

# RHODE ISLAND HISTORY



VOLUME 39:4 NOVEMBER 1980



*Wearing the distinctive and colorful uniform of the Burnside Zouaves, a Rhode Island unit raised during the Civil War, this soldier looks particularly fierce and determined, as if warning his enemies not to be fooled by his billowy attire. Actually, the Burnside Zouaves never saw action during the war. This and other photographs of the Zouaves in this issue are from a collection in the Rhode Island Historical Society Library.*

# RHODE ISLAND HISTORY

Published by  
THE RHODE ISLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY, 52 POWER STREET,  
PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND 02906, and printed by a grant of the  
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Issued Quarterly at Providence, Rhode Island,  
February, May, August, and November. Second  
class postage paid at Providence, Rhode Island.

Editorial Offices at Aldrich House  
110 Benevolent Street  
Providence, Rhode Island 02906

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*Rhode Island History* (1942- ) and its predecessors *Rhode Island Historical Society Collections* (1918-1941) and *Publications of the Rhode Island Historical Society* (1893-1901) are available in microform from Xerox University Microfilms, 300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106, (313) 761-4700. Please write for complete information. Articles appearing in this journal are abstracted and indexed in *Historical Abstracts* and *America: History and Life*.





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*The lives of soldiers during the Civil War were often filled with the boredom and routine of camp life. Here two unidentified Union officers pose while eating a meal of soup and hardtack, the all-too-common staples of a soldier's diet. The photograph was taken by James F. Gibson (one of Mathew B. Brady's assistants) at Camp Winfield Scott, near Yorktown, Va., in May 1862. In the letters that follow, Sgt. Charles E. Perkins of Rhode Island relates his experiences as a soldier in the Army of the Potomac during the campaigns of 1862 in Virginia and Maryland.*

**Letters Home:  
Sergeant Charles E. Perkins  
in Virginia, 1862**

*edited by Ray Henshaw and Glenn W. LaFantasie\**

The Civil War remains our national epoch. As America's worst catastrophe, the war transformed the lives of the men and women who lived through it. The passing of generations has not diminished the importance of the event. Perhaps this is because the war, as some historians have explained, did not really solve what it was supposed to solve. Despite the death and destruction, despite even the catharsis of reunion, the nation's problems did not melt away in the heat of the holocaust or disappear among the seams of sectional unity.

Yet the nation did learn a bitter lesson from the Civil War: that the tragedy of conflict, especially one that pits brother against brother, cannot be easily forgotten. The soldiers, northern and southern, who survived the war certainly never forgot what they had experienced. How could they? For these soldiers, heroes sung and unsung, the war was the *ne plus ultra* of their lives: what came before was paled, what came after was forever changed. The war was a rite of passage. No one escaped its effects. In the wheels of the veterans' lives, the war was a hub — the focus from which everything else in their lives would be defined, the measure against which everything else in their lives would be judged.

After the war, these veterans talked about what they had thought and felt and seen. They became fixtures in villages and small towns throughout America — old-timers who, without urging, would share their stories of the war and the part they had played in it. Sherwood Anderson, growing up in

the Middle West, remembered these veterans and their tales:

*For four years the men of American cities, villages and farms walked across the smoking embers of a burning land, advancing and receding as the flame of that universal, passionate, death-spitting thing swept down upon them or receded toward the smoking sky-line. Is it so strange that they could not come home and begin again peacefully painting houses or mending broken shoes? A something in them cried out. It sent them to bluster and boast upon the street corners. When people passing continued to think only of their brick laying and of their shovelling of corn into cars, when the sons of these war gods walking home at evening and hearing the vain boastings of the fathers began to doubt even the facts of the great struggle, a something snapped in their brains and they fell to chattering and shouting their vain boastings to all as they looked hungrily about for believing eyes.<sup>1</sup>*

The memories were imperfect. But even the tall tales and the heroic accounts said something to those who dismissed the stories as mere ramblings of old, wasted men. For whether or not the stories were exaggerated, whether or not they were boasts or brags, the tales of the old men kept the Civil War alive and vividly a part of the national memory. The war gods passed the stories to their sons and to all who would listen. Believed or not, the stories were a legacy.

There were other legacies. In trunks and crates, amid the dust of years, the sons and grandsons of the war gods would discover more tangible evidence of the deeds of battle. Letters written home

\*Mr. Henshaw lives in Cos Cob, Conn. Mr. LaFantasie is editor of this journal and editor of *The Correspondence of Roger Williams*. The editors wish to thank Robert S. Cocroft, copy editor of this journal, for his assistance in collating transcripts with the original letters.



and saved for posterity contained the details of the soldiers' experiences. The descriptions included in these letters were, unlike fading memories, first-hand accounts; whether accurate or vague, the letters had an immediacy and conveyed a realism that revealed what it was like to be a soldier in the ranks. And in these letters there was something more — feelings, fears, thoughts and deeds were expressed with honesty. No tall tales here. Survival was the theme of those who wrote home to report the boredom of camp life, the terror of battle, the death of comrades, or the loneliness of home-sickness. Indeed, if nothing else, the letters themselves were proof of survival. They were a link with the soldier's life as he remembered it in the context of home and family, and yet they communicated ideas that foretold the ways in which that life could never, would never, be the same. They were not the letters of war gods, for the gods had not yet been deified. These were the letters of men.

One of these men, Charles E. Perkins, was a Rhode Islander who served throughout the war in the Army of the Potomac and who faithfully wrote letters home to report his activities, his whereabouts, his adventures, and his feelings. But mostly he wrote home to report that he was still alive — his letters confirmed his survival.

Perkins was born in Smithfield, Rhode Island, on November 9, 1834, the son of Ebenezer and Betsy Roberts Perkins. As a young man, Perkins lived in Slatersville and worked as a scythe-maker. He was married sometime before 1861, but his own memory was vague as to the name of the minister who performed the ceremony and the actual date of his wedding.<sup>2</sup> He and his wife, Margaret, had one son named Charles. On June 5, 1861, he enlisted in the Second Rhode Island Regiment, which was mustered into service in Providence. During the course of the war, Perkins rose through the ranks from private to captain. He was mustered out of service on July 13, 1865. Returning to Rhode Island, Perkins faced an uncertain future. Divorced from his wife during the latter months of the war, he decided to seek his fortune outside his home state. Like other discharged soldiers, Perkins moved west and finally settled in California. He worked his trade as a blacksmith and as a tool sharpener in several quarries in the Napa Valley; later he was in charge of the blacksmith shop at the Folsom State Prison. At age sixty-five, he was admitted to the

California State Veterans' Home in Yountville, Napa County, where he remained until his death on April 10, 1898.

The letters printed here are selected from an extensive collection of Perkins manuscripts owned by Ray Henshaw of Cos Cob, Connecticut. Most of the letters were written to Perkins's sister, Elizabeth Perkins Haskell, whom Perkins fondly called "lieber" or "liber." He and his sister enjoyed a close relationship; in his early years, he was a frequent visitor to the Haskell farm in Cumberland, Rhode Island (the farm is now located beneath the old section of the Pawtucket reservoir). Perkins also addressed some of his letters to his brother-in-law, Whiting Haskell (Perkins called him "White"), who was a friend and, at times, a confidant. Perkins would write to Whiting what he did not want his sister to know — fears, anxieties, and the harsher realities of a soldier's life. Perkins's home-sickness is evident in almost every letter — he conveys his regards to neighbors and friends, always curious about how they were faring in his absence. The letters, transcribed with only minor changes in punctuation, reveal Perkins's isolation and solitude, though he wrote them in the midst of the largest army ever assembled on the North American continent. While occasionally despondent in tone, the letters more often show Perkins's resilience, fortitude, and hope. More important, these documents present a singular perspective on war and its realities; they represent a common soldier's view of tragedy and mayhem, boredom and frustration, as events unfolded around him. Here an unlettered man, no god of war, grapples with his emotions to communicate in the best way he can (primitively, but often poignantly) his impressions and experiences.

The following letters were written by Perkins in 1862 as he accompanied the Second Rhode Island Regiment in its peregrinations in Virginia and Maryland during the Peninsula, Second Manassas, Antietam, and Fredericksburg campaigns. In January 1862, when the first of these letters was written, Perkins and the Second Rhode Island were in Washington, D.C., where the regiment had been encamped since the previous July.

1. Sherwood Anderson, *Windy McPherson's Son* (New York, 1916), 21-22.

2. Charles E. Perkins to Elizabeth Perkins Haskell, June 18, 1865, Collection of Ray Henshaw.





RIHS Library

*Camp Brightwood, Washington, D.C., where the Second Rhode Island Regiment was encamped from July 1861 to March 1862.*

Camp Brightwood<sup>1</sup>  
Washington, D. C.  
Jan 10/62

Dear Sister

I have just got time to answer you[r] letter that I recived from you the 2nd and I was very glad to here from you and the rest of my friends. You say that it was very cold last knight and windey. It was very windy out here the same knight and we have had a little snow and a very little to[o] but it is very muddy here know and it is the menist mud that you ever see. The rain will not mix with the durt at all and it is just like putty. You say that you wished that you could say something new as it is a new year and it is the same with me. I cant think of eney thing new to say to you.

