

# Life of a Union Soldier

## From the Civil War Memoirs of Daniel Crotty

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### The Cherry Pickers

At this time it was common to make raids into Maryland to pick cherries that grew in abundance, and such other fruit as we could get. There is a field about three miles from camp with some nice trees, and thither we would go and eat our fill. One day, while up in a large tree eating away, we heard a loud, rumbling noise, like thunder. Looking down we saw a large bull beneath the tree, scraping the ground and bellowing fearfully. It was very likely he was anxious for us to come down and pay for the cherries we had eaten; but no, we stay up the tree and wait for his majesty's departure. Tired of waiting, he majestically walks away. We get down from the tree and leg it for the road. The bull gives chase and we fly ignominiously, for we would rather be excused from taking a horn, especially in that shape. I don't think there were any more cherries picked in that field, by any of our crowd at least. (p. 17)

### Camp at Arlington

Oh, what a lovely camping ground! I shall never forget my lonely beat on guard in this camp. A panorama stretches out before me that is difficult to describe. Down in the valley are myriads of tents shining in the sun; the lazy four-mule teams, as they pull their covered wagons along the different roads; the beautiful Potomac, as it winds its way to the sea; the Long Bridge leading across the river connecting the sacred soil with Washington, whose beautiful Government buildings increase the grandeur; and the unfinished monument to the Father of his Country, are all visible at one view. The fortifications around Washington are growing up like mushrooms, and now the Capitol is considered safe. We have built three or four forts in a short time, Fort Scott, Fort Richardson, and some smaller redoubts and breastworks. Our work is done here now, and we have to move to some other locality. (p. 27)

### The Routine of Camp Life

*Fourth of July, 1862 in Washington, DC:*

Camp life here is very hard, the weather being very hot, and we drill a great deal. In the morning at 5 o'clock we are awakened by the reveille; get up and answer the roll-call; then form for squad drill; then breakfast, after which is company drill; come in and rest for awhile, and then the whole regiment goes out for battalion drill; next dinner; next brigade drill; next division drill, and we all think if the fields were only large enough, we would have a corps and army drill....

Here we have the same routine of camp life as in all other camps—guard mount, guard duty, picket duty, and fatigue duty. Hundreds are getting sick every day, and if we stay here in this hot hole much longer there will not be much of the army left fit for service. (pp. 56-57)

### In Quest of a Drink of Water

*On the march to Williamsburg (August 1, 1862):*

I will relate an incident that happened to myself on this hot and thirsty march. There was not a drop of water with any of us, and with three canteens beside my own I started off in quest of some. Seeing a house not far off, hither I went, finding many there ahead of me, getting the precious liquid out of a very deep well. I cannot describe my feelings as I drew near the water, for my lips were parched with thirst. While in the act of drawing some, a man pulled up on horseback, and, I am ashamed to say, wore the dress of an officer. Said he, "Get away from here," at the same time drawing his cowardly sword. I told him I must have some water as the boys in the ranks besides myself were nearly choked with thirst. "Get back, I say, or I will run you through with my sword," said he, coming close to me. At that time I did not care much whether

I lived or not, but I was maddened almost to desperation. I seized my gun and in an instant fired the bayonet thereon, and made one lunge at him. It was well that his horse shied to one side, or my bayonet would have been thrust through his miserable body. He asked me what regiment I belonged to.... I asked him for his name but he rode off without telling me and I filled my canteens in triumph. I never saw or heard of him after. When I reached the boys they were almost played out, and took a drink of the water which nearly cost me my life to get. (pp. 59-60)

### **Winter in Camp, 1862**

It is evident now that all movements of the army is at an end for a while at least. Each corps, division, brigade, regiment and company, is assigned camping grounds, and all are told to build winter quarters, and make ourselves as comfortable as we can. The forests around this country are stripped of their trees for houses and fire-wood. The walls of our houses are built of logs, and covered with shelter tents, with a nice cosy fire place at one end, made of brick or stone, with a mud and stick chimney. They are very comfortable houses, with plenty of blankets and a bed of long poles. The sutlers are all up again, and supply us with what delicacies we can afford.

When one of our men die in the hospital, all who can, go to his funeral. It is one of the most solemn things of the soldier's life, to witness the burial of one of his comrades. One might suppose that a soldier is so used to seeing death on the battle-field, that he is hardened to everything, but it is a mistake, for when one dies in camp he is mourned over as much as those at home mourn over their friends. The soldier has the most acute feelings for his suffering comrades, and sympathize with the loved ones who have lost their relative or friend. The poor soldier dies away from home; no relative is near by to comfort or sympathize with him in his last hour, but his comrades gather around him and give him the burial of the warrior. He is laid out in his uniform of blue, in a plain, rough coffin, over which hang the stars and stripes. The mournful procession commences its slow march, headed by the band. Oh, how solemn are the strains as they are taken up by the chilling breeze. His comrades follow close behind, marching with reversed arms. The solemn procession halt at the lonely grave, when the coffin is lowered into the earth.... (pp. 75-76)

### **Thoughts and Reflections before a Battle**

*After the Battle of Kelly's Ford (March 17, 1863), in anticipation of a great battle:*

