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.

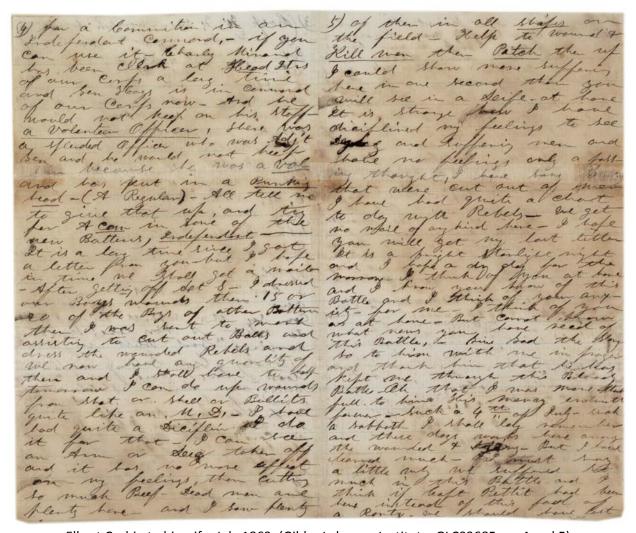
- 1. Indicate, by selecting specific phrases and sentences, how Private Corbin has been de-sensitized to the horrors of the battlefield.
- 2. How does Private Corbin express his disappointment with the military leadership? Do you find his complaints believable or are they just the comments of a frustrated,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

Image

The Gilder Lehrman Institute holds pages 3–6 of this letter; pages 1–2 and the pages after 6 are missing.



Elbert Corbin to his wife, July 1863. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC03685 pp. 6 and 3)



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

Transcript

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3) (Corp W. F. Thorn – wounded both Feet)
                        "Run over Rt")
(" Hooker
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<sup>d</sup> 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<sup>r</sup> 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 6<sup>th</sup>. 10.0, Clock – 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 Commition 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 <u>Vol</u> and has put in a <u>Pumkins head</u> – (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[?]
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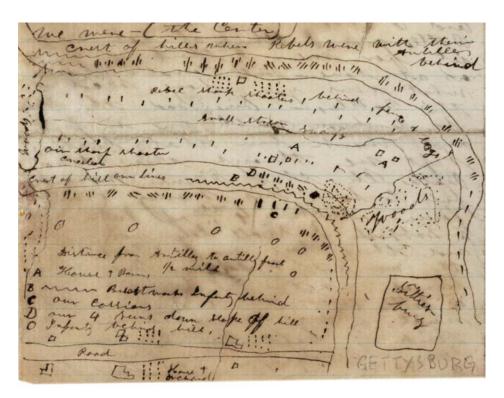
S. I dressed our Boys wounds then 15 or 20 of the Boys of other Batteries then I was sent to work

assisting to cut out Balls and dress the wounded Rebels and we now have an quantity of them and I shall

Union soldier turns medic at Gettysburg, 1863

have to help tomorrow I can do up wounds from shot or shell or Bullits quite like an M.D. - I have had quite a Dicipline I do it for that – I can see an Arm or Leg taken off and it has no more affect on my feelings, than cutting so much Beef - Dead men are plenty here - and I saw plenty [3] 5) of them in all shapes on the field – Help to wound & Kill men then Patch them up I could show more suffering here in one second than you will see in a Leife- at home It is strange how I have diciplined my feelings to see Dying and suffering men and have no feelings only a passing thought, I have some [illegible] that were cut out of men 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 the morrow – I think of you at home and I know you know of this Battle and I think of your anxiety - for me- I think of you as at home - But cannot know what news you have rec'd of this Battle, - Give God the Glory so to him with me in prayer and thank him that he has kept me through this Bloody Battle - Oh that I was more thankfull to him His mercy endureth forever – such a 4^{th} of July – such a Sabbath I shall long remember and these days work here among the wounded & dying – But I have learned much – I must say a little only we suffered so much in this Battle and I think if Capt Pettit had been here instead of this fool of a Ranty – we should have lost [4] 6) far less – The first day we [strikeout] (ie our Corps) was thrown in to fill a Gap in our lines where the living were massing and here we suffered much – we were driven back about 1/4 mile took another Position and held untill we had No support and were ordered out - the second day the line of battle was the same shape only farther Back, the enemy had their Artillery conceled much – and then the Position that our Capt - put us in was the worst we could have. Capt Pettit would never have put us in such a Place. I will mark out a little and show a little as to our Position and the Position Capt would probily have taken had he been here - I cannot map out the whole but [illegible] where we were – (the Center)

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 conceled

Crest of hill our lines

Distance from Artillery to artill front ½ 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

Gettiesburg