

William H. Emslie

By Christopher M. Bosma

William H. Emslie was a pretty average Union soldier. Almost every single thing about him is average. There were perhaps a few things, here and there that were different than the norm. He is the first-born son of a baker, and has a few brothers and sisters. Nothing truly amazingly interesting about him. Nothing too complicated. Nothing too spectacular. He was not an amazing writer. For what he did write, he did not have any amazing thoughts for this time period. Nothing he said or did was truly out of the ordinary.

But perhaps, that is exactly why you would want to read it. To learn in that time what is considered to be “ordinary”. Rushing off to war without a second thought was considered to be “ordinary” back then. It was “pretty average” back then, as it seems to be now, for a young kid, to join up with the military and die for his country. Perhaps even needlessly so.

While William Emslie's letters do not start until the early 1860s, he grew up mostly in the 1850s. The era is just before the civil war. While the civil war was caused by many factors - social, economic, political, historical, and many others, the events in the 1850s finally started the fire on the fuse of the keg of gunpowder that was waiting to go off almost from the very beginning of the United States.

America was divided primarily into two parts, North and South, with a vague West that would side either way. However, the North was winning the war against the South by slowly expanding into the west. While this was not necessarily a conscious effort on the whole, there were certainly a lot of people that wanted to stop the spread of slavery. And, of course, there were people who wanted it to continue. However, the abolitionist movement was gaining power and speed.

Due to the three fifths compromise, slaves counted as three fifths of a vote, and their masters always voted for them. This means that while the North has more “real” voters, the South almost always wins elections because of pure numerical superiority through its slaves. The northern states were forced to live under a southern President and a mostly southern Congress

and Senate. This obviously chafed and caused intense irritation amongst the Northerners. As time moved forward, and you got closer and closer to the Civil War, extreme positions on both sides of what would now be called the political aisle got worse. Uncle Tom's Cabin, an incendiary book to the South, and a heart rendering condemnation of slavery to the North, came out in 1852. In the early 1850s, the American Party emerged into American politics. Kansas and Nebraska had just become states, and their entry into the United States, be it slave or free, was changing a calm storm into a raging monsoon that would soon sweep the nation.

There was an intense amount of energy to keep each new state as slave or free. This energy was starting to break free of the debate over each state being slave or free. It was starting to lead to both sides gearing up for war. Lincoln called for troops, simultaneously as the South took over many forts in southern territory. The South had been threatening to secede from the Union since the signing of the constitution. And now as if it were in the middle of a dispute with its husband, it has decided it is leaving once and for all. The straw that broke the camel's back, that finally ended this lovely marriage between the North and the South, was Abraham Lincoln and the fact that he represented the party that supported abolition and or anti-slavery politics. Between the time that he becomes president in 1860, and the time that he is inaugurated, hell has broken loose. States are seceding left and right and joining something called "The Confederate States of America".

All of this leads us into William H. Emslie's life, as his first letter is in 1861. He is a young eighteen year old kid, who just moved out of his father's house. His father is a well-established baker and it is probable that William is as well, as he works "1 mile down river from Buttermilk Falls". While there is not any historical evidence, he probably worked at mill, or some other river-powered industry. He has moved a few times since he was born in West Point, NY, which is only ten miles or so to where he lives until he is seventeen years old and then he moves over two hundred fifty miles away from his parents to a town called "Buttermilk Falls", which no longer exists.¹ He is native-born, which makes him pretty average. His father however is an immigrant

¹. Google Search Engine, <http://www.google.com>,

from Scotland, and they are both Episcopalians. He is also white, and unmarried.

One might ask "Why is William H. Emslie's life important?" There are two things that are true of history and of wars in general. The first is that the first casualty of war is innocence. The second is that the more things change, the more they stay the same. William Henry Emslie is no different than most of our soldiers in Iraq right now. They write home, miss their loved ones, and have strained relationships, write of the turmoil, the problems, the good and the bad things going on in their lives. William writes home after a couple years in the thick of war. He is disgusted with what he has been forced to witness and be a part of. "... no reenlisting for me", William writes. However, he does not write home of the morality of killing people, for most people it is an argument that you have in your head.

