

Life of a Confederate Soldier

From the Words of Sam Watkins

For more information on Sam Watkins, visit:
http://www.geocities.com/1stdragoon/files/soldier_watkins.html

Thoughts on the Common Soldier

Reminiscences of Camp Cheatham, 1861:

A private soldier is but an automaton, a machine that works by the command of a good, bad, or indifferent engineer, and is presumed to know nothing of all these great events. His business is to load and shoot, stand picket, videt, etc., while the officers sleep, or perhaps die on the field of battle and glory, and his obituary and epitaph but "one" remembered among the slain, but to what company, regiment, brigade or corps he belongs, there is no account; he is soon forgotten. (p. 22)

After the battle on Cheat Mountain (September 12-13, 1861):

After the fighting was over, where, O where, was all the fine rigging heretofore on our officers? They could not be seen. Corporals, sergeants, lieutenants, captains, all had torn all the fine lace off their clothing. I noticed that at the time and was surprised and hurt. I asked several of them why they had torn off the insignia of their rank, and they always answered, "Humph, you think that I was going to be a target for the Yankees to shoot at?" You see, this was our first battle, and the officers had not found out that minnie as well as cannon balls were blind; that they had no eyes and could not see. They thought that the balls would hunt for them and not hurt the privates. I always shot at privates. It was they that did the shooting and killing, and if I could kill or wound a private, why, my chances were so much the better. I always looked upon officers as harmless personages.... If I shot at an officer, it was at long range, but when we got down to close quarters I always tried to kill those that were trying to kill me. (pp. 29-30)

The Weariness of a Long March

After the Battle of Perryville (October 8, 1862):

Along the route it was nothing but tramp, tramp, tramp, and no sound or noise but the same inevitable, monotonous tramp, tramp, tramp, up hill and down hill, through long and dusty lanes, weary, wornout and hungry. No cheerful warble of a merry songster would ever greet our ears. It was always tramp, tramp, tramp. You might, every now and then, hear the occasional words "close up"; but outside of that, it was but the same tramp, tramp, tramp. I have seen soldiers fast asleep, and no doubt dreaming of home and loved ones there, as they staggered along in their places in the ranks. I know that on many a weary night's march I have slept, and slept soundly, while marching along in my proper place in the ranks of the company, stepping to the same step as the soldier in front of me did. Sometimes, when weary, broken down and worn out, some member of the regiment would start a tune, and every man would join in....

...the boys would wake up and step quicker and livelier for some time, and Arthur Fulghum would holloa out, "All right; go ahead!" and then would toot! toot! as if the cars were starting—puff! puff! puff! and then he would say, "Tickets, gentlemen; tickets, gentlemen" like he was conductor on a train of cars. This little episode would be over, and then would commence the same tramp, tramp, tramp, all night long. Step by step, step by step, we continued to plod and nod and stagger and march, tramp, tramp, tramp. After a while we would see the morning star rise in the east, and then after a while the dim gray twilight, and finally we could discover the outlines of our file leader, and after a while could make out the outlines of trees and other objects. And as it would get lighter and lighter, and day would be about to break, cuckoo, cuckoo, cuckoo, would come from Tom Tuck's rooster. [Tom carried a game rooster, that he called "Fed" for Confederacy, all through the war in a haversack.] And then the sun would begin to shoot his slender rays athwart the eastern sky, and the boys would wake up and begin laughing and talking as if they had just risen from a good feather bed, and were perfectly refreshed and happy. We would usually stop at some branch or other about breakfast time, and all wash our hands and faces and eat breakfast, if we had any, and then commence our weary march again. If we were halted for one minute, every soldier would drop down, and resting on his knapsack, would go to sleep....

