

HONORABLE DERK DERUITER

ADDRESS TO SOLDIER COMRADES
ON
“LIFE IN UNCLE SAM’S ARMY”

DECORATION DAY ~ MAY 30, 1906



From National Archives

The following, which is part of the address given by Derk DeRuiter, on Memorial day, gives one of the best pictures of everyday army life that we have seen in a long while. It was to have been given at Greenwood cemetery, but, on account of the rain, was given in the opera house. (Petoskey Record, June 6, 1906)

THE SPEECH

Never do I find myself among the graves of comrades that past events do not rise before me. Could it have been foreseen that three and one-half million of men would for four years engage in a struggle to the death, the world would have stood with horror. The north could not be convinced that the south actually desired to break up the union; the south could not believe that the north would fight against secession.

When the first southern states passed acts of secession, it was still hoped that it was the work of those known as "fire eaters," and a sober second thought would restore them to reason; but star after star was obliterated from the flag. The flag itself was trailed in the dust; old and tried officers of the army forsook their trust; our little regular army was sent by the southern secretary of war to posts beyond recall; our navy, largely commanded by southern men was scattered in foreign seas.

It seemed too true as the prophets of evil said that "the life had fled, and the soul was dead," and the great republic was no more. But the great heart of the nation beat silently in doubt for only a moment. When Sumpter was fired upon, the spell was broken by the shouts of freemen as they sprang to arms with shouts of freedom upon their lips, and songs of liberty rising to the skies.

How well I remember the first regiments going to the front! It seems but yesterday, yet it was 46 years ago. How I, as well as thousands of other boys, bewailed the fact that we had not come on earth a couple of years earlier to take a hand in a war that would be finished in 90 days, and much sooner, if they would but give us boys a chance to get at them. But we sighed and feared it would be ended without our taking a hand, for had not our wise politicians said that this would only be a breakfast spell.

It was not very long, however, before the greater number of the anxious boys were accommodated with situations as musket bearers to Uncle Sam, and we got our fill of military glory and a surfeit¹. Comrades, do any of you recall the days when we donned the uniforms of blue and brass buttons? How proudly we paraded the streets showing ourselves off to the envy of those who were still younger, disliking to part with our uniforms even long enough to sleep? Then the starting from home.

You will remember the immense knapsacks with which we started. They were filled with everything required for light housekeeping. We resembled pack mules, or to use the classical language of the army, "tote mules," and oh, how reluctantly we parted with one article after another, and finally the old knapsack

1 Surfeit - An excessive amount of something. (Wikipedia)

itself, reserving only a section of pup tent and blanket and a few other absolutely necessary articles. Our haversacks, however, we never neglected with our hard tack, our choice porter house steaks cut from the swine; and what a variety of dishes we constructed from those two ingredients. Coffee, Ye Gods! A beverage, that carried us from Tartarus² to Elysium³, from the lowest depths of despair to heavenly bliss. How soothing this beverage after a hard day's march! We would go for rails, being careful always to take only the upper rail. We would make our coffee, fry our steak, and stretch ourselves on our blankets after a meal that was fit for the gods.

About the time we became drowsy, which was very soon, and began to dream, the voice of the orderly would ring out with fiendish delight: "Company B, fall in for picket duty."

Now every man in the company knew it was not our turn. It might be Co. A, or Co. C perhaps; but everyman in Co. B was willing to make affidavit it was not our turn. Under these conditions can you wonder that there was a good deal of irrepressible scripture used.

Then followed lonely hours on the picket line⁴, the consciousness that the safety of the army, perhaps the nation itself, depended upon vigilance. How often did you pinch yourself to keep awake? Every nerve was straining to the utmost tension, fearing some guerilla might creep up and finish your passion for glory with a rifle ball. Then how sure you were that your time on watch had long expired, and that the sergeant of the guard had forgotten to relieve you! About this time you would regret the examining surgeon had not rejected you at your enlistment, particularly if upon next day a forced march of 25 miles or more were made. On such occasions there was a slight discount on patriotism. Can you wonder that many fell by the wayside? Some taken prisoner, some dying from fatigue and from over-exertion under a southern sun, others cruelly murdered by merciless bushwackers. Their graves dot the hills and valleys of the southland, the fate of most of them unknown, marked only in the army roles as missing; yet these sacrificed their lives as bravely as those slain on the firing lines. Such is the life of a soldier.