You spoke about Coming home. That I think will be doutful for thare is so meney a head of me and thay all have a good excuse so I think my chance is ruther pore. But I should like to come home and I will if I can ever git a chance to come. Let it be when it will be long or short. I sopose you are a groing fat out thare this winter. You say that you cant git eney thing to do and of corse you must be a groing fat. I know that is the way with me. I dont hove much to do and I am groing fat my self.

Wall I have the plesure of shaking hands with Mr William Slater of Slatersville.<sup>2</sup> He looked quit[e] old fashon. I can tell you eney boddy from

R.I. looks good. We have got our huts about don and thay are bulley ones I can tell you.

Tell Ed Rodes that I have not recived eney letter from him yet and I should like to pretty well tell him to rite to a fellow and let me know how he gits along this winter and what every boddy is a doing in that part of the Cuntry and tell me how cramberys sell this winter.

Tell Jessey and Calley that I should like to hove some of thare pork for dinner to day and some of thare sider and apples to eat this evining.<sup>3</sup> So give my love to Jessey and Calley and tell them to ceep thare shose up at the hele and a stiff uper lip and give my love to Mr and Mrs. Hawkins and all the rest of the folks around thare.<sup>4</sup> So good day.

So here goes for some SALT CHunk<sup>5</sup>

From your brother  
Charles E Perkins

1. The Second Rhode Island Regiment moved to Camp Brightwood, "on the northeasterly side of Washington, going out by 18th street," in August 1861. Augustus Woodbury, *The Second Rhode Island Regiment: A Narration of Military Operations* (Providence, 1875), 48.

2. William S. Slater, the son of Samuel Slater's brother, was a textile manufacturer from North Smithfield and a Republican state senator. *Biographical Cyclopedia of Representative Men of Rhode Island* (Providence, 1881), 414-415. In June 1861, Slater had given waterproof raincoats to Company G of the regiment. Woodbury, *Second Rhode Island Regiment*, 23.

3. Jesse Ellis was Perkins's brother-in-law; Caroline (Calley) Perkins was his sister. They lived in North Attleboro, Mass.

4. Louise Hawkins was a teacher at the Tingley District School in Cumberland. Her husband has not been identified.

5. Salted meat.

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In a Old Barn in V.A.  
on pickit duty<sup>1</sup>  
Aprel 8/62

Dear Sister

I am out here in the woods in a old Barn that the lumber men use to ceep thare catle in when thay used to git out ship timber within about 8 miles of York town. It ranes and it has rained for about 24 hours and it is pretty weet and mudy. This is the

place two try a man. It will tell what cind of a Soldier he is. Last night I and Sergent Greene<sup>2</sup> layed in a pudle of water but to day we have got into a old barn so we are more comfortbale.

Last Saturday night we layed by the side of the river within a hundred yards of one of thare batreys all night watching them and to ceep them from coming a crost the river but thay did not try to come a crost it.<sup>3</sup> And in the morning thay put the shot and shell into us but thay did not hurt eney of us and we drawed back to the woods and layed thare all day Sunday.<sup>4</sup> And at night thay sent another Compney and we went back to our Camp which is at Warwick Cort House and now we are out on a nother road and we are very comfortble here. I have just had a good dinner of ham and joney cake and



RIHS Library

*Fort Monroe, Va. From this point on the Virginia coast, McClellan launched his invasion of the Peninsula.*



coffey that we got out of one of the rebels Captains house. The boys are siting around the fire a friing ham and joney cakes now and are having a good time. There is plenty of shep and pigs, hens, gees, and the boys live like kings. We are agoing to have a pudin for supper with molasses.<sup>5</sup>

*Our little Genral Mack<sup>6</sup> come up to our Camp yesterday to see us and he sayed to us: "Wall my lads we have got so far and you see what thare is before us and we will see what thay be and then we will go at them."*

I must stop riting. Tell Jessey and Calley and the rest of my friends to rite to me and tell me all the nuse for I cant git eney out here and you must not expect to here from me very often becaus I have got nether money nor stamps to send a letter with. So rite as often as you can and direct your letters to the second Reg R. I. V. Co. I Heys Corps Conch Division V.A.

From your true brother  
Charles E Perkins

1. Following the defeat of the Union army at the first battle of Bull Run in July 1861, the Federal commanders focused their attention upon the strategic importance of the Confederate capital at Richmond. General George B. McClellan, appointed commander-in-chief of the Union forces, set about reorganizing the army and formulated a plan to capture Richmond by advancing up the James River from Yorktown. McClellan began to move his divisions from the Washington area and transport them to Fort Monroe on March 17, 1862.

On March 26, after a brief and unsuccessful foray across the Potomac, the Second Rhode Island Regiment left Camp Brightwood and boarded the steamer *John Brooks* for passage to Fort Monroe. Early on the morning of March 28, the regiment left the fort, marched along the Yorktown road, and went into bivouac about three miles beyond Hampton Roads, Va. The Rhode Island troops remained in this camp until April 4. After an arduous march in inclement weather, the regiment arrived at Warwick Court House, about eight miles southeast of Yorktown, where the troops were assigned to picket duty along the Union line. Woodbury, *Second Rhode Island Regiment*, 70-73.

2. Henry A. Green of Woonsocket.

3. Confederate pickets were located across Warwick Creek within shouting distance of the Second Rhode Island. Woodbury notes that "the soldiers on both sides were disposed to be friendly." The Confederate batteries, however, "were a little more spiteful, and the shells, which occasionally fell inconveniently near to headquarters, were sufficiently suggestive of events to come." Woodbury, *Second Rhode Island Regiment*, 73-74.

4. I.e., April 6, 1862.

5. The regiment was desperately short of rations, but another soldier remembered that those "who chose to risk their lives for the purpose" were allowed to forage in the vicinity of the regiment's camp. Woodbury, *Second Rhode Island Regiment*, 74.

6. I.e., General McClellan.

Camp Windfield Scott  
Neere York Town, V.a.<sup>1</sup>  
Aprèl 18/62

Dear Sister

I recived your letter this morning and I was very glad to here from you. It is very plesant this morning and I sit my self down to answer your letter as I will do as often as you will rite if I can git a chance and I most always can; onley some times the male dont go and some times I am on duty out of Camp, so I cant git a chance to rite but I will rite as often as I can and I hope you will do the same.

We are out here in a open field within about 3 miles of the rebils batrey but thare is about 12,000 ahead of us and our boys are puting up a brestwork in frunt of that batrey.<sup>2</sup> Thay do it in the night. Thay have been at work two nights and last night the rebils tryed to drive them away but thay paid ruther deer for it and went back agane. They tryed it twice but thay could not do it, so this morning thay are very still. Only once in a while we here a kannan but the rebils gunners dont like to go upon the brest works to ame the gun for Birdans Sharp Shutez are in the woods and when a man shoes his head he is prety likley to git a ball through it.<sup>3</sup> And thay dont like it so thay ceep pretty still for I dont sopose thay have got eney more men then thay want and when one shoes his head thay have one less. I saw what thay call Calaforney Jo yesterday and his gun.<sup>4</sup> It weighs 45 lbs. and he says that if a man will show his head a mile off he will put a ball through it.<sup>5</sup> You have seene his name in the paper and he has ceep that gun still and he says that he will or dye and I guess he will. At lest I hope he will. And we have got 4 other guns that shute a ball a little larger then our muskets do and thay can shute it a hundred times a minit. Thay are drawed by one horse and are very handy and I should think that thay might do a grate work. Eney way I dont want him to shoot at me for he says that he can shoot a 100 balls into the bigness of a man one mile off in a minit so you can guess what cind of a gun thay be.<sup>6</sup>

This is all that I can think of now so you must give my love to Jessey and Calley and tell them to rite as often as they can; so good day untill you here from me again. Direct your letters the same as you did the other and it will come to me. I am well and I hope this will find you the same. Rite soone.

From your brother,  
Charles E Perkins





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Gen. George B. McClellan's headquarters, Camp Winfield Scott, near Yorktown. Photograph by James F. Gibson.

1. On April 16, the Second Rhode Island broke camp at Warwick Court House and marched three or four miles, advancing with the Union line, toward Yorktown. Woodbury, *Second Rhode Island Regiment*, 75.

2. Perkins underestimated Confederate troop strength. The Confederates held an eight-mile front with about 17,000 men. McClellan had amassed about 60,000 men on the lower Peninsula in early April, although steady reinforcements boosted the strength of the Union army to about 112,000 troops by the end of April. Mark M. Boatner, III, *The Civil War Dictionary*, (New York, 1959), 633.

3. Berdan's Sharpshooters were two special Union regiments that were comprised of outstanding marksmen equipped with Sharps rifles. During the siege of Yorktown, the sharpshooters skillfully used their target rifles to silence Confederate artillery batteries. Boatner, *Civil War Dictionary*, 736.

4. California Joe (1829-1876), whose real name was Moses Milner, was something of a legend in his own time. A fron-

tiersman who had lived in Oregon country before the war, he later joined Berdan's Sharpshooters and earned a national reputation as an expert shot. After the war he served as an Indian scout with George A. Custer. He died at Camp Robinson in the Black Hills, shot in the back by a man "who bore him a grudge." *Dictionary of American Biography*, III, 421.

