

# **“OH, COULD THEY BUT SPEAK...”**

*The history and importance of Michigan's Civil War Battle Flags*

## **Letters Home from Michigan Civil War Soldiers**

### **Abel Peck Letters: Michigan State University, Archives and Historical Collections**

**November 4, 1862**

Camp a little past Snicker's Gap, Virginia.

*Dear Child -*

*I wrote you the 2nd and said that the prospect was pretty fair for a fight but that chance is going for the present. The enemy were in force at the Gap but they are gone. It may be weeks before we see them. We know not. There is a grand movement of the Army and the trains and the beef cattle are moving this morning more than yesterday. There has been a long drove of cattle, possibly one thousand or more passed this morning. I must close Dear one. AG Peck*

**November 7, 1862**

Camp near Warrenton, Virginia.

*Dear One*

*I have another chance to write a little. We crossed the river the last of October, were ordered to Snicker's Gap, but before we got there the enemy was gone. We passed the Gap at the left to Manassas Gap but they were not there. Then we were ordered to Warrenton. We arrived here last night about midnight. Our regiment were the rear guard of the train and had to march slow, the reason of being so late. We have had very fine weather. We could lie on the ground without any trouble but today we have a little snow and we are in camp but may move before night. I must close for the mail is waiting. AG Peck*

**November 13, 1862**

Camp Nall on the road from Warrenton to Frederick(sburg), Virginia.

*Dear Child,*

*It is some time since I have had a letter from you. I have writ one to you within the last two weeks saying the chance was fair for us to have a fight but we are too late at Snicker's Gap and Manassas Gap. We marched 20 miles in a day to get to Manassas Gap (and) halted for the night. The next morning we were put as rear guard of the train and had to move slow. We halted about midnight near Warrenton and they ground what corn they had and we got along very well. The snow was gone before night and we have very fine weather. There is no trouble in lying on the ground without a tent when we halt late at night. I am well and hearty, and eat all I can get and stand the march as well as most men. My knapsack was rather heavy at first but I have got used to it and get along very well. My load consists of [ ? ] can of water, haversack with three days rations, one wool...blanket, one ruder (?) and over coat, dress hat, three shirts and lots of little traps, one fourth of a tent - that is, a piece of cotton cloth about two yards square. We have heard firing almost every day. It is about so far off most of the time. What we are to do I can not say. Some think we are a reserve and will not have much to do this fall. I must close to get this in the mail today. From your father with strong regard. Love to all*

*Miss Alice M Peck*

*AG Peck*

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**December 15, 1862**

Battlefield near Frederick(sburg), Virginia.

Dear Child

*I have just time to say that I am well. We are under fire of the enemy guns all day (the) day before yesterday. Lost seven men and a few wounded are lying on the battlefield yet, but have not done much today. Yours with strong regard. A. G. Peck*

**December 21st, 1862**

Dear One,

*This day finds me in good health in camp a few miles from our last camp. We marched yesterday, some said for Belle Plain but that we do not know. We are waiting for our provisions to come up for we are out and I am busying myself writing and making soup in a pint cup for want of something larger. I threw away a little (?) quart pail on the battlefield and it leaves us rather short of tin ware. I will send this the first chance I have but it may be some days. yours with strong regard. A. G. Peck*

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## Letters from Private David Lane

**He joined the 17th Michigan Volunteer Infantry, Company G, when he was 38 years old.  
From Father Abraham's Children by Frank B. Woodford**

**August 31st, 1862**

Fort Baker, D.C.,

*I enlisted August 12, 1862, was mustered into service of the United States on the 18th, and was assigned to Company G, of the Seventeenth regiment of Michigan Voluntary Infantry, then in barracks at Detroit, Michigan. Of the ninety-three enlisted men enrolled in Company G, sixty-five were farmers, ten laborers, five carpenters, six shoemakers, three clerks, one baker, one miller, one tinner, and one professional soldier. They range in age from the smooth-faced boy of sixteen years to the fully developed man of thirty-eight. I judge about the same ratio will apply to the other companies of the regiment, with the exception of Company E, which is composed largely of students from the State Normal College at Ypsilanti. The regiment is largely made up of men verging on middle life, who have left business, wife, and children, dearer to them than life, sternly resolved to meet death on the field of battle, rather than suffer rebellion to triumph and the Nation be torn asunder. We left the barracks at ten o'clock in the forenoon of August 27th, marched on board the steamer Cleveland, bound for the City of Cleveland.*

**October 9th, 1862**

Pleasant Valley.

