

### Through Blood and Fire: The Civil War Letters of Major Charles J. Mills, 1862–1865

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## Review

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**Mills, Charles J.** [J. Gregory Acken, ed.; based on the original 1982 ed., edited by Gregory J. Coco]. *Through Blood and Fire: The Civil War Letters of Major Charles J. Mills, 1862–1865*. Kent State University Press, 2023. HARDCOVER, \$55.00. ISBN 9781606354544. pp. 292.

For more than 160 years the world has been awash in Civil War letters and reminiscences of battles, the volume exceeding anything that one could possibly tackle or absorb in their lifetimes. Some of these collections of letters stand out as valuable, poignant, and important, and the present volume is one of them.

This volume was originally privately published by the well-known history enthusiast, author, and battlefield guide Gregory Coco in 1982, after he acquired a collection of artifacts and letters of the author, a Bostonian who served in several capacities during the war. The present publication adds to the understanding of this interesting young officer, whose life was ultimately cut short, and makes the volume of valuable information more widely available, as the original publication was a limited run. The current editor, Mr. Acken, has substantially added to the notes, introductions, and explanations, enhancing the value of the collection to a high degree.

Charles Mills was an interesting figure. The son of Boston merchants, his grandfather Elijah was a U.S. Senator and Congressman. Relatives through his mother's side of the family included a cousin, Timothy Dwight, a theologian who served as president of Yale College. The Mills family dry goods firm was hit hard by the Panic of 1857 but remained stable.

Born in 1841, Mills was schooled at Harvard, and his classmates included notable Civil War names — Henry Livermore Abbott and Robert Gould Shaw. Among his Harvard friends was

the would-be staff officer Theodore Lyman. He seemed poised for a key role in the conflict to come, but for Mills, the opportunities for glory seemed elusive.

At the outbreak of war, he longed for an officer's commission. Unsuccessful during the war's earliest months, he eventually enlisted as a private soldier in the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion of Massachusetts Militia, in May 1862. However, the unit was disbanded a mere four days after most members were mustered into service. The story of Mills' search for a Civil War identity stumbled on.

In July 1862 Mills was at Camp Stanton, just north of Boston, serving as a recruiter and hoping to help raise a company in the 33d Massachusetts Infantry. But the venture progressed unsuccessfully. Finally, in early September of the same year, he gained a commission as 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. in the 2d Massachusetts Infantry, and off to battle he went as an officer just in time for Antietam.

The present volume offers 119 letters, 118 of them written by Mills, and the majority penned to his parents. There are 15 from 1862, 93 from 1864, and 11 from 1865. They offer an absorbing and intriguing tale of a young Massachusetts man who experienced significant moments in the thick of the Civil War in the East, and time and again was the recipient of misfortune.

In September 1862, the 2d Massachusetts Infantry was commanded by Col. George L. Andrews, and his second in command was Lt. Col. Theodore Dwight. Dwight was a cousin of young Mills. As a 1<sup>st</sup> Lt., at Antietam Mills was engaged in the heavy fighting south of the cornfield, along the Hagerstown Pike. Here his cousin Theodore Dwight was mortally wounded. And Mills was also struck. As he wrote soon after, "I was sitting down, about one minute before the order to retreat, & had begun to feel as if I shouldn't get hit, the bullets had whistled so long & so briskly without affecting me, except with a sentiment of great disgust for them, when I felt

a tremendous pain in my leg, & on trying to get up, found that my left leg was completely paralyzed & excessively painful, so that I was unable to do so.”

Mills was grievously wounded, shot through both thighs by a round that passed through without shattering any bone. As such, he was in for a long recuperation, and was honorably discharged in March 1863. He spent months on crutches and learning mobility all over again. During part of this time he was in Washington, serving as secretary for a commission in the Navy Department, working for yet another famous relative, his uncle, Rear Adm. Charles H. Davis. He was next commissioned a 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. and regimental adjutant in the 56<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Infantry to rank from September 1, 1863, spending time at Camp Meigs near Readville, Massachusetts, before being offered the assignment as an aide to Brig. Gen. George H. Gordon, the first colonel of the 2d Massachusetts. But after a few days Mills turned down the opportunity.

Leaving Readville in March 1864, the 56<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts joined Maj. Gen. Ambrose Burnside's 9<sup>th</sup> Corps, moving for a rendezvous at Annapolis before heading south. And from this point onward, 1864 would become the big year of the war for Mills, and thus the great quantity of letters included in this work. He was delighted to be assigned as a staff officer for Brig. Gen. Thomas G. Stevenson, who commanded a division in the 9<sup>th</sup> Corps. “I have forty times the knowledge of what is going on,” he wrote, “am thrown in contact, as a rule, with gentlemen instead of roughs, and see a good deal of all the Generals.”

He followed the path of the 9<sup>th</sup> Corps. But a month after joining Stevenson's staff, the general was killed, shot in the head by a sniper at Spotsylvania. He continued trudging on through the May Campaign and on down toward Petersburg. And he flourished as a staff officer, joining the staffs of Maj. Gen. Thomas L. Crittenden and Brig. Gen. James H. Ledlie. The latter became famous hiding in a bombproof at Petersburg's Battle of the Crater. Initially Mills liked

him, but soon after wrote, “I have never met anyone a more thorough blackguard, in a responsible place, or one who had less sense of his duty.”

The staff duty for Mills rolled on with a succession of commanders. There was, briefly, Brig. Gen. Julius White. And then Maj. Gen. John G. Parke. He then briefly served on the staff of one of the heroes of Gettysburg, Maj. Gen. Winfield Scott Hancock, and then fixed on Maj. Gen. Andrew A. Humphreys, who became a personal hero of Mills.

Mills labored through his experiences in the long Petersburg campaign, and wrote many bits of interesting reflections, which are captured in this volume. He suffered with the soreness and poor shape of his legs, and yet soldiered on as best he could. The mixture of battle experience and substantial, almost remarkable, staff assignments, yields a unique and interesting perspective on the war that will delight readers interested in the eastern theater. Sadly, Mills died on March 31, 1865, at Hatcher’s Run, outside Petersburg, struck in the side by a cannonball, which killed him instantly at age 24. His story and recollections could have been much fuller, stretching years past the record that he did leave.

Mills was commissioned brevet major of volunteers to rank from January 23, 1865, for his services at the Wilderness, Spotsylvania, and Bethesda Church and the operations around Petersburg. He was commissioned lieutenant colonel and colonel of volunteers to rank from March 31, 1865, the day of his death, for gallant and meritorious services during the war. Thanks to Mr. Coco and Mr. Acken, he leaves an enlightening record of a young life extinguished far too soon.

David J. Eicher is Editor-in-Chief of *Astronomy Magazine* and the author of nine Civil War books, including *The Longest Night* and *Civil War High Commands*.