

A DIFFERENT KIND OF SOLDIER

My great-grandfather William Rehn was a professional photographer by trade. His father, Isaac Rehn, brought the new invention to Philadelphia and was credited with being the first person to ever photograph the moon. William continued in the family business until it was clear that the growing Civil War was not going to be a short-term affair. He closed his shop, went to Washington and enlisted in Company A, 1st Regiment, of the District of Columbia in January 1862.

The immediate explanation for him to do it this way is because the first battle of Bull Run had been fought and lost to the Rebels, and the first concern was to protect the national Capitol from being overrun. Beyond that, part of the mission of the unit William had joined was to protect the President's person. In future years he would regale his six children with stories about personal encounters with Mr. Lincoln.

However his family takes great pride in what was probably his most important contribution during the Civil War as an affiliate of Alexander Gardner, who, already based in Washington, together with Matthew Brady, the New York based photographic house, were attempting to photographically document an entire War, and its consequences. How well they succeeded is clear to anyone who has seen "A Photographic History of the Civil War."

During this period of his photographic/military duties it seems he was involved in a photographic session with Mr. Lincoln. He always later claimed that it was the most true-to-life likeness ever made of the President, who he knew close up. As all the best portraits of the day were made with glass-plate negatives, this was also. Thus to see the final image, any number of final positive images can be made. William Rehn rose to the rank of sergeant before being Honorably discharged in 1865. He spent the rest of his life in the practice of photography. His personal copy of that "portrait from life" of President Lincoln still hangs on the wall of one of his descendants.