*I am frequently asked how I like soldering. For a wonder, I am not disappointed. If anything, it is more endurable than I expected to find it. There are hardships--as a matter of fact, it is all hardship---but I was prepared for all that. I expected to suffer---to endure---and find myself the gainer by it. While others say: "If I had known, I would not have enlisted," I can say with truth I am glad I did. If I can be of service to my country I will be satisfied. That which troubles and annoys me most, others do not seem to mind. It is the intolerable, nauseating stench that envelops a military camp. My olfactories have become so acutely sensitive I can smell an encampment "afar off." Many complain of the strictness of military*

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*discipline. That does not trouble me. The law is a “terror to evil doers.” I am thankful for the many kind friends I have found here. I hail with delight the President's [Emancipation] proclamation. I believe it is a step in the right direction.*

### **October 17th, 1862**

Pleasant Valley

*We have heard heavy cannoning all day, but have not learned the result. It is rumored that we will move in a day or two---perhaps tomorrow. Where we go, rumor sayeth not. Our men say it does not matter where, so they take us where work is to be done. Two men deserted from Co. G yesterday and two today. This splendid regiment that left Detroit two months ago nearly one thousand strong, mustered today, at inspection, two hundred and fifty six men fit for duty. There are more sick than well, the result of insufficient supplies and brutal, needless exposure of the men by officers high in rank.*

### **December 28th, 1862**

Camp near Fredericksburg

*The battle of Fredericksburg had been fought--and lost. We are now engaged in the laudable occupation of making ourselves comfortable; building log huts to protect ourselves from the cold storms of winter. Our brigade---the First---was not engaged at Fredericksburg. We were commanded by Colonel Poe, a graduate of West Point, a man thoroughly versed in the art of war. He saw the utter hopelessness of the struggle, and, when the order came to advance, he flatly refused to sacrifice his men in the unequal contest. Of course, he was put under arrest, and will be court martialed, but he saved his men...This whole army, for the time being, is thoroughly demoralized. It has lost all confidence in its leaders---a condition more fatal than defeat.*

### **July 23rd, 1863**

Haines Bluff, Mississippi

*We arrived at our old camp yesterday---twenty days from the time we left it---the toughest twenty days of our experience. A dirtier, more ragged and drilled out lot of men I hope never to see. The first thing I did, after eating a little hardtack and drinking a cup of coffee, was to bolt for the spring, build a fire and boil my shirt, pants and socks, scrub myself from head to heels, put on my clothing wet--though not much wetter than before---and return to camp a cleaner, therefore a better man. There have been times when we could not get water to wash our hands and face, to say nothing of our clothing, for a week or more.*

### **November 25th, 1863**

Knoxville

*The enemy have advanced their sharpshooters to within one-fourth of a mile of our line. On the 20th they got possession of a house, just under the hill in our front, and annoyed us exceedingly. Colonel Comstock was ordered to burn it; he called for volunteers to perform the perilous feat. Instantly a company was formed, headed by A. J. Kelly, of Company E, and led by Lieutenant Josiah Billingsly. The house was set on fire and burned to the ground, but the heroic Billingsly was killed by a shell on his return.*

*Their sharpshooters had now advanced so near the men were forced to remain all day in their rifle pits. Every man who showed even his head became a target.*

*Yesterday morning, after it became fairly light, I jumped up on the embankment in front of me, as been my custom, to see what advancement the enemy had made during the night. I took one quick glance around, and as I looked I saw two curls of smoke directly in front of me; and on the instant one bullet whistled over my head; another dropped into the sand at my feet.*

