

Orsell Cook Brown: A Personal Lens into the Forty-Fourth Volunteer Infantry of New York

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Abstract

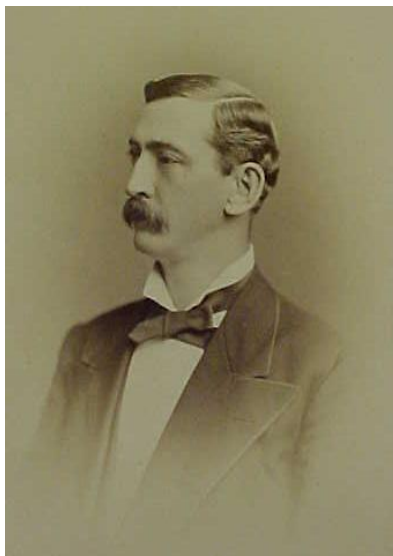
A thorough examination of life in a Civil War regiment, the 44th Volunteer Infantry of New York, was conducted through examination of the personal letters of the Quarter Master's Assistant, Orsell Cook Brown. This regiment also known as "Ellsworth's Avengers" was formed in Malta, NY in honor of Elmer Ellsworth, the Civil War's first Union casualty. The letters allow one to fully understand the esprit de corps of this regiment, their experience in "seeing the elephant," and the transparent overlap of civilian and military life faced by these brave men through the personal lens of Mr. Orsell Cook Brown. His letters were donated to the New York State Archives but were never transcribed or digitally archived. The examination of the letters included reading, interpreting, and typing his correspondence written in the year 1863. Brown's letters serve as a reminder of the emotionally and physically taxing lives endured by Civil War soldiers in their fight to reunite a divided nation. Brown describes his daily routine to his family as his only connection to the life he knew best, the life of a civilian. Brown loathes those who are not supportive of the war effort because he feels they are unappreciative of the sacrifices he consistently makes to ensure not only their safety, but their comfortable lives as civilians as well. He is internally conflicted as his heart's desire to return home remains at war with his mind's realization that he must bear the stars and stripes of the Army of the Potomac to define himself as a worthy man in the eyes of his nation. This research, which is still in the process of being completed, will be used in the writing of Siena College professor, Dr. Bruce Eelman's book centering around the 44th Volunteer Infantry of New York and for a Siena College Senior Honors Thesis detailing the history of the regiment, the average day in the life of a soldier, and reliance on the familial bond to give the soldier purpose in time of war.

Keywords: American Civil War, Union Soldier

1. Introduction

The United States has developed into the nation it is today because of the sacrifices of soldiers who volunteered to defend the principles that the nation was built upon. Wars have been fought by countless Americans who have chosen to put their own lives in jeopardy to ensure the safety and protection of others. Soldiers did not blindly submit to the demands of the military. They questioned, pondered, and continuously asked themselves why they were acting on behalf a bigger institution with which they may or may not have agreed. Soldiers fought for a variety of reasons. Many continuously reflected on why they chose to become part of a cause so much larger than themselves when the risks outweighed the benefits. Although soldiers were required to obey their commanders, many were hesitant to fully comply with their superior's wishes because they also wanted to fulfill their personal wants and desires. As a result, the war experience was individualized. Soldiers worked on achieving such goals as bringing prestige to the family name or earning rank and title in addition to fulfilling war duties.

One can gain a clearer understanding of the Civil War by analyzing personal letters written during the Civil War. This paper will examine the Quartermaster's Assistant to the 44th Volunteer Infantry of New York, Orsell Cook Brown. His three boxes of letters were donated to the New York State Archives by Brown's niece, Mary Emogine Hazeltine in 1935. Brown's question may have crossed the minds of most Civil War soldiers who fought to reunite the United States during the tumultuous years of 1861-1865. Although this may have been the words of one soldier, his words echo that of thousands who fought on the side of the Union. Men like Brown questioned their purpose in the war and if their fighting in the blood drenched fields and in the uncomfortable camp conditions was worth the pain endured. Despite the doubts that may have arisen, it was the dedication to the greater cause which kept the moral fibers of the regiment together. Brown wrote hundreds of letters to his family from 1861 to 1865. He wrote almost every day, often faster than his family members could respond. Although all the letters provide a detailed representation of the soldier experience, it is particularly telling to analyze the letters that he wrote in 1863 because of the significant events that took place during that year such as the Battle of Gettysburg that would ultimately determine the course of the Civil War. Below is a picture of the man behind the pen and the story that this paper seeks to tell.



