

“First Rate Grit”

Two Letters from the Thirty-Sixth Regiment, Company K
of the Wisconsin Volunteers, Spring 1864

*An Edition of Manuscripts in the Charles Xavier Goldsmith Collection
at the McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire*

Edited, with an introduction,
by Daniel Boster

INTRODUCTION

A Glimpse into the Mind

The American Civil War has been the subject of thousands of books, many films, and countless conversations. Students in high school and college history classes often find themselves concentrating on these four years in American history for weeks or even entire semesters. Often, the accounts¹ they study are concerned with the causes of the war, the events of individual battles, and the roles played by the “important” people (Lincoln, Grant, Lee). But there is something more to understanding this war than maps and lists, and, the fact is, these “important” men did not experience the war in the same way as the nearly three million soldiers who fought on the front lines.

Numbing boredom characterized some days on the front; terrifying fighting and violence marked others. One way for soldiers to escape their realities was letter writing. Boring and lonely days could be filled with sitting and writing a letter home. These letters served as an outlet to express horror and bewilderment at the violence of war. Soldiers used them to handle practical matters, ask questions about home, reassure parents, and renew promises of love. Reading these letters allows us to glimpse into the minds of some of the more than three million men who served in this war and move beyond textbooks, lectures, and lists to a greater comprehension of what war means and how it feels to those who make the sacrifice of serving.

By the time the war ended, approximately 618,000 of these men had lost their lives (Berkin 396). They never returned to farms, loved ones, jobs, children. But many of

¹ There are innumerable sources of information about the Civil War including hundreds of websites. Tim Harrison maintains a particularly well-designed and informative one at <http://www.swcivilwar.com>. It provides some straightforward information about many aspects of the conflict and links to dozens of other sites.

their letters did make it home. Two of those letters are included in this edition, and, hopefully, they will provide insight that a book or a lecture could never offer.

The War Comes to the Frontier

When the Civil War started, Wisconsin had only been a state for thirteen years and was still considered the “frontier.” By this time, the population of Wisconsin was 775, 881 and “five-sixths” of these people “tilled the soil for a living” (Klement 4), and more than a third of the population was of “foreign birth” (5). During the thirteen years of the state’s existence, the political scene² was a “complex and changing one” (7).

Republican Governor Alexander Randall was elected in 1859, and, as southern states began making the decision to secede in the winter of 1861, he made his feelings clear. On January 10, 1861, he told the Wisconsin legislature, “A state cannot come in the Union as it pleases and go out when it pleases... Secession is revolution; revolution is war; war against the government of the United States is treason” (12). Democrats wanted “peace and compromise,” but Randall was correct in his foresight that war was on the horizon. He asked the State Legislature to strengthen militia laws, as he wanted the militia to be an “organized and armed institution.” It was accepted during this time that all “able bodied free male white” residents between the ages of eighteen and forty-five were a part of the state’s militia. In 1861, this included about 130, 000 men, but Randall knew that to be effective these men must be organized. By 1860, there were forty-two uniformed volunteer companies and twelve others that had applied for organization. However, few of these men were actually prepared for service, as many soldiers were simply politicians

² Frank Klement’s *Wisconsin and the Civil War* provides a detailed overview of the political situation in Wisconsin throughout the war. Robert Wells provides a chronological account of Wisconsin’s involvement that includes a series of articles that were originally published in *The Milwaukee Journal* in 1962 to coincide with the centennial of the war. (Wells, Robert W. *Wisconsin in the Civil War*. Milwaukee: The Journal Company, 1962.)

looking for the prestige of a military title, and others who joined local militia companies because they often served as “social clubs” (13). Randall wanted to prepare Wisconsin to answer President Lincoln’s calls for troops, but he knew that the Wisconsin soldiers would have to be trained.

