

PICKET DUTY AND SNOWBALLS:
VIRGINIA, JANUARY 1863

Edmund DeWitt Patterson:
Journal, January 20, 1863

Following the Union defeat at Fredericksburg on December 13, 1862, the opposing armies in northern Virginia faced each other across the Rappahannock River. With the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia on the southern bank was Edmund DeWitt Patterson, a native of Lorain County, Ohio, who had moved to northern Alabama shortly before the war and enlisted in the 9th Alabama Infantry in 1861. He first saw action in the Peninsula campaign during the spring of 1862, was seriously wounded at Glendale on June 30, and rejoined his regiment in late November as a lieutenant.

January 20th 1863. I have almost given up writing in my journal for the fact that I have nothing in the world to record. There is too much sameness about this kind of soldier life. One day is the repetition of the duties of the day before, and I can always tell what (in all probability) I will be doing on the same day one month ahead. Capt. Crow is often on other duty, Cannon and Chandler on detached service, and I am generally in command of the Company. Every fifth day at three o'clock P.M. I go on picket and remain twenty four hours. We stand on our side of the river and look at the Yanks. They stand on their side and look at us. Sometimes we exchange papers, though in violation of orders, and sometimes the boys trade them tobacco for coffee. Just below the dam the water is not more than three feet deep, and the boys wade out to a little shoal of rocks in the middle of the stream and meet and take a drink together, make such trades as they wish, then each returns to his own side again. I have to visit some other post in the meantime, or make it convenient to have business in another direction, for it would not do for me to see these violations of orders. And yet I like to read a New York or Philadelphia news paper.

The principal amusement of the troops now-a-days is snow-balling. A great many of them never saw any snow, or at least not enough to cover the ground, until last winter, and many of the Florida troops have never seen any at all. Sometimes whole brigades and even divisions, with their officers in command, get into a battle with snowballs. Then the sport becomes exciting, and the balls fly so thick that the opposing forces scarcely distinguish each other. I think this imitation battle is decidedly more pleasant than the real. The health of the company and regiment is much better than it was last winter. The men have become acclimated and accustomed to exposure, and it would be almost impossible to kill one of them now, by anything except a bullet. About this time last winter, quite a number of our company was sick, several of whom died. McKelvey, Fowler, Irion, Webb, and several others. Thus far our death from disease has been more than from battle. And I believe that the same thing is true with every command in the army, at least with those from the Gulf States.