5. California Joe's gun is not identified from this description, but it is possible that it was an early version of the Whitfield rifle, a heavy English muzzle-loading rifle that had an effective range of 1,800 yards. Boatner, *Civil War Dictionary*, 917.

6. The four guns were probably Ager "Coffee Mill" guns, which were hand-cranked, single-barreled weapons that fired about 120 shots per minute. The Ager gun was a forerunner of the modern machine gun. George D. Chinn, *The Machine Gun: History, Evolution, and Development of Manual, Automatic and Airborne Repeating Weapons* (3 vols., Washington, D.C., 1951), I, 37-40.



Camp Winfield Scott  
Near Yorktown, V.a.  
May 4/62

Dear Sister

I recived your letter of the 26 and I was very glad to here from you and to here that you and your famley was well, for letters is about all the comfort that we git out here. We all look for the male just the same as a hog looks for his swill pale.

We have layed around here fore weeks ago yes-

terday and woved around every whare and now we have got into a very good place so we are living quite well. It is a very plesant farm. It is a large plantation and it is just as level as the floor. And rite by the side of the woods whare we are incamped there is a field of wheete with about 50 acres in it and it looks very pretty indeed. We have had 2 or 3 days of plesant wether so it has got quite dry and comfortbale.

There is no nuse to rite and I dont know what to



*Confederate water battery Magruder near Yorktown. This photograph by George N. Barnard was taken in June 1862 after the Confederates retreated from Yorktown toward Richmond.*

Library of Congress



rite to you. All that thare is new is that thare has been some very hevey kannanadeing ever since yesterdy. About 2 it began and it lasted untill this morning about 6 o clock and then it stoped, and as I sit here a riting to you it is about 11 o clock and thay seam to begin agane in the same place. It must be up neere Yorktown for last night we timed the report of the kannan. We could see it flash and it took 35 seconds for the report to git down to whare we are but we are on the very extreeme left of the lines so we are some 8 miles from Yorktown, and earley this morning we could here a very hevey firing of musketrey up that way. But we have not hurd what it was yet and I sopose you will here what it was as quick or quicker then we shall, so you will here what it was. We dont take much notis of a few kannans a going but them seam to be ruther larger then usel. Thare is one thing sure, thay have not drove our men and that is all that we care about. And thare is more about it. Thay cant drive us nare inch I dont beleve. That is a good ele [deal] to say but that is just what I think. I dont beleve if thay thort that thay could drive us away thay would let us come up rite under thare nose and bild a fort and dig rifel pits and all these things if thay thort thay could drive us away.<sup>1</sup> The kannans have stoped firing and I must stop riting. So you must write as often as you can.

So give my love to all of my friends. Tell Calley that I recived her letter the same time that I did yours and tell her that I will rite to her just as quick as I can git a chance and I think that will be in the morning. So rite soone as you can.

From your true Brother  
Charles E Perkins

1. General Joseph E. Johnston, commander of the Confederate forces on the Peninsula, ordered an evacuation of the Yorktown line on May 2, despite a request from General Robert E. Lee that the withdrawal be delayed for a few days. The Confederates moved out for a better defensive position nearer Richmond on the night of May 3-4, leaving behind some thirty siege guns. Clifford Dowdey, *The Seven Days: The Emergence of Lee* (Boston and Toronto, 1964), 58. Perkins's report of a cannonade during the evening of May 4 is curious since the Confederates had successfully abandoned their position near Yorktown by the afternoon of the same day. It is possible, however, that the cannon fire Perkins heard was related to a Union cavalry assault upon Johnston's rear guard near Williamsburg, Va. What sounded to Perkins like a major battle was actually a minor action. Boatner, *Civil War Dictionary*, 928-929.

Camp Lincon  
Near Richmond, V.a.<sup>1</sup>  
June 23/62

Dear Sister

I have just recived your letter of the 15th and I was very glad to here from you and your famley. I also recived the paper that you sent to me and I am very glad to git a paper. Tell Mr Hawkins I am much oblige to him for it.

You spoke about my sore fingures. Thay have all got well now so thay are just as good as ever. You wanted to know what aled them, so of corse I shall tell you. While I was cooking my supper one night I birnt them with some hot greese while frying some pork. I sopose you will think I have come to my apitite when you know I can eat pork but that I can do in good shape to[o]. But the fingerers has got well and the pork is all eat up and we have go[ne] back to our old place. And the wether is very pleasant and we dont have much to do at presant, so of corse every thing goes lovley. But it is all Soldiering. We have been on the Advance so long that it seames very plesant to git into camp once more and sit down and rest and I am a doing it to the best of my ability because we dont know how quick we shall hafto fight. For I think the rebils will hafto before a great while and so we are gitting readdy for them. If the papers know eney thing about what is agoing on in Richmond thay will hafto pitch onto us before a great while and when thay come agane we will be in better shape to recive them then we was before. We have got a larger house and famley and a good ele [deal] more firniture in our house then we had when thay came down the other time, so I think we can give them a better acomaditions.

I sopose that you North think that we git along ruther slowe.<sup>2</sup> But if some of them that find so much falt about not giting along eney faster was out here and see what thare is to move thay would ceep still about giting alonge so slowe. But I think that our Little Genral [McClellan] could March into Richmond betwene now and to morrow night but it would cost him 40,000 or 50,000 men to do it. But that hant what he wants to do. He wants to save all the men he can. But some folks think if a Genral dont loze half of his comand he dont know eney thing and has not don eney thing. I like to go slowe and sure for I know what it is to go in a hurrey and come back in a hurrey, for I remember I went to buls run [Bull Run] once and come back agane and I dont





Library of Congress

*Engineers from the Army of the Potomac building a "corduroy" road of logs near Richmond, hoping to overcome the mud that slowed McClellan's progress toward the Confederate capital in June 1862. Photograph by David B. Woodbury.*

want to see eney more such cind of work. The way Mack works them sutes me for thay have eather got to leave or fight him on his one [own] ground. And if thay ever come onto his ground and just so sure as thay come onto his ground thay will git whiped. I sopose you would like to know how he can make them fight them on his ground, so I will tell you all I know about it and how I look at seeying out eney place. When he gits a place all readdy to fight then he will drive in thair pickits a little further and so make a nother line and that you see ceeps his men under cover of his guns all the time. And if thay

come out to drive his pickets in then he will fight them and that is the way he works them.

I must stop now so give my love to Ed Rodes and Jesse and Calley and all the rest of my friends. So rite as often as you can and I will do the same.

From your true Brother in the Army  
Sergt Charles E Perkins

1. Camp Lincoln was located near Harrison's Landing on the James River, the site of McClellan's headquarters after the Seven Days' Battles.

Tightening his offensive position as he moved closer to Richmond, McClellan had deployed most of his divisions along the north side of the Chickahominy River, northeast of Richmond.



The Second Rhode Island was temporarily attached to the advance guard of McClellan's army and was positioned on the extreme right flank of the Union line (i.e., on the north bank of the Chickahominy). Woodbury, *Second Rhode Island Regiment*, 89. On June 3, the regiment was relieved of its advance guard duty and rejoined its own brigade near the James River. *Ibid.*, 89, 92.

2. McClellan was criticized in the press and in Washington for his slow advance up the Peninsula and for his apparent reluctance to launch a major offensive against Richmond. Plagued by rains and mud which hampered his progress, McClellan became obsessed with his need for reinforcements; he believed erroneously that the Confederates outnumbered his troops by two to one. Dowdey, *Seven Days*, 133-137.

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Camp Lincoln by the side of James river, V.a.

July 7/62

Dear Sister

I recived your letter last night and I was very glad to here from you. I was in hopes I should here that you had got entirley well and I am sorry to here that you are not well but we must take our chances and do the best we can. You say you are very well pleased to git a letter from me. I dont think you are eney more pleased to git a letter from me then I am to git one from you for you cant begin to tell how much a Soldier prizes a letter.

I sopose you are all looking to see how this move comes out and how all of thair friends has come out. It seams to be my good luck to come out of it so far, but I tell you we have had a tuff one of it. The mud the last day was up to a fellowes kneese. That was the next day after the battle.<sup>1</sup> I sopose you can tell more about the battle then we can but the loss on both sides must be very hevey especiley in the last days fight for our side had more then a 100 peases of artilyrey a playing into them all day besides what the gun boats don. And when one of our gunboats throughed a shell onto them it must have don a good deal of damage. It was one steddyy rore of artilyry all day long. I stood within 1 mile of our line of battle and could see our men work the guns. It was pretty livley work I can tell you.<sup>2</sup>

I cant think of eney thing to rite so I must stop. We have no nuse so you must excuse my poore riting and dirty hands. Give my love to Calley and Jessey and all inquaring friends. Tell White I should like to put him through his old bog meddow once or twice; so good day to you all untill you here from me agane. So rite soon as you can.

From your true Brother in the Armeey  
Charles E Perkins

1. I.e., July 2. The battle took place at Malvern Hill on July 1, the last of the Seven Days' Battles.

McClellan's army was finally reinforced during June. With these additional troops, he set about readjusting his lines about Richmond and changing his base of operations. General Robert E. Lee, who had succeeded Johnston as commander of the Confederate forces around Richmond on June 1, sought to destroy McClellan's isolated troops on the south side of the Chickahominy, as a preliminary action before driving McClellan back from his position near the Confederate capital. McClellan realized that his position was weak and began to shift the disposition of his troops to establish a base on the James River. But he waited too long. Lee took the initiative, putting into motion an elaborate and bold strategy. The result was the Seven Days' Battles, which began on June 25.

