

THE MEN IN THE RANKS.

FROM THE NOTE-BOOK OF AN OLD SOLDIER.

BY MAJOR PHILIP DOUGLAS.

WHAT sort of chaps enlisted? Well, I can speak only of the West. There a very large part were farmers' sons, boys of from twenty to twenty-five years of age; sound, healthy, docile, used to outdoor life and plain fare, and lacking only a quick understanding of distinctions of rank, and, in their earlier service, the power of dispensing with regular sleep.

The city-bred boy, used to theatres and other sleep-robbing amusements, could keep awake on guard or on picket duty without trouble. The country boy had to acquire this power painfully. As to rank, the farmer's son put on no airs and allowed none. So at first his officers, his own playmates perhaps, elected by the recruits themselves, appeared to his view as differing from himself chiefly in the matter of shoulder-straps and chevrons, and in getting more pay. Why he should salute and call by a title a friend who had hitherto been "Jim" or "Bill" to him, did not at first discover itself. The officers were at first quite as awkward in these matters as the men, disliking "to put on airs" with their boyhood friends, and hating caste as much as did the soldiers they commanded.

I remember the startled, disgusted look of a young regular officer riding with the new colonel of a new infantry regiment, on hearing a voice from the ranks call out to the colonel, "Say, John, what's the news from home?" These things were not intentional disrespect; they were natural, and hardly blamable. Of course campaigning soon corrected the more glaring of such faults, for the men required no course of lectures, after actual work began, to teach them the value and the necessity of organization.

In this I claim the volunteer from our Western States as peerless: his wonderful adaptability, his straightforward, practical sense. These made him a trustworthy and efficient soldier while a foreigner would be learning his facings. Young fellows who had never seen even a militia company became, with a few months of field service, efficient company commanders, sure

to do the proper thing even under the most adverse circumstances. Clerks from country stores were in the same time developed into active, skilful quartermasters and commissaries, while young family physicians became surgeons of marked capacity. They were very patriotic; but hatred of the foe seemed to come in only later, after this comrade had been killed and the other one crippled, or, harder still, captured.

Many lads enlisted younger than the ages prescribed. General Rosecrans had a boy of thirteen made a sergeant on the battlefield of Chickamauga for conspicuous bravery, and the first Kentucky (Union) had a scarred veteran of a captain promoted at seventeen for good soldiery. But as a general thing the immature recruit broke down and went home invalided. When he escaped this, he became a thing of whipcord and tempered steel.

Likewise men came into the ranks who were past the age of useful service. A man of fifty, or even of forty, however strong and healthy, was very apt to find lacking a certain resiliency, without which full value as a private soldier is not to be had.

The Mexican War veterans were at first in great demand; but apart from their methods being largely obsolete, they were generally past the military prime. The Mexican War had ended fourteen years before the Civil War broke out, and its veterans were nearly middle-aged men at least. These Mexican veterans were great terrors to us youngsters. Aggravating airs of experience were added to an unconcealed contempt for men who had never seen Taylor and Scott, and who didn't even know such names as "Paller Alter" and "Bewner Vister," to say nothing of "Cherrybusker" and "Chipulterpeck."

The West Pointers we did not so much mind. We felt that we needed them as generals, and we had the deepest respect for their fighting qualities; but we secretly sneered at them for being so finikin over

what we saw as trifles, and we were right in believing early in the struggle that they had a good deal to learn as well as ourselves. Most of them had been fighting Indians, and instinct told us that fighting Confederates was another contract.

The ideal soldier was perhaps a twenty-two or twenty-three year old Ohio or Indiana boy, fresh from the farm, and with a good cross-roads school education. Some latitude may be given as to years and States—say two or three preferably added, and to the Northwest. Such boys had no vices, and very rarely had bad habits. They loved their mothers, and were a little afraid of the "old man." As for physical courage, no class of men, in our country, at least, can be labelled one way or the other. Most men fight if incited by their passions or ordered by proper authority. A few, very few, love it, and a good many hate it; but if it has to be done, a man's preferences don't cut much of a figure. My own observation, when serving with a small, semi-independent command, made me select for exceptionally dangerous work those men who paled a little at first and then steadied themselves. Such men had sense enough to measure the danger and to avoid adding unnecessary risks, and yet had force enough to do their duty. The reckless dare-devil compelled admiration, but the steady fellow, who kept duty before him in spite of realizing the danger, commanded confidence.

An example of the former, one of many every old volunteer can cite, was the private soldier in the trenches at Vicksburg, ragged and dirty, and in no sense looking like a hero, who, rising up from a pitiful little fire on which his blackened tin cup of coffee was heating, found himself face to face with a party of officers of high rank, who had just come around an angle of the works, as a hissing grenade fell at their and his feet. Among these officers were men whose names are synonyms for bravery, but they stood transfixed when that ragged hero picked up the shell, and blowing on the fuse to make sure of its being in working order, threw it back over the breastworks, yelling to the Confederates, "Keep it yourselves; we don't want it," and turned to his coffee as the thing exploded, just out of reach, with a force that a moment sooner would have blown them all to atoms.

Another case will illustrate the valor of a man through a sense of duty. He was a lieutenant in an Ohio regiment in its

first battle. The command was lying down, sheltered by a depression in front of which was an open field with a Confederate earthwork a couple of hundred yards ahead. Over this open place rifle-balls were singing and fine stuff from the field-pieces was whistling. The colonel of the regiment, returning from his brigadier in the rear, was on the point of going out to view the ground over which the regiment was to charge presently. In answer to a lieutenant's question, he said he had to know whether a ravine on the left extended up into the ground in front. The lieutenant pulled him down gently to where all were crouching, and said calmly, "Let me go. There's only one colonel to the regiment, but there's a lot of us lieutenants." Five minutes later, as he banded a badly shattered leg he had dragged back, he described the ground accurately to the colonel. This done, without a word of comment he started back to the rear to get his leg "fixed by the doctor."

Occasionally a regiment got an exceptionally good name, but rarely did one get a bad reputation for want of steadiness under fire. At one of the earlier engagements of the war, in western Virginia, a green Indiana regiment was taunted by the Confederates from their breastworks with the cry of "Buena Vista!" There was a story current that a regiment from Indiana had flinched at the battle of Buena Vista in Mexico. The taunt cost the Confederates dearly, for within a few minutes the Indianians proved beyond doubt that any question as to their willingness to fight at close quarters was a matter of past history.

In the long run the higher principled men made the higher mark. One thing which raised the tone of the whole army was the chance for promotion. Death, resignations, and promotions out of the regiment made plenty of vacancies, and every ambitious young fellow knew that his promotion depended more on himself than on any one else. One gallant young fellow of twenty-six years fell in North Georgia in 1863 as colonel of his regiment, having filled every grade from private soldier upwards, not omitting those of sergeant-major and adjutant. He had been a minor clerk in a provision store in his native town when the war broke out. Until after the first year of the war brigadier-generals were the least qualified for their posts of all who wore buttons. But later on, when they were made by promotion instead of political preferment, all this was changed for the better.