

Soldiers' Letters



PUBLISHED
IN AID OF THE UNITED STATES
SANITARY COMMISSION.

SOLDIERS' LETTERS.

FROM

CAMP, BATTLE-FIELD AND PRISON.

“ To thee, O dear, dear country !
Mine eyes their vigils keep :
For very love, beholding
Thy happy name, they weep !
The mention of thy glory,
And thy noble martyr throng,
Is life, and love, and power !
Thine is the victor's laurel,
And thine the golden dower !”

EDITED BY

LYDIA MINTURN POST.

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TO THE
SOLDIERS OF THE UNION,
THE
NOBLE ARMY
OF BRAVE DEFENDERS OF FREEDOM AND THE RIGHT,

Living and Fallen;

TO WHOM
EVERY NON-COMBATANT IN THE LAND,
MAN, WOMAN, OR CHILD,
OWES A DEBT OF GRATITUDE, LIFE-LONG AND PROFOUND,
THIS VOLUME
IS
IN PRIDE AND PLEASURE
DEDICATED.

PREFACE.

THE events of the past four years are fresh in the minds of all. Who has forgotten the thrill of horror experienced when the news came of the attack upon Sumter, confirming the truth he was so slow to believe, that sacrilegious hand had been laid upon the sacred Ark of the Union, and the terrible alternative forced upon the Government of war, dismemberment, or complicity with an evil which would rear its hydra-head, and spread blight over our fair territories and sister States yet to be?

And we remember, too, that when the grievous necessity of war was accepted, each one felt that the lion had but to shake off his lethargy, put forth his strength, and go forward—the Army of the North—in a grand triumphal march, to quell and intimidate, by its *presence*, our rebellious, misguided brethren, and bring them with contrition back into the fold—back into the once United compact, those who had inconsiderately stricken a blow at the great Magna Charta of Union and Liberty.

Nor have we forgotten that instead of erring repentant *brethren*, we found a foe powerful, persistent, implacable—nor the dark days months, and years of gloom, disaster, and defeat—the times when the “heavens seemed as brass,” and sympathy was shut against us from abroad, and the powerful nations of the earth—saving the great Empire of the North, which was *breaking* chains, while our Southern insurgents sought perpetually to *rivet* them—appeared, to rejoice in our discomfiture, and take satisfaction in the design of the building up of a great Confederacy, to be founded upon the cornerstone of human slavery.

But we will not dwell upon the mournful picture—for surely the white-winged Angel of Peace is hovering near, and rays of hope and

joy are breaking through the dark cloud so long resting upon our beloved country, and we shall ere long hear the sweet music of the glad tidings sung on the Judean plains,

“Peace on earth, good-will towards men.”

In looking back upon this sad history, upon the times when the gray-haired—the middle-aged—the heads of families—the only sons of widowed mothers—and oftentimes *all* the sons of aged parents—members of a peace-loving, industrious community, who had known of war but as a dream of the past—all rushed to arms in their country's defence; a gleam of comfort pierces the gloom overspreading every home and fireside of the North, the East, the West: it is the welcome thought of the blessed ministrations, never to be forgotten—the efficient, far-reaching, provident, beneficent, Sanitary Commission.

In its behalf, this collection of soldiers' letters is made, published—letters sent in response to the following appeal:

“SOLDIERS' LETTERS.

“A collection of extracts from the letters and diaries of soldiers, both officers and privates, is being made for publication in aid of the Sanitary Commission. It is believed that much material of interest may thus be brought to light, viz.: Thrilling incidents of heroic conduct and self-sacrificing patriotism, and noble sentiments, expressed to mothers, sisters, wives, friends—from camp and field, fort and outpost, ship and gunboat. Persons possessing such records are earnestly invited to respond to this appeal.”

The letters are, with few exceptions, printed from manuscript letters, never before published.

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Letter of Abraham Lincoln,

COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF THE UNITED STATES ARMY.

The Record of a Loyal Family.

The names of the sons of Mrs. Bixby, of Boston, Mass., soldiers in the army, are as follows:

Sergeant Charles N. Bixby, 20th Massachusetts, killed at Fredericksburg, May 3d, 1863; Henry Bixby, corporal, 32d regiment, killed at Gettysburg, July 3d, 1863; Edward Bixby, private, died of wounds in hospital at Folly Island, South Carolina; Oliver Cromwell Bixby, 58th regiment, private, killed before Petersburg, July 30th, 1864; George Way Bixby, killed before Petersburg, July 30th, 1864.

