Personal Accounts in the Civil War

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PERSONAL ACCOUNTS IN THE CIVIL WAR

Hard facts alone do not fully reveal the true picture of the Civil War. Private journals, diaries and letters from the people who lived during those exciting and intense war years, are valuable in fleshing out the complete story of the American Civil War. Frederic Augustus James's Civil War Diary provides a glimpse of life as a Union soldier in a Confederate prison camp. Sam R. Watkins' "Co Aytch" gives an excellent viewpoint of the Civil War seen through a Confederate private's eyes. An entirely different perspective is revealed in Letters of a Civil War Surgeon which were written by Union Doctor, Major William Watson. The war lasted from 1861 to 1865 with a loss of over 620,000 soldiers. The stories of these three men help in understanding the tragic loss of so many American lives.

Frederic Augustus James's Civil War Diary covers the period from February 20, 1864 to August 23, 1864, and includes his observations and involvement in his capture at Fort Sumter, until about a month before he died at the Confederate prison of Andersonville.

James was a Union seaman captured on September 8, 1863 when he was on an unsuccessful mission to gain control of Fort Sumter (1). James was on one of the launches from the U. S. S. Housatonic (2). The Housatonic later had the misfortune of being sunk by the
Confederate submarine C. S. S. Hunley.

While in some respects James's journal notations read as very low keyed and somewhat mundane, the key to understanding them is to step back in time and place, and experience life as a prisoner of war. Life for a Union prisoner was filled with boring stretches of time with severe shortages of food, clothing and shelter. In almost every journal entry, James focused on the food he acquired, prepared and ate. He writes about the books he has read. Also doing his laundry and bartering for supplies. Prison life, for the most part, did consist of ordinary, humdrum activities punctuated by occasional dramatic events, and that is the reality of prison life anywhere and in any time period.

James included one such dramatic event that occurred in July of 1864. Some 50 to 60 prisoners banded together at the Andersonville prison to rob and even murder fellow prisoners (3). In *Andersonville; The story of a Civil War prison camp* by Raymond F. Baker, those men were known as the "Andersonville Raiders". Baker says these men were "a large, organized group of thieves, cutthroats, and murders," "the most notorious and dangerous predators" (4). For over four months those men operated daily in the camp preying on prisoners who were too weak to protest.

Finally, with the help of the Confederate Post Commander, General John H. Winder and prison commandant, Captain Henry Wirz, the "Andersonville Raiders" were arrested and tried by a jury of Union men. In words written by James on July 11, 1864 "Six of the raiders who had been on trial for their lives by a jury of our own
men, were hung at five, P.M. They were hung upon one gallows all at the same time, near the southwestern gate" (5). James noted in this journal entry that he did not witness the hangings as he had "no relish for such scenes" (6). The rest of the gang were punished by having to wear a ball and chain.

James adds in that same entry that he did his laundry, and had rice soup and fried mush (7). Life went quietly on once again with the basic questions of survival of what to eat, and how to stay sheltered and clean.

*Andersonville* lists the daily food rations for the prisoners as consisting of one quarter pound of meal with either one third pound bacon or one pound beef. Sometimes peas, rice, vinegar and molasses were also provided (8). All food was issued in an uncooked state as, at first, bakeries were not built in the prison, and when finally built, were totally inadequate for the large numbers of prisoners (9). James cooked his own food.

Merchants within the prison sold food to the prisoners, and if the Union men had money or something to barter, they could supplement the prison diet with eggs, meat, vegetables and fruits. The few times James acquired eggs he specifically listed them in his diary describing how he cooked them, and in some cases whether he got them through bartering or by buying them.

A continual observation of James is doing his laundry and his efforts to keep clean. Conditions at Andersonville were made worse by the pollution of the stream flowing through the prison camp. Ovid L. Futch writes in his *History of Andersonville Prison* that
the Stockade Creek was not only polluted by kitchen waste, but by two Confederate camps who used the water for washing, bathing and as the camp latrine before the water even reached the prison (10). Prisoners at Andersonville added to the pollution by using sloppy sanitary practices. It was very hard for anyone to keep clean in such an environment, and a place for disease and bugs to flourish.