After six days of fighting, McClellan had retreated to a strong position on Malvern Hill, about two miles north of the James. Lee, despite warnings about McClellan's superior defenses, decided to attack Malvern Hill. On the afternoon of July 1, a Federal cannonade successfully silenced Confederate artillery prior to Lee's frontal assault. Poor communications and disorganization hindered Lee's attempt to mount a coordinated attack. After heavy losses, the Confederates withdrew. That night, McClellan retreated to his new base at Harrison's Landing. Dowdey, *Seven Days*, 316-346.

2. During the battle of Malvern Hill, the Second Rhode Island held a position on the extreme left of the Union line atop the hill. The Rhode Islanders, engaged in heavy fighting, helped to repulse a series of Confederate attacks. Woodbury remembered the scene: "Lying on the ground until the advancing column came within a short musket range, 'they sprang to their feet and poured in a deadly volley, which entirely broke the attacking force, and drove them in disorder back over their own ground.'" Woodbury, *Second Rhode Island Regiment*, 96. Perkins was ill at the time of the battle and watched the action from a hospital located behind the lines near Malvern House. On Perkins's illness see his letter to Whiting Haskell, July 17, 1862, below.

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Camp Malvern Hill  
Near James River, V.a.<sup>1</sup>

July 17/62

Dear Brother<sup>2</sup>

As I sit here in my tent made up on stilts for we hafto put them on stilts in order to ceep out of the water, and think over the days that is past and gorn it makes me feelee ruther lonesome. And to look at the futer it makes me feelee ruther home sick. Here we have been out here now 13 months and over, and I cant see as this War is eney near to a close nor so near as it was the day I enlisted, and now here we are pened up by the side of James river twenty miles from Richmond and no place to git out, onley by the way of Richmond and we have got a big Armeey to whip before we can go that way. A Armeey that is more then twice our number to day and I guess more then that.<sup>3</sup>



I tell you what it is White, things looks rather dark and lonesome. Here we have been out here in V.a. in the swamps all the time for over fore months untill one half of our Army is sick or dead and I am about plaid out. For I have not been fit for duty for over three weeks and insted of giting better I git worse and this place is a tuff old place for a fellow when he dont feele well. For a man out here hant thort half so much of as a day is at home. If a man is sick out here and gits well agane he is d — b lucky. If you ceep out of the hospitle you may stand it but if you once git in to one of them you are surely a goner. A man can read the nues papers and thay would make him think that all of our sick men had a nice house and a fether bed to lay on but them nuse paper corispondence are a nusince to the Cuntrey. For I see the papers every day and I never see a word of truth in one of them yet, but it will not do to tell the truth. If you did we could not git eney more men but I am a talking to one that will not tell of all that he knowes and heres.

It is all very plesant for our friends at home to sit down and read how well our sick and wounded Soldiers fair, but when you come to see what I alone have seene and of corse what I have seene is nothing to what thare is in the Army. I have seene men lay down by the side of the road and die and I have seene men lay rite by the side of the hospitel here at this landing and die and no living person looked at them nor asked them if thay wanted eney thing. And I see a Dr. drive a man out of the hospitel to go on duty and he died in less then 2 hours. That is a fair spesimen of how our Volinteers to fight for the union fares and it is the fact to[o] because I see them cases my self and know it to be so.

I like my Cuntrey as well as eney other man but if I was out of this and knew as much as I know now 10,000 dollars would not hire me to come for a Soldier, as well as I like money. And agane our Ofisers hant got eney more feeling for a man then a boy has for a potato. I dont mean our Genrals, but it is our *Cols* and *Capts*. All thay want of a man is to do duty and he has got to do it if he can stand up and when he cant stand up thay will not look at him nor go near him so the poore fellow has to do the best he can. Go to the Dr and he will tell him to go to his Co [Company] and do his duty and he will be all right. That is the way thay talk to a privite in the Army but as good luck will have it I am not a privite. But I guess if thay could read this letter I should be one

and that pretty quick to[o], but I dont know as I should care much if I was a privite for a Sergents birth is the meanist job in the Army, for the Capt looks to us Sergents to do every thing about the Co and if every thing is not done then he will pitch onto us about it. All thair is to it. We git a little more pay and libertys but 10 times the work to do. But enough of this cind of talk.

Now what does the North think about the forse of the rebels at Richmond? Do thay think we can scair them or do thay think thay will fight? It has turned out just as I expected it would and I tell you what it is White, we have got to whip them and a lot of them before we take Richmond and we have got to have a lot more men before we do it. We have under rated our enmez too much and now we just begin to see it. If we had more men in the first place we could have taken Richmond before this time and not lost half as meney men as we have. Now we are 20 miles off and likely to stay here some time unless the rebils come and drive us into the river. Thay will have agood time a doing that and I dont think thay will do it nor I dont think thay can drive us away from here. Thare is one thing, we cant get away from here unless we whip them. Give us man for man and we will do it. How about them 300,000 men that is called for? Do thay come in fast or not we must have them and that before long too, or we shall have the rebils down on us with 2 or 3 to our one the way thay have alays done. We have got sick of such cind of work. We have got more men at the North than thay have at the South and why not have as maney men in the field as thay do? It seems that thay have got more men in every fight then we do.

I sopose you will think I talk rather plane about our Army but it is the fact and not just my senterments. When a man goes for a Soldier he has sold himself and is thought of no more then of a day.

How is the crops this summer in old Cumberland and how is every boddy and thare wives in these horrible times of War? I dont know but I have blowed about enough this time so I guess I will stop. I hope this will find liber better than when she rote to me last. Tell Jessey and Calley that we had one of the real old Suthern thunder shours last night and the water around my tent is about six inches deep. When we have a shouer out here it makes every thing snap and we have one about every other day. When it hant thunder it is artilrey,



so we have a racket of some kind about all the time. The rebels will try our transports and then our gun boats will try them and so it goes all the time. You must excuse this letter for I suppose it is a foolish one but if I was there I could tell you a good deal bigger story than this; so give my love to all and write soon and tell me all the news.

From your  
 Brother in the Army of the Potomac  
 in Co. I, 2nd Reg. R. I. V.  
 Charles E. Perkins.

1. Perkins was confused about his location. At the time of this letter, Confederate troops occupied Malvern Hill. The Second Rhode Island Regiment was still encamped at Harrison's Landing. Cf. Woodbury, *Second Rhode Island Regiment*, 96-98.

2. Whiting Haskell, Perkins's brother-in-law.

3. Perkins, like McClellan, exaggerated the size of the Confederate forces in the Richmond area. During the battles that occurred from June 29 to July 1, McClellan had 83,345 troops, while Lee had the advantage with 86,784. Boatner, *Civil War Dictionary*, 507.

Camp Near James River, V.a.  
 July 20/62

Dear Sister

I received your letter of the 13th this morning and I was very glad to hear from you but I was in hopes I should hear that you were better but it seems as though you are growing worse instead of getting better and I am very sorry to hear that you are not getting any better. And I hope by the time this reaches you that you will be smart again.

Dear Sister you tell about how well pleased you are to get a letter from me. I don't believe you are any more pleased to get a letter from me than I am to get one from you, for it is all the comfort that we poor soldiers take is to read letters from our friends. To read and answer the letters that I get from my friends is one of the greatest pleasures that I can have out here in these horrible times of war.

For my dear sister now man nor pen can begin to describe the horrors of war, it is so great. You ask me to tell you all about the battle, and how we fare and what we have to eat and how we spend our spare time. As for the battle I did not see a great deal

of it, but I see some of it and I see all of it that I wanted to see of it. But I heard the whole of all the battles that have been fought in front of Richmond, but the battle that you mean is the one that we call the battle of Malvern Hill. I was right where I could see the most of our troops on the land and I could see all of our gun boats that were engaged in that battle. I think that was as hard a battle as has been fought since the war began. At least there was the most artillery engaged that we ever had.<sup>1</sup> The line of battle was 2½ miles long and we had over 100 pieces of field artillery besides 13 seaguns, and the *Geleer* and the *Monitor*, and 2 or 3 other boats.<sup>2</sup> And that was worked about as lively as they could be, besides what infantry was kneeled so you can judge what kind of a battle it must have been. The roar was awful and the destruction must have been great on both sides, but the rebels lost 2 to our 1, for the rebels were led onto our artillery column after column into the very jaws of death.<sup>3</sup> They were bound to break our lines, but it was impossible for them to do it, and it was lucky for us that they could not for if they had broken our lines that day we should have been cleaned up root and branch. But as good luck would have it we have got down here 20 miles from Richmond. So you see we have not driven them quite as fast as we did one week. I think they have driven us a little but I think they have paid pretty dear for all the ground that they got. But we have got now where they can't drive us, nor hurt us much no way so they don't trouble us any at present but how long it will be before they will give us a try remains to be seen. But we don't expect them to come to us but we have got to go to them if we fight them and that is what we have got to do sooner or later and the quicker we get them 300,000 new men into the field the better it will be for our country and our cause. This fighting 3 and 4 to our 1 has about played out and we must have more men in the field. All that we ask is man for man and we will agree to whip them in any spot or place.