During the period between his first and last, of five short letters, William addressed all of his letters to his father. William Emslie's life during this period is marked with tragedy. His father, whom he writes all of his letters to, loses a fairly intelligent, very independent first-born son. His family, whom he is close with, loses a loved one. His innocence is lost in the horrific struggle that was the Civil War. He loses many friends, and comrades. And finally, he dies in a crowded, diseased, ultra-strict horrific military prisoner of war camp.

Tragic as the last few years of his life is, as pointless as his death is, it is not everything there is to know about him. However, his father losing his first-born son, while losing none of his other children, is quite horrible. His first letter says a lot about William H. Emslie and the kind of person that he is. He is literate, independent, and has a fairly close relationship with his father and some of the members of his family. He also happens to be at least middle-class if not a bit affluent.

He is, quite obviously, literate. His grammar and punctuation are not exactly perfect. Most words were codified by the via Webster's dictionary. ¹ But most northern schools at that time were

Google Maps, <http://maps.google.com>

"Rouses Point, NY" (Location of Fort Montgomery), "Cornwall, NY" (Location of William Emslie's Parents), "WestPoint, NY" (Location of William Emslie's Birthplace)
(accessed May 12, 2006)

¹. Wikipedia, "American English," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_language/American_English

teaching children to be literate. In fact, as a comparison of the north versus the south, the north had a fifteen percent lead in literacy over its southern counterparts. And that does not even include slave literacy, which would increase the gap substantially. Interestingly enough, most of the northern schools were teaching children a kind of "Adaptive Versatility" which basically means that they could go into almost any field and be anything that they wanted to be. Just because William Emslie's father was a baker, did not mean that he had to be a baker. He could have chosen another profession, had he wanted to. ¹

"Willie", as he was also known, is a fairly independent kid. He has moved out on his own. He has a social network in place. He has a job. The fact that he does all of this at the young age of seventeen is a testament to this fact. Abraham Lincoln did not move out until the age of twenty-two. ² We can tell most of this simply from his first letter. It is conceivable that William actually worked at Fort Montgomery. Leading up to and during the middle of the civil war, the fort was maintained by a few hundred workers. Some of the workers were even trained into a "civilian defense force"³

William Emslie seemed to be working with or under a friend of his named Regan. This Regan fellow apparently had an apprentice, so he was established in this area of Buttermilk Falls. Regan seems to be a fairly well-known person. William is apparently living, either temporarily or permanently, with Regan's parents, as he writes "Regan's folks is the nicest that I ever lived with".

William receives his trunk via the docks, while he may have been referring to a railroad docking area; it is fairly probable he sent his stuff via the various rivers connecting Lower New York with Fort Montgomery. This is very interesting because he works at Buttermilk Falls, in what is now Adirondack Park. The city no longer exists because it was swallowed up by the National Park system. Either way, when William writes "He has got a house to build down (near) Fort

(accessed May 12, 2006)

¹. James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom* (New York: Ballantine Books), 19-20

². Wikipedia, "Abraham Lincoln,"
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham_Lincoln
(accessed May 12, 2006)

³. Jim Millard, "Fort Montgomery: Through the years..."
<http://www.historiclakes.org/explore/Montgomery3.html>

Montgomery and then I will have enough walking to do I have little doubt that he means several miles, based on current maps.¹ Considering he is so far north, and it is in the beginning of April, when he writes "PS excuse the bad writing. my hands are as stiff as a poker". It is not surprising, considering that the Average Mean temperature for Fort Montgomery is around 56 degrees.²

William also writes of "old Tommy Cocks". This man might have been one of the two (or more) "Cocks Brothers" who built an elegant two-seated surrey, a four-wheeled horse-drawn pleasure carriage having two or four seats, for his Father. At the time of his moving out, his father has been running his own bakery for the last twelve to thirteen years. Clearly they have established themselves, and William, as stated before, is at least somewhat educated. He also has no problems moving over two hundred fifty miles away, and does not seem to have any problem shipping a very heavy trunk full of his stuff. All of these are signs that he comes from either an affluent, or middle-class family.

