

Union soldier turns medic at Gettysburg, 1863

Introduction

After three days of fierce fighting on July 1–3, 1863, nearly 40,000 battered soldiers lay scattered across the blood-soaked fields of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. As the torrential summer rain poured down on the wounded, Private Elbert Corbin of the 1st New York Light Artillery was thrust into an unexpected role when he was ordered to remain behind and take care of his fallen comrades.

In this rare letter, Corbin detailed the quick training that enabled him to assist his wounded compatriots. He also writes of helping wounded enemies: “dressed our Boys wounds then . . . assisting to cut out Balls and dress the wounded Rebels.” He resignedly noted the paradox of having to “Help to wound & Kill men then Patch them up.”

Corbin describes operations and procedures he performed, saying that he now “can do up wounds from shot or shell or Bullits quite like an M.D.” But he also reported that he is troubled by having become numb to the gruesome tasks of rudimentary surgery: “I can see an Arm or Leg taken off and it has no more affect on my feelings, than cutting so much Beef.” Though he claimed that he was no longer disturbed by his work, it is clear that Corbin’s experiences stayed with him, as he wrote of Gettysburg, “more suffering here in one second than you will see in a Leife.”

** The Gilder Lehrman Institute thanks the following people in helping to identify Corbin as the author of this letter: Thomas E. Corbin (great grandson of Private Elbert Corbin); Greg Goodell and Scott Hartwig at the Gettysburg National Military Park; and Stephen J. Dreher, historian for Pettit’s Battery B.*

Questions for Discussion

Read the document introduction and transcript and apply your knowledge of American history in order to answer the following questions.

1. Indicate, by selecting specific phrases and sentences, how Private Corbin has been de-sensitized to the horrors of the battlefield.
2. How does Private Corbin express his disappointment with the military leadership? Do you find his complaints believable or are they just the comments of a frustrated, tired, and emotionally drained soldier?
3. Explain how treatment of the wounded at Gettysburg in 1863 differed from modern medical attention.

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4) for a Commission in an Independent Command, - if you can see it - Charley Minard has been Clerk at Headquarters of our Corps a long time and Ben Gray is in command of our Corps now - and he would not keep on his staff a Volunteer Officer, there was a splendid Officer who was ~~not~~ Ben and he would not keep on because he was a Volunteer and was put in a snuffing head - (A Regular) - All tell me to give that up, and try for a Com in one of the new Battalions, Independent - It is a long time since I got a letter from you - but I hope in time we shall get a mail - After getting off Sat 5 - I dressed our Boys wounds then 15 or 20 of the Boys of other Battalions then I was sent to work assisting to cut out Balls and dress the wounded Rebels and we now had an quantity of them and I shall have to help tomorrow I can do up wounds from that or shell or Bullets quite like an M.D. - I had had quite a disfigurement do it for that - I can see an Arm or Leg taken off and it has no more effect on my feelings, than cutting so much Beef - dead men and plenty here - and I saw plenty

5) of them in all stages on the field - Help to wound & Kill men then Patch the up I could show more suffering here in one second than you will see in a life - at home it is, strange how I have disciplined my feelings to see ~~suffering~~ and suffering men and have no feelings only a feeling thought, I have some ~~ones~~ that were cut out of me - I have had quite a chat to day with Rebels - we get no mail of any kind here - I hope you will get my last letter - It is a bright starlight night and I hope a dry day for you tomorrow - I think of you at home and I know how you show of this Battle and I think of your anxiety - for me - I think of you as at home - but cannot show what news you have rec'd of this Battle, - I've had the story to to him with me in prison and thank him that he has kept me through this hell Battle - Oh that I was more than full to him - his money would be gone - but a 4" off sub - make a rabbit I shall lay some here and there days work here among the wounded & suffering - but I had learned much - but must say a little only - we suffered lots much in that Battle and I think if Capt. Pettit had been here instead of this fact of a Route - we should have lost

Elbert Corbin to his wife, July 1863. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC03685 pp. 4 and 5)

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Transcript

3) (Corp W. F. Thorn – wounded both Feet)

(" Hooker " Run over Rt ")

John M Scovil " Rt arm & sides Minnie B.

Lt. – A.S. Shelden Rt. & Lt Groin ")

S. Sherman Gun Shot Lt arm

August Rogers, Rt Leg Amput^d upper [*inserted: leg*] & gun shot in Rt arm

Coraden Wallace Lt Foot Gun Shot

A.B. Mallery Shell, Head

Geo Rabb " "

Theod Deneyer " "

O.S. states Lt. Arm gun shot

Sarg Childs Bruised leg

John Buckley Rt up^r leg slight

Pat Mc Gowen Lt Sholder Gun Shot

89 Horses killed – 3 wheels smashed

3 Cassions smashed – nearly all our clothing – this is all I can say this sabbath Eve – I want[?] to rest [?] A
kiss love. Kiss our Darlings. God Bless us—

Monday Eve July 6th. 10.^oClock – Em I have passed another busy day – Lieut Shelden was fixed up by me
and made as comfortable and sent off with some other officers I am left here in Care of the Boys –

Several of the boys who had very slight wounds are with the Battery. We have Patched up just so as to

man 4 guns all told and the Battery is ready for the front – I have an other Reccomend from Lieut

Shelden [2] 4) for a Commitment in an Independent Command, – if you can use it – Charly Minard [?] has

been clerk at Head Qtrs of our Corps a long time and Gen Hays is in command of our Corps now – And

he would not keep on his staff – a Volunteer Officer, there was a splendid Officer who was Adj't Gen.

and he would not keep him because he was a Vol and has put in a Pumkins head – (A Regular) – All tell

me to give that up, and try for A Com in some of the new Batteries, Independent –

It is a long time since I got a letter from you but I hope in time we shall get a mail – After getting off Lt[?]

S. I dressed our Boys wounds then 15 or 20 of the Boys of other Batteries then I was sent to work

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Detail of map on page 6



[text accompanying Corbin's illustration of the Gettysburg battlefield on the pagenumbered 6]:

crest of hills where Rebels were with their Artillery behind

Rebel sharp shooters, behind fence & logs

small stream sways [?]

our sharp shooters concealed

Crest of hill our lines

Distance from Artillery to artill front $\frac{1}{2}$ mile

A House & Barn

B [~~strikeout~~] works Infantry behind

C our cassions

D our 4 runs down slope off hill

O Infantry behind hill

Road

House & Orchard

Gettysburg