Camp Randall: Citizens to Soldiers

Carolyn J. Mattern’s *Soldiers When They Go: The Story of Camp Randall, 1861-1865* is an informative history of Camp Randall’s role in the effort to prepare Wisconsin’s young men for serving the Union. Governor Randall took Lincoln’s request for troops seriously, and he thought well-trained soldiers who would fight well for the North would help give his new state an identity and earn it respect from other states in the Union (Mattern 25). There was an overwhelming response to the initial calls for troops in Wisconsin, so there was an immediate need for place to train these enthusiastic volunteers (1).

In May of 1861, Randall authorized the establishment of a training ground on the state fairgrounds a mile and a half outside of Madison (3). At the start, the camp was well maintained, the recruits were warmly welcomed, and the mood among the men was upbeat. The people of Madison were supportive of the troops (4), and they had parades and celebrations for the soldiers coming and going from the camp (14-15). But soon the novelty of the soldier’s life began to wear thin, and the townspeople grew tired of the antics of the soldiers who were often ill-equipped to deal with the freedom of being away from home for the first time (12).

By the summer of 1862, news of the devastation of the war was making its way back to Wisconsin, and this “dispelled much of the public romanticism” about being a

soldier (69). Men were refusing to enlist, so a state-wide draft was instituted (76); communities had to provide enough men to fill a quota or watch their young men be taken against their wills.³ Unfortunately, many of those who did volunteer were not necessarily soldier material as the generous bounties⁴ offered by the state attracted “unwholesome” types who were enlisting only for the money (98-99). By the end of 1863, things were not going well for the Union; President Lincoln was forced to ask for more troops, and the war came to the Chippewa Valley.

Filling Quotas: The Formation of the 36th Regiment, Company K

In the first three months of 1864, pressured by General Grant and wanting to end the increasingly costly and unpopular conflict before summer, Lincoln issued a call for an additional 700,000 troops.⁵ Recruiting for Company K began in the Chippewa Valley in late February of 1864, and the quota of 120 men was filled within a few days⁶ (Bailey 140). Warren Graves was selected as captain of the company; Eau Claire businessman, Elias A. Galloway was chosen as First Lieutenant. Galloway was described, in the *Free Press*, as “qualified to discharge the perplexing duties of [his] offices in a creditable manner” (142). On March 15, 1864, the new recruits along with many veterans with “silvery locks” left Eau Claire for Camp Randall (140).

³ Rather than deal with the stigma of being forced into service by the draft, most men would “volunteer” before they could be drafted. However, some did try to “dodge” the draft. When these “dodgers” were caught, they were treated harshly by the volunteers and imprisoned at Camp Randall. The institution of the draft also resulted in riots throughout the state. (For information about some of these riots, see Robert W. Wells’ *Wisconsin in the Civil War*.)

⁴ A bounty was a payment given to soldiers who enlisted voluntarily. At the time of the organization of the 36th Regiment, this payment was \$105.00. (See Ermantinger letter.)

⁵ Lincoln called for 500,000 on February 1 and 200,000 on March 14. Of course, the additional troops did not end the war by summer, and 500,000 more troops were called on July 18; 300,000 more on December 19 (Klement 85).

⁶ Recruiting for the 36th Regiment was relatively easy as the recruits knew they were going to serve under Colonel Frank A. Haskell, who became a hero after serving with the Iron Brigade at Gettysburg (Mattern 101).

By the time Company K and the other companies that comprised the 36th Regiment reached Madison a few days later, Camp Randall was a mess. The pomp afforded to newly arriving soldiers during the early months of the war had vanished, and the soldiers no longer felt the enthusiasm of their predecessors. Instead of this enthusiasm, the new soldiers were motivated by “local pride, the bounty, and fear of the draft” (Mattern 101). The weather was horrible, disease ran rampant in the camp⁷, and there was no longer enough time for even the elementary training previous recruits had received (102). Most men were anxious and skeptical about when orders would come (89), but, finally, the 36th Regiment received news that it would go to the front on April 11. This did not come to pass as their departure was delayed because they were not at full strength, and their weapons had not yet arrived⁸ (102). Their orders did eventually come, and the 36th Regiment left for the front on May 10, 1864.

