

A Glimpse
of the
United States
Military
Telegraph Corps,
and of
Abraham Lincoln.

By

WILLIAM B. WILSON.

A Military Telegrapher in War Time.

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READ BEFORE THE
UNITED SERVICE CLUB OF PHILADELPHIA

[BY REQUEST],

JANUARY 16, 1889.

HOLMESBURG, PHILADELPHIA.



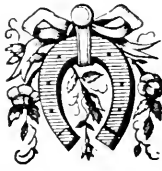
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*To the memory of my comrades who fell during the
great Civil War, sacrifices to patriotic duty, well per-
formed, this paper is lovingly dedicated by*

THE AUTHOR.



A GLIMPSE
OF
The United States Military Telegraph Corps.

The golden dream of empire, which had haunted the waking and sleeping moments of the cultivated aristocratic ruling class of the Gulf States, and of the land barons of South Carolina and Georgia, aided and abetted by impracticable legislation and fanatical expressions of latitudinarian doctrines of government by agitators throughout the Northern States, had at last brought about that most deplorable of all conflicts—civil war. It was a serious hour for the principles of self-government by the people as represented by the Constitution of the great American Republic.

Sumter had been fired upon, and the emblem of our nationality was lowered at the demand of revolting citizens.

In this crisis, President Lincoln called upon the various States for 75,000 men to restore the authority of the National Government.

In response to that call, the men, who in the preceding election had voted in the North for Lincoln, for Brecken-

ridge, for Douglas and for Bell, with a fair number of Union-loving men from the South, rushed forward, as with a common impulse, shoulder to shoulder, with a patriotic impetus inborn of love for and devotion to country.

I can yet hear the swish of the waves of patriotism as they broke upon the shores of Rebellion.

No persons rushed with more patriotic fervor to the field of Mars than did the boys of the telegraph. It was my fortune to be made manager of the military telegraph office in the War Department early in the struggle, and it is, therefore, with confidence I speak of the organization and efficiency of the Military Telegraph Corps of the United States Army.

On the 27th of April, 1861, on the order of Simon Cameron, then Secretary of War, David Strouse, Homer Bates, Samuel Brown and Richard O'Brien, four of the best and most reliable operators on the Pennsylvania Railroad Company's telegraph line, arrived in Washington and formed, under Thomas A. Scott, of Philadelphia, the germ out of which grew the best disciplined, the most wonderfully accurate, reliable and intelligent army telegraph corps ever known to the world. The quartette was rapidly followed by others, until, throughout the length and breadth of the army, over twelve hundred young men enrolled themselves in the corps, and rendered such services as had never before been performed for any government. Their ages ranged from sixteen to twenty-two—boys in years,

boys in stature, but giants in loyalty, and giants in the amount of work they performed for their country.

A better-natured, more intelligent-looking or harder-working band of young men did not exist in the army. They were ready and willing to go anywhere at a moment's notice, and, if necessary, to work day and night without rest uncomplainingly. Oft times they were sent where the sky was the only protecting roof over their heads, a tree stump their only office, and the ground their downy couch. Provisioned with a handful of hard bread, a canteen of water, pipe, tobacco-pouch and matches, they would open and work an office at the picket line, in order to keep the commanding general in instantaneous communication with his most advanced forces, or to herald the first approach of the enemy. When retreat became necessary it was their place to remain behind and to announce that the rear guard had passed the danger line between it and the pursuing foe.

All the movements of the army, all the confidence of the commanders were entrusted to these boys, and yet not one was ever known to betray that knowledge and confidence in the most remote degree.

The military telegraph eventually assumed, under General Eckert, colossal proportions, its ramifications extending to every portion of the Union where a Union soldier could be found. Its delicate, yet potent, power was felt and appreciated by every department of the Government.

The system, as perfected, was elaborate and complete in all its details—the boys constructed and operated during the war, within the lines of the army, 15,389 miles of telegraph, and transmitted over six millions of military telegrams. Of the latter, a large proportion were in the secret cipher of the Government, the keys of which were solely in the possession of the operators.

The boys didn't plan campaigns or fight battles, but amidst the fiercest roar of conflict they were to be found coolly advising the commanding general of the battle's progress.

When the army, in all its grand divisions, was in motion they were to be found in the advance, in the rear, on the right, left and center—wherever duty was to be performed: and when the army was in repose a thousand general officers had them at their elbows.

The corps was the very nerves of the army during the war, and was so considered by all those that came in contact with it, and yet it was not, and has not been, recognized as an integral part of that army.