It is mind-boggling that William never mentions what is going on around him. During the period right before he writes his first letter to his father, President Abraham Lincoln, leader of the United States of America, is busy appointing people left and right in his administration, working on what is to be done with Fort Sumter, interviewing people all the time for military command positions and he is becoming increasingly frustrated with figuring out who is loyal and who is not - As his orders are either carried out, or he finds out days later that they are not. William's loyalty is never in question. While I do not believe that William moved two hundred fifty miles away from his Father, just so that he could join up with the military, it was rather natural for a boy around William's age to move out of the house, and try to make his own fortune. The entire western territories were being settled year after year. As for his father and he's relationship, it seems that

(accessed May 12, 2006)

¹. Google Search Engine, <http://www.google.com>,
Google Maps, <http://maps.google.com>
"Rouses Point, NY" (Location of Fort Montgomery)
"Cornwall, NY" (Location of William Emslie's Parents)
"WestPoint, NY" (Location of William Emslie's Birthplace)
(accessed May 12, 2006)

². Weather Channel, <http://www.weather.com>
(accessed May 12, 2006)

they are fairly close. Closer than perhaps he and his mother are, as he almost never mentions her, but does take time to mention his grandma. It is very likely that his father and he share the same political views. Parents tend to pass their beliefs onto their children, and this might very well be the reason that William does not mention anything about what is going on, since his father would just nod his head and be done with it. Perhaps this is the reason that he mentions nothing about what is going on in terms of the War Between the States. There is that slight chance also that he just is not one of the kind of people who cares about such things. Many of the soldiers in the war in Iraq, right now, do not care about the politics of it; they just do their duty, and salute whoever is in command. Others care very deeply about the reasons they are at war, and speak out, after they are retired, since it is illegal to speak out against the president while you are in the armed forces.

On a side note, it is interesting to note that absolutely no-one died during the bombardment of Fort Sumter on April 12th, just two days before William writes his first letter.¹ However, there were a couple of people who died because of a cannon exploding. It was fired as a kind of "send-off" by the Union, basically saying "This will be the last time this is fired here", a big huzzah, over nothing. And because of this event, forever and ever, we will have to debate until the end of time, whether it was this Union artillerist who was the first casualty of civil war by pure accident, or if it was via a mob killing a Union soldier, which happened a week later, in Baltimore.

It is clear that the war has started, and William mentions that even in his town of Buttermilk Falls, which is as close to Canada as it gets, they are beginning the formation of regiments. William seems to be a prime candidate for the cavalry. He writes home to his dad, and replies back to some of the concerns that his sister Mary has about him. The closeness with his family is very apparent in this letter.

It starts with him expressing pity on a family friend, whose wife has died "...it will be hard

¹. Timeline Civil War 1861 Maps and Exhibits, "April 1861 -- Attack on Fort Sumter," <http://americancivilwar.com/tl/tl1861.html> (accessed May 12, 2006)

on him, poor fellow and he apparently received a reply stating from his father that someone named Mr. Chadayne became well again after being sick. William is "glad of that", and is hardly the conversationalist. No major philosophical ideas or thoughts for or against the war, just simple chit-chat. Despite this, it still says something about him.

He mentions his shoes falling apart, while he is still living on his own. They have apparently fallen apart, and it seems at least in small part that he has written to his father to tell him "You were right", as he says "These shoes of mine was not worth having". Perhaps before he left he bought a pair of shoes, that his father told him not to buy. Probable and possible as many Americans in the 1850s were able to buy products in stores, which were not necessarily the greatest in quality, but were cheap and functional enough to use and buy. Unlike, perhaps in other countries, Americans were not averse to buying things that were not made by a craftsman. This exchange between him and his father shows that he values his father's opinion.¹ Also, as a secondary note, about his father's relationship and his, his father chose to keep William's letters, probably out of love for his son and wanting something to remember him by. He probably kept a lot more that somehow got lost over time. His father's replies are lost, which could be any number of reasons, ranging from his death at Andersonville prison, him losing it in the last battle that he writes about, or just simple carelessness.

