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Letters of A Union Officer

L. F. HUBBARD and the CIVIL WAR

N. B. MARTIN

IN JULY, 1857, a twenty-one-year-old tinsmith named Lucius F. Hubbard took a printing press from Chicago to the frontier community of Red Wing, Minnesota. Twenty-five years later he was elected Minnesota's ninth governor. Not the least of the accomplishments which led the young artisan to the governor's mansion was his Civil War record. Then, as now, being a war hero was not a political handicap in America.

Hubbard, who was born in 1836 at Troy, New York, was brought up by his Aunt Mary Hubbard in Chester, Vermont. From 1862 to 1865, during his service in the Civil War, he wrote to her about once a month. Virtually all the letters have been preserved, and they were recently presented to the Minnesota Historical Society by Mrs. Marie Warnson of Red Wing. They were discovered there in 1945 among the possessions of Mrs. Warnson's mother-in-law, the late Mrs. Gustava Charlotte Snell Warnson. How the letters got from Chester to Red Wing, and how they came into the hands of the elder Mrs. Warnson are unknown.

Although these documents were only recently brought to light, it is probable that Hubbard had them at hand when he wrote of his regiment for a volume on Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars (1890). They contain little new information, but they are of interest as a record of the spontaneous reactions of an intelligent, extremely articulate Union officer. One of them, penned in the closing days of the war, contains a moving description of the soldiers' reaction to Lee's surrender and the death of President Lincoln. Clearly and candidly written, the letters are valuable, too, for the insight they provide into Hubbard's youthful personality and ambitions. They reveal him to have been a conscientious and efficient young officer, who displayed great pride in his regiment and a strong affection for his men. In them, one can observe the bond that three years of war created between Hubbard and his companions-in-arms, a bond that was later to make itself felt in postwar Minnesota poli-

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tics in the form of the Grand Army of the Republic.

ON SEPTEMBER 4, 1857, Hubbard had founded the Red Wing Republican, predecessor of a newspaper still published there, the Daily Republican Eagle. When President Lincoln called for volunteers, the young editor-publisher settled his affairs and enlisted on December 19, 1861, as a private in Company A of the Fifth Minnesota Volunteer Infantry. "I had felt ever since the war broke out," he wrote his aunt from Fort Snelling on April 1, 1862, "that I ought to have some hand in it, and that it would be a slur upon me all my life if the occasion was allowed to pass without an offer of my services in some capacity unmistakably patriotic to the cause."

He assured his aunt: "I have done reasonably well for the time I have been in the service (less than four months)." He had indeed done well, for on February 5 he had been elected captain of his company, and by March 24, about three months after his enlistment, he was a lieutenant colonel at the age of twenty-six. "It seems to be my inevitable fate," he continued, "that whatever I engage in I am bound to get my hands full of business. . . . [I] was placed in command of the entire regiment without having previously acquired the least knowledge of even the first principles of the profession."

By May, 1862, the Fifth Minnesota was ready to go to work. Except for three companies, which were detached to guard the frontier in western Minnesota, the regiment moved to Hamburg Landing, Tennessee, on the Tennessee River just north of the Mississippi state line. The battle of Shiloh had been fought near by the month before.

Late in May the Fifth Minnesota took part in the brief fighting that preceded the fall of Corinth, Mississippi. Hubbard wrote his aunt on June 1 that he had been "struck by a ball in the abdomen but it was an angling shot and effected only a bruise which was slight." He reported that his regiment "had a hot time. Though in the published reports of our occupation of the place it may appear that there was little or no fighting," he assured his aunt "that our brigade and particularly our regiment had a hard fight. We engaged and repulsed about 3000 rebels and was exposed to a terrific fire of Artillery for the greater part of two days." Hubbard admitted that the regiment's losses were, however, "comparatively small as our position being under the brow of a hill protected us from the fire of the enemy."

FROM HUBBARD'S first engagement in Tennessee to his last campaign in Alabama is a distance of about three hundred miles as the crow flies, but it took him three years to get there, for he had to fight his way through Corinth, Vicksburg, Nashville, the Red River country of upstate Louisiana, and most of Arkansas and Missouri.6

In his letters describing these years and these campaigns, Hubbard reveals an unsentimental attitude toward his enemies, and a rather practical and businesslike approach to war. He was seemingly unmoved by abolitionist idealism; his letters contain no descriptions of the condition of the slaves. He simply believed that "crippling the institution of slavery is . . . striking a blow at the heart of the rebellion, and inflicting upon our enemies the greatest possible injury, which latter I conceive to be the policy of war, and the business for which I am employed by [the] government."7

While Hubbard's regiment was on guard duty near Cherokee, Alabama, in the fall of 1862, he reported that large numbers of slaves from near-by plantations arrived at the camp seeking sustenance and conduct out of the area. "I am doing quite a busi-

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6A detailed account of Hubbard's Civil War experiences may be found in the author's eighty-seven-page manuscript entitled "L. F. Hubbard and the Fifth Minnesota," a typewritten copy of which is in the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society.

