

Poem on a Civil War death: “Only a Private Killed,” 1861

Introduction

Approximately 3.5 million men served in the Union and Confederate military during the Civil War. Recent scholarship indicates that at least 750,000 men died. Lewis Mitchell of the 1st Minnesota Volunteers was one of those men. On October 21, 1861, during the Battle of Ball’s Bluff, Virginia, his regiment was stationed near Edward’s Ferry, away from the main fighting. The unit lost only one man—Mitchell.

A few weeks later, Mitchell’s friend Hanford L. Gordon wrote the poem featured here. Gordon recounts how he learned of Mitchell’s death and gives a visceral description of his friend’s last moments. He concludes the poem with a patriotic observation about a soldier’s fate: “And as each grave is filled / We will but ask our Chief to say / ‘Only a private killed.’” In these verses, a soldier comes to terms with the death of a comrade and the possibility of his own death in the early days of the Civil War.

Excerpt

But we fight our country’s battles
And our hopes are not forlorn
Our death shall be a blessing
To “Millions yet unborn.”
To our children and their children
And as each grave is filled
We will but ask our Chief to say
“Only a private killed.”

Questions for Discussion

Read the introduction and the poem. Apply your knowledge of American history and literature to answer the following questions:

1. Describe the circumstances that led Hanford L. Gordon to compose his poem “Only a Private Killed.”
2. Locate a contemporary newspaper account of the Battle of Ball’s Bluff on October 21, 1861. Which more effectively portrays the horror of war, the contemporary newspaper account of the Battle of Balls Bluff or the poem “Only a Private Killed”? Explain your answer.
3. Why does the poet repeat the refrain, “Only a private killed”?

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Transcript

Lines on the death of my friend Louis Mitchell of Co. I 1st Reg^t Minnesota Vols: who was killed in a skirmish on the Virginia side of the Potomac Oct: 21st 1861. The events and circumstances are literally true.

We've had a fight a Captain said
Much rebel blood we've spilled
We've put the saucy foe to flight
Our loss – but a private killed!
"Ah, yes!" said a sergeant on the spot
As he drew a long deep breath
Poor fellow, he was badly shot
Then bayoneted to death!"

When again was hushed the martial din
And back the foe had fled
They brought the private's body in
I went to see the dead.
For I could not think the rebel foe
('Tho under curse and ban)
To vaunting of their chivalry
Could kill a wounded man.

A minie ball had broke his thigh
A frightful crushing wound
And then with savage bayonets
They had pinned him to the ground
One stab was through his abdomen
Another through his head
The last was through his pulseless breast
Done after he was dead.

His hair was matted with his gore
His hands were clenched with might
As though he still his musket bore
So firmly in the fight
He had grasped the foeman's bayonet
His bosom to defend!
They raised the coat cape from his face
My God! it was my friend!

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Think what a shudder thrilled my heart
'Twas but the day before
We laughed together merrily
As we talked of days of yore
"How happy we shall be," he said
When the war is o'er and when
The rebels all subdued or dead
We all go home again!

Ah little he dreamed, that soldier brave
(So near his journey's goal)
That God had sent a messenger
To claim his Christian soul!
But he fell like a hero fighting
And hearts with grief are filled
And honor is his, though our Chief shall say
"Only a private killed!"

I knew him well, he was my friend
He loved our Land and Laws
And he fell a blessed martyr
To the country's holy cause.
Soldiers our time will come most like
When our blood will thus be spilled
And then of us our Chief shall say
"Only a private killed."