William H. Emslie fits the typical cavalryman for the Union. He was in his early twenties, and was born in America. The average cavalryman however was usually from a farm and/or rural area, while for the most part, William lived in cities most of his life. There was a romantic appeal about being in the cavalry. It was considered to be very macho to be in the cavalry. It was also thought to be fairly easy. Considering that William owned a horse, named "Pick", it was probably very easy for him to get into a cavalry unit. The four major supplies for any cavalry unit were a horse, saddle, pistol or carbine, and a saber. Most of the time, the average cavalryman was missing one or all of the previously mentioned supplies. Horses were becoming harder and

¹. James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom* (New York: Ballantine Books), 17

harder to come by the war's end, one and a half million horses had died during war.¹ The fact that William H. Emslie owned a horse, knew how to use it, and was fairly well to do, made him a prime candidate for the cavalry. As a last note, He does not really have a reason for joining the war. He has a job, but perhaps it was because staying behind would have had many social issues to deal with. Such as disappointing friends, community, family, possibly having the name "coward" attached to his reputation. And certainly we cannot forget the most important thing of all – Glory!²

He discusses that in town they're "raising a company to go and fight here" and they're trying to "get Regan to be a captain of it" but he expresses doubt or unease about whether that might happen. Incompetent, politically-chosen, and completely unprepared people with no prior experience commanding a unit was more the rule than the exception in both the North and in the South in the early years of the Civil War. Many were unprepared for the rigors of commanding a unit, let alone, commanding that unit in the thick of battle. So Regan was pretty much just as qualified as Emslie was.³ Of course his doubt could be because Regan was a southern sympathizer. "A mob got together in Fishkill last week and was agoing to hang Regan". Apparently the mob was too small to do as there "was not enough of them or they would" have.

Putting this into historical context is interesting. William probably joins up simply because everyone else is joining up. Caught up in the fervor of what is going on around him. Many soldiers joined up because of peer pressure⁴, and many also believed that the war would be over in a matter of days, not years. Emslie makes no mention of how long he believes the conflict will last. I also find it interesting that he is consorting and or working with a guy who is believed by more than a few to be a southerner. Perhaps Regan is from the South, but has Northern views, and the

¹. Wikipedia, "Cavalry in the American Civil War,"
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cavalry_in_the_American_Civil_War
(accessed May 12, 2006)

². James Robertson, *Tenting Tonight: The Soldier's Life* (Alexandria, Virginia: Time-Life Books), 20-24

³. James Robertson, *Tenting Tonight: The Soldier's Life* (Alexandria, Virginia: Time-Life Books), 20-24

⁴. James Robertson, *Tenting Tonight: The Soldier's Life* (Alexandria, Virginia: Time-Life Books), 20-24

mob can not differentiate between the two. It could be why the mob is too small to hang him. Regan might be for the Union, despite his southern heritage. While there is a great amount of information sitting on either sides of the Regan's loyalty equation, even Robert E. Lee is not completely on the Southern side. He sides with the North, but joins the South because "I cannot raise my hand against my birthplace, my home, and my children". It is very likely that many Northerners felt that anyone from the South in their territory felt as Lee did. Perhaps that is why they got together and wanted to hang him.¹

On a side note, while it is not necessarily about Emslie, Robert E. Lee had just resigned from the Union Army. Robert E. Lee is the leader of the confederate army at the end of the Civil war. Also, just two days before William writes his message to his father, Virginia secedes from the Union. It is the eighth state to do so. The day before William writes his second letter, President Abraham Lincoln, leader of the United States in 1861, has an evening meeting about losing Harper's Ferry, Virginia. He decides to go to bed early that night, but the Assistant Secretary to the President wakes him up, and tells him of a plot against his life. The president grins.² And as a final note, on April 19, 1861, the day of his second letter, a Massachusetts regiments heading to Washington due to Lincoln's call for troops, is forced to march through Baltimore because of how the railroad was set up. An anti-North mob comes out of the woodworks and before you know it, they are following the troops around town. Soon, the mob presses the troops pretty hard, and before you know it, someone panics, and fires into the crowd. Four union soldiers and twelve civilians die. Known as the Baltimore Riot, these were the first deaths of the Civil War.

Those sixteen deaths would hardly be the last casualties of this war. William's remaining innocence about war and what it is like to be in the thick of battle is still prevalent now, as he writes about being proud of his regiment. All that he will want, in later letters, is to go home. He describes his near death experience, and some of the problems he is facing in terms of camp life.

