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How It Feels To Be a Soldier

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A Word to the Soldier of To-day From a Boy Who Fought in the Great Rebellion

Fewer and fewer of us remember our own last real war. Since the Civil War this nation has never actually been at war; we have had rather a series of skirmishes, knowing full well each time that it could not really be serious. Routine was certain to continue.

Here are a few scattering letters from a boy who lived and fought and thought through the Civil War. There is in them no historical value, no war information of strategy; there is something of the boy's life as presented in personal letters to the home folks. Something of how he lived and fought and thought; these three.

May I call particular attention to the latter? In these times of loose anti-conscription talk, of foolish fear of "Dictators" here, of Let George Do It, there is much in this simple record for our thinking and guidance. This boy thought much of his first battle, of fighting, of how to behave under fire. But he also thought of his mother in a hot country kitchen putting up fruit:

"How I should like to be at your apple parings!"

Good times with the girl friends of what, after a few weeks of soldiering, seemed his youth, came to him as he wrote his brother. He asked with a great longing:

"Do you still think of those good times, or do present pleasures blot them out?"

How does it feel to go to war? Let this boy patriot tell it. Here he is,

at eighteen, trudging across the dusty prairies of Illinois in 1861, searching for a recruiting station with room and need for him.

St. Louis, Mo..

Dear Mother:

August, 7, 1861.

I suppose you would like to know why I did not come home as I agreed. Time would not permit—the company started on Monday and I could not return if I went with it. We arrived here late in the evening—got supper at ten P. M. Captain ——'s company had only forty men and was not received, so I joined another on the sixth. Am well satisfied with the change.

This youngster's father was dead and his grandfather stood in the place of a father to him. His grandfather having forbidden him enlistment, he had run away from home, and kept going until he found a Captain who would take him. His first letter to the man he had disobeyed is only a full-hearted explanation. There is apology for the act, but no regret.

St. Louis, Mo.

Dear Grandfather:

August 11, 1861.

I ask forgiveness for going contrary to your wishes in joining the army. I feel that I have only discharged a duty which as a good citizen I owe to my country, to my friends, and to liberty. And now I ask your blessing as, with my face to the enemies' land I go forward. As long as this arm has strength to wield a sword or handle a rifle; as long as these feet can carry me forward and these eyes see to direct my steps, I expect to march forward unless the enemy submits to the Constitution and laws. I am already satisfied that a camp life is a hard one, and would not advise any of my friends to join the army unless it becomes necessary.

St. Louis, Mo.

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My dear Brother: August 16, 1861.

I will try to give you some of the particulars of soldier life so far as I have tried it. There are 800 on duty in our regiment. Health is good, with the exception of dysentery, which is a somewhat inconvenient, though not a bad sickness.

We don't have more than half enough to eat. I was on guard two nights ago, armed with a pick handle. We drew our blankets yesterday. Had orders to march today at dinner—took down our tents and got ready at the expense of our dinners. Were ready at one o'clock when the order came to pitch our tents as before. Drew our muskets about ten P. M. under great excitement. As soon as the muskets were distributed, a double guard was put out. I was one of 150 that went from our regiment. At headquarters we received ten rounds of cartridges after which we were posted at midnight in the Arsenal. We were disappointed, for there was no battle. Stood guard all night without sleep.

Dear Mother: Jefferson City, September 17, 1861.

I received yours of the fourth last evening. It has been here several days. We are just in from a ten days' scout. I am tired, but I send this that you may know that I have not forgotten you. How could I forget a Mother that has been as good as you have been to me?

We have plenty of peaches. We almost lived on them during the scout. I should like to be at your apple cuttings!

News came since dark that Marshall's cavalry and 500 Irish troops were taken prisoner at Lexington, 80 miles up the river. Now, if General Price wants fun let him come down here. Mother, can't you write once a week? I love to hear from home so well.

Your affectionate son, —

Dear Mother: Jefferson City, Mo., September 21, 1861.

I am prepared to give you a true account of the battle of Lexington. Our boys gained the day. They lost 800 men while the Secesh lost 4,000. It is all a mistake about Marshall's cavalry being prisoners.

We drew our uniforms this morning and expect to receive our money tomorrow. I am as fat as when I left home. We have plenty to eat—such as it is. There are plenty of apples, peaches and cider when we pay for them. Ben is sick at the hospital. Yours, with love, —

Dear Mother: Springfield, Mo., November 1, 1861.

I was very glad to hear from home this morning. It is the first time since I left Otterville. We marched from Sedalia, 120 miles.

Our advance guard had a fight here with General Price's rear guard. I was on the battlefield two days after the battle. The dead and wounded were taken care of, yet the ground was sprinkled with blood. How queer one feels on a battlefield! The feeling is very much the same as that felt on a Fourth of July when one hears the fife and drum.

Price's camp is only forty miles from here and we expect to have an engagement in the next five days. So the Colonel told us today in a speech.

I almost feel anxious to be in a battle and yet I am almost afraid. I feel very brave sometimes and think if I should be in an engagement I never would leave the field alive unless the Stars and Stripes floated triumphant. I do not know how it may be. If there is a battle and I should fall, tell with pride and not with grief that I fell in defense of Liberty. Pray that I may be a good soldier.