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*This morning Lieutenant Colonel Comstock received a mortal wound from one of them. A number of our boys have been wounded. The first four or five days of the siege our men divided up into reliefs and went to the bank, in the rear of our pits, to cook and eat their food. On the 24th, as I was eating my breakfast, a rifle ball struck a camp kettle standing beside me and spilled its contents. About that time one of my comrades was struck in the face, the ball passing through both cheeks, nearly cutting off his tongue. Inspired by these gentle protests, we moved our kitchen over the brow of the hill, where we could cook and eat our “flapjacks” undisturbed.*

### **April 3rd, 1865**

Inside of Petersburg

*Petersburg is ours, at last. The fighting yesterday was terrific, lasting from 3 o’clock in the forenoon until dark. The Seventeenth was not engaged; was detailed as Provost guard. The first division entered the city early this morning. I can write no more now. Everybody is shouting. My heart overflows with happiness, too deep for words.*

### **April 19th, 1865**

*Yesterday afternoon we received the sad news from our Nation’s Capitol; news that caused each soldier’s cheek to blanch, as if in presence of some dire calamity. Our President is murdered; ruthlessly struck down by an assassin’s hand! The demon of secession, in his dying agony, poured out the vials of its wrath that swept over the army; the strong desire, openly expresses, to avenge his death by annihilating the people whose treason brings forth and nourishes such monsters. Woe to the armed rebel, now and henceforth, who makes the least resistance.*

*To illustrate the feeling of the men, I will write down an incident that occurred in our regiment. We have one reptile left, and only one, to my knowledge. When the news reached us, he was heard to say, with an oath; “I’m glad of it. If I had been there, I would have helped to do it.”*

*Before his words had time to cool, he was seized by the men near him; a tent rope was thrown around his neck, and he was hustled toward a tree, with intent to hang him. The officer interfered, and sent him under guard to the “bull pen.”*

*Tomorrow is to be observed as a day of mourning throughout the army. Never was man more sincerely mourned than will be Abraham Lincoln, and in history his name will be enrolled beside our Washington.*

### **May 8th, 1865**

*There are rumors of grand reviews, triumphal processions, and all the rest of it; and our flag, too, must have all the various battles in which we were engaged inscribed upon it. And officers are in no hurry to lay aside their trappings. Why should they be? It clothes them with authority which, laid aside, they never no more can wear.*

### **June 8, 1865**

*We were discharged at Delaney House, D.C., on the third day of June, and next day took cars for Detroit, where we arrived on the seventh, and were disbanded. We are no longer an organized body. Each individual is at liberty to consult his own interests or inclinations. After exchanging photos and kindly regards with my late comrades, I took the midnight train for Jackson.*

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## **Letters from 32-year-old Gus Smith to his parents in Howell, Michigan.**

**Smith enlisted in July of 1862 and served as a First Lieutenant in the 22nd Michigan Infantry. Letters from From Bull Run to Appomattox, by Mason, Philip, and Pentecost.**

### **September 22, 1862**

*Here we are in the darndst dirty hole in the whole world. It is very dry and dusty here. We have to lay on the ground in the open air. We are bothered almost to death for water to drink, say nothing of washing ourselves and clothes. Haven't changed my shirt since I left Pontiac and don't know when I can, as our baggage is fifteen miles from here. We are the dirtiest set you ever saw. We have to drink water out of a common duck pond. It looks green when we dip it up. If we all don't get sick it will be a wonder.*

### **September 29, 1862**

*I had a treat tonight in the way of a good wash and a clean shirt, the first I have had since I left Michigan.*

### **Spring, 1863**

*Wish I could be there to help you, But I cannot. And then I can help you almost as much here as I could there. I like the business very much, and have been tolerably successful so far, I think. I think I may well be proud. It has been a great school for me. I have already been amply rewarded, and I believe, I am thought something of here. And it is gratifying to me to know, that the position I hold, I have fairly won. Nothing would tempt me to exchange places with any of my old croneys or associates. I am about as far ahead as any of them.*

