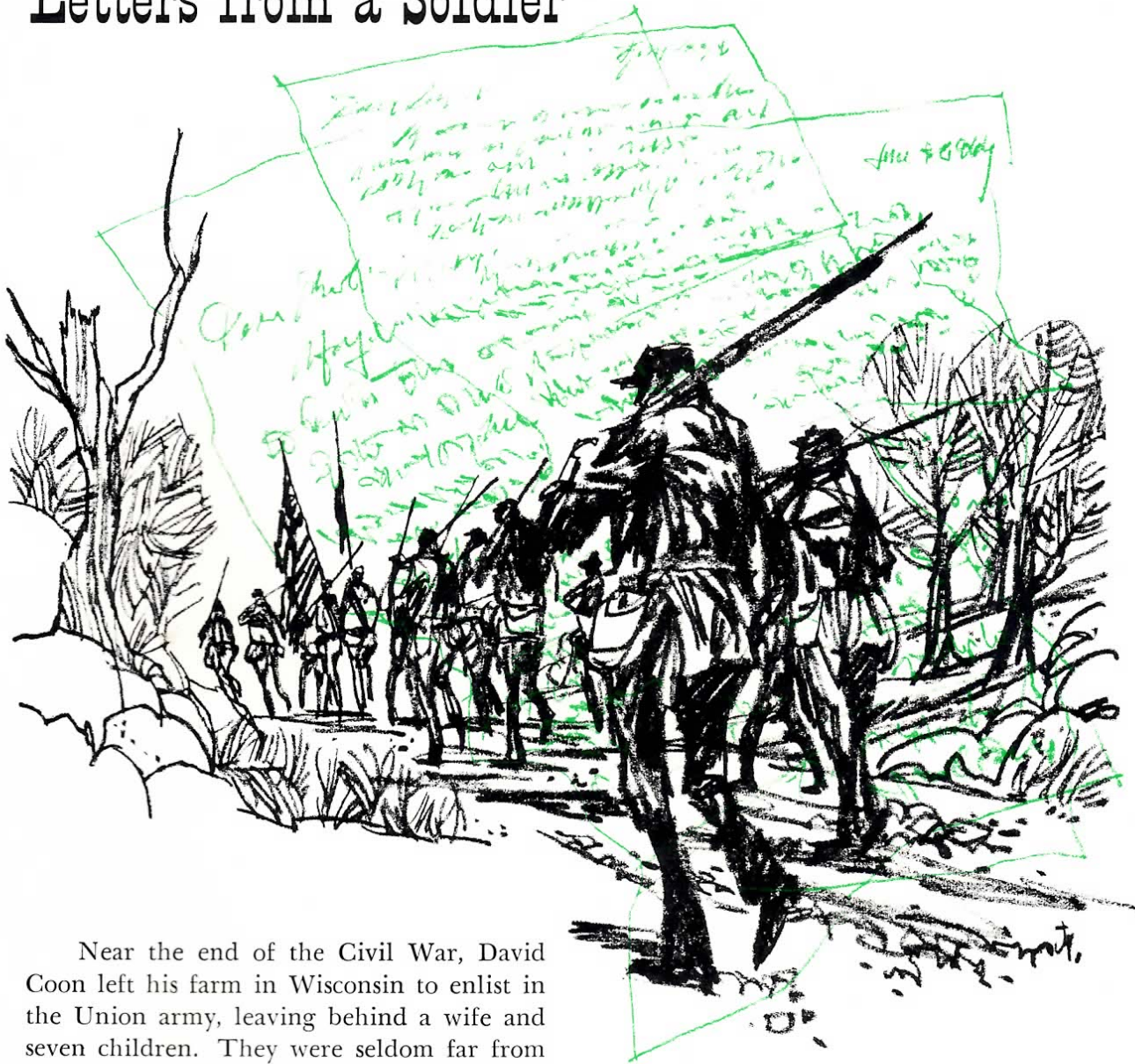


# Letters from a Soldier



Near the end of the Civil War, David Coon left his farm in Wisconsin to enlist in the Union army, leaving behind a wife and seven children. They were seldom far from his thoughts, and he wrote to them about once a week. His first letter, dated February 28, 1864, typifies his concern for his family's welfare.

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"I expect \$165 local bounty which I think we had better use to pay for the sugar and all our other debts, and you will get \$5 a month from the State. I think I can send home \$5 a month more. I hope Herbert [his son] will be able to raise your own provisions and some to spare. . . . Do the best you can, all of you."

The problems of his family worried Coon greatly. Once he wrote a very long letter to his wife telling her how to deal with a man to whom they owed \$15 for a cow, and in another, written on May 8, he says:

"Yours of the 2nd gave me the blues. I should have thought that when the first cow was lost the others would have been taken care of and not put in the lot without fixing the fence." Apparently Herbert had lost the whole herd.