Yours affectionately, —

Springfield, Mo., November 3, 1861.

Dear Mother: An opportunity offers and I send you a line, which may be the last. We expect to be marched onto the battlefield before morning. I feel anxious to go. I feel very brave now, and when we get there, if I don't get weak in the knees, shall do some good fighting.

Yours sincerely, —

My dear Brother: Rolla, Mo., December 18, 1861.

I got a letter from you and Dave this morning. Glad that you are getting along so nicely with the girls.

I had measles like sixty, but am all right now. I am very well satisfied with my position, but let me tell you there is nothing desirable in a soldier's life. I would advise all that are at home to stay there for the present because there are more here than there is place for this Winter. I don't expect I will get home until my time is up, but I can't help it.

Your affectionate brother, —

Dear Grandparents: Rolla, Mo., December 28, 1861.

I have not received an answer to the last letter that I wrote you but as the mail is uncertain I will again. I reckon there is as merry a set of fellows here as ever you saw, what there is left of us. There are now but 300 able for duty out of 900 when we left Sedalia. There are new cases of smallpox every day. As fast as one gets well another is taken.

We expect to stay here this winter. Are building quarters that we may be comfortable. I hope to come a few days sometime this winter. With love to all, I am as ever,

Your affectionate grandson, —

Dear Mother: Rolla, Mo., December 31, 1861.

My happiest moments are spent in thinking of home and how I may surprise you by coming in unexpectedly.

There is a good deal of solid comfort in the wild, rough life of a soldier. It is true there are a good many hardships to be endured, but these I expected to find, and in them I find pleasure in the tendency they have to develop the unselfish in one's character. It seems to me that they develop the real characteristics of the

highest type of manhood. Yet the camp can not be compared to home—home only valued when deprived of it.

Benton County, Ark.,
March 10, 1862.

Dear Mother: Camp on the battlefield.

Through a kind Providence I am again permitted to write you. We enjoyed the coveted privilege of going into a battle. We were in camp on a farm five miles south of Bentonville on the fifth. It was quite cold. The 37th Suttler brought a barrel of whiskey to camp. A good many of the boys got drunk. On the morning of the sixth at one o'clock we marched.

We were just off a spree and in poor condition to march. General Sigel got many curses for ordering us out so early. We thought there was no danger, and we were very tired and sleepy. Every time we halted, the boys tumbled down and went to sleep, though it was snowing hard. It quit snowing at daybreak and the sun shone brightly all day. We got to camp at Sugar Creek about eleven miles northwest of Bentonville about twelve. We were stacking arms when the order came to about face and march at quick time to re-enforce Sigel. The Rebels drove him out of Bentonville. Though we were very tired, we were rested by the excitement of a prospective battle. We soon got back four miles. We had had nothing to eat all day or the day before because of our spree, and so we were very hungry. The provisions were in the wagons and did not reach us till eleven o'clock at night. Our teamster brought a keg of lard, so we had shortening for our biscuit. We slept well the rest of the night with our guns for pillows and the canopy for a tent.

We were up early, got our breakfast, provided two days' rations of biscuits in our haversacks, ate our dinner, and fell into line at command with one blanket apiece. We were glad to hear the command. We had listened all day to the continual rattle of musketry and roar of cannon, and were anxious to join the fray.

We spent the time from one o'clock until eight hunting a place to fight. Over hills and

hollows, through brush and over fields we went from point to point. Once or twice we halted while our battery threw a few shells. At eight, we settled for the night on the picket line. Many of the boys had thrown off their blankets and consequently suffered, for it was very cold. Part watched at a time and part slept, cold or no cold, for we had slept little for three days and two nights. . . . Prisoners that we took in the morning said that Price made them a speech before the battle in which he told them that a half hour's battle would give them the victory, that we were surrounded (and we were), and could not hold out long.

At eight they opened the ball, expecting to have a victory soon. In fifteen minutes we were on the field supporting the artillery. There were 30 pieces of artillery about 100 yards behind us, firing as fast as they could. The Rebels were firing at us with a large number also. The shot and shell rained thick about us, the air was full of blue streaks, marking the track of projectiles flying in all directions. For two hours the duel continued. Finally the Rebs' artillery was silenced, and we double-quickened across the field. Again the guns had to be silenced because the grape began to whistle over us.

At last we fixed bayonets and started on a charge into a hazel thicket. When we had advanced into it about 100 yards the musketry opened on us at 70 yards. Such a rattling of musketry and whistling of bullets I do not want to hear again. Of course, we did our best to return the compliment. For fifteen minutes the whistling and shaking of brush continued and then the Rebs skedaddled. The victory was ours—after three days of fighting. Our regiment lost four killed and twenty wounded.

I received a slight flesh wound on my back between the left shoulder blade and the backbone. I was on my knees with a cartridge in my teeth when two balls came along. One cut the skin right on the shoulder blade and the other took quite a large piece of flesh out between the shoulder blade and the backbone. I would rather the wound had been somewhere else. My back is so sore I can hardly write.

