

"CIVIL WAR LETTERS"

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George C. Leonard was born in Cannonsville, N.Y., in 1833. When he was twenty-nine years old he enlisted in the 144<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the New York Volunteer Infantry. It was August 25, 1862, and the "perfect Union" established nearly a century before was torn apart by a war which would, of course, end all wars. Leonard was young, idealistic, patriotic, and adventurous. Until this time, his life had followed the pattern of many ambitious and intelligent young men of this era. He earned a teaching certificate at Franklin University and secured a position in Bloomville, N.Y. where he met his wife Dorcas. After marrying, Leonard pursued boot and shoe making as a prosperous trade, and moved to Hamden, N.Y. Prior to the outbreak of the war two of his four children, Ossian and Jessie, were born. When the war broke out George Leonard was among the first in the area to enlist. Everyone knew the war would soon end, the Rebels would be subdued, and the gallant Union victors would march home again to their families.

The waiting began. The long and lonely road to the eventual Union victory was cluttered with frustrated hopes, and fractured ideologies. Many men like George Leonard dreamed a little, prayed a little, fought hard and filled their young minds with new, and often bitter experiences.

It seems essential that the mood and emotion of history be felt and understood as clearly as the textbooks events and because he is my great-great grandfather, it is uniquely important to me that I feel and understand the thoughts and emotions of George Leonard himself. Thus there is a dual significance to the legacy he left behind: a collection of letters he wrote to his wife, Dorcas, as he journeyed through the rebellious south during the Civil War. They begin where he began, written first from Camp Seward, Virginia, just south of Washington, D.C. Here, and in Camp Bliss in Upton, Virginia, he spent the last months of 1862. On October 16th, he records his earliest impressions of soldiering and of the city, Washington, D.C.

Dear Dorcas:

...It is evening now, and the camp is rather quiet. We came to this camp the next day after I wrote you from Washington...I tramped around the city a little in the morning before we left and went into the Capitol and you better believe it was a big thing for us country jockies. I saw more marble ten times over than I ever saw in my life before...

The night we arrived here there was a report that we were to have some "work" to do right straight along, but no one seemed much frightened except Capt. Stone, some of the boys thought he was badly scared and we had orders to sleep with our clothes all on, and our guns in position where we could lay our hands on them without difficulty...at all events I haven't heard as any of our companies have been called out...

Contact with the "Rebs" was not really as common as these young patriots had supposed, each forecast of battle became a thrilling hope of adventure, and prisoners were the ultimate badge of glory. On October 23, 1862, Leonard writes his wife:

...There were two companies of the 143<sup>rd</sup> Regiment (which is encamped just by us) out the other day and they brought in a couple of prisoners but whether we will have the luck to get any, I can't tell as yet...

He also adds:

I can't say as some do that I really want to get into a battle but feel quite independent of it. I would rather prefer not going into battle, but if it so happens I don't intend now to play sneak or coward but take my chances with the rest...

By late November the weather in Virginia began to turn cold and damp, though the ideology still persisted, the realities of their existence created a more pensive mood among the soldiers. On November 19th, 1862, Leonard writes:

...but as for getting homesick, I haven't come to that yet, and if I was situated again as I was, I am not sure but I should enlist again, though a good many of the boys think if they were only back home again they would stay there, but the main objection I have to soldiering is on account of being separated from my family. Soldiering is very good business of itself, especially when we live to home as we do here...

Even now, though, the hopes for a rapid end to the fighting were still high. On December 14th, he writes:

ever...from what I can learn, he was naturally a shrewd smart fellow and a hardened case and seemed to depend on his good fortune to get him out of this scrape...He sat on his coffin and the major read his death warrant to him, then he knelt beside it and the chaplain prayed for him, then he was blindfolded and placed in a position facing the marksmen, kneeling slightly forward against his coffin...the order was given to fire...he then raised up and fell over backward being struck in the chest with two balls. As soon as life was extinct the division were marched in review past the corpse...

Though sickness had been a constant menace, it grew to its greatest dimensions in the fall of 1863 when the 144<sup>th</sup> was ordered to Folly Island, S.C.:

October 14, 1863

Dear Dorcas:

...We have sometimes thought and it has often been remarked that the health of the regiment is improving, but really I can't see it. Soon after we came to this camp, we had a hundred and twenty-five to thirty reported sick every day, now we have two hundred fifty to sixty, so I can't see where the gain is; of those that came here with us, there are twenty two dead and buried, twenty of whom have died of disease, and two have been killed, only one by the Rebs, the other accidentally by the bursting of our own gun...

Though battles continued to be scarce for Leonard's regiment, the experiences were still plentiful. In 1864 the regiment moved very deeply south to Jacksonville, Florida. There Leonard found a climate and life fascinating with newness.

March 16, 1864

...to tell the truth I have almost fell in love with this section of the country, and I think a man could live as cheap here with just a little less than half the labor he can up in our country. And land is remarkable cheap here too, before the war commenced, it sold for a dollar and from that to twelve schillings per acre, their principal crops here are sweet potatoes, cotton, corn, and sugar cane....I went into a house owned and occupied by a man named Palmer...I had quite a talk with two of his daughters...they told me when the war broke out their father had forty slaves and now they were all gone...they seemed to care but little about that, but...manifested a good deal of feeling when speaking of the suffering and death of so many poor soldiers in both armies...

The election of 1864 was perhaps one of the most dramatic episodes of the war years. From early April until election time in mid-November, Leonard's letters to his wife are filled with his thoughts and observations on the subject.

April 28, 1864

...I believe you have written a number of times something in regard to politics and you seem to be quite anxious I should vote for Old Abe, and I am sure I've no objection to doing so but your opinion, as expressed in your last letter, agrees with mine exactly for I don't know of a man in the world that I would like as well to vote for as John C. Fremont...

October 3, 1864

...the Chicago Platform I hadn't seen before, and I can't see how any man of sense can vote for such a platform unless he is an out and out traitor...I think...there are two or three of our company that will probably vote for McClelland, but the most of them are in for Old Abe. Some think McClelland will make a big run and perhaps be elected but it don't seem to me that we have traitors and cowards enough in the country to elect him...

In April 1865 the Union troops heard the news of President Lincoln's assassination. Leonard's reaction illustrates the grief of an average soldier:

...The main subject of thought and conversation here now is the assassination of the President ...it cast a gloom over everything. All the flags were immediately lowered to half mast and ...there was a gun fired every half hour through the day...It is an awful blow to our country. But I'm in hopes it will not have the effect to prolong the war or have a bad effect on the terms of submission of the Rebels...

Many of the young patriots who left their homes in 1863 never returned, but George Leonard was fortunate. He came home a sergeant with three hundred dollars severance pay. He packed his family off to Hancock, N.Y., where he bought a large piece of property, resuming his shoemaking trade. Here he lived out his life, well-liked and respected as a skillful and honest tradesman, a good citizen, a "man of letters" and a student of his times who held very definite opinions on national affairs. When he died in 1895 he left a valuable legacy, not only through the written memoirs

of his army days, so carefully saved and cherished by his family, but through the memories and images he created in the minds of those who knew him, memories that enable him to be understood and admired even now.