7Hubbard to Mary Hubbard, September 8, 1862.
ness in the confiscation of slave property," he wrote on September 8. "I have already sent about eighty human chattels away by railroad headed north, and have about fifty more in camp... I have also attached quite a number to my regiment in the capacity of teamsters, cooks, and servants." He added that "It certainly makes the rebels wince to see their 'niggers' taken off which is a source of some private satisfaction to me even if it does not contribute greatly to the general good."

He further reveals his feelings toward the rebels in a letter written on August 24, 1863, from Camp Sherman, Mississippi, about eighteen miles from Vicksburg. "When I was in command at Black River R. R. bridge [in Mississippi] I was required to feed hundreds of destitute residents of the country from the public stores of the army. Proud Southerns [sic] dams and haughty belles who once would perhaps have scorned to ask a favor of a detested Yankee, would receive from me an 'order for rations' with as much meekness and humility as the black chattel outside who was waiting his turn. For a while until I was instructed otherwise, I would give subsistence only to those who would take the oath of allegiance. Some would take the oath without hesitation, while with others there would be a struggle between their pride of opinion and the inexorable necessities of their situation. I notice however that they would generally yield to the persuasion of an empty stomach. I fear," he added, "that in some cases I felt more of a malicious satisfaction in administering the oath, than of unadulterated sympathy for their sufferings."

HIS REMARKS contain a good deal of candor regarding the conduct of the war. On September 8, 1862, for example, he told his aunt: "It does seem as though there was terrible mismanagement in the 'Army of the Potomac.'" From Young's Point, Louisiana, he wrote on April 13, 1863: "We are digging a canal across the country, from the Mississippi to a bayou which communicates with the waters of the river below Vicksburg, and by means of which it is expected important advantages may be secured in our operations against the city. If it proves of no more avail than the other canal projects in this vicinity," he said dryly, "it will not play a very important part in the reduction of the place."

"You have probably obtained from the newspapers a pretty correct history of the Red River campaign," he informed his aunt on May 23, 1864. "... it has been most
disastrous in its results, and . . . General [Nathaniel P.] Banks has proven himself a miserable failure as a military man. Probably the people of New England entertain quite a different opinion of Genl Banks, and I have no doubt such a sentiment as the above would prove very unpopular if uttered in Vermont, but it is the universal expression of this army and a fact thoroughly demonstrated by the events of the past two months."

Though not an idealist, Hubbard had a strong and continuing sense of duty. "On the 19th prox.," he wrote on November 16, 1864, "I shall have completed the three years for which I originally enlisted. Perhaps you would like to have me quit soldiering. . . . I should be most happy to do so if I could feel that it was my duty. I think however that my services are due the country a while longer, and for the present it is my purpose to remain." In describing to his aunt, in a letter dated May 24, 1863, his regiment’s occupation of Jackson, Mississippi, he said: "I think I never felt prouder in my life, than when I saw the flag of my old regiment waving triumphantly in the state house square of the Capital city of Jeff. Davis’ own state."

The letters also show Hubbard’s political convictions. "We were all greatly rejoiced to learn of Mr. Lincoln’s re-election," he wrote on November 16, 1864. "The sympathies of the army in the west are altogether with the administration, and so far as our soldiers have had an opportunity to vote they have cast their ballots almost unanimously for Mr. Lincoln. A McClellan man in this command is so much of a novelty, that when the soldiers hear of one they are curious to see him. I believe that the destiny of our country depended upon the results of the late Presidential election. Had the Copperheads succeeded I believe a dishonorable peace would have followed the inauguration of McClellan, and that our government would have become a scorn before the world; but that disaster has been averted, and now let slavery die and we will yet fulfill our destiny and become the greatest people upon the face of the earth."