David Coon remained at a post hospital for some time, nursing the sick and dying who had never yet seen a battlefield. (There were more casualties from disease in the Civil War than there were from wounds.) Finally, on the evening of May 8, his regiment left camp, and on May 15 it reached its destination, Washington, where it joined General Grant's Army of the Potomac. Coon wrote:

"There is a good deal of dissatisfaction against our Colonel. There is a big battle in progress, and it is supposed it is his intention to rush us right into the thickest of it without having had a chance to try our arms. The most of us have never even loaded or fired them off yet, and if we have to go into it in such a condition it will be nobody's fault but his. I have heard some say that *he* will be among the missing."

The regiment was rushed into battle, however, without any rest or target practice, proceeding down the Potomac, on to Fredericksburg, and from there to Spotsylvania, where on May 18 it had its first taste of battle. Other encounters followed in rapid succession, and from May 26 to June 7, 400 soldiers of that regiment were killed in battle or died of wounds.

On June 14 Coon's regiment crossed the James River and marched toward Petersburg, their objective being to capture that city, a vital communications center, then move north and capture Richmond. But the siege of Petersburg was to last nearly a year, and before it was over 42,000 Union soldiers would be killed, wounded, or captured. Coon's regiment lost 111 men there, and it wasn't until June 24 that the men were relieved, for the first time in four weeks.

Life temporarily quieted down, and Coon found time to write of a little incident that happened when he fell out of his column to aid a sick man, and the guard that was following the regiment to deal with stragglers came upon them.

"The officer came around, and the first I knew he struck me over my shoulder with the flat of his sword. . . . I got my gun in a threatening attitude and told him very plainly that he had better not do that again. Whereupon he ordered the guards to arrest me. . . . He released me after two hours and offered to let me go back to the regiment but wanted me to promise to be a better boy. That was something I didn't know how to do but instead gave him to understand that I should take measures to find out if an

officer had a right to strike a man without provocation. He then ordered me kept under guard, and I had my breakfast and laid down and was taking a good nap when he came and asked me if I wanted to go to my regiment. I told him I was having a very good time. He told me to get up and take my things and go. He was glad to get rid of me.”

Early in August the Union army marched north. On August 24, at a place called Reams Station, Coon’s regiment was surrounded, and only a few succeeded in getting themselves out. One hundred and thirty-four men were reported missing—and David Coon was one of them.

On August 27 he wrote his last letter to his family: “I write to inform you that through the fortunes of war I am a prisoner. In battle on the 25th our whole regiment was taken.”

Apparently the Confederate handling of prisoners was humane, for in the same letter Coon wrote: “I can truly say that whatever treatment I may receive hereafter I shall ever remember with gratitude the treatment received from the officers and guards who have had us in charge thus far.”

After about a month the men captured at Reams Station were sent to a prison in North Carolina, an abandoned cotton factory that had been at one time the most pleasant and spacious of all the Confederate prisons. But by October 1864 things had changed, and there were 10,000 prisoners being held in terribly overcrowded conditions. In the next five months about 3500 men—one-third of the prisoners—died.

David Coon was one of these. In the Civil War diary of a sergeant in his company there is a simple entry dated November 2, 1864: “David Coon died today.”

## CHECK YOUR READING

- 1. The greatest concern demonstrated in David Coon's first letter home was for the**
  - A** safety of his regiment
  - B** progress of the war
  - C** welfare of his family
- 2. Coon's son Herbert apparently made a mistake that resulted in the loss of the family's**
  - A** herd of cattle
  - B** homestead
  - C** food supply
- 3. The greatest number of casualties in the Civil War resulted from**
  - A** wounds
  - B** famine
  - C** disease
- 4. Coon's regiment was afraid that its colonel would**
  - A** rush them into battle unprepared
  - B** retreat without informing them
  - C** refuse to take any prisoners
- 5. Later this fear proved to be**
  - A** well justified
  - B** highly exaggerated
  - C** baseless
- 6. At the siege of Petersburg, Coon's regiment fought for about**
  - A** ten days
  - B** four months
  - C** a year
- 7. When Coon fell out of line to help a sick soldier, an officer**
  - A** robbed him
  - B** struck him
  - C** mocked him
- 8. Coon's reaction to this kind of treatment can best be described as**
  - A** weary resignation
  - B** reckless fury
  - C** outspoken indignation
- 9. Coon's last letter home was written**
  - A** shortly before a battle
  - B** soon after his capture
  - C** days before his death
- 10. Coon's last letter indicated that his Confederate captors were treating him**
  - A** humanely
  - B** indifferently
  - C** cruelly

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