

INTRODUCTION

He signed his first letter, *Yours for the Union*, Rollin B. Truesdell. He was twenty-one, optimistic, and determined to volunteer for service when our country faced its most fearsome foe—ourselves. My great-great-grandfather enlisted three weeks after the rebel attack on Fort Sumter in South Carolina on April 12, 1861 and served in the 27th New York Volunteers, Infantry. The blistering dispute between the North and the South had formally transitioned to war. Without hesitation, Rollin traveled north from his home in Liberty, Pennsylvania, to be among the first volunteers for the Union. He would not be a bystander watching as the Union and the Constitution teetered toward collapse. He began his service without previous military experience but eager to learn. Demonstrating the kind of leadership and resolve that got noticed, Rollin was promoted twice during his enlistment and mustered out as sergeant.

Like many other soldiers who desperately missed family and friends as the war ground on, and the shock of gory battle became emblazoned on his soul, Rollin tethered himself homeward by devotedly writing letters to loved ones in Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania. These letters, over one hundred of which were preserved by the Truesdell family, tell the story of Rollin's awakening to the costs of war even as he solidified his conviction that this war, and winning it, was imperative. Sacrificing our country was not an option.

The first of his letters brimmed with enthusiasm as Rollin settled into the reality of his decision. ("I love a soldier's life and the excitement connected with it." August 22, 1861.) By the time his service drew to a close, Rollin was war-weary and frustrated at the lack of federal progress in ending the war. ("I am anxious to have this terrible drama close." March 26, 1863.) Nonetheless, Rollin remained resolute in his commitment to the cause. ("I would willingly stand my chances for life or death in another seven days fight, another Antietam, . . . if I could feel sure that by another New Year's Day we could conquer and dictate terms of peace which would be lasting and ensure prosperity and happiness to the nation." March 26, 1863.)

The 27th NY Volunteers received accolades from commanding generals within the Army of the Potomac because of their reputation for steadfastness and quality leadership. They could be depended on to follow orders and to fight. They thus suffered the fifth highest loss of life among the thirty-eight two-year regiments from New York State; 146 of their total enrollment of 1,155 men died.¹ Only 566 soldiers in the regiment had weathered the vicious storm and mustered out in May 1863.

Major General Henry W. Slocum was the 27th NY's first colonel. Brevet Major General Joseph J. (J. J.) Bartlett was the regiment's major. In his letters, Rollin wrote frequently and affectionately of Slocum and Bartlett as sterling examples of soldiers, and as decent men. Their bravery, selflessness, and clarity of mission stood in stark contrast to other federal political and military leaders, in Rollin's estimation.

Soldiers and witnesses to the war wrote contemporaneously and reflectively of their insights and experiences in newspaper articles, speeches, and books. Rollin's peers from his regiment published *The History of the 27th Regiment N.Y. Vols* in 1888, and tentmate William Westervelt penned *Lights and Shadows of Army Life, as Seen by a Private Soldier* in 1886. Through Rollin's own words and additional supporting context, this book complements and builds on his comrades' recollections. The rolling narrative traces events from the day Rollin swore his oath to the stars and stripes on May 8, 1861, until his return home to Liberty, Pennsylvania, on June 5, 1863, permitting readers to walk alongside Rollin as he steers his path through the chaos and heartbreak of war. Rollin transforms from an earnest young man to a battle-hardened veteran—though no less driven by the values and standards instilled in him as a youth.

His trek is rife with the brutalities and truths of war but also the camaraderie that stems from a shared struggle. As we will learn in his letters, Rollin was afflicted with the measles soon after enlisting; elevated to company clerk; selected for recruitment duty; dazed by hunger and thirst during the Seven Days Battles to the point of dreaming achingly of drinking from the cold spring at the family homestead; and marched alongside his comrades while barely conscious. He carried a soldier from another New York regiment for a half mile on his back from the battlefield at Gaines' Mill to safety. He learned the euphoria of victory in battle. He slept alongside corpses of friends killed in battle. He narrowly missed losing his own life when a shell exploded next to him, leaving him badly concussed during the final campaign fought by the 27th NY Volunteers—Chancellorsville. (The chapter on this campaign reflects

Rollin's incapacitation, and the words of his comrades in the regiment fill in the narrative when Rollin was unable to write home.)

Rollin was a clear, largely unemotional, reporter of what he saw on such bloody battlefields as Crampton's Gap, Antietam, and Fredericksburg, but also in the camps where soldiers endured the slow passage of time between engagements with the rebel forces. Rollin vividly described his day-to-day life as a soldier. He wrote of the improvised Thanksgiving meal he and Westervelt cooked in November 1862, of the infamous dreaded "Mud March" of January 1863, and of the first time he shot a man. His letters allowed him an outlet for the shocks of the war, a means to chronicle events, a vehicle to form arguments and test theories about the war effort, and a reassurance of home and the life he would return to after the war. He relished the letters he received from loved ones and insisted that family write him back "immediately."

The youngest of six children, Rollin had three brothers and two sisters. Elder brothers John Calvin and Martin Luther no longer lived near the family homestead in Liberty when the war broke out and were not in regular correspondence with Rollin. Due to a broken hip, John used a cane for years and was unable to enlist, but he did organize a company called the "Truesdell Rangers" for a Wisconsin Regiment. Martin was in the Signal Service and lived to regale his family with such war stories as when his station was shot out from under him, forcing him to slide down a rope—instruments and dispatches in tow—to escape. Of his brothers, Rollin was closest to his brother Albert, who wanted to enlist but was thwarted due to having asthma. Albert corresponded with Rollin and visited him in the field. Julia, the eldest, was sometimes the target of Rollin's good-natured cajoling to write him more often—("ask sister Julia if she has run out of paper." March 9, 1863.) Clarissa (Clara) was the sibling closest to Rollin in age. The affection they felt for each other is clear within the banter in the many letters Rollin wrote to her.

Rollin appreciated correspondence from all his family and friends but yearned the most for letters from his father and mother, Samuel W. and Lucy Truesdell. ("Write me as often as you can for I prize letters from my parents above all others." September 27, 1862.) He, in turn, wrote conscientiously to them; most of the preserved letters were addressed to his parents. These letters reflect Rollin's desire to appear confident and healthy to assuage his mother's concerns; they also provide a window into Rollin's bond with his father, his confidante.

Though over 150 years have passed since the conclusion of the American Civil War, the reverberations from this epoch are still felt. This war was by far

the most personal of all the wars in which the United States has engaged, imperiling the very existence of the country. Approximately 10 percent of the American population entered service from 1861 to 1865, and as a modest estimate, some 620,000 died—a sobering toll.² Today, the United States again weathers rancorous times, and it is commonplace to hear that “our country is tearing itself apart.” My great-great-grandfather volunteered to put himself on the front line of battle to safeguard the Union during the most direct threat to its perpetuity—the Civil War.