Do any of you remember the campaign in Kentucky in 1862, when you marched and countermarched throughout the length and breadth of that state? During the hot weather the dust was so thick that you could hardly see your file leaders. When it was raining, the yellow clay was so sticky that it was with great difficulty you could raise your feet without leaving your shoes sticking in the mud. In that campaign you were sometimes the pursuer and often the pur-

2 Tartarus is the lowest region of the world, as far below earth as earth is from heaven. (Encyclopedia Mythica)

3 In Greek mythology, Elysium was a section of the Underworld. The Elysian, or the Elysian Plains, were the final resting places of the souls of the heroic and the virtuous. (Wikipedia)

4 A detachment of one or more troops, ships, or aircraft held in readiness or advanced to warn of an enemy's approach. (The Free Dictionary)

sued, until the battle of Perrysville⁵ that ended Bragg's⁶ career in Kentucky. How many times during that summer would some of you have given a month's pay for a drink of such water as you used to draw from the old well at home—the bucket and the windlass. After three months spent in that state and tasting the water, do any of you wonder at the Kentuckian's aversion for water? I certainly do not.

These periods of hard campaigning were often followed by a considerable time in camp with rest and plenty of rations. Of course, we had government rations, and if any unfriendly chicken or duck had the audacity to attack us, we always defended ourselves even if we sometimes happened to kill the offending fowl or duck. I have even known a soldier to kill a goose for hissing at the American flag. When in camp, the hardships of the last campaign were discussed about the campfire. The trials and perplexities of the other fellow were laughed at. A soldier always sees something very funny in the other fellow's past troubles. We aimed to make ourselves comfortable, getting all the good out of life that there is in it, thanking the gods that we were not worse off.

But the camp had its troubles. It was a saying among the soldiers that the government had taken all of our liberties and rights except one, and that was the right to grumble, and this we exercised to the limit. Drilling is ever distasteful to the volunteer, and we could never divest ourselves of the idea that drilling was an invention of his satanic majesty. Then we would long for the excitement of another campaign to get away from the drillmaster. When again the hardships of the campaign were beginning to weary us we would long for the camp and an occasional drill. Such is the life of a soldier.

How often after being on our feet 12 or 15 hours we would think it impossible to go any further. Then the fife and drum would strike up "Yankee Doodle," or the "Girl I Left Behind Me," and for a time our fatigues were forgotten, and we were good for another stretch. Then some fellow would strike up "John Brown's Body," and companies and regiments would join in the chorus. This would stimulate us to another effort. About this time some mounted orderly or staff officer would meet us on the way to the rear. We would call out, "How far to camp, pard?" He would reply: "Just ahead at the river, about a mile, I guess." This always had the effect of quickening our pace, but oh, what a mile that was! That river would recede much faster than we could march, and we would often embellish the English language with new and most wonderful adjectives.

These experiences were in the army of the Cumberland⁷, and the experiences of other divisions were about the same. A great deal of marching, considerable

5 The Battle of Perrysville, KY. Also known as the Battle of Chaplin Hills, fought on Oct. 8, 1862. (Wikipedia)

6 Braxton Bragg (March 22, 1817 – September 27, 1876) was a career United States Army officer, and then a general in the Confederate States Army—a principal commander in the Western Theater of the American Civil War and later the military adviser to Confederate President Jefferson Davis. (Wikipedia)

7 The Army of the Cumberland was one of the principal Union armies in the Western Theater during the American Civil War. It was originally known as the Army of the Ohio.

fighting, always excitement enough to keep one from growing lonesome. There are some moments in a soldier's life that seem like ages. Those of you who were present at the battle of Chickamauga⁸, where the right wing was broken and Sheridan's division nearly annihilated, where the brave General Lytle⁹ fell—at that awful moment it seemed as if the entire army was lost, but there stood brave old Pap Thomas on the left, cool, grim and determined, repelling attack after attack, holding the enemy in check until night, when he fell back and placed his army between the enemy and Chattanooga. This saved the army and the entire state of Tennessee to the Union cause. Those present at Missionary Ridge¹⁰ will remember how long a life you lived in a few short moments. Climbing up the side of the Ridge, in some places almost perpendicular, swinging your muskets on your backs, pulling yourselves up by brushes and shrubs, sometimes giving a comrade a lift by hand, and all this under a tremendous artillery fire, most of which went wild over your heads, you reached the summit in what seemed an age. It was really only about an hour. What had been considered impossible, had been accomplished.

