



# **The Bloody 85th: The Letters of Milton McJunkin, a Western Pennsylvania Soldier in the Civil War**

*Richard Sauers*

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The letters of Milton McJunkin are unique and insightful in several ways. His regiment, the 85th Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry, and its wartime service was atypical of the majority of Civil War units. That organization had the distinction of serving in both the Army of the Potomac and the Army of the James. These letters thus provide a different view of the war than the average Army of the Potomac soldier. McJunkin and his comrades served their time around Washington and saw action on the Peninsula at Williamsburg and Seven Pines (Fair Oaks). But they also participated in expeditions to Suffolk, VA, and to Goldsboro, NC. In the latter campaign the regiment provided a reliable backbone for General Foster's force, creating a diversion in favor of General Burnside in Virginia, Foster's men slashed into North Carolina. The 85th fought at White Hall, Kinston, and outside of Goldsboro. Boarding steamers at Moorehead City, they proceeded to South Carolina to spend more than a year in operations against Charleston. While the Army of the Potomac was spilling blood on the 85th's native soil, the boys of western Pennsylvania were consecrating the sands of the South Carolina islands--in one week of siege operations against Fort Wagner on Morris Island, the regiment lost 120 men.

Upon returning to Virginia in May 1864, the regiment was part of General Butler's ill-fated operations in the Bermuda Hundred Campaign, and then in the siege of Richmond and Petersburg. The 85th was distinguished in the Battle of Deep Bottom, where three of its soldiers were awarded the Medal of Honor for their deeds of valor. Although November 1864 signaled the end of the regiment's service, a portion of the men had re-enlisted as veteran volunteers. These soldiers carried on and were among the force that cut off Lee's escape route at Appomattox.

McJunkin's letters permit us to observe the inevitable evolution of the hardy and boastful recruit to the wearied veteran. If one wants to know what was truly going through the minds of these fighting men, read his letter of Jan. 17, 1864. Sadly, McJunkin's one furlough home proved to be his last. Initially healthy and hardy, he was fated to perish not by bullet or shell, but rather a victim of disease. The reader feels his plight. McJunkin dies with less than a month left to serve. It is truly a shame that McJunkin met his demise before the completion of his term of service. The humorous content of some of his letters, leads one to believe that he was of likeable nature, and probably a favorite around camp.

This work is an apt tribute to a noble spirit and fine soldier as well commemorating the reputation of a gallant and hard fighting regiment from western Pennsylvania. Complementing the text, are nearly 60 photographs of McJunkin's comrades with military biographical sketches. After McJunkin's letters is a summary of the regiment's field service in "The Deeds and Sacrifices of the Eighty-fifth Pennsylvania." Then there is an accolade concerning the flag of the regiment, and the postwar handling of the sacred emblem. The book has been indexed, thus making it a useful resource to the reader. The book has 216 pages, 63 photos and sketches and a post-war roster.

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