You asked me what we had to eat out here so I will tell you. The biggest part of our feed is hard crackers and salt chunk. Some times we have beens, and some times fresh meat, but now we have got here we shall get more and better feed than we have been having of late. But I tell you what it is like, it is rather tough fodder. I would give all of my old horse to be at your hotel and take one good meal with you. If I only had some of your fodder out



here I think I could [do] it justis. At least I should like to try it about this time in the day.

You want to know all about my house and famley so I will tell you as near as I can. My famley is the hole Co, much for one as for the other, and my house is of this discription. The flore is about 2 ft from the ground and is made out [of] round sticks a layed up on crotches and being luckey I got 2 bundles of straw to lay on. And the rooffe is made out of two peses of cloth made expresley for the pirpus. Thay are 6 ft long and 4 ft wide so two of us put them together and it makes quite a hotell. We al-[w]ays make them on the ground but we haft put them up on sticks so we will not git drouded for every time it rains the water is about 6 or 8 inches deep. So that is the style of my house. I tell you what it is liber, Charles Weeks is a difrent boy from what he was at home.<sup>4</sup> He is a good study fellow and he does his duty as well as eney other man in the Co. He and I makes our tent together, so he gits along first rate. He has told me a good maney times that coming for a Soldier has made a man of him and I think so to.

All the boys that you know in this Co. is Charley and you know little William Reede and thay are both smart and rugid.<sup>5</sup> This is about all I can think of at presant so you must excuse all mistakes and my poore riting. So I will draw this to a close by sending to you all and hoping that you will be speedley restord to good helth for that is one of the greatist blessings that we can have in this World of Wo. Rite soone and just as often as you can and I will try to answer them to the best of my ability. So good day to you all untill you here from me agane.

From your ever true Brother in the Armeey,  
Sergt. Charles E Perkins

1. Perkins was right. General Henry Hunt, Union artillery commander, had amassed about 250 cannon on Malvern Hill. Boatner, *Civil War Dictionary*, 504.

2. The gunboats in the James River covered the rear of McClellan's army and provided artillery assistance during the Battle of Malvern Hill.

3. Lee lost 5,355; McClellan lost 3,214. Boatner, *Civil War Dictionary*, 507.

4. Charles W. Weeks of Slatersville.

5. William H. Reed of Slatersville.

Camp Near James River, V.a.

July 26/62

Dear Sister

I recived your letter of the 23rd and I [was] very glad to here from you and to here that you are giting better. And I hope you are gitting well as fast as I am. If you are you will be well in a short time for I am about well.

I sopose White has got all through haying before this time, and I sopose you have began to think about going to the *Shore* and *Oh* how I should like to be thare and go down thare with you this summer. But I shall hafto wate untill this rebellion is put down and how long that will take no boddy knows.

You say that you would like to look into my tent and see me sleep. I guess you would think my hotell was ruther airey, for we dont have eney ends to our tents. And I sopose if you could see me a siting in the doore of my tent and a cracker box for a desk to write on, and my old pipe full of tobaco and the smoke a roling out of my mouth like a steeme engine for that is just what I am doing now, you would think that we was taking all the comfort in the world. And so I should if I had not one at home to think about. You asked me if I could git tabaco to smoke out here. We can git it but we hafto pay very high for it. A head that I used to pay 8 cents for at home we hafto pay 25 cents for out here and every thing elce in propotion so if we git eney thing we hafto pay pretty deer for it. So you see we can smoke if we have money enough.

You wanted to know if Burnside was near me.<sup>1</sup> He is not very near me. He is at Newport News, and I am a 100 miles above him. And if he was near me I should not see Abner for Burnside has got onley one R.I. *Regt* with him and that is the 4th and I dont know what *Regt*. Abner is in but I think he is not in that one.<sup>2</sup>

You want to know what cind of a Cuntrey I am in so I will tell you as near as I can. It is most all woods and swamps, with a few good farms and the soil is all clay, and very good water. Thay rase wheat mostley, and when we come down here we marched through some of them so I guess thay will not turn out very hevey this year. And we had one field of wheat to fight in. The battle of Malvern Hill was faught in a wheat field.

This is all that I can think of at presant, so I want you to tell Sarah that I think it hant hardley fare for her to look at me when I cant see her, so I think she





Courtesy of Ray Henshaw

*Elizabeth Perkins Haskell, the sister to whom Perkins addressed most of his letters.*

had aught to send me her miniture for that is the nearist that we can git to a Woman is to look at the picture, so I think she had better send me hers.<sup>3</sup> So give my love and best respects to her and all the rest of my friends and tell them all to write to me and you must do the same for it is a great comfort to us Soldiers to git letters to read. So good day until you here from me agane. Write soon and often.

From your true Brother in the Armeey  
Sergt Charles E Perkins

1. General Ambrose E. Burnside of Rhode Island.

2. Abner Haskell, Jr., was a private in Company D, Fifth Rhode Island Heavy Artillery.

3. The "Sarah" referred to here was probably Sarah Parmenter of Sheldonville, Mass.

Camp Malvern Hill  
Away Down South In Dixey  
Clost By The Side Of  
The James River, V.a.  
July 29/62

Dear Sister

As I sit here in this lonesome old Camp I am well and I [hope] this will find you the same. I tell you what it is, Sister, things are not quite so livley as thay was one Month ago when we was up in frunt of Richmond. For when we was up thare, thare was music all the time. It was eather a kannan or a musket all the time night and day, but since we have been down here we have not been disturbed, and it seames very still for us to be. Once in a while we here an odd gun up the river but that is nothing. Onley some of our gun boats chance to see a few of the rebels and so thay send them over one or two of them iron pots as the rebels call them.

What do you think about our little Genral out North. Since we have been here I have had a chance to git and read all the leading papers of the North, and the most of them seames to talk as though he was to blame for not taking Richmond. Thay say that McClellan had the largist and the best equiped Armeey ever formed on this Continant. It is the best equiped Armeey in the world but when thay say the largist, that is not so, for our Regt and one more was the first that struck Ganes Mills and Mecanickvill.<sup>1</sup> And I was on Ganes farm when Prof. Lowe made his first assension in his baloon and when he come down he looked ruther sober.<sup>2</sup> And he said thare was a pile of them over thare, and as near as we could find out by Nigers and prisners that thay had 200,000 men in and around Richmond when we first landed at Ganes farm or Mills as thay call it. And I dont beleve that McClellan ever had, since he left Washington, 100,000 fighting men and still thay blame him for not taking Richmond. We Soldiers all ask [w]ho can take Richmond if little Mc cant? And we all answer, know man, and if we that is with him and know what he has got to contend aganst are satisfide with him why should eney boddy elce find falt? And why dont thay give him man for man with and against the rebels and then if he dont take Richmond it well be time enough to find falt with him. That is all we ask and I think it is more then he will ask to do with. But we want man for man and that is all we ask.

Why dont some of them men at the North that is a



bloing our Genral so much come out here and help him do this job if thay are so very smart and not stay at home and rob the Government of every sent that thay can lay thair hands onto. I think if thay would take a musket insted of a pen the Cuntrey would be a goodele better off. And that is just what all of us out here think and I guess it is about right.

You must excuse me for writing so often but I have nothing elce to do so thought I would sit down and write you a few lines to let you know that I had got well and this will find you the same. Tell White that I could show him how to go to the shore and live out dors. Tell Jesse and Calley that I should like

to help them pick thair appels this fall but it looks as though the job that I have got on hand now would last me untill after that time. So I shall hafto wate untill some other time. Give my love and best respects to Sarah and tell her to write to me and give my love to every boddy and thir Wife and tell them to write me a few lines and you must do the same for letters is the greatest comfort that a Soldier can have. So good day to you all. You must take good care of your self liber and git well agane. Write soone and often.

From your true Old Brother  
Sergt Charles E Perkins

Camp Walburn Hill  
Away Down North In Dixey  
Close By The Side Of  
The James River. Va.  
July 29/62

Dear Sister

As I sit here in  
this lonesome old Camp. I am well and I  
this will find you the same. I tell you what  
it is Sister. Things are not quite so lively as

Courtesy of Ray Henshaw



Library of Congress

*Prof. Thaddeus S. Lowe observing the battle of Fair Oaks from his balloon "Intrepid," May 31, 1862.*



1. The Second Rhode Island arrived at Gaines Mill, located on the Chickahominy about ten miles west of Richmond, sometime during the third week of May, when McClellan was advancing toward Richmond. As part of the Union army's advance guard, the regiment then moved on to Mechanicsville, about eight miles northeast of Richmond, where they held the extreme right of the Union line. Woodbury, *Second Rhode Island Regiment*, 81. Two of the Seven Days' Battles were fought at Mechanicsville (June 26) and Gaines Mill (June 27) but it seems from Woodbury's account that the Second Rhode Island was not engaged in these battles. Hence, Perkins's point here is obscure.