How often do instances long forgotten present themselves to our mental vision? Some droll remark by the wit of the company, or some event that happened long ago, helped to make that variety that constitutes the life of a soldier. I am reminded of an incident that at the battle of Stone River¹¹: A rabbit came scampering through our lines going to the rear as fast as he could jump. Our company wit called out; "Go it little cottontail; I would run faster than you are if it wouldn't give me a bad reputation; At another time the company lined behind which protected it from musketry fire, when the same fellow called out: "Company B, side step to the left; there isn't a d__n bit of log at this end of the company." Then do you remember the coming in of the mail during the Atlantic

8 The Battle of Chickamauga, fought September 19–20, 1863, marked the end of a Union offensive in southeastern Tennessee and northwestern Georgia called the Chickamauga Campaign. The battle was the most significant Union defeat in the Western Theater of the American Civil War and the battle with the second highest number of casualties in the war (following Gettysburg). (Wikipedia)

9 William Haines Lytle (November 2, 1826 – September 20, 1863) was a politician in Ohio, renowned poet, and military officer in the United States Army during both the Mexican-American War and American Civil War, where he was killed in action as a brigadier general. (Wikipedia)

10 The Battle of Missionary Ridge was fought November 25, 1863, as part of the Chattanooga Campaign of the American Civil War. Following the Union victory in the Battle of Lookout Mountain on November 24, Union forces under Maj. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant assaulted Missionary Ridge and defeated the Confederate Army of Tennessee, commanded by Gen. Braxton Bragg. (Wikipedia)

11 The Battle of Stones River or Second Battle of Murfreesboro (in the South, simply the Battle of Murfreesboro), was fought from December 31, 1862, to January 2, 1863, in Middle Tennessee, as the culmination of the Stones River Campaign in the Western Theater of the American Civil War. Of the major battles of the Civil War, Stones River had the highest percentage of casualties on both sides. Although the battle itself was inconclusive, the Union Army's repulse of two Confederate attacks and the subsequent Confederate withdrawal were a much-needed boost to Union morale after the defeat at the Battle of Fredericksburg, and it dashed Confederate aspirations for control of Middle Tennessee. (Wikipedia)

campaign, and four months continuous battle, when letters were delivered in the trenches often under a heavy fire? But you forgot all about the shot and shell, and read the letter from “the girl you left behind you.”

The march to the sea was a pleasure excursion, or a sort of a picnic, just dangerous enough to give it spice, yet not enough to make us very cautious. Here we lived on the fat of the land, reached Savannah in time to celebrate Christmas and New Year’s Day, feeling that the end for which we had so long struggled was near.

Those who were in either of the four corps that formed Sherman’s army will remember how joyfully we turned our faces northward from Savannah, skirmishing with Joe Wheeler’s¹² cavalry, sometimes nearly waist deep in the water for hours. Don’t ever suggest the water wagon to any man who marched through those swamps. Then you remember our night marches, which were illuminated by the burning of pitch pine trees. What a weird scene the army presented! The light of burning torches, shining on cavalry, infantry and artillery! In this manner we reached Goldsborough after fighting the battles of Averysborough¹³ and Bentonville¹⁴. While lying in camp at this point we received news of the capture of Richmond and the surrender of Lee’s entire army. Then we knew the end had come as we were amply able to take care of Johnston’s¹⁵ army, which was the only force left the failing confederacy that could be called an army. A few days later this army also surrendered and our passion for military glory was fully satisfied.

Amid our rejoicings the army was thrown into gloom, almost despair. The great and good ruler of our reunited people was foully stricken down in the moment of his triumph. When Lee had surrendered the main army of the down-falling confederacy, the army under Johnston was on the point of surrendering. On that self-same day, too, we saw the identical flag of the union that four years before had been sadly hauled down from Fort Sumpter raised again over that historic fort, and everything looked hopeful. But Abraham Lincoln never spoke again. The early beams of the morning sun failed to warm the lifeless remains of

12 Joseph Wheeler (September 10, 1836 – January 25, 1906) was an American military commander and politician. He has the rare distinction of serving as a general during war time for two opposing forces: first as a noted cavalry general in the Confederate States Army in the 1860s during the American Civil War, and later as a general in the United States Army during both the Spanish-American War and Philippine-American War near the turn of the century. For much of the Civil War he served as the senior cavalry general in the Army of Tennessee and fought in most of its battles in the Western Theater. (Wikipedia)

13 Averysborough, North Carolina. Also called Averagesboro.

14 Bentonville, North Carolina

15 Joseph Eggleston Johnston (February 3, 1807 – March 21, 1891) was a career U.S. Army officer, serving with distinction in the Mexican-American War and Seminole Wars, and was also one of the most senior general officers in the Confederate States Army during the American Civil War. Johnston’s effectiveness in the Civil War was undercut by tensions with Confederate President Jefferson Davis, but he also suffered from a lack of aggressiveness, and victory eluded him in every campaign he personally commanded. (Wikipedia)

the great war president and liberator, and they were borne in mournful silence back to the White House, a mute and ghastly witness of the sheer desperation of those who, through armed rebellion in the open field by fair and legitimate war had ceased, were determined to keep up that fire in the rear which had been promised to the southern leaders by their northern sympathizers.

