Through Corn Fields and Handcuffs: Private George Robbins of Connecticut’s Sixteenth Volunteer Infantry

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During the summer of 1860, George Robbins was just beginning his apprenticeship as a machinist at the Lincoln Iron Works in Hartford, Connecticut. Little did he know that his coworkers would one day join him on the battlefield. Robbins noted in his memoirs that he was not initially motivated to volunteer following Lincoln’s call for 300,000 troops at the beginning of the war. Rather, it was a local mass at which
"The Star-Spangled Banner" was played that inspired him to enlist. Both he and his older brother, Lewis, were mustered in as privates in Company K of the 16th Regiment on August 11, 1862, by Colonel Frank Beach. The brothers were separated when Lewis moved to a company lacking men. George then departed on August 24, 1862 via the ship George C. Collins. The regiment traveled by train to Baltimore and on to Washington D.C. by August 29th, which Robbins made great note of in his memoir, feeling that he was, "stepping on holy land."

After the 16th moved from their camp at Fort Ward towards Antietam, where the Union and Confederacy fought its single bloodiest day of the war, Robbins recalled the regiment being rushed forward. He noted, "Our experiences were duplicated by thousands in the new regiments that were hastening to the front." All moved forward into battle, but the 16th soon found themselves in, "an absolute maze of corn, which would leave any man blind." When the rebel guns opened up, the regiment was quickly shattered. Robbins was struck by a bullet that badly bruised his leg. Remarkably, he thought little of his injury and yearned to return to combat.

Robbins rejoined the regiment by June 22nd as they were beginning on one of the largest marching campaigns of the war. Known as the "Blackberry Raids," because of the mass of berries surrounding the regiments, Robbins recalled, "Having covered over two hundred miles in six days we were intent to destroy communications with General Lee’s army, then fighting the Battle of Gettysburg at Hanover Junction some fifteen miles from Richmond. Our attempt, without jest, was fruitful." Robbins' company, however, found little piece in victory.

The hard luck of the 16th that had greeted them at Antietam got much worse. On April 17, 1864 in Plymouth, NC, the regiment was surrounded by a far superior Confederate army and forced to surrender. Refusing to let their coveted battle flags fall prey to the enemy, the regiment tore them in pieces and distributed them among the men. Robbins wrote later that "No sight of such pride could ever fade from my memory."

During the first night of captivity Robbins was selected to serve as an arbitrator. He reasoned to guards that several items left at the 16th’s camp had practical use. Running low on supplies themselves, the Confederates allowed Robbins to make the trek back with a guard, on the promise he would return or cost a comrade his life as a penalty. He returned with supplies, and his diary. Until his release from the notorious Andersonville Prison camp in Georgia, Robbins used the diary to record his vivid thoughts as he watched men die slowly, right in front of him. The most common cause of death was untreated ailments and refusal to cooperate with their captors. In one of many unsent letters to his parents, George insisted that more than anything else men died from losing "the will to seek tomorrow."

For the next ten months and four days, Robbins remained a prisoner, and later wrote of it "Seeming like one long night." He was paroled at Richmond, Va. on February 24, 1866, and mustered out of the Union army on June 1, 1866, having spent two years, nine months, and twenty days at war.
Little is known of Robbins post-war life; although his memoirs indicate that he returned to Plainville, CT. What happened to his remaining family is unknown, but the preface to his memoirs stated he had a young son, who is never named. Robbins also gives no indication of seeing the flag his regiment fought so hard to protect, reassembled and marched to the State Capitol during the grand Battle Flag Day on September 17, 1879. Robbins recorded his remarkable and troubling experiences in a series of letters, a diary, and in memoirs, all of which are located at the Connecticut Historical Society, and offer a unique window in one man’s life in a war that consumed thousands.

Research materials and image courtesy of the Connecticut Historical Society www.chs.org

This essay is part of the wider Connecticut Civil War 150th Anniversary Commemoration www.ccsu.edu/civilwar

NOTES


2 Robbins, Civil War Memoirs, 1.


4 Robbins, Civil War Memoirs, 2.

5 Robbins, Civil War Memoirs, 4.

6 Robbins, Civil War Memoirs, 8.

7 Robbins, Civil War Memoirs, 28

8 Robbins, Civil War Memoirs, 45.


10 Robbins, Civil War Memoirs, 52.


13 Robbins, Civil War Memoirs, 68.

14 Hines, Civil War Volunteer Sons of Connecticut, 64.

15 Robbins, Civil War Memoirs, 72.
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