FOR HUBBARD and for the country the winter of 1864–65 was the last of the war. December, 1864, had seen the young Minnesotan brevetted brigadier general for conspicuous gallantry at the battle of Nashville. He and his troops then joined with other Union forces in pursuing the rebels southward. On January 10, 1865, Hubbard’s men reached Eastport, Mississippi, where they set up winter quarters. Seven days later he wrote that he was “situated very pleasantly, indeed. I have a large, well furnished room in a citizen’s residence for my individual quarters. In the family occupying the house are two young ladies, quite interesting, pretty and very agreeable; aged respectively eighteen and twenty; whose society serves greatly to relieve the monotony of camp life.”

The final decision to initiate operations against Mobile was made in January, 1865. Troops and equipment began to be drawn from various points in the Mississippi Valley and concentrated around New Orleans. On February 5 and 6, 1865, Hubbard and his brigade embarked at Eastport and were transported north via steamboat down the Tennessee River to the Ohio. "I am again on the move," he wrote on February 9, "destined for a point somewhat remote from the locality whence I last wrote you. We left Eastport on the 7th inst., and are now lying at Cairo [Illinois] enroute for New Orleans. . . . It is presumed that our ultimate destination is Mobile."

February 22 found the command setting up camp at New Orleans. From there on February 27 Hubbard wrote: "I am very much pleased with the city of New Orleans. It is a much finer city than I expected to see; well laid out, and handsomely built up. Its business enterprise is, however, as a matter of course, almost entirely gone. . . . We are luxuriating on oysters, and a variety of green vegetables."
Early in March the men were again put aboard steamboats and carried along the shore of the Gulf of Mexico as far as an island at the entrance to Mobile Bay. On March 8, 1865, Hubbard wrote: "You will observe that we have taken another hitch towards our destination. We arrived at Ft. Gaines in Mobile Bay yesterday, and are at present encamped in the sand on Dauphin Island. This is not the pleasantest place in the world, though I have seen a great many infinitely worse. The location is not suggestive of a very great degree of comfort, though in some respects it is desirable. The coast along the gulf and bay, is one vast oyster bed, hence, we enjoy most luxurious living, and all at a very cheap rate.

"The preparations for a general movement against Mobile seem to be about completed," he continued, "and I have no doubt you will soon hear of active operations in this department... The enemy certainly cannot have a very large army in this part of the Confederacy, as it must draw largely upon the resources of the rebels, to provide for existing contingencies in Virginia and the Carolinas. [General William T.] Sherman seems to be meeting with wonderful success. If our arms meet with no reverse during the pending campaigns, I shall hope to see the war ended with the present year. The army prays for such a consummation, as earnestly as our friends at home."

On March 23 the Union forces left Dauphin Island and moved by steamboat to the mouth of the Fish River, which flows into the east side of Mobile Bay, to begin their last campaign. Moving north against light resistance, the Fifth Minnesota invested a succession of strong earthworks known as the Spanish Fort. "We got as far as the vicinity of 'Spanish Fort,'" Hubbard wrote on April 5, 1865, "and have been engaged in a siege of the place since that time. We are considerably astonished at the character of the obstacles, and the determination of the opposition with which we meet.

"The position against which the army is now operating is a very formidable defensive work," he explained, "strongly garrisoned, and held with great pertinacity. We have commenced a vigorous siege, and by a system of regular approaches, hope to reduce the work. My command is in the front line of investment, and is employed day and night in digging dirt, very much after the McClellan fashion. I have already constructed a network of approaches, intricate with saps, mines, parallels and emplacements, and have advanced to within a few yards of the rebel defences. I have lost about one hundred men thus far in the siege, and suffer more or less every day. 'Spanish Fort' is regarded the key point in the defences of Mobile, and hence is held with great obstinacy. It is situated on the east shore of the bay, directly opposite to,

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5 Hubbard alludes to the fact that in the spring of 1862 Union troops under General George B. McClellan had inched cautiously upon Richmond from the vicinity of Yorktown, spending much time and energy throwing up elaborate earthworks and entrenchments.

and in plain view of the city. I think you may expect to hear of its capture within a few days." On April 12 Mobile fell, and on April 25 Hubbard entered Montgomery.

A FEW DAYS later, on May 3, he described for his aunt how the news of Lee's surrender reached the Fifth Minnesota. "We first learned of the capture of Richmond, the surrender of Lee's army and the probabilities of a speedy termination of the war, about the 20th ult., while on the march," he wrote. "It was near the close of a very hot day; the troops had made a long march, over dusty roads, and were feeling sore and tired out. The column had halted for a rest, and the men were seeking protection from the heat in the corners of fences and on the friendly side of an occasional stump or tree; when a courier bearing dispatches rode rapidly up from the rear. He halted a moment, and communicated the joyful news to me, which you may be sure did not linger long in its way to the men; and there followed a scene it was a delight to witness. The heat, dust and fatigue were forgotten; the weary became rested and the footsore suddenly cured. Officers and soldiers abandoned themselves to the most extravagant demonstrations of joy. Everybody cheered and shouted until they were hoarse. The men disregarding orders and discipline, fired a salute with their muskets on their own account. They pulled and hustled each other about, stood on their hands, rolled in the dirt, and were guilty of innumerable other absurd performances; indeed, they were positively frantic for a while."