2. T. S. C. Lowe — a noted balloonist, an acquaintance of Lincoln, and a favorite of McClellan — organized the Union army "Balloon Corps" in 1861. During the Peninsula campaign, Lowe and his corpsmen made a number of ascents over the field of battle to observe enemy movements, troop strength, and to map the terrain. McClellan himself went aloft, as did other officers. The Confederates had a balloon of their own, called the "silk dress balloon," which was used for observation during the campaign. It was captured by a Federal gunboat on the James River on July 4. J. Duane Squires, "Aeronautics in the Civil War," *American Historical Review*, XLII (1936-1937), 652-669.

3. Perkins was mistaken. McClellan's total force of over 100,000 men was the "largest army ever commanded by one man in the history of the western hemisphere." Joseph P. Cullen, *Richmond National Battlefield Park* (Washington, D.C., 1961), 3.

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Camp Near Harisons Landing, V.A.  
Aug 3/62

Dear Brother

It was with the greatist of plesure that I recived your letter of July the 28. We moved our Camp yesterday and now we have got a very plesant place out of the mud and water. And while I am siting here a writing this letter we are having a nice little shour. But I have got my tent pitched in good shape so I am all right. You spoke about our being jagg [tired] out and discureged. We are pretty well jagg out but we ar not discouraged. Far from it. You cant find a Soldier in our Armeys that is discouraged unless it is some that never dast to fight. Such ones as them of corse are whipped and allays was. But all that ever was willin to fight ar willin to fight to, that is, all that is able to fight. We have got a plenty of men out here ar bound to git red of all the fights that they can. And now we want all the men that comes out here now to make up thare minds to fight and if thay dont calculate to do that we dont want them for thay ar worse then no men at all.

Not that I am eney braver then eney other man and I know that I am not but I inlisted with the

expectacions of fighting and I am willin to do my part of it as long as I can and I will go as whare and stay as long as eney of my offesers will and that is what we have got to [do]. And if we do that we shall whip the rebels, for we have got some just as good and brave Genrals as ever drew a Sword.

You spoke about our goverment fighting the south with one hand and helping them with the other. That is to[o] true. But that has played out. If a rebels property gits eney favers from eney of our Soldiers you can call me a poore judge.

The people at the North talk about the union feeling at the south. The North has not give the men at the south eney incoragement to be a union man. Whare ever our Armeys has been the rebels has fared just as well [as] the union man and in some respects I have thaught better, so you see the rebel has been took care of by both Armeys while the union man has been took care by only one. Tharefore we cant [blame] them so much for not being union men.

That bill to confiscate the rebel property is just what we want and it aught to have been past in the first place.<sup>1</sup> If it had been I think this rebelion would have been cleaned up before this time.

You spoke about sending Reg on as fast as thay got them full. I think thay had better fill up our old Reg first for thare is no mistake but that one man in our old Regs is worth eney two men formed into new Regs at the presant time and now is the time we want them for we know the ropes and thay dont. We can show them how to live and how to drill more in one day then thay can learn in a month. So I think had better fill up our old Regs first. This is about all I can think of at presant so I will draw this at a close by giving you all my love and best wishes and hoping you will rite soone and often.

From your true Brother,  
C. E Perkins

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1. On July 17, 1862, Congress passed an act prohibiting the return of fugitive slaves to Confederate owners. The act also declared that slaves coming within the Union lines were free. J. G. Randall and David Donald, *The Civil War and Reconstruction* (Second ed., Boston, 1961), 372.



Camp Near Harisons Landin, V.A.  
Aug 10/62

Dear Sister

It is sunday and it is very warm and it has been for the last two or three days and I have got nothing else to do so I thought I sit my self down and write you a few lines. I dont know but you will git tired of reading my letters for I write so often but it will be time enough to stop writing when you say you have got sick of reading my letters. I have got no newse to you, onley things seams to be on the stir just this time but what it will amount to we cant tell.

I recived a letter the other day from Josephene and thay are all well in *Ohio*. She told me to give her love to you all the next time I wrote to Cumberland. She says that William wants to go the the war but I told her that I thought that he was to[o] old a man to come out here and lay around here in the mud and rain.<sup>1</sup> But mud and rain is not very plenty out here at this presant time for it [is] very dry and hot enough to rost a niger.

I see by the papers that Govner Sprague is agoing to raze a niger Reg and bring it out here with him.<sup>2</sup> And how do the folks like it out thare? And what is he agoin to raze them for? Is thare not white men enough to put this rebellion down or has our goverment got to call on the niger to fight? I think thare is white men enough to whip the South, nigers and all. And if they want the niger to do any thing send them out here and set them to work on the trenches and let them our Soldiers rest. And that is all that we Soldiers want them to do. Let them do the work and we will do the fighting. If thare hant white men enough out North to put this thing down I think the best thing [is] that what few we have got out here had better come home and let the trouble drop. I dont know but you will think I am ruther steep but them is my senterments.

I sopose you are all giting ready to go to the shore about this time and how I should like to be thare and go with you. I hope you will be well enough to go for I [think] that you dont like to go any whare any better than I do my self. And you know that I dont like to go any whare but I have got some whare now and I think a good chance to stay some time. But here is what [I] can stay about as long as any of them and not find any falt.

This is about all that I can think of at presant so give my compliments to Louise Hawkins and tell her that I shall be very happy to answer all the

letters that she will be so cind to write to me or any one elce that will take the troble to write to me for I like to git all the letters that I can. So give my love to every boddy and thare Wife and tell them all to write and I will answer them to the best of my ability, for I have got a plenty of time and paper to do it with. And you must write as often as you can. So good day untill you here from me agane.

From your Brother  
Serg. C.E. Perkins

I would be very much oblige to you, liber, if you would send me some postage stamps if you git this dollar for we cant git them out here very plenty.

1. The reference was to Josephine, whose last name is not known, a niece of Caroline Perkins Ellis (perhaps by marriage), who lived in Liberty Township, Ohio. Her father, William, owned a lumber mill there.

2. Governor William Sprague had called for a regiment to consist "entirely of colored citizens" on August 4. Despite an enthusiastic response by blacks in the state, the War Office in Washington did not grant permission for such a regiment until June 1863. The regiment organized that summer was the first black artillery regiment raised in the North during the Civil War. Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the Civil War* (Boston, 1953), 185.

Fortress Monroe, V.a.  
Aug 21/62

Dear Sister

I have just got a chance to answer your letter that I recived from you last friday. Of corse you have herd of our leaving Harisons Landin. I left thare last friday morning with the wagon trane and we landed here the next tuesday, but I have just got a chance to write to you, so you must excuse me for not writing before for I have been ruther buisey. I have had the charge of all the garde on the trane, 100 men, so it has ceep me pretty buisey, and when we landed here I was pretty well used up. I can tell you I was so lame that I could hardley stir, but I have got about all over it now so I feele all right for a new start whitch I expect we shall halfto take every minit.<sup>1</sup> But whare we shall stop the next time is hard work to tell but whare ever we do stop I will write and tell you. I have got no news to tell you for I have not herd any thing from the troops since I started from our old Camp for they have not got here yet.

I have got to hurey and put this into the offiss so I must make a very short letter of this, so you must





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*Freed slaves behind the Union lines in Virginia, 1862. Photograph by James F. Gibson.*

excuse me for not writing any more. I recived one letter from Louise [Hawkins] and you tell her that I should be very happy to recive another whenever she can spare time to write to a poore old broken down Soldier. Tell White I should like to have him on the trane of wagons that I came down with. It was ruther short. There was only about 2,000 in one string and if that is not a hard job to follow a trane like that then I am no judge. But I am here saft and sound so I must stop. So give my love to Mr. Hawkins folks and tell them to write to me and I will do the same. Give my love to Calley and Jessey and tell them I am all right. Tell them to write. So give

my love and best respects to every boddy and thair Wife and write as often as you can and I will do the same. So good day untill you here from me agane.

From your true Brother  
Sergt. C.E. Perkins

1. General Henry Halleck, commander-in-chief of the Union army, ordered McClellan to withdraw from the Peninsula on July 11. Perkins, accompanying the Second Rhode Island's supply wagons, left Harrison's Landing on August 15 and arrived at Fort Monroe on August 19. The regiment marched from Harrison's Landing on August 16 and camped at Yorktown on August 20. Woodbury, *Second Rhode Island Regiment*, 98-99.



Camp Near Downsville, M.D.<sup>1</sup>

Sep 24/62

Dear Sister

I recived your letter yesterday and I was very much plesed to here from you. You said we could not write but you can git all the letters that I can write and I can git all you or any boddy else will write to me. We canot git them [as] quick as we can when we are a laying still but we can git them after a while. So you must write just as often as you can for a letter is a good dele for a poore Soldier to recive from his friends; so be sure and write as often as you can and I will [risk?] but what I shall git them.