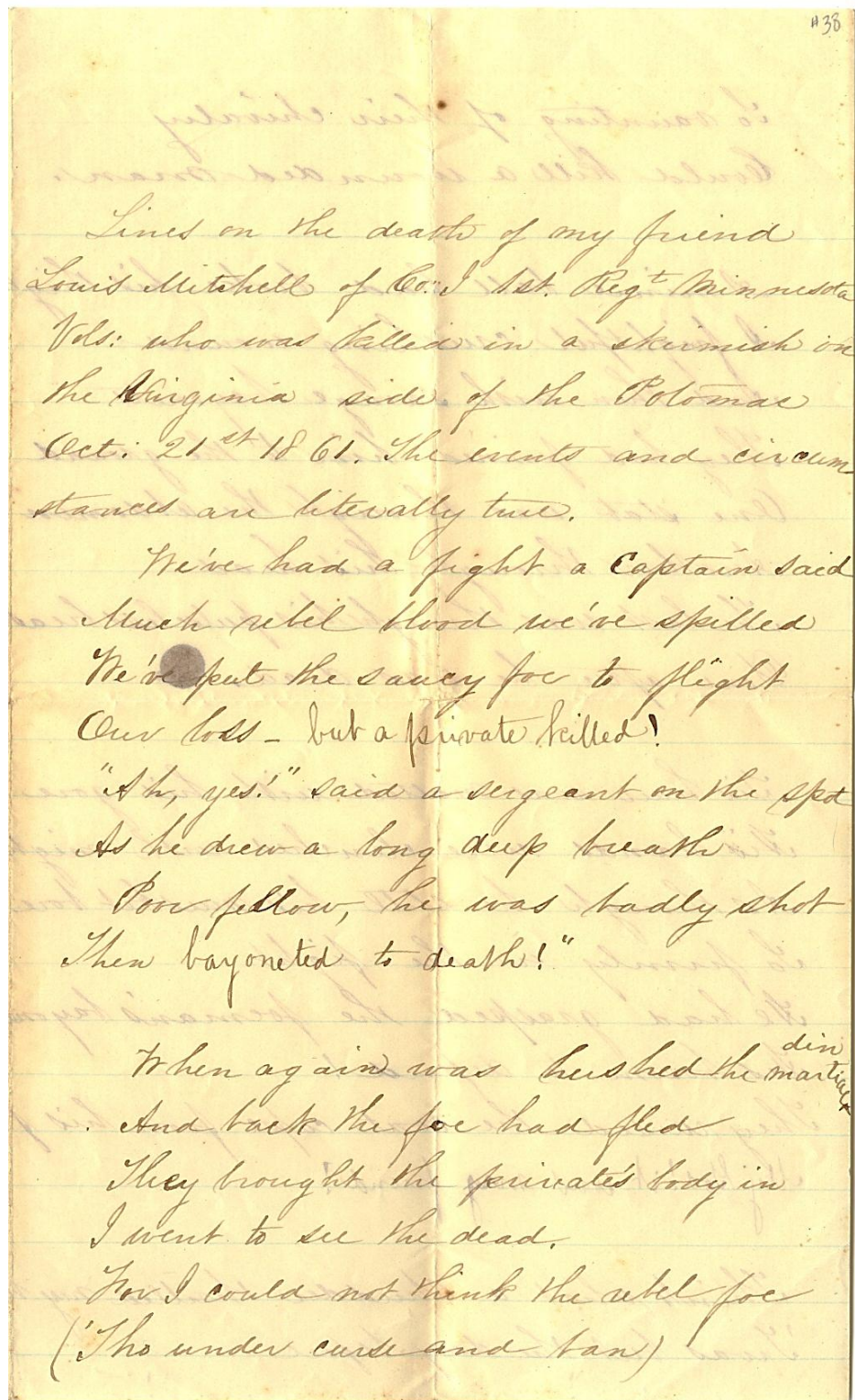
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"Only a private killed."