The Impact of Brown's Letters

Brown's letters serve as a reminder of the emotionally and physically taxing lives endured by Civil War soldiers in their fight to reunite a divided nation. Examining Brown's letters will give insight into a soldier's life in camp including his experience in the infamous regiment in honor of Elmer Ellsworth, his struggle to cope with the loss of his family, and his constant mental grappling to define his purpose in the war. Brown describes his daily routine to his family as his only connection to the life he knew best, the life of a civilian. Brown's perspective on the war is through the lens of his elite status as the assistant to the quartermaster. Brown loathes those who are not supportive of the war effort because he feels they are unappreciative of the sacrifices he consistently makes to ensure not only their safety but their comfortable lives as well. He is internally conflicted as his heart's desire to return home remains at war with his mind's realization that he must bear the stars and stripes of the Army of the Potomac to define himself as a worthy man in the eyes of his nation. These letters show that these Civil War soldiers function as people do today. They had motives, feelings, and were susceptible to tragic flaws. They had their own personal reasons for fighting in the war that may or may have been different or similar to that of his comrades. They give an insight into one life out of the thousands that fought, one story that with the help of historical preservation will be told and never forgotten.

Orsell Cook Brown was born on April 20, 1835 and was a native of Chautauqua County, NY and the son of Samuel and Clarissa Brown. Orsell lived until the age of forty-six, passing away on March 21, 1881. He was named after a leading attorney, Orsell Cook, in Jamestown, N.Y. that his father admired greatly. Brown had two younger sisters who died very young, two living brothers, Charles Gardiner Brown, and Ferdinand Delos Brown and two living sisters, older sister, Ella Brown Williams and Olivia Brown. Brown enlisted on August 19, 1861 and for the bulk of his service he was a clerk with the quartermaster department. In October of 1864, he was promoted

quartermaster sergeant of the 140th New York Infantry Regiment, and in December of 1864 he was commissioned, but was not mustered out as a second lieutenant with rank. In June of 1865, he transferred to the 5th veteran infantry and in August of the same year, he mustered out from the 5th at Harts Island, New York. The 44th Volunteer Infantry of New York saw action at Gettysburg, the Peninsula Campaign, Sharpsburg, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, Petersburg, and the Wilderness Campaign. Due to his assignment to the quartermaster's department he saw action in only one battle. After the war Brown worked for the Internal Revenue Office in Washington, a position he held until his death in 1881.ⁱ Brown was not the only member of his family to be serving in the war. His younger brother, Charles Gardiner Brown, at the age of 23 enlisted on September 9, 1861 and served for approximately four years.

2. Significance of the Regiment

"I am perfectly content to accept whatever my fortune may be, confident that he who noteth even the fall of a sparrow will have some purpose in the fate of one like me. *** God bless, protect and care for you."ⁱⁱ This quote reflects the final thoughts of Col. E. Elmer Ellsworth before he defended the Union's pride in an act of valor that took his life. Ellsworth was immortalized by Brown and his comrades as members of the 44th Volunteer Infantry of New York, a regiment that was created in honor of Elmer Ellsworth, the Union's first casualty. Elmer Ellsworth grew up in Malta, New York and was a good friend of President Lincoln. Ellsworth tried to remove a Confederate flag flying on top of a hotel in Alexandria, Virginia that could be seen from the White House. Ellsworth was shot and killed in the process by the hotel owner. In honor of him, the 44th Volunteer Infantry of New York was created to remind soldiers of the Union cause personified by Ellsworth. This regiment was commonly known as Ellsworth's Avengers.