You asked me what this world will come to. That is what I should like to know my self. I sopose you have herd all about the aful fight that our army had here in M.D.<sup>2</sup> You say you would like to come out here and make me a visit, but my Dear Sister, if you should see one of these battle fields you would go home agane and stay thare and not want to come out here agane. It seams that our Regt. is very luckey but how long it well be so no boddy can tell. But we have a chance to see all the battle fields, and my Dear Sister you can not emagne [imagine] any thing about how a battle field looks untill one has seene for him self. I tell you what it is, I have seene all that I want to, but I expect I have got to see more yet. But that last battle of Wednesday last was one of the most horrowble lookin place that this Army ever see. You say that I am very cind to write to you and let you know how I am gitin along. My Dear Sister it is no truble to me to write to you when I can git time and things to write with but some one of my cind friends has stole my knapsack and all of my writin stock so I cant write quite so well untill I can git to whare I git some more, but I can git a little of the boys so I can write to all my friends. But we must git to whare we shall stop before a great while I should think. We are stoped clost to Williamsport at a little place caled Downsville but I expect we shall move agane pretty soone. It ranes to day and my pardner has piched our tent and while I am writin to you he is cooking our dinner out of fresh meet. I tell you what it is, my Dear Sister, I have got one of the best pardners that any man can have out here. He is a little fellow. He is onley 6 ft. 4½ inc high and one of the best harted men in this world and he dont feere any thing.

You must excuse me for not writin any oftner for we have been on the move every day for 4 or 5

weeks. I wrote to Calley yesterday and I will write agane soone. So give my love to Sarah and tell her to write and I will answer all of the letters I can git. Give my best respects to Mr. Hawkins folks and tell them to ceep thare shouse up at the hele. Give my love to Caley and Jesse and all the rest of my friends. So good day. Write soone and often and I will do the same.

From your True Brother  
Sergt. C.E. Perkins

1. The route from Fort Monroe to Downsville, Md., was circuitous and hazardous for the Second Rhode Island Regiment. Arriving at Alexandria, Va., on August 31, the regiment marched to Fairfax Court House and briefly engaged some Confederates near Chantilly on September 1; this action followed in the wake of the Union army's disastrous defeat at the battle of Second Bull Run on August 29 and 30. During early September, as Lee launched an invasion of the North up the Shenandoah Valley, McClellan (still in command of the Army of the Potomac) maneuvered his troops to block the Confederate advance. After the battle of Chantilly, the Second Rhode Island comprised the rear guard of McClellan's army. On September 3, the regiment returned to Alexandria and began a series of day-marches into Maryland. The Rhode Islanders camped at Jefferson, Md., on September 14 and heard the sounds of fighting from "three distinct points" — at South Mountain, at Burkettsville, and at Harpers Ferry. Just as the men were encamping at Jefferson, they received orders to move: "Leaving their supper half-cooked, they fell into ranks, and the column again advanced, pressing rapidly through the village, and hurrying on to Burkettsville, where the command arrived about midnight. On the 15th the troops passed through Burkettsville, crossed the South Mountains at Crampton's Pass, and encamped at Pleasant Valley." Woodbury, *Second Rhode Island Regiment*, 105-107, 110-111, 112.

On September 17, as McClellan's Army of the Potomac met Lee's Army of Northern Virginia in a bloody encounter at the battle of Antietam near Sharpsburg, Md., the Second Rhode Island was positioned in the passes near Elk Mountain to defend the rear of McClellan's army. Woodbury describes the regiment's movements, including an exhausting twenty-eight mile march over Elk Mountain: "The movement had been harassing in the extreme. On the march and the countermarch, all day within hearing of the guns, and, at one time, while crossing the mountains, within sight of the field [at Antietam], yet too far away to be of any help to their comrades-in-arms, our men regarded the situation as somewhat vexatious. They had been without sufficient supplies of food for the last two days, and were hardly disposed to regard the aspect of affairs with complacency. They had hoped for an opportunity to go into action on the 18th, when they were brought to the immediate front, but the day passed quietly, and, on the following morning, when an advance was made it was found that the enemy's main body had evacuated the position, and made its way safely across the [Potomac] river." On September 23, the regiment was withdrawn to Downsville, Md. Ibid., 113.

2. The battle of Antietam.





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*President Lincoln and Gen. McClellan pose with other officers for Alexander Gardner's camera after the battle of Antietam, October 3, 1862. About a month later, McClellan was relieved of his command of the Army of the Potomac.*

Camp Near Williamsport, M.d.<sup>1</sup>

Oct 11th 1862

Most Dear and beloved Sister

I recived yours of the 3rd this morning and I tell you I was very glad to here from you once more. I had not got a letter from you in some time and I began to feele as though you and the rest of my friends had forgot me. But a letter this morning from you made every thing all wright agane. When I dont git a letter from you once a week I think somthing is the marter. So Dear Sister I hope you will write just as often as you can make it conveyent so to do and I will do the same. When I am in Camp I have plenty of time to write so when I am on the march you must excuse me if I dont write quite so often but you must write if I dont.

You say you hope I shall find my knapsack or find another one just as good but that is out of the question for once you loze any thing out [here] it is gorn for ever. But as I have got a few friends and some little money I have got my stock of writing pretty well up once more. So you kneed not be in a hurey nor be scared about them stamps for when I kneed them and think you are not agoin to send them, but mean to ceep them for your self I will tell of it. Untill then dont borrow any trouble.

I have no news to write to you onley what you can see in the papers. We are having good news from the West and I hope it will ceep coming untill this truble is dun with.<sup>2</sup> But I am afrade it will last a good while yet. Let a man read the papers and he would think that this War was agoin to be don in a very



short time. But you cant make us old Soldiers think so, as I told the Edeter of the Providence Press.<sup>3</sup> He was out here this week and one morning he come out to whare I was on gard and he was agoin to have this thing don with in a month or two. I told him that he might talk that to a recrute but it would do no good to talk to us old fellowes that had been out here 16 months. I dont want you, liber, to think that I am whiped nor discouraged for I am not. Neather are the rebels, but the time is a coming when we shall conquer. *But When is that time a coming?* That is what we all want to know.

This is all I can think of at presant so I will draw my letter at a close by sendin my love to every

boddy and tell them to write my Mess mate, name is Samuel Wight and a bulley fellow he is to[o].<sup>4</sup> So write soone and often.

From your true Brother  
Sergt C.E. Perkins

1. This camp was the same as the one Perkins earlier described as being near Downsville, Md.

2. Probably the Union victory at Perryville, Ky., on October 8.

3. The "Edeter," who was probably a field correspondent for the *Providence Evening Press*, has not been identified.

4. Samuel Wight of North Scituate. Perkins and Wight became close friends. In early May 1863, Wight was wounded at the battle of Salem Heights; he died later that month.



General Ambrose E. Burnside of Rhode Island (center) and his staff near Warrenton, Va., November 1862.

Library of Congress



Camp near New Baltimore, Va.<sup>1</sup>  
11/62

Dear Brother

As I have a few spare momints this morning and I felt as though I should like to here from you and the opinion of the public about the removel of Genral McClellan from the comand of the Armeey of the Potomac.<sup>2</sup> I sopose thare is a few men at the North that is satisfade now he is out of the Armeey but I tell you White it is a sore news to this Armeey. He took leaf of his Armeey yesterday so we all had a chance to see him, for he and Genral Burnside rode through our Camp three times yesterday, and I think he looked the soberist that I ever see him look and I have seene him a good many times. I thought when we got to Harisons Landin he looked pretty sober but I think he looked more so yesterday as he pased along the line of our division. But we gave him three harty cheeres and away he went for the last time I expect. For I sopose he is relived of his comand for good and ever. But I tell you it is the hardist blow this Armeey ever had. The retreat from the frunt of Richmond is nothing to lozing our little Genral, but he has gorn and we poore Soldiers has got to stand it for the sake of a few men at home having thare own way. I here this morning that a good many of the officers are resign of acount of his being relived. And I tell you if I had my way about it I would not be a Soldier another day but I am here a inlisted man and have got to put up with what ever I can git and take what thay are a minto [mind to] give me. But I sopose I can tell what I think about it for all of any boddy. But I tell you it is pretty tuff to have him taken away from us, one that the hole Armeey is willing to follow any whare and any time.

Burnside may be just as smart a man and smarter than Mc, but we Soldiers dont think so. Thare is one thing sure. If he is not smart he will git triped up and that pretty soone to. For we have got a large Armeey to move and look out for and if he takes care of it as well as George B. [McClellan] has don, he will do well. In the first place the Armeey has not got the confidence in Burnside that thay have in George B. But thare is no use of my blowing any more so I will stop and draw this at a close. So give my respects to all and write as soone as you can and I will do the same.

From your true Brother  
Sergt C.E. Perkins

1. The Second Rhode Island broke camp at Downsville, Md., on October 31, and began another series of day-marches that brought it across Maryland, over the Potomac River, and back into Virginia. On November 9, the Rhode Island troops camped at New Baltimore, not far from Warrenton, Va. Woodbury, *Second Rhode Island Regiment*, 115, 120.

2. McClellan was relieved of his command on November 5. He was replaced by General Ambrose E. Burnside of Rhode Island. The regiment received word about McClellan's removal on November 7. Woodbury, *Second Rhode Island Regiment*, 20.

Camp near Fredrickburg, V.a.<sup>1</sup>  
Dec 19th 1862

Dear Sister

I have just recived your cind letter of the 9th and I am very happy to here from you once more for I had began to think that you had forgot me for I have not had a letter from you for a long time. But I new that you was away from home and could not write very well but I am very glad to here that you are better and I hope this will find you better then ever. As for myself I am well as ever I was in my life, so I stand it pretty well. But it is pretty tuff wether for a man to live out here in the field in the day time. But it is ruther cold and hard work to sleep, but we make out to sleep by giting up two or three times in one night. But as long as I have my helth and git enough to eat I can stand it pretty well. But I should like to git out of this cind of business for it is to[o] much of a good thing and I go in for a change. But here I am and I must make the best of a bad job.