The War in Virginia: May and June 1864⁹

After crossing the country by train, the men of the 36th arrived in Washington on May 14, 1864. The men then took a ferry down the Potomac to Belle Plain Landing and then marched to Fredericksburg.¹⁰ The weather was horrible, and a sense of foreboding had settled over the Union troops (Trudeau 191). By the 18th, Grant had begun to

⁷ Sixty members of the 36th Regiment succumbed to disease before they left for the front.

⁸ The method for getting supplies to Union troops was horribly inefficient and, often, controlled by corrupt businessmen. (For an excellent overview of this aspect of the war and other details about the daily lives of soldiers, see Fred A. Shannon’s “The Life of the Common Soldier in the Union Army, 1861—1865.”)

⁹ Noah Trudeau’s *Bloody Roads South* is a detailed account of these two months of the Civil War. Trudeau’s works includes comments about strategy, insights into the personal lives of the soldiers involved, and a great deal of other interesting information. (See Works Cited page for complete bibliographic information.)

¹⁰ By this time, Fredericksburg was run-down and had become a “vast hospital.” Wounded men walked the streets and taunted the new soldiers as they passed through the town (Trudeau 199).

question to importance of trying to take Spotsylvania¹¹, and he decided to change his strategy and try to draw Lee's troops out of their entrenchments (210). On the 19th, the men of the 36th Regiment were made part of the First Brigade, Second Division, Second Corps of the Army of the Potomac under the command of General Winfield Hancock. Two days later, they were sent to the North Anna River to lure Lee into the open field (212). On the 23rd, the intense fighting of the North Anna started in earnest. Lee thought he could easily destroy the already downtrodden Union troops, and Grant thought going to the North Anna would be a good opportunity to strike out at Lee even though he realized it would lead to great loss¹² (225). (A few members of Company K are wounded during this engagement including Stephen and Jordan McCann.) Lee did not "take the bait," and, on the 25th, Grant decided to withdraw. By the next night, the Army of the Potomac had left the area (245).

The scene of the battle shifted. The 36th Regiment, along with the rest of the Army of the Potomac, was ordered to march to the southeast to engage Lee's troops at an important junction near Cold Harbor. It was a race by both sides to get troops near Cold Harbor, and the men marched through difficult terrain (247) and had to face heavy fire at night (264) as they made their way to the south. They arrived near Cold Harbor on June 2, and the men were pleased at Grant's decision to delay the attack until the next morning¹³ (276). Grant "felt confident" that his troops would succeed, but the soldiers did not share Grant's optimism. "Many spent the hours before the attack writing letters home

¹¹ For an examination of the strategic aspects of the war in Virginia, see Frassanito, William A. *Grant and Lee: The Virginia Campaigns, 1864-1865*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1983.

¹² The Union lost more than 2,000 in killed, wounded, and captured during this three-day period of engagement.

¹³ June 2nd was an extremely hot and rainy day, and the men were exhausted from two straight nights of marching and facing heavy enemy fire. A chance to rest would have been welcomed.

and some even pinned their names and addresses to their coats so that their bodies could be identified afterward” (Symonds 89). It rained all night.

As the sun rose on June 3, the men were unable to see due to heavy fog. The members of the 36th were still relatively “untested,” and they felt the same sense of foreboding that most Union soldiers were feeling (Trudeau 282). Between 4:50 and 5:15 AM, they were ordered to move, and, almost immediately, their brigade commander, Colonel Henry McKeen, was killed, and Colonel Frank Haskell of the 36th took over his command. As the leading regiments were defeated and fell apart, the 36th moved to the front (289) and, eventually, slowed to a stop. Haskell realized that they were in trouble and ordered his men to lie down, and, as he issued this order, he was killed¹⁴ (290).

The Union was “blasted,” and, by 1:30 PM, Grant suspended offensive operations (295). There were bodies everywhere, and Grant regretted the day’s assaults as the Union had lost 4,517 in wounded and more than 1,100 in killed in one morning (298). Many members of Company K, including Charles Ermantinger¹⁵, were killed or wounded on June 3. Skirmishes continued until June 8, and Cold Harbor ended up being one of the bloodiest and most devastating battles of the Civil War.