A sixth son, who was wounded in one of the recent battles, and who belongs to a Massachusetts regiment, is at present in the hospital at Readville, under treatment.

Executive Mansion,

WASHINGTON, November 21st, 1864.

Dear Madam — I have been shown in the files of the War Department, a statement of the adjutant-general of Massachusetts that you are the mother of five sons who have died gloriously on the field of battle.

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I feel how weak and fruitless must be any words of mine which should attempt to beguile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming. But I cannot refrain from tendering to you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the Republic they died to save.

I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom.

Yours very sincerely and respectfully,

A. Lincoln.

Mrs. Bixby.

SOLDIERS' LETTERS.



MARCH OF THE SEVENTH REGIMENT.

“In reading the account of the march of the 7th regiment, it seems *tame* after the baptism of fire and blood through which our beloved country has since passed ; but as an exponent of the temper of the people at the *beginning*, it may possess interest.

“G. H. WESTON, Chaplain 7th regiment.”

LETTER I.

“THE regiment left New York April 19th, 1861, with the intention of passing through Baltimore. I believe it was known to the officers and to most of the men, though not to the public generally, that a terrible riot had just taken place in that city. In a few hours the regiment expected to arrive there, and if the faces of the soldiers looked pale as they marched down Broadway, as was remarked by friends, it was the pallor of determination, and not of fear. It was only on arriving at Philadelphia that we learned that the communication was cut off by the destruction of bridges and the tearing up of rails, and that it was impossible to reach Baltimore, except by marching, which would have consumed too much valuable time.

“The insurgent city was in a terrible ferment ; exasperated to madness by what had just transpired—expecting

their houses to be laid in ashes by the next body of advancing troops. Even Union men united with rebels and fanatics in the resolution to dispute our passage, to the bitter end.

“On the streets through which we would have to march, every house was converted into a fortress filled with armed men, and even howitzers hoisted into the second stories to sweep the avenues with grapeshot. Under such circumstances, we should have been at their mercy; and had we attempted the passage, as would have most certainly been done had not the communication been destroyed, the regiment would have been received with a storm of fire they could but very imperfectly have returned. Had we been able then to reach the city, the startling reports that convulsed all New York would have proved too true, and it was no doubt in ‘the anticipation’ of such a bloody catastrophe that they originated—‘the wish was father to the thought.’

“On the 20th, in Philadelphia, the regiment was placed in a most embarrassing position. No orders could be obtained from Washington; the wires were in possession of our enemies; our colonel was doubtful how to act. A council of war was held: it was determined to proceed by sea. Accordingly, at half-past 4, P. M., we embarked on the steamer *Boston*, the best that could be procured, and resolved to be guided by circumstances. From this moment, until our arrival at the junction, I believe we were in constant peril, and I confess my heart bled as the young ardent faces filed by me to take their places on board. I acknowledge I had serious misgivings as to the issue. The boat was old and small, and even in smooth water careened so that the men had to be moved from side to side to keep her on an even keel. How so many could be crowded into

such narrow quarters is still to me a mystery ; and a gentleman, familiar with such operations, declared to me, on our return, that he could not have conceived it possible to convey so large a body of troops with such a transport. Fortunately we had calm weather and a smooth sea, the like of which, the pilot declared, he had rarely seen. The lower hold, filled with men, was almost unendurable ; with the hatches on, it would have been a "Black Hole." But He who measureth the waters in the hollow of his hand was our protector and guide.

"Another danger to which we were exposed was, we had no convoy. The enemy knew we were coming. We were, no doubt, under their glasses almost from the hour of leaving, and a steam-tug, with a single gun, might have captured or destroyed us. One shot would have disabled our machinery, and then it would have remained either to surrender or sink. In the crowded state of our vessel, every ball that passed through her must have caused fearful loss of life.

"Arriving off the mouth of the Potomac, we looked eagerly around for a man-of-war to convoy us to Washington ; nor do I yet understand how, in so fearful an emergency, such a precaution was neglected. Every boat we hailed reported every thing in the hands of the secessionists ; and if the enemy meditated an attack on the capital, it was not likely they would permit a thousand men to go to its relief, when a single gun on the banks of the river could have barred our passage. Could we have ascertained the position of the batteries, we could have perhaps landed and stormed them ; but it would have been an easy task to mask them until we were under their fire, and then resistance, at the best, would have been madness. I retired to rest that night with the expectation of being awakened

by the crash of a cannon-ball through our bulwarks, and the cries of wounded men.