Its services were great: its sacrifices many. Beginning at Yorktown, where poor Lathrop was murdered by one of Magruder's buried torpedoes, from East to West and North to South, as our grand armies marched and fought, until Rebellion's knell was sounded at Appomattox, almost every field, almost every march numbered one of the telegraph boys among the fallen

A hundred nameless graves throughout the battle-fields of the Union attest their devotion unto death to the sublime cause in which they were engaged, and yet the Government they loved and labored for never as much as thanked them for their services. It is a sad reflection, when old memories come back, that of the twelve hundred boys composing that corps there are not three hundred left. Where are the remainder? Those that did not lay down their lives in action succumbed shortly after the war from wounds, and from the effects of exposures and imprisonments.

Here let me say of the dead: Not a funeral note was sounded as they passed into the earth: not a flower is cast upon their mounds as Memorial Day comes around.

And of the survivors: Not a door swings upon its hinges to welcome them into any of the various organizations of the loyal men who fought the battles of the Union, and to-night, in this presence, I stand alone, the one exception, where one of the corps has been invited to participate in any of the ceremonies or entertainments of a society formed of persons who served in the army or navy of the United States during the great Rebellion.

A few of the officers were commissioned, and, in consequence, are borne upon the rolls of honor, but the rank and file, who performed the principal duties, although obliged to take an oath of allegiance and of secrecy, not being technically sworn into the service, were disbanded

without a word of thanks or a scrap of paper showing that they had honorably discharged their trying duties.

Secretary of War Stanton said, in one of his reports to Congress: "The military telegraph has been of inestimable value to the service, and no corps has surpassed it."

Since the war, Congress has been appealed to to right the wrongs and enroll the corps, but, notwithstanding Grant, McClellan, Hancock, Sherman, Sheridan, Burnside, Warren, Rosecranz, Sanborn, Porter, Smith and others have urged that the services of the corps were invaluable, and its members shamefully treated, and General Logan and J. Donald Cameron exerted their utmost endeavors, from their seats in the United States Senate, to have justice done, the wrong remains unrighted.

'Twas an hour fraught with gloom, when the maddened bullet, speeding from the murderer's weapon, laid low the head of that mighty chieftain, who was the one, had life been spared him, that would have seen justice done the corps. But the corps, like humanity in general, suffered when Abraham Lincoln died.

It was through my connection with the corps that I became acquainted with Mr. Lincoln, and it is for that reason I have grouped a glimpse of him with a glimpse of it.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

The multitude of sketches that have been written on the life, character and public services of Abraham Lincoln make me hesitate in speaking of the impressions of him that were left on my mind by daily contact with him during the first year of his administration of the presidency. This hesitation is rather increased than diminished when I consider that his fulsome eulogists, under the garb of confidential friends, have so surrounded his memory with a halo of deity that to speak of him as I saw him may be looked upon as a misrepresentation. The tragedy of his death, and the tight hold he had upon the popular heart at that time created the opportunity for opening the flood-gates of flattery, which, to a great extent, have obscured the true character of the man.

I first saw him in Harrisburg, on an evening in February, 1861, as he emerged from the side door of the Jones House, in the judicious act of flanking any hostile movement that might be developed by the threatening attitude of Baltimore as he proceeded to Washington and his fate. At that time, although conceding to him honesty of intention, I did not accept him as an oracle. My political education had been in the strict construction school, and I had

only then returned from South Carolina to place myself on the side of the Union. Knowing the earnestness and intensity of the feeling in the South, I looked upon his speeches from the text of "nobody hurt" as belittling the gravity of the situation. Towards the close of April, 1861, however, I was called to Washington as military telegrapher in the Department of War, and in that capacity came in contact with Mr. Lincoln many times daily, and often late at nights. He was always on terms of easy familiarity with the operators, and it was through that familiarity that my acquaintance with him was formed.

I soon saw a man before me with a kind heart and charitable disposition, who had a duty to perform that he intended performing with a conscientious exactitude. In the many telegrams he indited or dictated, and in the conversations he had with Secretary of State Seward, who almost invariably accompanied him to the war telegraph office, he displayed a wonderful knowledge of the country, its resources and requirements, as well as an intuition of the needs and wants of the people.

He was entirely unselfish, and in his exalted position did not seem to think of himself for himself. The great cause of perpetuating the Government entrusted to his care seemed to absorb his whole time and thought. When he acted it was from a sense of duty, and whatever the effect such action might have upon himself I don't think influenced him pro or con.