On to Petersburg

During the pause in fighting on the 8th, E.A. Galloway wrote his letter to S.S. McCann, and this letter provides an emotional account of the Battle of Cold Harbor. Galloway had made it through this engagement unharmed, and, along with the rest of his company, left the Cold Harbor area on June 12 (Butler 148) and headed toward Petersburg to aid Grant in his plan to defeat Lee by going “around” his army instead of

¹⁴ This was devastating for the members of the 36th as many of them had enlisted to serve with Haskell. (See note 6.)

¹⁵ Ermantinger was shot in the arm and died from these wounds on June 21, 1864.

“smashing through” it (Symonds 91). The men of the 36th arrived in Petersburg on June 15 and occupied the first line of the enemy’s works the next day, but they faced a more daunting task a couple of days later (Butler 149).

On June 18, the men were ordered to charge the “second and heavier” line of works that was situated in an open field on the other side of dense woods. They were violently repulsed, and the regiment lost a third of their remaining men. One of those was Lieutenant E.A. Galloway who died the next day. By the 22nd, they were surrounded and beaten, and, as evening came upon them, they realized that they had no way out and were forced to dig holes and lay in them until it got dark. Their officers eventually led them out, and they were moved back to camp for several weeks¹⁶ (149).

Both Charles Ermatinger and Elias A. Galloway volunteered to serve the Union despite the knowledge that they might not live to return to their homes. Like thousands of others, they wrote letters that did make it home. Their letters give us information about life in camp, strategy, and the sights and sounds of battles, but, more importantly, the two letters that follow bring the emotion of war to us and beseech us to contemplate the plight of the individual soldier. Perhaps they can help us understand what Galloway describes as the “first rate grit” of the members of Company K of the 36th Regiment of the Wisconsin Volunteers.

¹⁶ For a continued account of the service of the 36th Regiment until its conclusion in the summer of 1865, see the timeline in appendix one.

NOTES ON THE TEXTS

In preparing the final texts of these letters, the following editorial decisions were made in order to make these letters easily readable by contemporary student readers:

1. I standardized punctuation in instances when doing so would clarify the writer's likely intentions. Therefore, some punctuation errors are left intentionally unedited.
2. I left numbers ("12" instead of "twelve").
3. I replaced ampersands (&) with "and."
4. I did not correct grammatical mistakes, as they were not egregious enough to render the letters incomprehensible. The only exception to this is my omitting words that the writers repeated consecutively in the manuscripts as these instances were probably mistakes perhaps due to the fact that these letters were probably hastily written.
5. I corrected spellings to reflect contemporary standard spellings. ("cros" changed to "crossed"). I also corrected the spellings of proper names.
6. Abbreviations were often used for first names and titles, so I replaced them with the complete names or titles. ("Chas." changed to "Charles"; "Col." changed to "Colonel")
7. Diplomatic versions of both letters are included in appendix two.
8. In both the edited and diplomatic versions of the letter, I noted places where individual words in the manuscript were unreadable due to the physical condition of the letter or the writer's handwriting; I used [...] to indicate this. If I could discern a possibility for these words, I included my impression of what it might be by including this possibility in brackets such as [gallant] in the Galloway letter. All of these instances are explored in the footnotes.
9. In the diplomatic versions, I used ^ to indicate phrases that were written in between lines in the original manuscripts. This symbol precedes and follows the added phrase. In the edited version, I simply included the phrase/sentence where the author intended it to be based on its location in the original manuscript.
10. In his letter, Galloway underlined certain words, and the edited and diplomatic versions reflect this.

Both of these letters exist in original manuscript in the Special Collections Area Research Center at the McIntyre Library at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire as part of the Charles Francis Xavier Goldsmith Collection and are available for public viewing. (Eau Claire MssBs Location 6/3f) Heather Muir, Archivist and Special Collections Librarian, was gracious and infinitely helpful during the production of this edition.