“During the night our course was altered, and the dawn of day disclosed the distant city of Annapolis. Even here our approach was cautious, for the city might be in the possession of the enemy, and a swift steamer lurking there ready to dart out on its prey. But the sight of the “brave old flag” streaming from the mast-head of the Constitution frigate, which the 8th Massachusetts had towed out as she was about to be seized by a party of rebels from Baltimore (their fathers, they said, had built her, and they were determined to preserve her), this flag reassured us. Never did the stars and stripes seem so dear to us. We never before realized how much we loved them, and at the sight there went up a cheer from our gallant men that made the welkin ring.

“The 8th Massachusetts regiment left Philadelphia a few hours before us, and at Havre-de-Grace had seized the steamer Maryland, and arrived in advance. In towing out the Constitution they grounded, and when we arrived, these brave men had been confined on their steamer for twenty-four hours, without food or drink; some, in their agony, drank salt-water, and became delirious. We consumed half a day in attempting to tow them off, and were at last compelled to land our own regiment and send back the Boston to land the 8th.

“We found the Naval School of Annapolis in hourly expectation of an attack, as the whole country round was in possession of secessionists. But we were once more on land, where the Seventh, if attacked, could defend themselves, and thus were we mercifully brought to the haven where we would be; and never did I utter a more hearty ‘thanksgiving for a safe return from sea.’ We all realized the fulfilment of

the promise, 'When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee.'

"But in Annapolis we were yet a weary way off from our destination. Still not a word from Government—the telegraph torn down—the locomotive disabled—the rails displaced—the bridges demolished—and the road reported in possession of the enemy. Our position was still critical and trying. It was the original intention to march for Washington immediately on landing, as the capital, if not already captured, was supposed to be in great peril; and here, for a third time, there seems to have been an interposition of God in our behalf.

"It was finally concluded to hold Annapolis, to make it the basis of military operations, and open the road to Washington. The rails had been torn up for miles, but the '8th Massachusetts,' a noble body of men, commanded by General Butler, a brave man, commenced to lay them down and repair the engine. Intimidated by numbers, the rebels did not molest them.

"Late on the evening of the 23d inst., the discharge of a rocket from the Constitution, followed by the report of a cannon, gave the signal of unfriendly visitors in the bay. The drums immediately beat to quarters, and in *just seven minutes* from the first tap, the Cadets, the 8th Massachusetts, and the National were in line of battle, ready for action. It proved a false alarm; but I am convinced, from what I subsequently learned, that it saved us from molestation, if not from a battle, on the next day's march.

"The vessels proved to be friendly, loaded with troops. They came to take our place and hold the city.

"On the 24th of April, the 6th and 7th companies and the engineer corps, marched as an advanced guard: the 8th

Massachusetts followed, and the main body of the National Guard moved forward. The morning was one of the most sultry I can remember, and the men suffered terribly, marching, as they did, on the railroad, often between high banks; not a breath of air could reach them, while the sun was intensely warm, and they loaded with heavy knapsacks.

“By dark, the Seventh was in advance of the Eighth, after having rebuilt a large bridge which had been destroyed. Of the sufferings of that night’s march, I need not speak. A shower had drenched the men and changed the atmosphere: it was cold, and the men could not walk fast enough to keep themselves warm, it being necessary, every few minutes, to halt the whole body to lay rails.

“Hungry, thirsty, cold, weary, in constant expectation of an attack, the Seventh toiled on without a murmur, dragging the two howitzers by hand; and as fast as the poor fellows fell from exhaustion, often insensible, they were put on the surgeon’s car, and dragged by hand also, this having become necessary, as we were now cut off from our locomotive by a break we could not repair. Three times did I lift a soldier of the Massachusetts regiment after he had fallen, and at last left him on the ground in the care of his companions; and when, at last, the dawn broke on our weary line, I could scarcely recognize my intimate friends, so pale, haggard, and altered did they look in the cold morning light.