The regiment was recruited under the auspices of the Ellsworth Association of the State of New York. According to the book *New York in the War of the Rebellion*, the original plan for the memorial regiment was to enlist one man from every town and ward to serve, however, this plan was not followed through. Men were chosen through a highly selective process that demanded men who displayed a respectable emotional and or monetary investment in the areas of education, culture, social standing, property, and morality.ⁱⁱⁱ Recruits had to be unmarried, not over thirty years of age, and not be under five feet, eight inches in height, and have some military experience.^{iv} Even men who wanted to be a part of this elite regiment who did not meet the necessary standards would find alternative means by deceiving the inspection system. Short applicants "walked as tall as possible" and some even placed extra lifts were put upon the shoes to give the required height of five feet and eight inches.^v Candidates competed against one another to see if they were more worthy than their neighbors to serve for the forty-fourth on behalf of their town. The character of the regiment was also demonstrated through by the formation within its rank of a religious and literary organization where "spiritual ideals were cherished, and when opportunity offered themes of thought, principles of conduct and 'burning questions of the day' were profitably considered and ably discussed."^{vi} Men that embodied these qualities and were consequently worthy of serving for this prestigious regiment reported at Albany where the regiment was organized under orders of the state. Subscriptions were instructed to pay one dollar which would be immediately forwarded to the Treasurer of the association at Albany to be used towards the mustering and complete equipment of the regiment.^{vii}

3. The Regiment's Actions During the War

The 44th participated in many of the major battles with the Army of the Potomac. In 1862 the regiment of 1,061 men left for Washington, D.C. where it was assigned to the 3rd brigade, 1st division, later with the 5th corps. After the winter passed, the regiment then made its way to Centerville soon returning to Fairfax and then left for Yorktown. Throughout its time serving in the war, the regiment garrisoned Fort Magruder then moved to Gaine's Mill where it was engaged in the Seven Days' battles. After returning to Alexandria, the regiment moved from Fortress Monroe to Manassas. The 44th was in reserve at Antietam but was active in both Shepherdstown and Fredericksburg. In 1863, the focus of this study, the 44th also fought in the Chancellorsville campaign and the Battle of Gettysburg. At Gettysburg, the regiment defended Little Round Top while 111 men were killed, wounded, and missing. After spending weeks in camp at Emmitsburg, "the command was present at battle of Bristoe Station, active at Rappahannock Station and in the Mine Run campaign, and went into the winter quarters at Brandy Station."^{viii}

Many men chose to re-enlist with the regiment. In May of 1864, the men suffered great loss during the Wilderness campaign and at Bethesda Church.^{ix} As the war progressed, and regiment faced a great decrease in men they continued to fight on. The regiment was active in the first assault on Petersburg in June of 1864, at the Weldon railroad, and at Poplar Spring Church. On October 11, 1864, the 44th was mustered out at Albany and the veterans and recruits were consolidated into a battalion, of which 266 men were transferred to the 140th and 183 to the 146th N.Y. “The total strength of the regiment was 1,585, of whom 188 died during the term of service from wounds received in action, and 147 died from accident, imprisonment or disease. The loss in killed, wounded and missing was 730.”^x The information was taken from *The Union army: a history of military affairs in the loyal states, 1861-65—records of the regiments in the Union army—cyclopedia of battles—memoirs of commanders and soldiers*. The book eloquently states the experience of the men who fought for the 44th, “The men chosen for this command were of the flower of the state and displayed their heroism on many a desperately contested field, where they won laurels for themselves, and for their state.”^{xi}

4. Esprit de Corps

The Forty-Fourth Volunteer Infantry of New York had a common goal that connected the men in the regiment and gave them a reason to fight otherwise known as the “Esprit de Corps.” The death of Elmer Ellsworth personified the fear of the death of Union pride. Men bonded together to fight to uphold the Union and to eternalize the values of courage and devotion to the nation as seen by Ellsworth’s actions. This concept of “Esprit de Corps” is not unique to the forty-fourth; many regiments had reasons that bonded men together. In *Brothers One and All: Esprit de Corps in a Civil War Regiment*, author Mark Dunkelman discusses the unique bond evidenced by the 154th New York Regiment as documented in personal letters of the soldiers who fought for the specific regiment. Common experience allowed soldiers to have the ability to understand each other, but morale and loyalty gave them the ability to trust each other. Trust and devotion was necessary for soldiers to assert their allegiance to the regiment, but disloyalty or an infringement of any kind could jeopardize the fragile bond that kept the men together. Ideally, every regiment needs a foundation, similar to the one described by Dunkelman, but the forty-fourth regiment had a foundation that far outweighed that of others. They had one of the leading symbols of patriotism as their emblem. For this reason, the 44th arguably had more incentive to uphold the principles of the Union.^{xii}