¹. Everything2.com, "Robert E. Lee,"
<http://www.everything2.com/index.pl?node=Robert%20E.%20Lee>
(accessed May 12, 2006)

². The Lincoln Log, "A Daily Chronology of the Life of Abraham Lincoln,"
<http://stg.brown.edu/projects/lincoln/index.php>, (April 8-19, 1861), (August 15, 1863)

He mentions not having any chance to write since he left Fredericksburg, which from the date on the letter - September 9, 1862 is a year since he enlisted, and he apparently has not written home since the skirmish that happened on May 5th, 1862. Quite a bit of time. The last letter that he gets from his father is August 23 at Culpeper - Just a few days before the second battle of Bull Run. He writes with pride of "our regiment" and that it has "done some hard marching and won for its self a name".

He writes a bit of the horrors he has seen, "The grape and canister mowed the men down like sheep". He is describing the effect of a piece of artillery that essentially fires grape or canister shots. Grape shots were not as common on the battlefield. They tended to only be used by the Navy. Many soldiers confused the two. Canister shots however were quite malicious and very effective at ripping the enemy to shreds. They were composed of a tin can, with metal balls tightly packed in with sawdust and then they were fired at the enemy. The effect was similar to giant cannon-sized shotgun. Despite having won itself a name, his regiment, during that battle or within the recent battles, lost a lieutenant, a surgeon, and three corporals who were "shot badly". He also mentions his friend "Harvey Wiley is in some hospital, but I do not know what one it is". Harvey Wiley probably died at the hospital, since a majority of the deaths in the civil war were not from dying in the middle of battle, but rather afterwards – either from their wounds and the dark age methods to save men's lives, or from diseases, which were rampant and out of control. In fact, disease was the number one killer in the civil war. Because most of the fighting was done behind trees, or rocks, or behind some kind of cover if possible, most battle wounds were in the extremities. Seventy-one percent of all bullet wounds were in the arms or legs.¹

On a side note, while it is not necessarily about Emslie, President Lincoln is dealing with the after-effects of the Second Battle of Bull Run. He also has to deal with the fact that Robert E. Lee, in command of over fifty thousand men, is rampaging toward the North. The Union army is almost twice as large, and is under McClellan's command. Almost one week later, 26,000 men

(accessed May 12, 2006)

¹. Caring for the Men, "The History of Civil War Medicine,"
<http://www.civilwarhome.com/medicinehistory.htm>

are dead at the battle of Antietam. Lee withdraws to Virginia.

Almost a year later, after the Second Battle of Bull Run, he has lost more friends. Friends that he and his father knew. William has written several letters, and feels lonely. He mentions briefly some ambitions about moving up in rank, and his troubles with the command structure.

William has written several letters, two from a place called Alexandria, Virginia. Alexandria was a huge whore warehouse. It was described as a “perfect Sodom”, a reference to Sodom and Gomorrah from the Bible, which was a place of absolute sin, to most Union soldiers.¹ Considering that he is an unmarried man of an age of eighteen or nineteen, who is constantly in mortal danger, and the war does not look like it is going to end any time soon, I am pretty sure William probably had some fun with the girls. He never really writes about his boredom, or what he does in his free-time, so it is really left up to conjecture as to what he does. Gambling, getting wasted off of whiskey and spending money on “Horizontal Refreshments”² and other great American past-times such as this were pretty common on both sides.

William writes of someone named “Ken J.” Apparently they were very close friends, and he was captured in battle on a reconnaissance mission. He says that “he feels like he’s lost a brother”, and he writes this in a way that kind of makes me think that once you are taken prisoner you do not really come back. He realizes early on that becoming a Prisoner of War was definitely not a good thing. It is conceivable he had heard about some of the conditions in southern POW camps. His loneliness is quite apparent, as he writes his father very early in the letter “I thought you were dead or had forgotten me”. No information could be found on whether the Postal Service during this time was very reliable or not, so it is left up to conjecture as to why else he would be writing so many letters and not getting any reply back. It is doubtful that his father would just ignore him. His father gives him a one dollar attached with the mail that he is replying to in his

(accessed May 12, 2006)

¹. James Robertson, *Tenting Tonight: The Soldier's Life* (Alexandria, Virginia: Time-Life Books), 61

². Life in a Civil War Army Camp, <http://www.civilwarhome.com/camplife.htm> (accessed May 12, 2006)

third letter.¹ His sister, Mary, has either written him, or in a recent previous letter attached \$0.50 cents. In today's money is about \$9.25. He tells his father to tell her that he is "much obliged to her for it".

