

From the Archives of “The Light” Newsletter of the 5th MI, Co. K

A Day in the Life of a Camp Edited by: Will Eichler

Those of you who are new may ask, “Where are we going?” I will use this time to give you a little idea of where that is. We’ll find out today by looking back to the writing of George G. Benedict. He was a newspaper editor in Burlington, Vermont at the outbreak of the Civil War. He joined the 12th Vermont in the fall of 1862. Benedict was one of four editors from Vermont to join 9 month regiments sent by that state. All wrote letters from the field to their readers. Benedict is distinct among the group in that he remained a private for the majority of his service. His descriptions of life in camp and on guard are some of the best I’ve ever seen. In the book, “Army Life in Virginia,” Eric Ward has collected all 31 of the letters he sent home over the nine-month time of service.

I highly recommend this book to anyone who want to know the “where are we going?” question. Our goal as living historians is to get in Sherman’s Way Back Machine (yes, I mean Sherman the cartoon character, not General Sherman) and take us to the era of the Civil War. I’m going to let one of George Benedict’s letters give you a glimpse of that place. This is his letter of Nov. 14, 1862. The context is that the 12th Vermont has been in Federal Service only about 2 months. They arrived in Washington DC just after Antietam. This is their first foray into Virginia. General McClellan has just been replaced as commander of the Army of the Potomac, a tragedy for many of the soldiers who idolized him.

Camp Vermont – near Alexandria, Va.
Nov. 14, 1862

Dear Free Press: [Benedict’s newspaper]

You have discovered that I make little or no mention of army movements; nor do I indulge in criticism or speculation on the course of the war in any of its parts. Such matters I leave to the correspondents from Headquarters. My object is to give your readers, so many of whom have friends in the ranks, some idea of our life and business as seen not from the officers marquee, or the reporter’s saddle, but from the tent of the private. I have nothing to write, consequently, about the change in the chief command of the army, or its probable results. You can judge of them better than we; I may say, however, that there has been no meeting in the 2nd Vermont Brigade, in consequence of Gen. McClellan’s removal, and that any change that promises more active and efficient service for the army, will have our hearty approval, as a portion of the same.

In the absence of anything especially exciting, let me try and describe, briefly, an ordinary day in camp. You are, perhaps, familiar enough with the regular arrangement of tents in a regimental camp. The tents of the Colonel and his Staff are commonly disposed in a line at the rear of the camp. In a

parallel line with them are the tents of the line officers, each captain's tent fronting the street of his company. The company streets run at right angles to the line of the officer's tents, and are of variable widths, in different camps, according to the extent of the ground. In our present camp they are about 25 feet wide. On each side are the company tents, nine on a side, a foot or two apart, facing the street on each side. At the inner end of the street, on one side, is the "Cook tent," occupied by the company cooks and stores, and in front of it is the "Kitchen Range." Whose patent this is, I cannot say. It differs from most others I have seen. It is composed of a trench, 4 feet long and 2 deep, dug in the ground. In the bottom of this the fire is kindled. Forked sticks at the corners, support a couple of stout poles, parallel with the sides, across which are laid the shorter sticks on which hang the kettles. With this apparatus, and an oblong frying pan, of formidable dimensions – say three feet long by two wide, is done all the cooking of the company.

The first signs of life, inside of the line of the main Guard, are to be seen at these points. The cooks must be up an hour or two before light, to get their fires started and breakfast cooking. The fires are, on the cold mornings (and most of the mornings are cold) objects of attraction to those of the soldiers who, for any reason have lain cold – too cold to sleep. These come shivering to the fires, and watch the cooks and warm their shins, till Reveille. There are stoves now, however, of some sort, in most of the tents, and almost all can be as warm as they wish at any time.

At daybreak, the Drum Major marshals his drum and fife corps at the centre of the line, and the Reveille arouses, with the scream of fife and roll of drum, the sleeping hundreds, lying wrapped in their blankets under the canvas roofs. The reveille is a succession of five tunes, of varying time, common and quick, closing with three rolls, by the end of which each company is expected to be in line in the company street. The men tumble out, for the most part, just as they have slept, some with blankets wrapped about them, some in slippers and smoking caps, some in overcoats. – In line, the orderly sergeant calls the roll, and reads the lists of details for guard police, fatigue duty, &c. After roll call, many dive back into their tents and take a morning nap, before breakfast, others start in squads for the brook, which runs close by our camp, to wash. The fortunate owners of wash-basins- there are two in our company – bring them out, use them, and pass them over to the numerous borrowers; others wash in water from their canteens, one pouring on the hands of another. "Police duty" comes at 6 1/4, and is performed by a squad under the direction of a corporal. This varies slightly from the popular notion of such duty – which is commonly supposed to consist of wearing a star, standing round on city street corners, and the occasional diversion of clubbing some non-resistant citizen. "Police duty" in camp, corresponds to what, when I was a boy, was called clearing up the dooryard. The sweeping of the company streets, removal of noisome or unsightly objects, grading of the grounds, and work of similar character, come under this head. At half past six comes the "Surgeon's call." This is not a call of the Surgeon, who is not expected to appear in company quarters, unless for some special emergency but of the