“Fires were now built along the line, to warm the men. The adjoining fences furnished the fuel, but the proprietor was sent for and amply remunerated at war prices. The men rummaged their knapsacks for any remaining piece of raw meat, and scoured the neighborhood for food; and under other circumstances it would have been amusing to

see the tired soldiers drop asleep while conveying it to their mouths. Sleep was even more imperative and exacting than hunger.

“We found the Junction in possession of the Federal troops, and were soon on our way to Washington by rail. It was there I saw and heard read a mass of captured telegraphic dispatches, in which was disclosed the plan for cutting off the Seventh, by destroying the bridges, removing the rails, and charging with cavalry through every cross-road they were to pass. The plan was admirable, and I afterwards learned why it was abandoned.

“It seems the colonel of the body of the enemy's horse (some 500 strong) had been sent in disguise to Annapolis to watch our movements. He was there on the eve of our march, and saw the rapid formation of the troops in order of battle, when the alarm was given to which I have before alluded. He returned and reported it was inexpedient to attack.

“Hence the reported destruction of the Seventh, from the Charleston papers. They reported as done what was so well planned and confidently anticipated.

“The wisdom and prudence of our delay at Annapolis were now apparent. Had the National Guard been cut to pieces, as they might have been, not only would New York have been clothed in mourning, but a severe blow would have been given to our cause throughout the land, and Washington would have probably fallen into the hands of the insurgents. Again and again was I informed by high military authority, that our capital could have been captured by a thousand resolute men. The authorities knew not whom to trust—men sworn in and furnished with arms would desert—and the city was filled with traitors; and, aside from the enemy in Virginia, there were foes in their midst sufficient to take possession of the place.

"I cannot describe to you the raptures of joy with which we were received at Washington. Old men hailed us as deliverers, and wept like children. They had been long looking for us, and 'hope deferred had made the heart sick,' but when the Seventh wheeled into Pennsylvania avenue there was one long sigh of relief. The inhabitants felt (for the time, at least) they were safe, and that night slept soundly, who had not done so for many anxious days.

"Of the importance of the march to Washington, perhaps it does not become me to speak; I might be a partial narrator. But sober history will assign it its proper place in its future pages. The Seventh marched at a few hours' notice—marched with one day's rations—marched expecting battle—marched at a moment when the executive arm was literally cut off from its body, the North and West—marched when the government were in utter ignorance of the spirit of the loyal States, and did not know whether they were to be supported or not. At this critical moment, when the seat of government was menaced by an unscrupulous foe, they responded to the call made on them, in greater numbers of the original members than ever appeared on any gala day, at any period since their formation. Less than this I cannot say. I might say much more. I might make comparisons, but I forbear. Where all are patriotic—self-sacrificing—brave—let all petty rivalries, mean jealousies, and unmanly detractions be laid, at this solemn hour, as a sacrifice on the altar of our common country. Let the only emulation be, who shall best serve his country. Suffice it to say, the Seventh, aided by the immortal Eighth of Massachusetts (whom the descendants of Bunker Hill well know how to honor), to whom a word in our disparagement would be very unsafe, opened a road from the loyal States to their capital, and, as a distinguished

citizen of that State remarked to me, 'broke the backbone of secession in Maryland forever.'

"Nor can I forbear saying one word in commendation of our judicious commander. It would have been easy for him to have incurred foolish risk; to have put his regiment in unnecessary peril; to have made daring experiments; to have furnished brilliant paragraphs for the press; to have criminally sacrificed his men, and furnished material for pictorial sheets. But he was intrusted with a higher and more important mission than to create a sensation and minister to a morbid taste. He was to take care that the Republic received no harm. That 'discretion is the better part of valor,' has become a synonym of ridicule; but it is a great truth, and one on which the great captain of this age, and the most humane, too, is conducting probably his last, and, we hope, his most splendid campaign. Our colonel deserves, as he has won, not only the thanks of his superiors, but the gratitude of every father, mother, wife, child, brother, and sister of the members of the National Guard.

"Napoleon Bonaparte once ordered a charge to gratify the caprice of a beautiful lady, who wished to see something of war; and as he gazed on the dead—sacrificed for an idle whim—he declared he regretted that rash order more than any act of his life. When the light brigade—the famous six hundred—made their mad charge at Balaklava, the French, the most dashing soldiers in the world, exclaimed, as they swept by, '*C'est très magnifique, mais ce n'est la guerre*—this is very splendid, but it is not war.' No, a well-ordered retreat even, may be more serviceable than a barren triumph. Many a rash commander has had reason to exclaim with the ancient captain, 'Alas! another such victory, and I am undone.' 'The true soldier con-

tends not for brilliant momentary success, but for solid and lasting results.' He deserves best of his country, humanity, and religion, who insures success while he spares the effusion of blood.