Apparently his father has also been writing to him, asking him if he wants to be higher than a corporal or sergeant or some other higher rank. It is not known what rank his father wants him to be at, or asks him if he wants to be of a higher rank. However, in the next sentence he talks about the untrustworthy captain in his unit. So I assume his father asks him if he wants to be a captain. He replies that he would rather be a corporal or a sergeant first, because he does not think he is capable of holding the position of captain yet. Perhaps he is not interested in being a Captain, considering that he has such weak impressions about his superiors, such as his Captain, "He is a sucker. He owes about 500 dollars in the company and if he is asked for it he puts them under arrest, no more". There was a huge amount of incompetent and or politically appointed and or just generally worthless people in command of units. Despite there later being a board to oversee and evaluate the command structure, if William's captain is as bad as he sounds, he was probably one of the pesky politically appointed, which were much more difficult to get rid of.² Finances were a pretty big deal, since some units in the Cavalry went without pay for many months.³ And unfortunately for William, he happens to be one of them. He ends the letter with "I have got six months pay due on the first of next month".

William feels lonely as many Union soldiers do, and he seems half-relieved half-upset that his Father has not written to him in some time, as he writes "I thought you were dead or had forgotten me". Upset for obvious reasons, and relieved, because his father has decided to write him again. Or perhaps it was all unintentional, because of the postal service. While I can not be sure what \$1.50 would buy you back in 1863, especially during a time of war, it can be at least

¹. History of the United States Postal Service 1775-1993, "Railway Mail Service," <http://www.usps.com/history/history/his2.htm> (accessed May 12, 2006)

². James Robertson, *Tenting Tonight: The Soldier's Life* (Alexandria, Virginia: Time-Life Books), 52

³. James Robertson, *Tenting Tonight: The Soldier's Life* (Alexandria, Virginia: Time-Life Books), 63

somewhat paralleled to people raising money and buying armor for their sons and loved ones in Iraq.¹ Perhaps his previous letters that were written (seven in total) were lost by the confusion in the US Postal Service, since they had changed from a “post office on wheels” to canceling that project all together in January of 1863. But then again, information was already speeding up precipitously with the introduction of rail usage to the USPS.

On a side note, while it is not necessarily about Emslie, a great many letters survived from the date of August 27, 1863. Many of these letters wrote of the horror of the battle of Gettysburg, which was the turning point of the war. William’s 2nd New York Cavalry Unit suffered no losses during the battle of Gettysburg, and Gettysburg saw the first signs of use of the Spencer Repeating Rifle. From August 27th, the battle of Gettysburg had been more than two months ago. On this same day, Abraham Lincoln gets his hand on a Spencer repeating rifle, from the inventor, Christian M. Spencer.² This weapon was a huge change, since it was the beginning of automatic machine guns. This rifle was a supreme advantage for the North, and in the latter part of the war, after Gettysburg, it proved a decisive weapon. It could fire over twenty times in under a minute.³ An unknown fed-up confederate said “that tarnation Yankee rifle they load on Sunday and shoot all week”.

The North had other inventions working for it (and occasionally against it), such as the railroad. Despite these technological advances, most did nothing to comfort or help the soldiers. And the carnage was only getting worse. William writes to his father from “Dismounted Camp” and apparently he has been in some kind of large accident. Apparently, “the cars ran off the track and hurt fifty or more bad”. He writes that “he is all right but I am pretty sore all over” but that he’ll be fine sooner than later. Many union soldiers were able to travel by railroad, versus their

¹. The Inflation Calculator, <http://www.westegg.com/inflation/> (accessed May 12, 2006)

². The Lincoln Log, “A Daily Chronology of the Life of Abraham Lincoln,” <http://stg.brown.edu/projects/lincoln/index.php>, (April 8-19, 1861), (August 15, 1863) (accessed May 12, 2006)

³. The Spencer Repeater, <http://www.aotc.net/Spencer.htm> (accessed May 12, 2006)

southern counterparts who had to march everywhere.¹ This was a serious advantage, despite the occasional train running off the tracks.