H. L. Gordon
1st Regt Minn. Vols.

Camp Stone Md: Nov: 12th 1861

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Image



Hanford L. Gordon, "Only a Private Killed," November 12, 1861, p. 1. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC06559.038)

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Hanford L. Gordon, "Only a Private Killed," November 12, 1861, p. 2. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC06559.038)

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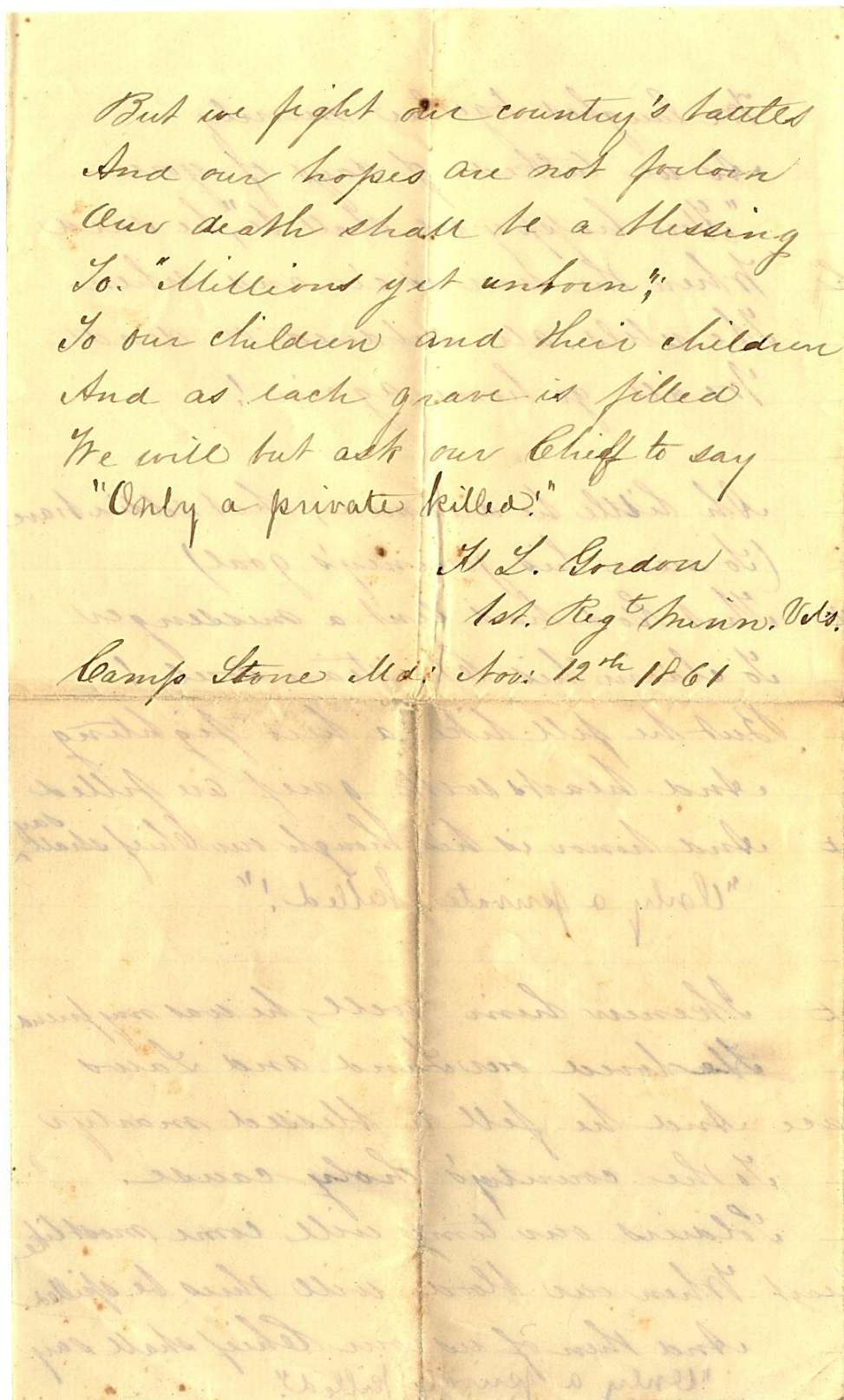
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Hanford L. Gordon, "Only a Private Killed," November 12, 1861, p. 3. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC06559.038)

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Hanford L. Gordon, "Only a Private Killed," November 12, 1861, p. 4. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC06559.038)