

Samuel W. North Letter and Transcription

April 15, 1863 - Camp near Falmouth

Introduction

Sam's April 15, 1863 letter opens with an explanation to his brother why he is not able to send his pay home. It's evident that governmental red tape has not changed over the past 150 years. When minor mistakes were made, they evolved into perpetual mistakes that were impossible to get corrected. Sam always signed his name S. W. North. When he enlisted, the recorder of names wrote Samuel J. North and for every signature needed by the Army after that, Sam had to sign his name Samuel J. North. On the next to last payroll, Sam forgot and signed S. W. North. Although the paymaster, according to Sam, knew of the incorrect spelling of his name on the rolls, he decided that day to deny Sam his pay. Sam didn't seem too upset about it as he stated that he wasn't really in need of anything.

In January, Sam wrote an account of what became known as the Mud March – knee-deep mud due to non-stop, horrible down-pouring rain, under which Burnside's Army had to retreat back to camp, from Banks Ford on the Rappahannock where he attempted to cross. I haven't been able to find a connection or any mention of the movement of Federal troops on Monday, April 11, as part of Hooker's preparation for the Chancellorsville Campaign. Hooker's first movement of troops that led up to the Battle of Chancellorsville was made on April 27, 16 days after April 11.

Sam's company definitely had orders to move and everyone had to carry eight days' rations, which was always a signal to the men that something big may be in the works. Whatever the reasons were for moving the troops on April 11, the weather may have brought the plan to a halt until April 27. Camp Falmouth was on the north side the Rappahannock River and north of Fredericksburg. Chancellorsville is west of Fredericksburg and Warrenton is well north of Chancellorsville. To move the whole cavalry, as Sam writes about, would have been a major maneuver. "I think it is the plan to cross the main force below those above were for a decoy though a considerable force may cross above the city this is my idea." Was Sam's idea right?

For about five months, the 126th's camp had been at Falmouth, directly across the river from where the Confederate troops were camped on the other side of the Rappahannock. Both sides would have been able to see each other; it was only a hollering distance away. It was five months to get acquainted with the boys on the opposite side of this struggle called the Civil War. Exchanges of newspapers and other things were made on cornstalk rafts. One young Confederate was even brave enough to take a chance at swimming across the river, once the pickets on the other

side assured him he could return. This attempt was halted when an officer of the 91st Regiment warned him he would be taken prisoner.

Sam is counting down the days and weeks until muster out when he can go home and see his family but at the same time, stating that if it wasn't during wartime, he would be satisfied to stay in the army. Many young men on both sides of the conflict contracted wanderlust during their service to their country.

Transcription

near Falmouth Va April 15th

Dear Brther

I received your letter last night or night before I believe it was and as the boys are almost all sending some money home I write to let you know why I don't send any we were payed for four months but owing to a mistake in sighning my name I with several other did not get mine. When I enlisted I signed my name as I always do S. W. North. but somehow my nam was copied on the roll, Samuel J. North, and has always continued so on the muster rolls and this time when I came to sign the muster roll I put my correct signature to it and the paymaster this time was very strict and did not give us who had mistakes in our names – there were several – who did not get paid. but we will get it when we are discharged there will not be the least risk of losing it. I had just as like have it then as now as I don't need it and would run the risk of sending it home

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when I do get it I will get six months pay at once. We had orders to move but I will give you the whole account on monday the 91st regt with four men from each company of ours and the 134 & 129 started on monday morning they are now at U.S. ford & Banks ford and holding them they are about six miles up the river our whole cavalry force has gone out towards warrenton they are reported to have had a fight. We were to have gone this morning but it commenced raining last night and has been pouring down all day and this night it is raining still, it will raise the river and may delay the move. It seems as if providence was against us all along the mud march was defeated on acct of the weather Burnsidess plans were disclosed another time now this move has just gone far enough to be exposed I think it is the plan to cross the main force below those above were for a decoy though a considerable force may cross above the city this is my idea. some of our boys were out to see those at the fords they say they could not see many rebs at first

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But they soon came pretty thick they are on good terms with our boys they made a raft of cornstalks and put a Richmond Examiner on it and sent it over to our fellows one of the boys from our company got it the war news was torn off. one hollored over will you let me come back again if i come over our boys said yes he stripped off and was coming when one of the 91st officers said I will have to make a prisoner of you he then stopped and went back our company was at Stonemans Swich yesterday unloading cars we unloaded a great deal of hay and grain they have splendid engines on the road the finest I ever saw tell pap to send me some postage stamps as mine are most done. I sent the April agriculturist. I might most as well have a sharp stick to write with as this pen. give my love to all the friends I will write soon again if anything is going on write soon

S. W. North

I forgot to say that we have to carry 8 days rations of all but meat that is driven along with us. I think if I live

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to get home my shoulders will be so used to straps that I can take a bundle of hides or a box of goods I know I will always be able to feel for sore shouldered horses My own have been pretty well blistered and rubbed after a march so they hurt whenever I would move but only four weeks and then Im done playing pack mule still if it was not for this horrid butchering I believe I would stay in the army I fear I will not feel contented at home it is hard to tell what I will do

SWN