He does not name the battle, but since his last piece of action was at Buckland Mills, Virginia, it can be assumed this was the battle he was talking about, William describes the battle, and this makes it his longest letter ever written to his father that survived to present day. Apparently his unit has been in heavy fighting, almost every single day. He has been in the battle of Culpeper Brandy Station and, as his unit (and other units) are falling back, they are skirmishing with the enemy on almost daily basis. After a number of skirmishes in which they attack, they end up in New Baltimore, and it is then that the confederates attack them by surprise – We “were surrounded by infantry and cavalry. we fought in good order and then it came down to every man for him self”. Apparently his horse is down, not necessarily dead, at this point, but he does not mention whether it is his original horse, Pick, or if it is some other horse. Chances are, after two to three years, it is not, due to the high casualty rate of horses in the cavalry.² He is forced to leave it, as he is running away from the Confederate soldiers. The confederates yell at him “No quarters, you Yankee sons of bitches”. He apparently has two or more cavalry coming towards him, and he fires at one of them on the left side and “he rolled out of his saddle”. The other apparently is after him, and he is running across a field, towards the woods, just as he arrives in the woods, he sees a southern citizen, shoots him, and then he runs on until “I met a niger. I hit the nig over the head with the carrabine”, which is a type of rifle. Apparently he mounts a horse. He does not mention whether it is his original horse that he left behind, or if it is a new horse, I assume it is a new one. The “rebels was about twenty yards” behind him. He manages to survive this battle, without any major wound.

William is also apparently completely sick of it all. And sick of putting his life on the line. As he finishes his message with “No re-enlisting for me. Send me five dollars for I have nothing

¹. Wikipedia, American Civil War, “Analysis of the outcome,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Civil_War (accessed May 12, 2006)

². The Union Cavalryman in the Civil War, <http://www.bufordsboys.com/UnionCavalryManII.htm> (accessed May 12, 2006)

but what is on my back no more". After almost a month of fighting, I am sure if he had any possessions left, they were left behind with his horse. Much as it is in Iraq, right now, re-enlistments are down, as well as general sign-ups across the United States.

After almost two years of not being fed properly, not being paid properly, getting shot at, almost dying, having to put up with a captain who steals from his men, losing his horse, and finally getting into a huge railroad accident, William sounds like he is ready to call it quits. His dedication to his country, and the fact that he continues well afterwards until he has been captured by the enemy and sent to Andersonville Prisoner of War Camp, in Georgia, is a testament to his courage in battle. Because of his personal sacrifice, amongst many, many others, the Union is still whole and complete. Much can be said of our soldiers in Iraq as well. Some of them do not agree with the war as a whole, or what they are fighting for, they simply are doing their jobs.

Had he deserted, he might have been able to escape the horrific disease-filled death at Andersonville. Besides the disease, lack of resources, food, water, and constant death surrounding this prison, people also had to put up with internal and external gangs attacking the prisoners, and dealing with living under the heel of some very angry southerners.

One of the chief causes of death in the world today, as it was then, was Diarrhea, which was the cause of William's death within Andersonville Prison, is lack of potable water, or occasionally, food poisoning.¹

Andersonville, or Camp Sumter as it was officially known, was one of the largest of many Confederate military prisons established during the Civil War. Even before it was completely finished being constructed, they were already pouring Union soldiers into it by the thousands. William happens to be one of them. He dies June 25, 1864. Thirteen thousand soldiers die, out of forty-five thousand sent there during its lifespan. He could have died many ways there. The Moseby Raiders, "a vicious gang that terrorized the Federal prisoners"², or perhaps trying to

¹. Wikipedia, "Diarrhea," Acute diarrhea, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diarrhea> (accessed May 12, 2006)

². James Robertson, *Tenting Tonight: The Soldier's Life* (Alexandria, Virginia: Time-Life Books),

escape by passing the “dead line”¹ in which a row of pickets separated freedom from captivity. Getting into fights with other prisoners and killed that way was also all possible. There were over twenty-nine thousand people there, by July of that year.² The lack of resources, food, and fresh water did not help the overcrowded conditions. All of these things plagued that detestable prison. Had he been wounded when he was in battle, and then taken prisoner, he probably would have died of his wounds, or of the horrible medical conditions of that time.