We march on. The scene of a few days ago comes unhidden to my mind. Tramp, tramp, tramp, the soldiers are marching. Where are many of my old friends and comrades, whose names were so familiar at every roll call, and whose familiar "Here" is no more? They lie yonder at Perryville, unburied, on the field of battle. They lie where they

fell. More than three hundred and fifty members of my regiment, the First Tennessee, numbered among the killed and wounded—one hundred and eighty-five slain on the field of battle. Who are they? Even then I had to try to think up the names of all the slain of Company H alone. Their spirits seemed to be with us on the march, but we know that their souls are with their God. Their bones, today, no doubt, bleach upon the battlefield. They left their homes, families, and loved ones a little more than one short twelve months ago, dressed in their gray uniforms, amid the applause and cheering farewells of those same friends. They lie yonder; no friendly hands ever closed their eyes in death; no kind, gentle, and loving mother was there to shed a tear over and say farewell to her darling boy; no sister's gentle touch ever wiped the death damp from off their dying brows. Noble boys; brave boys! They willingly gave their lives to their country's cause. Their bodies and bones are mangled and torn by the rude missiles of war. They sleep the sleep of the brave. They have given their all to their country. We miss them from our ranks. There are no more hard marches and scant rations for them. They have accomplished all that could be required of them. They are no more; their names are soon forgotten. They are put down in the roll-book as killed. They are forgotten. We will see them no more until the last reveille on the last morning of the final resurrection. Soldiers, comrades, friends, noble boys, farewell! we will meet no more on earth, but up yonder some day we will have a grand reunion. (pp. 67-70)

Nicknames

Almost every soldier in the army—generals, colonels, captains, as well as privates—had a nick-name; and I almost believe that had the war continued ten years, we would have forgotten our proper names. John T. Tucker was called "Sneak," A.S. Horsley was called "Don Von One Horsley," W.A. Hughes was called "Apple Jack," Green Rieves was called "Old Snake," Bob Brank was called "Count," the colonel of the Fourth was called "Guide Post," E.L. Lansdown was called "Left Tenant," some were called by the name of "Greasy," some "Buzzard," others "Hog," and "Brutus," and "Cassius," and "Caesar," "Left Center," and "Bolderdust," and "Old Hannah"; in fact, the nick-names were singular and peculiar, and when a man got a nick-name it stuck to him like the Old Man of the Sea did to the shoulders of Sinbad, the sailor. (p. 71)

Foraging for Food

Swimming the Tennessee River with "Roasting-ears":

The Tennessee river is about a quarter of a mile wide at Chattanooga. Right across the river was an immense corn-field. The green corn was waving with every little breeze that passed; the tassels were bowing and nodding their heads; the pollen was flying across the river like little snowdrops, and everything seemed to say, "Come hither, Johnny Reb; come hither, Johnny; come hither." The river was wide, but we were hungry. The roastingears looked tempting. We pulled off our clothes and launched into the turbid stream, and were soon on the other bank. Here was the field, and here were the roastingears; but where was the raft or canoe?

We thought of old Abraham and Isaac and the sacrifice: "My son, gather the roastingears, there will be a way provided."

We gathered the roastingears; we went back and gathered more roastingears, time and again. The bank was lined with green roastingears. Well, what was to be done? We began to shuck the corn. We would pull up a few shucks on one ear, and tie it to the shucks of another—first one and then another—until we had at least a hundred tied together. We pulled the train of corn into the river, and as it began to float off we jumped in, and taking the foremost ear in our mouth, struck out for the other bank. Well, we made the landing all correct.

I merely mention the above incident to show to what extremity soldiers would resort. Thousands of such occurrences were performed by the private soldiers of the Rebel army. (p. 97)

Impressions after a Battle

After the Battle of Chickamauga (September 19, 1863):

We remained upon the battlefield of Chickamauga all night. Everything had fallen into our hands. We had captured a great many prisoners and small arms, and many pieces of artillery and wagons and provisions. The Confederate and Federal dead, wounded, and dying were everywhere scattered over the battlefield. Men were lying where they fell, shot in every conceivable part of the body.... In fact, you might walk over the battlefield and find men shot from the crown of the head to the tip end of the toe. And then to see all those dead, wounded and dying horses....