"I cannot refrain from noticing the mercy of Providence in the preservation of the health of the soldiers.

"At Camp Cameron, for several days and nights the exposure was terrible. Our encampment was called Mount Pleasant; but for a time, this was a palpable misnomer. It rained incessantly; the weather cold; the tents were without floors; the men, without beds, were compelled to lie down (many of them drenched to the skin from being on guard) in wet, rank clover. The hospital was soon filled with invalids, and I can only attribute their rapid recovery to their youth, spirits, temperate habits, and the skill of our excellent medical staff.

"At two o'clock, on the morning of May 25th, we crossed the Long Bridge into Virginia. It was a sublime spectacle. The silent tramp of ten thousand men hardly aroused the sleeping inhabitants of Washington. Three thousand men moved by me like phantoms; not a beat of the drum, not a word exchanged. The profound silence was more emphatic and expressive than the most noisy demonstration. Each man felt he was engaged in the discharge of a stern and solemn duty. Once across, the tired men threw themselves down and slept the deep sleep of the exhausted.

"Though there were twelve hundred and thirty names on our muster-roll, we brought or sent home every man but one alive, and nearly every one in good health. Alas for the exception! A widowed mother, and a fond young wife, mourn to-day their untimely loss,—one gallant spirit that went from them buoyant with health, glowing with

patriotic fire, and eager to win an honorable name in the service of his beloved land. But let them be comforted. He fell in the discharge of his duty; his memory is embalmed in the hearts of his comrades that loved him so well; and it is sweet to die for our country.

“At Annapolis, several hundred Testaments (with Psalms) were distributed. They were eagerly sought for, and there were not enough to supply the applicants.

“It was at once touching and gratifying to observe, during a halt, the men reading their Testaments, in some instances by single individuals—in others, groups listening with the most marked attention; and no doubt many a fervent prayer was offered up in silence by the weary soldiers, for danger makes men grave and serious, and they no doubt realized that loved ones at home were praying also. Many had brought their Bibles and Prayer-books with them, but all were anxious to possess another, as a memento of the campaign. One father sent five sons to the war, all in one company: each applied for a Prayer-book, and two additional ones for their parents at home. Throughout the entire period of absence the behavior of the regiment was creditable to them as gentlemen, soldiers, and Christians. The trials and dangers through which they have passed I am sure have chastened their hearts, made them wiser and better men, and produced impressions that will not soon be effaced. If never before, they now realize what it is to pray in earnest.

“How this unnatural contest is to end, Omniscience only knows; unless He interferes to overrule the wrath of man, it threatens to be one of the most disastrous in the annals of time. But we have put our hand to the plough and cannot look back. We hope the government will adopt no narrow or mercenary policy, and accept no dishonorable

compromise. The people are ready to do their part, and such a remarkable and unexampled unanimity of sentiment in the North and West, under the circumstances, seems like an augury from God, and an earnest of success. We can afford to expend one hundred—nay, one thousand millions if need be. A grateful posterity will cheerfully pay the debt. A vigorous display of our resources and courage now may be economical in the end, and save us from long dissensions and a future foreign war. Let us stop at no proper sacrifice of money or men, or regard any peril too imminent, or sacrifice too great, to accomplish this glorious result.

“We have for long years been enjoying the benefit of our fathers’ toils and sufferings. Let us resolve to bequeath to posterity a similar legacy. We believe God is on our side, and it is a great consolation to know that our great captain, whom, may Heaven preserve, purposes, so far as possible, to make it a humane war. But, under any circumstances, war is a fearful evil—civil war doubly so. Let us endeavor, therefore, to banish, as far as possible, all private hate and personal animosity; and while we aim to chastise our mistaken foes, let it be like the correction of a loving parent of an erring child—more in sorrow than in anger—ever praying God to give them repentance and better minds.”

NEW YORK, June 9th, 1861.

LETTER II.

Copy of a letter picked up in camp by Colonel John Chester, called in history “the gallant Colonel Chester.”

He was present at the siege of Bunker Hill, and was selected to go before the British lines with an exchange of prisoners, on