James writes about what he calls one of the plagues of Pharaoh, just one of the many bug problems he had to deal with. James colorfully calls body lice "genus creepers" (11). Author Futch quotes from Private Shatzel's diary written during his imprisonment at Andersonville that prisoners would go "skirmishing for lice", and "grey-back (another term for lice) raising" and even "louse fighting" (12). Prisoners were not the only ones infested with lice; both the Union and Confederate armies were, as James writes, "plagued" by "genus creepers".

Sam R. Watkins, a Confederate soldier, writes in his memoirs "Co Aytch" a description of louse races. Bets would be placed on individual lice to see which one crawled off a plate first. One of the Confederate soldiers consistently won with his lice. His secret was revealed when it was discovered he heated the plate inducing his louse to move faster than his opponent's louse. Watkins uses the same phrase as James, and calls lice the plague of Pharaoh's people (13).

A soldier, quoted in Doctors in Grey by H. H. Cunningham, places the appearance of "the greyback" solely on an introduction by Lincoln's soldiers with the assumption that lice were just
another Union weapon (14). No doubt, Union soldiers blamed Jefferson Davis and the Confederates for much the same thing.

Lice resulting from poor sanitary conditions was just one irritant affecting the soldiers of the Civil War on both sides. When death statistics are revealed, in which a ratio of 2 to 1 was used to describe deaths from disease, there needs to be an explanation of what those diseases were.

In Andersonville prison, where Frederic Augustus James was held prisoner, a total of 45,000 Union soldiers were imprisoned there with a death rate of 12,000 men who died of disease (15).

James developed a cold on July 24, 1864, and relates in his diary how he treated his illness with picra (16), a bitter toxic acid that according to Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, can be used as a medicine or an element used in explosives (17). Medicines were not well developed, nor was medical treatment sophisticated in any sense. Another illustration of that is when earlier on James makes a diarrhea medicine for other prisoners out of rhubarb root under the mistaken impression that rhubarb would control the bowels (18). Rhubarb is a purgative and has the opposite effect.

James does get some medicine, not identified in his diary, from the prison hospital where a friend of his worked. James then wrapped a "wet girdle" around his middle in an attempt at treating his illness (19).

Doctors in Blue by George Worthington Adams, mentions the wet girdle treatment calling it a "belly band" (20). It was used as
one of the methods in treating diarrhea, James's eventual symptom of illness. Diarrhea was called the "Tennessee quickstep" with doctors not knowing what caused it (21). Part of the problem lay in viewing diarrhea as a disease and not as a symptom. Because of that fact, the causes listed ranged from poor diet and bad water to strange causes such as "crowd poisoning" and "depressing mental agencies" (22). Adams concludes that "no clear answer can be given as to what the Civil War army "diarrhoea and dysentery" actually was" (23).

Doctors in Grey listed treatments of diarrhea and dysentery using silver nitrate injections, which cauterized the anus, or administering opium, calomel, streychnia or acetate of lead. The "Diseremus Pill" was equal parts of red pepper and crude resin (24). James's rhubarb preparation was not far off the mark for the medicine of the day.

Lack of understanding of what disease Frederic Augustus James had, and treatment that may or may not have exacerbated his condition, plus his weakened physical state, finally caused his death on September 15, 1864 just a short time before all the prisoners were released from Andersonville (25).

The History of Andersonville Prison reinforces the assertion that as author Futch says "the chief cause of high mortality at Andersonville was the character of the care and treatment provided for the sick" (26). Futch says the greatest killer was diarrhea which caused 3530 deaths along with Dysentery which caused 999 deaths (27). Frederic Augustus James was just one of those
Lack of proper medical knowledge definitely had a bearing on the thousands who died during the Civil War, but another element with a powerful impact, was the new type of weapons used with the resulting severe injuries.

