

### PERSPECTIVES FROM A FIELD AND AFAR: The Civil War Letters of Colonel Charles F. Johnson, Invalid Corps

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## Feature Essay

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**Pelka, Fred, Editor** *PERSPECTIVES FROM AFIELD AND AFAR:The Civil War Letters of Colonel Charles F. Johnson, Invalid Corps*. University of Massachusetts Press, \$26.95 softcover ISBN 155849460X

Worth of the wounded

Maimed soldier returned to service

Established by General Order 105 in April 1863, the Invalid Corps (later renamed the Veterans Reserve Corps) was composed of soldiers who were convalescent, ill, or had been permanently disabled in combat, and were separated into two battalions according to their degrees of impairment. Many members of the Invalid Corps served as hospital attendants, cooks, and clerks; others worked at facilities like the Old Capitol Prison guarding thousands of rebel inmates, secured railroad and telegraph lines, served as military police, escorted draftees, assisted in controlling the draft riots of 1863, and participated in the defense of Washington in 1864.

In the past, readers wishing to study the Invalid Corps and the men who served in its regiments had typically been frustrated by the scarcity of primary and secondary documents on this unique aspect of Civil War history. The War Department's *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* and the Surgeon General's *Medical and Surgical History of the War of the Rebellion* provide two indispensable sources on the formation and official operations of the Invalid Corps, but both can be cumbersome and the latter's information is all too often restricted to the medical treatment of individual members. Detailed, first-hand accounts of soldiers who served in the Invalid Corps are rare. For some years, Private Alfred Bellard's *Gone for a Soldier* was the only such source readily available to the public, but it has since gone out of print. Documents by soldiers like Robert E. Johnston, who participated in the defense of Washington, remain unpublished and can be difficult to acquire. Therefore, readers interested in the Civil War, disability history, and 19th century American culture will be

delighted with Fred Pelka's edition of **The Civil War Letters of Colonel Charles F. Johnson, Invalid Corps**. Comprised of 143 letters, the book offers a richly detailed account of a Union officer's career from the fall of 1861 to the winter of 1864 (a brief letter from 1866 concludes the volume). Col. Johnson joined a Pennsylvania division soon after the Union defeat at the first battle of Bull Run and during the Seven Days' Battles was shot four times in the legs and groin and given a medical discharge. In 1863, only a few days after reading a flier calling for officers to serve in the newly formed Invalid Corps, the 36-year-old Johnson volunteered to join the new unit.

Virtually all of the letters printed in this volume were written to Johnson's wife Mary, but military as well as domestic concerns are addressed in his correspondence. Johnson frankly discusses subjects of interest to the social historian: the family's (frequently tight) finances, his homesickness, his physical health, his dislike of the company his wife keeps, his views of the appropriate social roles of men and women, his concerns with his young sons' education and discipline, and--in some of the most deeply affecting moments in the book--his rage over his children's sexual abuse.

With respect to the military component of the war, Johnson's gripping depictions of guerilla warfare in Missouri and the displacement and violent assault of refugees by Confederate raiders in the rural areas of the border states are worthy of special note. Most significant, however, are Johnson's statements on the Invalid Corps. He records its, initially irregular, establishment and the composition and distribution of its soldiers. A dedicated commander popular among peers and subordinates alike, Johnson expresses concern over the political machinations he fears may harm the Corps as well as profound dissatisfaction with the living conditions of his disabled men who, in his view, bunk in conditions vastly inferior to those of the able bodied soldiers. Public attitudes towards the Invalid Corps, crucial to an understanding of disabled soldiers in the Civil War period, are also recorded in Johnson's letters. The reader may trace the initial prejudices against Corps members as well as a burgeoning appreciation for them in this correspondence.

Taken as a whole, Johnson's experiences with, and reflections on, the Invalid Corps, form an essential repository of information for historians of disability. Readers learn that, despite severe physical impairment, members of the Corps were often determined to engage Confederate soldiers in combat and did so on notable occasions. Indeed, when stationed in Virginia as an Invalid Corps officer

Col. Johnson suddenly found himself called upon to command thousands of regular and Veterans Reserve Corps troops during one of Gen. Wade Hampton's 1864 assaults on the Union lines at White House Landing. Interspersed with letters on the Invalid Corps are strikingly candid ones about Johnson's own disabilities and the effects these disabilities continued to have on his physical, psychological, sexual, and professional life. This book thus offers historians of disability an important resource for expanding an already substantial body of work on soldiers with disabilities. Moreover, historians studying labor and disability in the 19th century will be intrigued by Johnson's detailed descriptions of the work disabled soldiers regularly performed, his conviction that as an officer in the Invalid Corps he worked harder than he ever did as a field commander, and his indignation at the assignment of Invalid Corps soldiers to tasks unsuited to their physical abilities.

It is worth noting that these domestic and military subjects are presented in an engaging writing style that reflects Johnson's intriguing personality. At times, he creates striking portraits of the natural scenery of the various regions where he is stationed, in particular Northern Virginia, Indianapolis, Columbus, and St. Louis. Johnson also takes pains to record the unique modes of speech and idiosyncracies of the inhabitants of the various regions in which he serves, often reminding the reader of the local color authors of the later 19th century. At other points Johnson displays a biting wit in epistolary writing that can be, as Pelka aptly describes it on page 18 of his Introduction, as scatological as Chaucer and as iconoclastic as Twain. Indeed, Johnson seems to delight in telling his wife about his bodily functions, and sections of his letters do resemble Twain's early western journalism and sketches. Less often, Johnson's prose turns in a more romantically passionate vein when he writes about such diverse topics as his love for his wife, his appreciation of Gen. George McClellan, and his rage at Southern rebels and sympathizers.

Fred Pelka, author of the *ABC-CLIO Companion to the Disability Rights Movement*, has written an extensive introduction and notes to accompany Johnson's letters. These editorial contributions are exceptionally valuable resources; indeed, they alone are worth the cost of the book. Characterized by rigorous research and insightful observations, they help the reader gain a better understanding not only of Charles F. Johnson's life and military career but also of the Invalid Corps itself and 19th century American visions of disability. Both introduction and notes have been composed using a wealth of important source material: documents from the National Archives, recent and important scholarly

studies of military and social history of the Civil War, 19th century magazines and newspapers, and documents held by Johnson's descendants, to name some of the most prominent. Deftly handling his editorial interjections, Pelka places specific events mentioned in Johnson's letters in the broader context of the major events taking place at both the military and political levels of the war, identifies connections between Johnson's individual experiences and the broader history of people with disabilities, and includes important statements about the Invalid Corps by governmental officials, members of the military, and the popular press. The editor has also selected 20 images of Johnson and his family as well as hospitals, Soldier's Homes, Veterans Reserve Corps units, and advertisements for the Invalid Corps, many of which appear with detailed captions to further enrich the reader's understanding of Johnson's wartime career and the experience of the disabled Civil War soldier.

Hundreds of officers and thousands of enlisted men served in the Invalid Corps/Veterans Reserve Corps. After President Lincoln's assassination, members of the Corps escorted his body to Illinois, and later, many former officers and soldiers from the Corps worked in the Freedman's Bureau. There is no doubt this crucial aspect of Civil War history deserves extensive study. Johnson's candid, engaging letters and Pelka's skillful editorial work give us an ideal place to start.

*William Etter, Ph.D is an Assistant Professor in the School of Humanities and Languages at Irvine Valley College. His article on Alfred Bellard's Civil War memoir will appear in the April 2005 issue of Prose Studies, and he has recently completed a book manuscript entitled The Good Body: Normalizing Visions in Nineteenth-Century American Culture and Literature.*