Those at the front remember the feeling that the news of this dastardly crime produced in the army. Tears fell from eyes unused to weeping, but never did we blame our brave enemies who were fighting for what they thought was right.

During the entire war a class known as “copperheads¹⁶” and we owe apology to the reptile for using his name for describing anything so contemptible, sympathized with the south but lacked the courage to go boldly and fight for what they professed to believe. They were principally engaged in discouraging enlistments, using every effort to induce soldiers to desert. They were organized in secret lodges known as Knights of the Golden Circle and Sons of Liberty. This organization plotted to release and arm all prisoners of war held by our government, to seize the railroads, burn northern cities, and to compel the government to recall our armies from the south. The vigilance of the military, however, overthrew these plans. The leaders were captured and some sentenced to death, but pardoned by President Lincoln.

These patriots, together with a very large number who had gone to Canada for the benefit of their health, were now returning in great numbers, as they found their health greatly improved by the cessation of the draft. This class of patriots feared the return of nearly a million men from the ranks of the army would be dangerous to the welfare and morals of the country, and incidentally had a little fear for their own safety, but there were unmolested and allowed to sink into oblivion, despised by all, even their own children.

The entire army returned to civil life. Now note the reluctant demoralization. Every president of the United States elected since the civil war up to the present occupant of the president’s chair, with one exception¹⁷, was a member of the old army, and that exception was drafted and sent a substitute, thus fighting by proxy. About 75 per cent of both houses of congress was for 30 years composed of members of either the northern or southern armies. About the same proportion is true of governors of states, and so down to local officers, showing that the people did not fear the old soldier, but rather insisted upon being governed by him. In fact, the history of the last 46 years has been made by ex-soldiers.

It has sometimes been said that the southern soldier was superior to the northern, as the northern army was double that of the south; but when it is considered that the divisions of our army were actually 2,000 miles from the

16 The Copperheads were a vocal group of Democrats in the Northern United States who opposed the American Civil War, wanting an immediate peace settlement with the Confederates. Republicans started calling anti-war Democrats “Copperheads”, likening them to the poisonous snake. The Peace Democrats accepted the label, but for them the copper “head” was the likeness of Liberty, which they cut from copper pennies and proudly wore as badges.

17 Grover Cleveland was drafted but paid \$150 for a substitute. (Askeville.com)

main army, that every mile of railroad upon which we depended for supplies, every bridge and every tunnel, every mile of telegraph wire needed guarding, garrisons were required in southern cities, and that entire states were in possession of our arms, it will be understood what an immense army was required for this guard duty alone, besides the armies at the front. Until the last year of the war the confederates were always able to meet us with a greater number of men at the point of contact. These soldiers were American soldiers, and that is praise enough for any man. Our enemies fought for what they thought was right. They did their best, and deserve the respect of every man who admires courage and fidelity to convictions. The sons of soldiers of the north and of the south fought side by side in the Spanish and Philippine wars, and have shown their devotion to their united country by many laying down their lives in its defense. And now, my comrades, we who are in the sere and yellow leaf have climbed the hill of life, and long since passed the summit and are descending the western slopes. In the last year more than 50,000 of the old army joined the silent majority. We resemble the tattered old flags that we brought home from the southland. We are but the shreds and tatters of the old army of freedom. In a very few years "lights out" will be sounded for the last remaining member of the old army.

Our civil war, established the fact of Lincoln's words "that government of the people, by the people and for the people, has not perished from the face of the earth," but is far more firmly established than ever before. Our government is far from perfect; but what human institution is perfect? It has also proved the fact that republics are not ungrateful. Never before in the history of the world has any government provided so well for its soldiers, not one of whom need be without food or shelter. When we try to compare our government with any other, we find nothing to compare it with, we are absolutely alone with our great soldiers' homes and many other comforts provided for her defenders. Then in no other country on earth is there such an organization as this noble women's union known as the Woman's Relief Corps¹⁸.

Comrades, we should bare our heads before these noble women. They are always doing something to make the road a little smoother for veterans, and their families. God bless these patriotic women. Consciousness of duty well done is the only reward they have on earth for their kindness. May they hear the Master say: "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of these, my brethren, ye have done it unto me."

Comrades, shall we be considered egotistic, if we say with our dying breath that our country is better for our having lived in it? We leave it a grand and glorious whole, with not a bondman within our borders. We found it dying, but while we are dying, the republic lives, yes, the republic lives.

18 Auxiliary to the GAR (Grand Army of the Republic)



From National Archives