Soldiers relied on familial bonds to give them purpose in time of war. His letters show his struggle to actively participate in the war because his heart was truly at home. Orsell is very close with his family and writes to them frequently detailing his daily routine. Although it may have sounded menial to his beloved sisters, his descriptions in the letters is what sustained the familial bonds and ties back at home. On January 31st, 1863 he wrote, “Your letter my darling sister seemed to bring me very near home. For after thoroughly perusing it I lay down upon my cot and pictured all that is beautiful, lovely, and dear to me and many a thought was its loved inmates and a wish and prayer that your lives might be spared- and the time speedily comes. When I could fill the long vacant seat around the fireside and be numbered as one of your happy band. It’s always best to look upon the Brightside. But there is gloom hanging over me tonight which I cannot penetrate.”^{xiii} His poignant words show that he is internally conflicted as he struggles to actively participate in his war duties but longs to be with his family. You can feel his heartbreak and pain when his anticipation for a letter is met with disappointment.

The practice of letter writing by Civil War soldiers served a very important function during the course of the war. Letters sought to educate loved ones at home of the details of the war and how it was fairing while simultaneously providing an escape for soldiers serving as the bridge between the war and the home front. Letters revealed the hardships faced by soldiers day after day and the monotony of camp life, how soldiers viewed the war, and the strength of the familial bonds between soldiers and the loved ones they were reluctant to leave to fight this war. Unlike today, letters were the only source of communication and were vital to getting a sense of the emotions that these soldiers were feeling and experiencing while serving in their positions. There were thousands of letters written from regimental soldiers during the period of time that the war was occurring, 1861-1865. Brown anxiously awaits a package from his family with essential needs and food from back home that would often arrive stale or inconsumable. On February 15th he wrote, “What a shame that my box which no doubt you all think I am enjoying has not yet arrived. I am of course expecting it every day. I fear some of the delicacies will spoil.”^{xiv} Brown awaited the luxuries from day to day, anything that would distract him from the mundane life of camp that seemed inescapable. These men were torn away from everything they ever knew and letter writing was the only past time that doubled as a way to connect with the life they reluctantly left. Writing letters was not always easy, ink would sometimes freeze in the wintertime and finding an adequate supply of paper was challenging. As seen by Brown,

when soldiers ran out of room on their sheets of paper while writing a letter they would start writing perpendicular to what was already written. This practice was known as hatching. Brown would write his letters horizontally from left to right and then he would rotate the paper vertically and write perpendicular to the writing already on the paper.

5. Camp Relations

Many soldiers did not know when and where the next move would be and often waited with anticipation. Inclement weather and success on other fronts would prolong their stays in some locations. On January 25th, 1863 Brown wrote, "Pontoon Trains were nearly sunk in out of sight and actually the Rebes had a large board put up in plain sight on the opposite bank of the river which read thus "Burnside stuck in the mud" Well the joke is on us this time. It is said that their army were six hours passing a given point- so they evidently got wind of our movement we could have crossed at the appointed time however they would not have been there when we are again to start out but no one can tell but the general opinion now is that we shall remain here until spring opens unless Mr.Reb should give us a sudden call."^{xv} In an unmarked letter in March of 1863, Brown wrote "Good news was received last evening from Genl Grant's army. The occupying of Vicksburg and etc we think it a great thing...movements will be governed somewhat by the success of the Army in the South west." For the majority of the letters the regiment is stationed near Falmouth, Virginia. Brown had better conditions than most soldiers because he lived with the Quartermaster and was able to have meals that consisted of biscuits, canned peaches, boiled potatoes, and beefsteak. Brown is very detailed in his explanation of his meals and all of his everyday routines because mundane details were often the only bout of news he would have to share. When Brown did travel, he was able to stay in civilian homes where he was often treated to warm meals and a comfortable place to sleep.

As for military status, Brown struggles to define himself with more formal title. Brown loathes those who are not supportive of the war effort because he feels they are unappreciative of the sacrifices he consistently makes to ensure not only their safety, but their comfortable lives as civilians as well. He is internally conflicted as his heart's desire to return home remains at war with his mind's realization that he must bear the stars and stripes of the Army of the Potomac to define himself as a worthy man in the eyes of his nation. On March 8th, Orsell reveals that he aspires to raise himself in rank to the position of a private. "Hopes that seemed almost within my power realize positions to be obtained which would more fully enable us to render to you and all at home some recompense for my time, now I been able to grasp they have departed, faded like the autumn leaf."^{xvi} This quest was met with disappointment.