There was nothing ornamental in or about him, and to depict him in the ornamental light is to detract from his true greatness, which consisted of his being a true representative of a great people and a great principle of government.

Mr. Lincoln's shining characteristic was his extreme simplicity. He thoroughly recognized the true import of his position to be the serving of the people, and he tried to so conduct the administration of affairs that whoever looked upon him in the presidential chair should see reflected the power, the intelligence, the charity, the greatness of a great Nation. His acts were all studied in the school of duty, and were, to the extent of his information, the expressions of the national will. This was nowhere more notable than in the issuing the Emancipation Proclamation. To make him a god of freedom on account of his promulgating that paper which released the country from the curse of slavery is to give him attributes he never claimed, and to imply motives he would have spurned.

The Emancipation Proclamation was not issued solely in the cause of freedom, or solely to liberate the slaves, for Mr. Lincoln and the political party which had elevated him to the presidential office were committed to the strange doctrine that although slavery was an evil not to be extended yet it was to be tolerated and protected because of its existence. He announced most earnestly in his inaugural address that he had no purpose to interfere, directly

or indirectly, with the institution of slavery in the States where it existed. That he did not depart from that policy until he was compelled by the stern necessities of war and the readiness of the people for such departure, is a matter of historical fact. 'Tis true he entertained emancipation views, but they were based upon emancipation by compensation, attended by colonization, that was to be reached through independent State action. When General John Cochrane, of New York, in the fall of 1861, suggested and advocated the arming of the slaves, and Simon Cameron pressed for the same object in Cabinet councils, both knowing that it was a practical emancipation measure, and that the slave, by its adoption, would become his own emancipator, Mr. Lincoln did not second them in their efforts because he did not think it the will of the people.

He declared his purpose to be the execution of the laws and the maintaining the union of the States inviolate. But as the war of the Rebellion drew on apace, larger and larger in its proportions, and fiercer and fiercer in its animosities, with variable results to the contending parties, the emancipation of the slaves became an absolute military necessity, and with that necessity came the Emancipation Proclamation. Its origin and standing rests nowhere else. The slaves were declared free, not because slavery was wrong, but for the same reason that the enemy's horses, cattle, houses, wagons and lands were taken from him—to cripple him in his resources.

'Twas duty to the country, not justice to the slave, and Abraham Lincoln claimed no other credit.

He was not a god, and it is unseemly sacrilege to paint him in colors wherein he might be mistaken for such. He was a man, with all the attributes that enter into manhood. He had all the tastes, ambitions, affections, longings and passions of other men, but he had them under a complete control, so that they might be used for the benefit of common humanity, and not alone for self-gratification.

There was nothing false about him, for while he might curtain his thoughts and intentions as a matter of temporary policy, it was not for the purpose of deception, but simply to guard against the plucking of unripe fruit.

'Twas not into ancestors' graves that Abraham Lincoln dug for the clothes that were to clothe him in the garb of manhood. He studied the laws of his Creator to find the material from which to shape them, and he found it.

Despoiled of his titles, honor and power, and introduced solely as the homely, honest man he was, into that American society that seeks the tracery of a ducal coronet on its escutcheon, and that obtains its principal sustenance from the phosphorescent light emanating from the bones of long buried ancestors, he would have been thrust out as an unwelcome guest.

Whilst he was kind and tolerant to those of different opinions from his, and freely communicated with all those with whom he came in contact, yet he impressed me with

being a man who had but one confidant, and that confidant himself.

Before coming to a conclusion, I will narrate some anecdotes of the man that came under my personal observation :

In the fall of 1861 fires in Washington City were of frequent occurrence. without any organized adequate means for rapidly extinguishing them being in existence there. This condition of affairs was a source of so much anxiety to the country at large that no sooner was a Washington fire announced in the newspapers of the principal cities than the mails would teem with patriotic offers to the President, from all sections, for the formation of fire brigades, as a component part of the army, for the protection of the Capital. This was one of the many great annoyances of irrelevant subjects thrust upon the President in those trying times, but he bore it all as a part of the responsibilities resting upon him : yet at last he was compelled to rebuke it from sheer lack of time to give it any attention. One night the Washington Infirmary burned down, and, as customary after such a disaster, the next day brought the President the usual complement of offers for fire engines and firemen. Philadelphia's patriotism, true to its traditions, could not await the slow progress of the mail, but sent forward a committee of citizens to urge upon the President the acceptance of a fully equipped fire brigade for Washington. On their arrival at the White

House they were duly ushered into the Executive Chamber and courteously and blandly received by Mr. Lincoln. Eloquently did they urge the cause of their mission, but valuable time was being wasted, and Mr. Lincoln was forced to bring the conference to a close, which he did by interrupting one of the committee in the midst of a grand and to-be-clinching oratorical effort, by gravely saying, and as if he had just awakened to the true import of the visit, "Ah! Yes, gentlemen, but it is a mistake to suppose that I am at the head of the fire department of Washington. I am simply the President of the United States." The quiet irony had its proper effect, and the committee departed.