On a side note, which is of interest, Captain Henry Wirz, the commandant of the prison was executed for war crimes. He was the ONLY civil war soldier to be executed for war crimes.³ Even Jefferson Davis’s trial was dropped. Due to the serious amount of mistreatment and death at this camp, more than any other, Henry Wirz was put on trial and sentenced to death. He was charged with thirteen individual counts of murder, and convicted on eleven of them on top of the main charge of “Deliberately impairing the lives of the prisoners”.⁴ I do not doubt that Emslie’s parents and siblings watched this trial with perhaps a sense of happiness that justice is served.

Josef Stalin once wrote that “One death is a tragedy, but ten million deaths is a statistic. Putting this statement out into the open, without any background information whatsoever is still startlingly true, however, it has quite a bit more meaning when you realize he said this a short time after ordering the execution of over ten million peasants in the country-side for not following his orders in the former Soviet Union. And so it is with William H. Emslie. He is just a number. One of thirteen thousand out of forty-five thousand union soldiers who ended up in Andersonville Prison.⁵ He is grave 2454. He is one man in the vast hurricane that was the Civil War.¹ Are we to

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¹. James Robertson, *Tenting Tonight: The Soldier’s Life* (Alexandria, Virginia: Time-Life Books), 129-131

². James Robertson, *Tenting Tonight: The Soldier’s Life* (Alexandria, Virginia: Time-Life Books), 129-131

³. Wikipedia, “Andersonville Prison,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andersonville_Prison (accessed May 12, 2006)

⁴. Wikipedia, “Henry Wirz,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Wirz (accessed May 12, 2006)

⁵. Andersonville National Historic Site, “National Park Service (USDI),” <http://www.nps.gov/ande/> (accessed May 12, 2006)

look down on him for being captured and dying in the ill-kept prison? I believe that a man is more than his death, and that it is easy to pull a trigger on an unsuspecting civilian, or African American person guarding a horse, It is easy to do these things when you know nothing about them. Would any confederate be able to pull the trigger on a man whom he knows quite deeply? I think not. It is easy to murder and kill people when you know nothing about them. The major disconnect from the North and South is that they did not know each other. They were brothers, cousins, nephews and uncles all, but at no point did they realize this until thousands upon thousands of people had died.

It is easy to bomb and kill over one hundred thousand Iraqi citizens when you do not even have to look them in the eye, and instead you choose to bomb them. In many ways, such as this, war is not changing. And in some ways, by simply pressing a button, we kill thousands, and think nothing of it, since we do not know them, nor will we. William H. Emslie seems to have no problem killing people. He has no problem being in the thick of battle, and he willingly volunteered to join up. He was not drafted. He wanted the glory of battle and perhaps after two or three years of war, he was completely disillusioned by it, and no longer wanted that. Perhaps he just could not pull the trigger anymore. He asks his father for money, after saying he is not going to re-enlist. Perhaps he is planning on using the money towards getting out of the army. Or maybe the supplies are getting so scarce, that he needs the money to survive.

A man's life is not solely defined by his death. And by learning about a man's past, and present, and his family, you enrich not only yourself, but you find yourself more and more unlikely to be put into a position where you are willing to say "Yes, I am okay with that person dying, for my interests". When you can see someone's humanity, then you begin to understand what I am talking about.

My thesis is important in that it gives you the overall point I am trying to make. It helps you to understand that we are not all innocents here in the present. That we are all equally guilty of our ancestor's wrongs. We try to justify things by saying "Well, times were different back then"

¹. Andersonville National Historic Site, "National Park Service (USDI)," <http://www.nps.gov/ande/>

but they were not. We just allowed horrible atrocities to be committed and said it was a sign of the times. By knowing our past. By knowing that the people that we came from... Whether that be genetically or by philosophy, we can stop ourselves from committing the same mistakes over and over again.

In truth, I do not necessarily think that William H. Emslie's life will add a great deal to the already huge amount of data that is available on the war between the states. He does not add a huge amount of understanding to my understanding of our mutual past. He is rather, a small puzzle piece that when added to the greater whole, makes a more clear picture of the events of that time. I wish that I could say he was some selfless pious man who joined the war for some noble cause. But in truth, he probably did it because his friends were doing it, or for fear of ridicule. His social ties are quite strong. What I think does add to the historical background is just that. That his reason is small, and insignificant. But it is significant in that many other people of that time agreed with him, and felt that it was the right thing to do and felt that they needed no other justification than "My friends are doing it, so I will too"