The soldiers' joy, however, "turned to sorrow, and our rejoicing to the deepest mourning," Hubbard continued, when they reached Montgomery and learned "of the death by assassination of President Lincoln... What a terrible calamity, and to occur just at this crisis. There is a feeling of regret among the troops that the war is likely soon to cease. They feel that the President's assassination calls for a terrible vengeance, and they regard themselves the proper instruments for its execution. Woe be to the people of the South, if hostilities again commence," said Hubbard. "In President Lincoln they lost their best friend."

The Minnesotan then indicated that Lincoln's death had been responsible for a change in his own plans. "I suppose you are hoping soon to hear that I am out of the service and at home," he said. "I had made up my mind to quit, as soon as I could become satisfied that the war was practically over, and no more fighting to be done; but since learning of the assassination of the President, I have resolved to remain until I am positively sure there is no further need of my services. I shall then very gladly leave the service and return to more congenial pursuits."
HUBBARD spent the late spring and summer of 1865 on occupation duty at Demopolis in central Alabama. “I imagine you will open this letter,” he wrote his aunt on June 4, “with the expectation of receiving an assurance that I am about to come home. As the war is over, and the army in process of being disbanded, you will conclude there is no reason why I should remain longer in the service, and naturally expect me to retire from it at once. I fear you will feel some disappointment upon learning that my connection with the army is likely to continue for a few weeks longer.

“If consulting my own wishes was to determine the question,” he went on, “I should hardly remain past the time necessary to observe the formalities of ‘mustering out’; but my command has so earnestly protested against my leaving them just now, that I have consented to postpone action in the matter for the present. My brigade being composed of veterans,” he explained, “is not included in that class of troops being mustered out under existing orders, and it is expected that the government will retain the re-enlisted men until the regular establishment can be reorganized and increased. It does not seem probable however,” he added, “that any portion of the volunteer army will be needed beyond a few weeks at most.”

It is evident, however, that Hubbard regarded his impending departure from the Fifth Minnesota with mixed feelings. “Although I am more than willing to leave the service,” he continued, “yet I assure you it requires no little effort, or slight sacrifice of feeling, to finally dissolve one’s connection with his old companions-in-arms. It is like the breaking up of a family. The common perils, privations and suffering we have experienced during more than three years, has bound us together in the strongest association, and a sudden separation produces a sensible strain upon the sympathies and affections of every member of the command. The farewells and God bless you’s of the soldiers are very affecting, and often brings tears to the eyes of men whose sensibilities have been blunted by the rudest experiences of war.”

THROUGH the summer of 1865 Hubbard waited to be mustered out. On July 16 he wrote: “I am still in the service with no immediate prospect of leaving it. You may possibly begin to believe that I really like the service and feel loth [sic] to leave it. That, however, I assure you is not the case. For more than three months I have impatiently awaited the time I thought I could muster out without prejudice to myself or the command, and I am still in a state of suspense upon the subject. The old brigade won’t consent to my leaving them as long as they are required to stay. They say that we have passed through the war together, and ought to stick by each other to the last. Of course I would not for the world leave the glorious old veterans of the 2nd Brigade, and have them entertain an unpleasant thought upon the subject.”

But the young officer’s thoughts were upon his future plans. “Upon leaving the service, I design to return to Minnesota,” he informed his aunt, “and after attending to some matters of business there, hope to pay you all a visit. I hardly know what occupation I may choose upon leaving the army, but have little fear but that some opening will present itself in Minnesota sufficient to employ my energies.”

Hubbard was mustered out on September 6, 1865. After making the promised visit to Chester, he returned to Red Wing, where he directed his energies into the grain business, flour milling, and railroads. From 1872 to 1873 he served as a state senator from the sixteenth district. On January 10, 1882, he became governor of Minnesota, in which capacity he served until 1887. During the Spanish-American War he returned to military duty, serving as brigadier general in command of the Third Division, Seventh Army Corps. He died at Minneapolis on February 5, 1913.