orderly sergeant, who calls for any who have been taken sick in the night, and feel bad enough to won it and be marched off to the Surgeon's tent, when after examination, they are ordered into hospital or on duty as the case may require. Breakfast takes place at 7, by which time in well ordered tents, the blankets have been shaken, folded and laid away with the knapsacks in a neat row at the back of the tent, and the soldiers start out, cup in hand, for the cook tent, where each takes his plate with his allowance of break and beef or pork, and fills his cup with coffee. Some sit and eat their breakfast on the woodpile near the fire; but most take all their meals to their tents. The straw covered floor is all the table, a rubber blanket the table cloth, and sitting round on the ground like so many tailors, we eat with an appetite which gives to the meal a zest almost unknown before we "went a sogering." Our meals do not differ greatly, the principal difference being that we have cold water instead of tea or coffee, for dinner. The rations are beef, salt and fresh, three-fifths of the former and two of the latter, both of fair quality; salt pork, which has uniformly been excellent' bread, soft and hard, the former equal to first rate home made bread, the latter in size, taste and quality resembling basswood chips – very wholesome, however, and not unpalatable; rice, beans, both good, and potatoes occasionally; coffee, rather poor, and tea ditto. Butter, which when good, is on of the greatest luxuries in camp, cheese, apples, which with most Vermonters, are almost an essential and other knickknacks, are not furnished by government; but may always be bought of the sutlers, at high prices. Our company are great hands for *toast*; and at every meal the cookfires are surrounded with a circle of the boys holding their bread to the fire on forked sticks, or wire toast racks of their own manufacture, and of wonderful size and description. So we live, and it shows to what the human frame may be endured by practice and hardship, that we can eat a meal of good baked or boiled pork and beans, potatoes, boiled rice and sugar, coffee and toast, and take it not merely to sustain life, but actually with a relish – curious, isn't it?

Dinner is at 12, Dress Parade at 4 ½ and Supper at 5 ½. The heavy work of the men fills the intervals. This varies; at Capitol Hill it was company and Battalion Drills. Here it is digging in the trenches of Fort Lyon, and cutting lumber in the woods nearby, for our Winter quarters. Evenings are spent very much as they would be by most young men at home, in visiting their comrades, playing cards and checkers, writing letters, and reading. A private occupation of a leisure hour, with the smokers, is carving of pipes from the roots of the laurel, found in profusion in the woods here. It is a slow business, in most cases beginning with a chunk about half as large as one's head, which is reduced by slow degrees and patient whittling to the small size of a pipe bowl. Another common, but not so delightful pastime, is the washing of one's dirty clothes. Many of our men have learned to be expert washers, and that without washboard or pounding barrel. Those who have pocket money, however, can have their washing done by the "contraband" washwomen, who have been on hand at every camp we have occupied.

At half-past eight the tattoo is sounded by the full drum and fife corp, playing several tunes as at Reveille, when the company is again drawn up in its street and the roll called. At nine comes "Taps," when every light must be out in the tents, and the men "turn in" for their night's rest. The ground within the tents is covered with straw or cedar branches, on which are spread the rubber blankets; this is the bed, the knapsack is the pillow. There is no trouble with undressing; our "blouses," or flannel fatigue coats, pantaloons and stockings, sometimes with overcoat added, are the apparel of the night, as of the day. We slip off our boots, drop in our places side by side, draw over us our blankets; and sleep, sound and sweet, soon comes with every eyelid. The man who can sleep at all, in camp, commonly sleeps soundly and well.

I spoke in the beginning of this letter of the absence of anything exciting in camp. We have since had something particularly exciting for Company C – the arrival of the boxes of good things from our kind friends in Burlington. We have had warning of their coming and were anxiously awaiting them. They reached camp after dark last evening; but the sound of wheels and the noise of unloading before the Captain's tent told every one that they had come and an eager crowd hurried to the spot. A couple of pickaxes were quickly put in use. The covers flew off as if blown upwards by the explosive force of the good will and kind feeling imprisoned within, and the parcels were quickly handed out to the favored ones, who thereupon quickly disappeared within the tents, from which shouts of joy and laughter would come peeling as the things within were unpacked. What unrolling of papers and uncovering of boxes, and uncorking of jars and bottles and munching of good things in every tent! A bevy of children were never more pleased with their presents in holiday time, than we with our home luxuries, made doubly delicious by our confinement to army fare, and trebly valuable because they were from the friends *at home*. The whole thing was pronounced worthy of our Burlington friends and emphatically "*bully*." I beg you will divest the word of anything of coarseness or slang if may have heretofore had. It is the adjective which in the army expresses the highest form of admiration, and is in constant use from the Colonel and chaplain to the lowest private. When the soldier has pronounced a thing "*bully*," he can say no more. I wish you could have heard – and if you had and listened sharply I think you might, the cheers and tiger (roar) which after roll call at tattoo last night were given by Co. C, "for our fiends in Burlington."

The health of the regiment is improving. We have but thirteen men on the sick list, and none dangerously ill.

The picket line our Brigade is guarding, has been moved out several miles, and now runs about two miles this side of Mount Vernon. The weather is fine and the spirits of the men good. But they do not take very kindly to the "fatigue duty" on the trenches. They think they had rather be engaged in chasing or fighting rebels than in "strategy," however important the latter may be in all wars.

Yours, G.

Well, that's a lot for one month, but I hope it gives you a glimpse into life in an army camp. The book is available from Borders, B&N or Amazon and is about \$20.00. If you're looking for a great addition to you Civil War library, I can't give you a much better recommendation.