### **March 12, 1863**

*Wish I could be home just long enough to Shoot about a dozen of those cursed traitors that infest Livingston County. Such as bill Clark, Harmon, and others that I could mention. Damn'em if it was not for such Union men as they are, this bloody war would soon end, but just so long as Such men, are allowed to talk and act, treason openly and boldly among You there at home, as they do, There is in my humble opinion, no prospect of a Speedy termination. At best, Be united, Be a unit, and pull together, And we will whip them into Subjection in Short order, but Place an army, as we are placed, with a fire in front, and a great deal worse on in the rear, It is up hill business, and pretty Sandy at that I reckon.*

### **No date**

*Well, Mother, how are you to night? Wish I could drop in and see you this eve. Should like to eat breakfast with you tomorrow morn. Our living is pretty tough, Some of the time, but I get along with it as well as any of the rest. We had hard bread and Coffee without Sugar for Supper tonight. Should have made a fuss about it if I had have been at home. But as it was, I had to eat it, and make the best of it.*

*Father, take care of what few traps I have, in case I do not return. My Saginaw property you can dispose of as you think best. You will find a good pair of Buck Gloves in my trunk, take and use them. Have you done your threshing yet? If so how does the wheat turn out? How much are you going to sow this fall? Who have you got to help you? Tell me all the news about everybody!*

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## **Various letters written by the men of the 4th Michigan Volunteer Infantry**

**The 4th Michigan Volunteer Infantry at Gettysburg: The Battle for the Wheatfield. Dayton: Morningside Press, Martin Bertera and Ken Oberholtzer**

### **Edward Taylor**

*Dear Mother:*

*I take this first chance to let you know that I am safe from the battle of the day before yesterday and yesterday -- the slaughter was awful but so far all is in our favor -- I was taken prisoner by a party of "Rebs," and was sent to their rear but managed to escape when they were repulsed by playing wounded and hiding behind a large rock -- I will tell my adventures another time. We took 300 men into the fight and brought out 88. I had a narrow escape. There is a lull in the storm. What comes next is hard to tell. I escaped my captors before they had time to parole me and so am good for the next fight. No more at present. When I can, I will write again.*

*Your affectionate son,  
Edward H. C. Taylor*

### **William H. Tolford**

*Dear Family and Friends:*

*I am happy to inform you that I am safe; but I have sad news to tell you concerning the rest of the Company and regiment. We arrived on Thursday last soon after the fight commenced and immediately ordered to the front. In the afternoon we were ordered to support a battery. The battery soon became disabled, and we were ordered to charge on the rebels. We did so and in doing it were flanked on two sides by the rebels which exposed us to severe cross fire. We were nearly surrounded before we were ordered to retreat. Col. Jeffords was wounded on the way back and afterwards died. Our loss in killed, wounded, and missing is very great. We have only ten men left in our company and not much over one hundred in the regiment...*

*We have taken a great number of prisoners and according to all accounts have got the rebel army to a pretty tight place. We had no fighting near us yesterday, and but a little the day before. We heard some cannonading to the left of us, in the rear of the enemy, and it was supposed by some that the rebels were trying to escape. Others thought that reinforcements were coming to us, and in the rear of the enemy.*

*I could not tell all the news concerning our march from Virginia, and the fight here, if I were to write all day. Suffice it to say, we had a very rough time of it; but we are thankful that we are no worse off. Our regiment may not be called to go into the fight again, very soon, on account of our colonel. I hope to hear from you soon. I remain as ever your affectionate friend and husband.*

*W.M.H. Tolford*

### **William Robinson**

*Dear Father:*

*I rec'd your kind letter of the 15th inst. this noon, and as I wrote you yesterday that I had not heard from any of you, I thought it my duty to acknowledge the receipt of it immediately. As I wrote you it is nothing but a flesh wound and I shall be able to walk with crutches in little over a week. I sat up to have it dressed this morning for the first time. There is no need of Mothers coming down here, but I thought that if you had time that it would be a pleasant trip for you, and that you could assist me about obtaining a leave. I should be very happy to see Mother, but as far as nursing is concerned I have the*

