontoon bridge, and that he "relieved the Dr. of a bottle which wet the inside as well as the out."



Shenkel was impressed with Cowen's ability as a forager and frequently noted "bash's" acquisitions. On May 28, while camped at Kelley's Ford he wrote, "As soon as we got into camp the boys started for a skirmish among the poultry and hogs. Cowen with his usual good luck made a capture of a nice fat hog." On the 29<sup>th</sup>, "Cowen made another raid among the hogs."

Later, on Sunday June 7<sup>th</sup>, Shenkel recorded his own attendance at two religious services but noticed that "Cowen was a little in the wind from the effects of some milk mixed with a little something stronger than water."

Less than a month later the 62<sup>nd</sup> P.V. was being chewed up in the fighting in the Wheatfield. Shenkel wrote on July 3<sup>rd</sup> that "...in yesterday's engagement we lost two hundred and forty-four out of four hundred fifty." When the regiment

marched away from Gettysburg they could muster only about ninety men.

Any further details about Cowen's activities are lacking because diarist Shenkel was detailed to remain in Gettysburg to tend to the wounded. He remained there until the end of November and eventually returned to the regiment, which was in winter quarters at Licking Run. One of the first acts was to borrow five dollars from "Bash."

Shenkel's diary ends with the December 31<sup>st</sup> entry but he used several blank pages to record "1864: Killed, wounded and missing in Co. L." he listed seven wounded and one dead on May 5, 1864 at the Wilderness. On May 12<sup>th</sup>, the regiment lost heavily at the battle of Laurel Hill. Twelve names are recorded, including "Abashe Cowen - wounded and died."

Jacob Shenkel was mustered out in August, 1864 and returned to his home in East Liverpool, Ohio. He must have made more than one condolence call on the Cowen family in Pittsburgh because he married Bash's sister Annie in 1866.

*Timothy R. Brookes*