As soon as morning comes we expect to have a terrible battle, and each man has his own thoughts and reflections. We sit around the bivouac fires, and, as is usual before a great battle, each tells the others that in case he should fall what will be done in regard to letting the loved ones at home know what became of him, and what should be done with the little effects that a soldier carries about him. Write to my mother, says one, and tell her, if I fall, that I always tried to do my duty to my country. Write to my wife, says another, and should I fall, my last thoughts were of her and my darling children. Write to my brother, says another, and should I fall, tell him to come and fill my place in the ranks. A thousand and one things are talked about and thought of the night before a great battle, which no one can tell but those who have passed through the sad ordeal. At last poor human nature needs repose, and we lie down to rest. We look up and see the stars peeping down at us; we nestle close together, for the night is frosty and cold, and soon we are oblivious of all the dangers that surround us. (pp. 111-112)

### **Drawing Rations and Army Cooking**

One of the most peculiar features of a soldier's life is the drawing of his rations. Everything in our army goes like clock-work, from the Army Quartermaster down to the Orderly Sergeant who deals out the sugar, coffee, pork, beef, and hard-tack, or hard bread, to his company, who gather around him like chickens around an old hen, to get their daily food....

Another feature in a soldier's life in camp is cooking his rations. We are not very particular how we cook our pork. Sometimes we fry it in a tin spider, which we make by cutting in two a canteen; other times we punch our ramrods through a slice and let it fry over the camp fire, and, in order not to lose any of the grease, we hold a hard-tack under and let the gravy drop on it, which answers very well for butter. We have different ways of cooking hard-tack. At first we could not manage it very well, but necessity is always the mother of invention, and during our four years campaigning we have found out a good many ways to make our life more comfortable than at first. The best way we find to make hard bread palatable is to soak in cold water,

then fry in a spider with the fat of pork. Of course, butter would be better, but that luxury is out of the question, unless we pay an extravagant price for it to the sutler. Hot water will not soften hard-tack, but will make it as tough as leather. Our "concentrated soup" will bear a brief mention. Vegetables of all kinds are pressed together and made as hard as a stone—potatoes, onions, parsnips, carrots, cabbage, pepper, salt, and garlick, are mixed up in a solid mass, so when boiled about ten hours it makes a delicious soup, but it is not much of a favorite with many soldiers, because of a sickish taste there is to it. There is nothing a soldier likes better than his coffee, without it he could not live in the field. In about ten minutes after we halt we can sip our favorite beverage. On the campaigns "concentrated soup" is out of the question, for we do not stay long enough in a place to cook it. (pp. 165-166)

### **Sunday Morning Camp Inspection**

The Sunday morning inspection in camp will bear a brief mention. It takes place after guard mount, on the parade ground. Each man must appear to the best advantage he can. His brasses must be cleaned and his musket in good order; knapsacks packed tidy, and everything about him must be as neat as possible. The band form on the parade ground, the companies march to the music and form as if on parade. The Adjutant turns and salutes the Colonel, telling him the battalion is formed. The Colonel then gives the order for the companies to right wheel, the right of the companies standing still, thus leaving a space between each company. Then the front ranks come to an about face, so as to face the rear rank, which has stepped to the rear about four paces, before the front rank has got the order to face about, thus leaving a space between both ranks for the inspecting officer to pass through. "Unslung knapsacks," is the order after "ground arms," and each man puts his knapsack at his feet, unpacked and the contents laid bare to open inspection. It is funny sometimes to see the contents, especially after a campaign. A soldier has perhaps a shirt, a pair of socks, and a prayer book or testament. Some have more, and some less, more generally the latter, but in winter-quarters, where there is a chance to have plenty of clothing, the knapsack of a tidy soldier is worth looking at. The overcoat is folded in a nice roll and strapped on top; the blankets, shirts, drawers and socks, with a soldier's album, which almost every soldier carries with the pictures of dear and loving friends at home. All have their proper places in the knapsack.... (pp. 166-167)

### **The Fate of the Soldier after a Battle**

*After crossing Hatcher's Run (February 5, 1865), and engaging in a skirmish:*

The fine weather of the past few days has been interrupted by a cold, drizzling rain. We lay around here for a few days in great misery, the eyes melted almost out of our heads with the smoke that stays around from the numerous camp fires that are built to keep us warm. Oh, what a miserable time, wet to the skin, ragged and dirty, with the scalding water rolling down our cheeks, caused by the smoke. Surely, this is another blunder, caused by some one; we can all see that no good will come of this move, but, on the contrary, it will be the cause of many a brave man being ruined for life from these few days of hardships. It seems to us that it is the delight of some officers to see the poor soldier suffer. Oh, who has suffered that the country might be saved? Is it the officer or the private? In almost every book written on our bloody war the gallant officer so and so is spoken about, but not a word about the poor privates, who, I contend, put down this gigantic rebellion, for they have stood the brunt of every battle, and braved the hardships of the campaigns, and what do they receive in return from the officers for doing the most trivial offense? They are degraded with punishment not fit for an Indian savage. I will not class all officers with those mentioned, for our army are blessed with as good men as ever were born to command, but they are an exception to the general rule. Oh, yes, but it was the officers that led the men into the battle, but how long would the majority of them stay after they did go in? A very short time, as thousands of brave soldiers can testify, who had to fight the battles that saved the Union, and to them the praise is due of every true American citizen. (pp. 168-169)

From Crotty, Daniel G., *Four Years Campaigning in the Army of the Potomac*, Dygert Bros. & Co., Grand Rapids, MI, 1874, (Reprinted: New Jersey: Belle Grove Publishing Company, 1995), by way of [http://www.geocities.com/1stdragoon/files/soldier\\_crotty.html](http://www.geocities.com/1stdragoon/files/soldier_crotty.html).