Reader, a battlefield, after the battle, is a sad and sorrowful sight to look at. The glory of war is but the glory of battle, the shouts, and cheers, and victory.

A soldier's life is not a pleasant one. It is always, at best, one of privations and hardships. The emotions of patriotism and pleasure hardly counterbalance the toil and suffering that he has to undergo in order to enjoy his patriotism and pleasure. Dying on the field of battle and glory is about the easiest duty a soldier has to undergo. It is the living, marching, fighting, shooting soldier that has the hardships of war to carry. When a brave soldier is killed he is at rest. The living soldier knows not at what moment he, too, may be called on to lay down his life on the altar of his country. The dead are heroes, the living are but men compelled to do the drudgery and suffer the privations incident to the thing called "glorious war." (pp. 109-110)

Promotion to Corporal

After the Battle of Atlanta (July 22, 1864):

"Why, hello, corporal, where did you get those two yellow stripes from on your arm?"

"Why, sir, I have been promoted for gallantry on the battlefield, by picking up an orphan flag, that had been run over by a thousand fellows, and when I picked it up I did so because I thought it was pretty, and I wanted to have me a shirt made out of it."

"I could have picked up forty, had I known that," said Sloan.

"So could I, but I knew that the stragglers would pick them up."

Reader mine, the above dialogue is true in every particular. As long as I was in action, fighting for my country, there was no chance for promotion, but as soon as I fell out of ranks and picked up a forsaken and deserted flag, I was promoted for it. I felt "sorter" cheap when complimented for gallantry, and the high honor of fourth corporal was conferred upon me. I felt that those brave and noble fellows who had kept on in the charge were more entitled to the honor than I was, for when the ball struck me on the ankle and heel, I did not go any further. And had I only known that picking up flags entitled me to promotion and that every flag picked up would raise me one notch higher, I would have quit fighting and gone to picking up flags, and by that means I would have soon been President of the Confederate States of America. But honors now begin to cluster around my brow. This is the laurel and ivy that is entwined around the noble brows of victorious and renowned generals. I honestly earned the exalted honor of fourth corporal by picking up a Yankee battle-flag on the 22nd day of July, at Atlanta. (p. 185)

The Field Hospital in Atlanta

It was the only field hospital that I saw during the whole war, and I have no desire to see another. Those hollow-eyed and sunken-cheeked sufferers, shot in every conceivable part of the body; some shrieking, and calling upon their mothers; some laughing the hard, cackling laugh of the sufferer without hope, and some cursing like troopers, and some writhing and groaning as their wounds were being bandaged and dressed....

Ah! reader, there is no glory for the private soldier.... The officers have all the glory. Glory is not for the private soldier, such as die in the hospitals, being eat up with the deadly gangrene, and being imperfectly waited on. Glory is for generals, colonels, majors, captains, and lieutenants. They have all the glory, and when the poor private wins battles by dint of sweat, hard marches, camp and picket duty, fasting and broken bones, the officers get the glory. The private's pay was eleven dollars per month, if he got it; the general's pay was three hundred dollars per month, and he always got his. I am not complaining. These things happened sixteen to twenty years ago. Men who never fired a gun, nor killed a Yankee during the whole war, are today the heroes of the war. Now, I tell you what I think about it: I think that those of us who fought as private soldiers, fought as much for glory as the general did, and those of us who stuck it out to the last, deserve more praise than the general who resigned because some other general was placed in command over him. A general could resign. That was honorable. A private could not resign, nor choose his branch of service, and if he deserted, it was death. (pp. 202-203)

From Watkins, Sam R., *"Co. Aytch": A Side Show of the Big Show, Herald, Columbia, TN, 1881-1882*, (Reprinted: New York: Touchstone, 1997).