The "minie ball" according to Frank R. Freeman in *Microbes and Minie Balls* was "a cone-shaped bullet that expanded when fired". That new type of bullet caused considerable damage with its deeper penetration, and in the words of Dr. Theodore Dimon "does not permit much debate about amputation" (28).

Some statistics published in *Doctors in Blue* show that 94 percent of all wounds were bullet wounds. Only one in seven survived a gunshot wound. The "minie ball" alone caused 108,000 wounds. Author Adams asserts that the bullets of that time period were much worse than our modern day bullets. The lead bullet was much slower, and tended to carry particles of clothing and skin into the resultant wound which caused severe infections to set in (29).

Sam R. Watkins describes walking with a wounded soldier whose "breast and sleeve of his coat had been torn away, and I could see the frizzled end of his shirt sleeve, which appeared to be sucked into the wound" (30). The soldier dropped down dead as Sam walked besides him. Sam had one very close encounter with a "minie ball" when one hit him, but was stopped by the Bible he carried.

Just how horrible were those Civil War wounds can be illustrated by another excerpt from Watkins' memoirs. He describes
a trip to a field hospital in which he finds a fellow soldier named James Galbreath who had been shot on July 22, 1864. Watkins asks James if he was badly wounded, and James pulls down the blanket to show his wound. Watkins writes "I get sick when I think of it. The lower part of his body was hanging to the upper part by a shred, and all of his entrails were lying on the cot with him, the bile and other excrements exuding from them, and they full of maggots". Sam also describes the huge pile of decaying arms and legs outside the field hospital (31).

Another perspective on war time medicine is given in the Letters of a Civil War Surgeon edited by Paul Fatout. The letters were from Major William Watson, a surgeon in the Army of the Potomac from 1862 to 1865 to various members of his family. Major Watson was the son of a physician, well educated at Lafayette College and the medical college of the University of Pennsylvania. Watson wrote his letters mainly to his father and his six younger sisters (32). The letters offer an insight into much of the same situations that Frederic Augustus James and Sam R. Watkins faced such as poor food, difficult to non-existent proper sanitary conditions, boredom, infestation of lice, poor clothing and disease.

One would expect Watson's letters to his father to be full of interesting medical news with new techniques cited since his father was a physician, but that was not the case. For the most part, his letters home were full of complaints about the food, and how hungry he was. He also wrote about the type of shelter he contrived to
find, and the frustration of not being paid, which was a reoccurring theme with both James and Watkins.

Concerning his medical war time work, Watson wrote to his father, in a very matter of fact way, about the number of amputations he had performed (33).

A good description of an amputation was given by General Carl Schurz quoted in Doctors in Blue in which he relates how surgery was performed out in the open because the light was better. The patient screaming in pain was given ether. The surgeon assessed the wound and determined that the limb would have to come off. Using a blood stained knife, previously held in his teeth, the surgeon wiped the knife against his "bloodstained apron, and the cutting began" (34).

Major Watson performed many amputations, and in a letter written on July 18, 1863 he wrote about the number of amputations and other operations he had performed, but nothing was added about any new techniques or unusual cases. The out of the ordinary cases would be the ones his doctor father would be most interested in. Instead, Watson writes "the mortality among the wounded is fearful - caused principally by Gangrene, Erysipelas, Tetanus and Secondary Hemorrhage. Our secondary operations have been very unfavorable. Most of the cases die" (35).

Doctors in Blue make a case for experimentation with the development of new techniques by the surgeons in the Union army. Doctors were not experienced in treating wounds that many had never seen in private practice (36). A young doctor such as Major Watson
would not have had any experience in performing surgeries like an amputation.