6. Lighter Days and Challenges

Although war was not a pleasant experience, Brown describes some lighter moments that seemed to have shined some light into his darkest days. To pass time soldiers would visit neighboring regiments that were camped out adjacent to their camps. In an undated letter between February 15th and 21st, Brown describes his trip to visit to the camp of the 5th Michigan Volunteer Infantry where he used the Quartermaster's horse and gets stuck in the mud in front of all the men in the infantry. He wrote "told him he never need expect me to camp of the 5th again. He regretted that my first visit should prove so unfavorable. Invited me to dinner. But I did not accept. I will try it over the first pleasant day, don't fool me in that hole again. To return to camp was my greatest dread. I did not fear the Q.M. but knew the laugh would be upon me."^{xvii} As you can tell, Brown does utilize humor in his letters despite unfortunate circumstances he faces like the one I just described. Brown also had the opportunity to socialize with elite military officials including, Joshua Chamberlain. On March 14, 1863 Brown wrote that the camp was visited by Lieutenant Col Joshua Chamberlin of the 20th Maine Infantry and his wife. To make Chamberlin's visit more enjoyable, Brown provided popcorn for both him and his wife. Little did Brown know that in just a few short months, Chamberlin would become famous on July 2, 1863, the second day of the Battle of Gettysburg. Chamberlin and his men would execute a bayonet charge on Little Round Top that would fend off the attack of Confederate General John B. Hood's men and secure General Meade's left flank. This incident is significant because it showed that Brown's position as assistant to the quartermaster allowed him to intermingle with higher officials that the average soldier may not have had the opportunity to meet.

Every day brought new challenges for Brown and every day was another reminder of how he was separated from the loved ones that he cared so much about. On January 8, 1863, Brown writes, "What a lovely morning and Dear Ollie would that I might- with you at- home enjoy- how different- would be the seens and circumstances of my life.

Here I sit in my close tent with an awful headache hardly knowing that is the Sabbath except from the usual Inspection.”^{xviii} Besides dealing with the challenges that are associated with living in a war zone and carrying out necessary duties despite these conditions, soldiers experienced the high and lows of life that the average person goes through on a daily basis. Brown was able to deal with the emotional pain every day and still managed to trudge forward. The success of the war determined his return home and he would long for success on the battlefields to expedite the war. Brown’s absence from home tested his family’s true love for him. Their longing for his arrival was determined by how frequent and consistent letter writing on behalf of his family proved to be compared to his own frequent writing. Mundane camp life provided time for him to reflect upon the political state of the nation and of his purpose both as a man and as a soldier.

7. Conclusion

Brown, as other soldiers who served in the 44th, helped to eternalize Elmer Ellsworth through their own fighting. Soldiers served as representatives of their family and often to protect them as extending their roles as males outside the confines of the home.^{xix} The regimental flag often made by the women in the community and like the Union needed to be protected and defended serving as a tie to the town they left behind.^{xx} The regiment faced tragic loss, but the eternal flame of the man who the regiment bared forever took part in the war vicariously through the fighting of the soldiers. Brown was not completely sequestered from the outside world. Because of his connection with the quartermaster he was able to enjoy some comforts of home when they were posted in the homes of civilians while traveling. Brown also had the assistance of civilians who would come into camp to assist with the mailing of letters.

The Civil War was a collective experience but experiences of the soldiers were individualized because the war affected the men in different ways. Many who enlisted had no prior military experience and were fighting because it was more or less the only way to achieve success in nation where both enemies were citizens like themselves. Brown joined the war efforts with a desire to raise his rank, starting in a higher position from the onset because of his educational background and affluent family. Many soldiers embraced the war as way to provide financial means for their families or a way to gain honor for their family name by way of courageous acts on the battlefield. Brown is a case-study of a man who tried to replicate his civilian life while at war but failed. He wanted to use the war experience as a means to better himself while unifying the nation. As a soldier, his doubt and constant fears are evident in every letter. He was more actively involved in his own personal battle to overcome the temporary loss of his family and cruel realities of war than he was in the actual war. Despite the accommodations he received, he could not fully accustom himself to the life of a soldier. Perhaps the few accommodations that he received were reminiscent of the many accommodations that were typical of his civilian life at home, making it even more difficult for him to adjust to his condensed life style barren of his loved ones. The letters serve as his way to reassure himself of the love felt for him by his family.

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