The personal familiarity of Mr. Lincoln, shown in his intercourse with the war telegraphers already spoken of, cannot be better illustrated than by relating a few personal encounters with him.

September 26, 1861, was an appointed day for humiliation, fasting and prayer, and was generally observed throughout the North. We operators on the military telegraph were extra vigilant at our posts; our boy George was engaged in preparing a "Daniels' battery" when, shortly after noon, Mr. Lincoln entered the War Department office. Spying George, he accosted him with "Well, sonny, mixing the juices, eh?" Then taking a seat in a large arm-chair, and adjusting his spectacles, he became aware that we were very busy. A smile broke over his

face as he saluted us with "Gentlemen, this is fast day, and I am pleased to observe that you are working as fast as you can: the proclamation was mine, and that is my interpretation of its bearing upon you." Then, changing the subject, he said, "Now, we will have a little talk with Governor Morton, at Indianapolis. I want to give him a lesson in geography. Bowling Green affair I set him all right upon; now I will tell him something about Muldraugh Hill. Morton is a good fellow, but at times he is the skeeredest man I know of."

It was customary for Mr. Lincoln to make frequent calls at the war telegraph office, either for the purposes of direct telegraphic communication or to obtain what he called news. One day in September, 1861, accompanied by Mr. Seward, he dropped into the office with a pleasant "Good morning; what news?" Responding to the salutation, I replied, "Good news, because none." Whereupon he rejoined, "Ah! my young friend, that rule don't always hold good, for a fisherman don't consider it good luck when he can't get a bite."

On another day, also accompanied by Secretary Seward, he came into the office. They seemed to have escaped from some one who had been boring them, and the President appeared to be greatly relieved as he sunk into an arm-chair, saying, "By Jings, Governor, we are here." Mr. Seward turned to him and, in a manner of semi-reproof, said, "Mr. President, where did you learn that inelegant

expression?" Without replying, Mr. Lincoln turned to us and said, "Young gentlemen, excuse me for swearing before you: by jings is swearing, for my good old mother taught me that anything that had a *by* before it is swearing. I won't do so any more."

Mr. Lincoln was entirely free from political intolerance, although at times he was compelled to permit its exercise by others. I experienced an application of his broad views. A few days prior to the Pennsylvania election, in October, 1861, I went to the White House and reported to the President that I was going over to Pennsylvania for a few days, and that I would leave the war telegraph office in charge of Mr. Homer Bates, who would keep him as thoroughly advised of passing events as I had been doing. With his peculiarly humorous smile breaking over his face, he said, "All right, my young friend, but before you go tell me if you ain't going over to Pennsylvania to vote?" I replied affirmatively, adding that it would be my first vote in my native State. Upon his questioning me still further, I told him I was a Democrat in politics, and expected to vote for the ticket of that party. Then, with the remark "Oh, that's all right! Only be sure you vote for the right kind of Democrats," he bade me good bye.

On the 27th of August, 1861, our pickets beyond Ball's Cross Roads had been driven in and an attack upon our lines was anticipated, the enemy being reported as advancing in force along the railroad. General McClellan was on

the Virginia side giving his personal attention to his command. About nine o'clock in the evening Mr. Lincoln, in company with two other gentlemen, came into the office to be "posted." I told the President that General McClellan was on his way from Arlington to Fort Cochrane, that our pickets still held Ball's and Bailey's Cross Roads and that no firing had been heard since sunset. The President then inquired if any firing had been heard *before* sunset, and upon my replying there had been none reported, laughingly said, "That puts me in mind of a party who, in speaking of a freak of nature, described it as a child who was black from the hips down, and, upon being asked the color from the hips up, replied *black*, as a matter of course.

I could go on indefinitely relating such anecdotes, but I refrain, and will conclude by saying:

Abraham Lincoln will live in the correct history of his times as one who was unflinching in his devotion to duty, unswerving in his fidelity to a great cause, one whose every breath poured forth the purest sentiments of patriotism; and as one who tried to live a manly life within the bounds of his comprehension of manhood's aims and duties.

WILLIAM B. WILSON.

Holmesburg, Philadelphia.