Dr. Watson worked in a field hospital for most of his time with the army. From *Doctors in Blue* comes a good description of what happened to the wounded brought into the field hospital. The wounded would be placed on the ground or on straw. Those slightly or mortally injured were passed over. Bleeding was checked and bandaged with sometimes the use of a tourniquet to stop the bleeding. Whiskey or brandy was given to the patient, contrary to what modern medicine would prescribe today. Opiates also were liberally administered (37). Both liquor and opiates are depressants, and, coupled with severe shock, it is a wonder patients survived their first brush with the medical personal.

Perhaps though, not all of the patients received their dose of alcohol or morphine. Watson mentions in one letter home, that some of the surgeons ran away in the middle of a battle against General Lee's forces. Watson wrote that the surgeons were reported as having drunk all the liquor reserved for the wounded. Because those surgeons were drunk the wounded "had not (had) their wounds dressed for six, some even for ten days - and that Erysipelas, Gangrene and Maggots resulted from this neglect" (38).

Reading diaries or journals add to a deeper understanding of the Civil War. So often insight is gained when those time capsules are opened. In the case of what Watson, Watkins and James felt about the war, it is only necessary to refer back to their words written over a century ago.
All three men were volunteers who stayed in for the duration. In Frederic Augustus James's case that duration was his death at Andersonville prison in Georgia. Among James's possessions were four poems that were either his own compositions or copied from other sources. From the care taken by James of those poems, they must have meant a great deal to him.

One stanza of the poem "St Patrick's Day" is:

"Who shall bear the brunt of this great crying evil?
Is it Jefferson Davis? or his privy Counsellor the devil?
Or shall the weight of it, in truth, be laid upon,
The policy of our Government at Washington" (39).

James was held prisoner for a little over a year, and had a lot of time for introspection. Whether he wrote "St Patricks Day" or not, the poem poses an interesting question of where the blame should be laid concerning the Civil War, and, perhaps an even more important question of what difference does it make to the thousands of soldiers who died.

Sam R. Watkins enlisted in the spring of 1861 and served in Co. H of the Army of Tennessee until General Joseph E. Johnston surrendered his army on April 26, 1865. Of the original 150 men who enlisted with Sam, only seven were alive at the end of the war (40). Watkins was a tough, tenacious, Confederate fighter with a lot of pithy comments concerning battlefields and officers. He writes in his memoirs, that "officers have all the glory. Glory is not for the private soldier; such as die in the hospital, being eaten up with the deadly gangrene" (41). He continues to emphasize
that many privates fought hard and deserve some of that glory. Watkins, along with many other soldiers did question orders, but, in the end, a large number charged impossible positions and followed orders.

Sam's reaction to the Civil War is best related in a final quote from his memoirs:

"The United States has no North, no South, no East, no West. We are one and undivided."

One can almost hear Watkins say "The tale is told. The world moves on" (42).

Dr. Watson was a strong Union man who throughout his letters home supported Union decisions concerning the war. He was very forthright in his opinions on the enemy writing that there "is no truth or honor in a Rebel" which was an opinion he held to the end.

When the war was over, Watson was most concerned that Jefferson Davis "the old scamp escape with a half million dollars in specie". Watson chooses to stay in service till the very end as he writes "there is an act of Congress appropriating 3 months' pay proper to every officer remaining in service till the expiration of the war" (43).

After marching in the grand review on May 23, 1865 in Washington, Major William Watson finally went home to begin another chapter in his life. Paul Fatout who edited Major Watson's letters says that Watson continued his practice of medicine, but died at the relatively early age of forty-one possibly from the cumulative effects of his intense experiences during the war (44).
The Civil War of 1861 affected thousands of people directly as well as indirectly. Personal accounts have added enormously to our understanding of those dramatic and heartbreaking times.
ENDNOTES


2. Hammer, pp 41, 121.

3. Hammer, p 86.


5. Hammer, p 86.


16. Hammer, p 89.


25. Futch, p 113.
27. Futch, p 107.
33. Fatout, p 70.
34. Adams, p 118.
35. Fatout, p 72.
38. Fatout, p 64.
42. Watkins, p 247.
43. Fatout, pp 93, 96, 97.
44. Fatout, p 98.