I sopose you have [heard] all about the fight so thare [is] not much for me to say any thing about it. All that I have got to say about it is ruther a bad job.<sup>2</sup> Our Co. was the first one to cross the ponton bridge, but as good luck would have it we did not git into the fight.<sup>3</sup> Our Regt lost eight men wonded but none cilled so I think we was pretty lucky. But I tell you liber, thare was some of the tallest fightin that we have had and I had a good chance to see all of it in the senter whitch was in back of the Sitey. Our men marched up to the rebels batreys 4 times, one after the other but it was no go. Thay could not take them and many a noble fellow layde down his lif for the pay. And when the Genral that was trying to take them batreys and could not, we dont [know] ho [who] is agoin to take them, and that Genral is old fightin Jo Hucker as we call him.<sup>4</sup> If he cant fight I dont know ho [who] can. But we have been over the river and got back again.





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*Fredericksburg, Va., from the east bank of the Rappahannock River. This photograph by Timothy O'Sullivan was taken in March 1863.*

You say the Hawkins Girls are very much pleased to write to me and to have me write to them but I tell you Sister they dont feele any more pleased then I do to have them write to me, nor thay dont think any more of me then I do of them and I hope I shall alleys [always] have the plesure of writing to them. So you must give them my compliments and tell them I am well and hope thay are the same. You say you have got your miniture taken and I hope you will send it to me and if I ever do git a chance I will have mine taken and send it to you. I had a letter from Josephene in Ohio the other day and thay are all well and she says that she has got a yong Sister two months old. Thare is one thing Sister I must ask you for and that is some stocking. If you will send me a some and a pair of mitings or gluves and I will send you the pay for them. Send them by male. Give my love to all of my friends and write as often as you can and I will do the same.

From your true Brother  
Sergt C.E. Perkins

1. Burnside formulated a plan for the capture of Richmond that depended upon the capture of Fredericksburg, Va., on the Rappahannock River. On November 16, the Second Rhode Island left its camp near Warrenton and two days later encamped near Stafford Court House, where it remained until December 4. After another march, this time in bitter cold, the regiment reached White Oak Church, about five miles below Falmouth, on December 5. Five days later the Union army — including the Second Rhode Island Regiment — was amassed on the north side of the Rappahannock facing Fredericksburg. Woodbury, *Second Rhode Island Regiment*, 123-124.

2. Caught on the far side of the Rappahannock, with the Confederates occupying the town of Fredericksburg and its heights, Burnside attempted on December 11 to move his army across the river and to strike Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. Union troops, working to lay pontoon bridges across the river, were harassed by Confederate sharpshooters, until Burnside finally ordered a detachment of volunteers to take the town and clean out the nest of enemy marksmen. With this task accomplished, Burnside began to move his forces across the river and into the town, where he faced the Confederates who held an impregnable position on Marye's Heights. On December 13, Burnside launched a series of desperate assaults against the fortified Confederate position. The attacks, however, were hopeless. When the Union soldiers finally gave up the idea of pushing the Confederates from their defensive stronghold that evening, the field was strewn with dead and wounded, many



piled three high. Burnside's tactical errors had cost dearly — the Union army lost 12,600, while the Confederates lost about 5,300. Randall and Donald, *Civil War and Reconstruction*, 224-225.

3. Companies I and K of the Second Rhode Island crossed the pontoons on December 11 at a place below Fredericksburg and along the left flank of the Army of the Potomac. Woodbury describes the crossing: "Down at Franklin's bridges the men had been waiting, as patiently as possible, for the somewhat dilatory movements of the right wing. . . . As soon as word came that Sumner had finished his work, preparations were made for crossing. Who should take the lead? General Devens's brigade was selected. It was the right of Newton's Division. The Second [Rhode Island] was on the right of the brigade, the post of danger, as well as honor. It left camp about 3 o'clock in the morning, marched a mile, rested till daylight, moved on rapidly for four or five miles, down to the river bank, and there stacked arms, awaiting the course of events. The Mississippi regiment . . . was on the opposite side, watching closely the movements of our men, and prepared to greet them with a volley or two, on their approach. The time had come for crossing. Captain [Samuel] Read was directed to take his company [I] and two others, for the advance. He chose Companies B, Captain [Henry] Young, and K, Captain [John] Shaw, and Colonel [Frank] Wheaton accordingly ordered them upon the honorable duty. Eager to obey, down they go to the bridge, Read leading, then Shaw, then Young, with the whole division looking on approvingly. They take the bridge at a double-quick, rush across with a cheer and a yell, deploy on the instant of reaching the other side, and charge gallantly up the river bank. The rest of the Regiment follow. It was a brave deed bravely done, and the advance companies received a good deal of praise from Devens, Newton, and other generals." Woodbury, *Second Rhode Island Regiment*, 127-128.

4. General Joseph Hooker commanded the Center Grand Division of the Army of the Potomac at the battle of Fredericksburg. He later replaced Burnside as commander of the Army of the Potomac. Boatner, *Civil War Dictionary*, 409.

dont git much. Of corse you must have a picture of mine to pay for yours but Sister you may hafto wate some time before you git it for we cant git one taken out here any time that we are aminto [a mind to]. But I will promis one thing and that is you shall have it just as quick as I can have it taken. But it will not be such one as your, for we cant git that cind taken unless we go to Washington and that we cant do. But I will git the best that I can.

I sopose the question is the same with you now as it is with us out here and that is, what will be dun next? But none of us can tell but I hope it will be a better move then we have had latley. All we can do is to take things as thay come and hope for the best. Tell Ed Rhodes I am all right and hope he is the same. Tell him that when he sed that thair was some good writers in your neiborhood that he got it about right for I do think that the Hawkins Girls are first rate. For I git some nice letters from them and I feele very thankful to have such friends as thay be to corispond with. So give them my best wishes to them and to all of my friends and write as often as you can and tell all to do the same. No more at presant.

From your true Brother  
Sergt C. E. Perkins

Camp near Fredricksburg, V.a.  
Dec 28th 1862

Dear Sister at home

And how I wished I was with you for I tell you what it is my Dear Sister, I for one have got tired of staying out here to fight while our, aught to be our, best men sit in Washington and quaril. If thay dont do somthing besides that before long we may as well come home and let it all go for what it will fetch and that will not be mutch.

I recived your ever cind and welcom letter this morning and I tell you Sister, that picture was worth more then all the rest for now I can look at one face alough [although] but a picture. But it seams as though it could speak. And I know it is the picture of one true and faithful friend. As for news I have got none to write to you this morning for we



## From the Collections

It was the evening of April 28, 1864. A crowd, filled with anticipation, gathered at Howard Hall in Providence to witness an unusual display of martial artistry. A number of dignitaries arrived, among them Seth Padelford, the lieutenant-governor of Rhode Island. Then in marched Captain H. Mason leading his squad of Burnside Zouaves. Dressed in their exotic uniforms patterned after those of the famous French fighting forces, the Burnside Zouaves prepared themselves for their colorful drill. Military officers and their ladies watched as the orders were given and the squad began its exhibition. "The various movements and evolutions," reported the *Providence Daily Journal*, "were executed with almost perfect accuracy and precision, and withal so beautifully as to elicit the

heartiest applause from regulars and the militia — from those who knew the movements were right, and from those who judged only from an unschooled sense of the beautiful." Onlookers marveled at the unison of motion as the Zouaves performed a bayonet exercise and a "silent drill." During an intermission in the program, the soldiers "gave some informal exemplifications of the result of physical culture and training."

After the drill was over, the crowd stayed to dance and to mingle with friends. It was a grand affair, an evening of great conviviality, "and the hours whiled away pleasantly until 'jocund morn stood tip-toe on the misty mountain tops,' and the last notes of Spink's band faded upon the ear like the laughing stars from the overarching canopy."







Sometime earlier that day the Burnside Zouaves had assembled for a photographer who took group and individual shots of the unit's members. The original photographs are now part of the collections of the Rhode Island Historical Society. But what is not clear from the historical record is why so much attention was paid to the Burnside Zouaves, apart from their skill in performing military drills. Apparently the unit never saw active service in the Union army. Nor was it a militia or home-guard regiment of the state. What role Ambrose E. Burnside, the Union general from Rhode Island, may have had in the formation of the unit is not known. Perhaps the unit was raised and trained too late in

the war to be assigned active duty, though this seems unlikely. Perhaps it was used to promote enlistments in Rhode Island's regular regiments, a recruitment device that was intended to reveal the benefits "of physical culture and training" for young men who joined the army. Perhaps the unit was organized and trained as a fraternal group, whose sole purpose was to perform military drills and to host dances for Rhode Island's patriotic citizens to enjoy. Whatever its *raison d'être*, the unit did at least make its debut with style and grace on that evening in April 1864, when some Rhode Islanders reluctantly went home at night's end, regretting that the notes of Spink's band ever had to fade.