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*best...My wound is doing beautifully, it has nearly stopped suppurating and has begun to granulate.*

*Good Bye, Love to all*

*William*

*P.S. I will write more when I can sit up.*

## **Lt. Michael Vreeland, 22 years old when he mustered in**

*My last recollection of the day was the blood red sun sinking in the west through the smoke and haze of the battle. A sun I never expected to see again.*

## **Unknown**

*The order was then given to stack arms. Colonel Jeffords said “Men you are now standing on free soil once more. Now give three cheers for the free soil states.” This was done and if I ever heard the woods ring with cheers it was then. It was then imagines that we breathed purer air. In short time the command “attention take arms” was given and we were soon filing out in the direction of Gettysburg. The rebels were now roaming at will over the free soil of Pennsylvania and they were going to give us a battle on free soil and see how we would like it. We were all well aware that a hard battle was soon to be fought.*

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## **A variety of letters from various soldiers fighting with the 19th Michigan Volunteer Infantry**

**They Died to Make Men Free: A History of the 19<sup>th</sup> Michigan Infantry in the Civil War. Dayton: Morningside House, Inc., 1994. by William Anderson**

### **Lieutenant Samuel Hubbard:**

*Captains swore and screamed at their men, telling them a hundred things at once, assuring them of their imminent danger, that it was certain that the rebels were about to enter into a wholesale butchery of the entire regiment. The regiment made noise enough for 30,000 men in a charge. The whole affair was a ridiculous farce. There may have been rebel scouts in the vicinity, but of this I have serious doubts. The only wonder is that we had not killed some of our own men. It had one very satisfactory result, by way of showing the native fighting qualities of the men. Some men cried like babies, others acted like maniacs, others showed promptness, coolness and courage, whilst a few showed contemptible humiliation and cowardice. Some feigned illness, others that their guns were out of order and useless, others had to undergo a change of linen, the next day.*

### **Private:**

*...tell Martin that if he feels as though he would like to be a soldier to take a bushel of corn and travel twenty miles some day and see whether he likes it or not. I tell you what we have to carry we have a knapsack in which we put our clothing consisting of two changes of unde clothes, a heavy blanket dress coat and some little trinkets that to a soldier are indispensable and then we have our gun weighing about ten pounds and a catridge box containing 40 rounds of catridges and a haversack containing three days rations of hard crackers and meat and a canteen filled with water...*

### **Private Henry Noble:**

## **“OH, COULD THEY BUT SPEAK...”**

### *The history and importance of Michigan's Civil War Battle Flags*

*A man here gets sick and unless he has a strong constitution he sinks rapidly to the grave. He loses his appetite there is nothing he can eat no dainty morsel such as he would get were he at home and his mind naturally wanders back to his home and the luxuries he enjoyed while there and he becomes disheartened and homesick. No loving wife mother sister or sweetheart is near to cheer his drooping spirits and administer to his wants and he gradually falls away and eventually dies. Homesickness here is a fatal disease and seldom fails in bringing its victim to the grave. While we were at Nicholville a man died in the hospital who (they said) died of nothing else but pure homesickness. But I guess there was a little something else mixed with it.*

#### **Colonel Gilbert:**

*As soon as my regiment became engaged he abandoned his Company and took shelter behind a large tree 15 or 20 yards in the rear of our line. I found him there and in asking what he was doing there & why he was not with his company he replied that he could not take any part in the fight, that I must not depend on him for anything, that the Lieut. could not command the Company & begged me to excuse him. I repeatedly ordered him to his post but he refused to obey. We soon had the occasion to change our position when he ran off down the Rail Road track where he lay for some time. He at length ran off again further to the rear & crumpled a horse belonging to one of the Cavalry & rode back to Franklin - I have never seen a man exhibit such cowardice & fear as Capt Basset did on this occasion - His Company was ably commanded by Lieut. Hubbard & did well. Capt Bassett admits all the facts & only excuses himself in the pretense that he was sick. He was sick before the action commenced & it would have required no more physical ability for him to have remained & done his duty than it did to run away...*