LINCOLN AND THE MILITARY TELEGRAPH CORPS

NO persons rushed with more patriotic fervor to the field of Mars than did the boys of the telegraph. It was my fortune to be made manager of the military telegraph office in the War Department early in the struggle, and it is therefore with confidence I speak of the organization and efficiency of the Military Telegraph Corps of the United States Army.

On the 27th of April, 1861, on the order of Secretary Cameron, David Strouse, David Homer Bates, Samuel Brown and Richard O'Brien, four of the best and most reliable operators on the Pennsylvania Railroad Company's telegraph line, arrived in Washington, and formed the germ out of which grew the best disciplined, the most wonderfully accurate, reliable and intelligent army telegraph corps ever known to the world. They were soon followed by others until over twelve hundred young men enrolled themselves in the corps and rendered services such as had never before been performed for any government. They were from sixteen to twenty-two, boys in years and stature but giants in loyalty and the amount of work they did for their country. A better-natured, more intelligent or harder working band did not exist in the army. They were ready to go anywhere at a moment's notice, and if necessary work day and night without rest, uncomplainingly.

Ofttimes they were sent where the sky was the only roof, a stump their only office, the ground their " downy couch."

With a handful of hard bread and a canteen of water, they would open and work an office on the picket line, to keep the commanding general in touch with his advanced forces, or to herald the first advance of the enemy. When retreat became necessary it was their place to remain behind and to announce that the rear guard had passed the danger line between it and the pursuing foe.

All the movements of the army, all the confidence of the com-

—Read before the United Service Club of Philadelphia.

manders, were entrusted to these boys, yet not one ever betrayed that knowledge and confidence in the most remote degree.

The military telegraph eventually assumed colossal proportions, extending to every part of the Union where a Union soldier could be found. Its delicate yet potent power was felt and appreciated by every department of the Government. The system was elaborate and complete—15,389 miles of wire and over six millions of military telegrams during the war, within the lines of the army.

The boys didn't plan campaigns or fight battles, but amidst the fiercest roar of conflict they were to be found coolly advising the commanding general of the battle's progress. When the army was in motion they were wherever duty was to be performed; when in repose, a thousand general officers had them at their elbows.

The corps was the very nerves of the army during the war, and was so considered by all those that came in contact with it, yet it was not, and has not been, recognized as an integral part of that army.

Its services were great, its sacrifices many. From Yorktown to Appomattox, almost every field, every march, numbered one of the telegraph boys among the fallen. A hundred nameless graves throughout the battlefields of the Union attest their devotion—yet the Government never so much as thanked them for their services. Of the twelve hundred, there are not two hundred left—those who did not die in action succumbed shortly after the war from wounds, or the effect of exposure and imprisonment.

Here let me say of the dead:

Not a funeral note was sounded as they were buried; not a flower is cast on their graves as Memorial Day returns; and of the survivors: They are not admitted to any of the various organizations of those who fought for the Union, and I am so far the only one invited to participate in any of the ceremonies or entertainments of such a society.

A few of the officers were commissioned and in consequence are borne upon the rolls of honor, but the rank and file, who performed the principal duties, although obliged to take an oath of allegiance and of

secrecy, not being technically sworn into the service, were disbanded without a word of thanks or a scrap of paper showing that they had honorably discharged their trying duties.

Secretary Stanton said, in one of his reports to Congress: "The military telegraph has been of inestimable value to the service, and no corps has surpassed it."

Though Congress has often been appealed to, to right the wrong and enroll the corps, the wrong remains unrighted.

One there was, had life been spared him, that would have seen justice done us—but the corps, like humanity in general, suffered when Abraham Lincoln died. It was through my connection with the corps that I knew Mr. Lincoln, and so I group a glimpse of him with one of it.

I first saw him in Harrisburg as he emerged from the Jones House, in the judicious act of flanking any hostile movement in Baltimore, as he proceeded to Washington. As a military telegrapher I came in contact with him many times daily, and often late at night. He was always on terms of easy familiarity with the operators, and so my acquaintance with him was formed.

I soon saw a man before me with a kind heart and charitable disposition, who had a duty to perform that he intended performing with conscientious exactitude. In the many telegrams he wrote or dictated, and in the conversations with Mr. Seward, who usually came with him to the telegraph office, he displayed a wonderful knowledge of the country, its resources and requirements, as well as an intuition of the needs and wants of the people.

In the autumn of 1861 there were many fires in Washington, and among the many great annoyances of irrelevant subjects thrust upon him in those trying times, were the constant offers from everywhere, to form fire brigades, as a component part of the army, for the protection of the Capital. He bore it all as a part of the responsibility resting on him; yet at last was compelled to rebuke it from sheer lack of time to give it any attention.

A committee of Philadelphia citizens eloquently urged the matter,

but valuable time was wasting, and Mr. Lincoln was forced to bring the conference to a close, which he did by gravely saying, and as if he had just awakened to the true import of the visit, " Ah! Yes, gentlemen, but it is a mistake to suppose that I am at the head of the Fire Department of Washington. I am simply the President of the United States." The quiet irony had its effect—the committee departed.

The personal familiarity of Mr. Lincoln, shown in his intercourse with the war telegraphers, already spoken of, cannot be better illustrated than by relating a few personal encounters with him:

September 26, 1861, was an appointed day for humiliation, fasting and prayer, and was generally observed throughout the North. We operators were extra vigilant at our posts; our boy George was engaged in preparing a " Daniels' battery " when, shortly after noon, Mr. Lincoln came in. Spying George, he accosted him with " Well, sonny, mixing the juices, eh? " Then taking a seat in a large arm-chair and adjusting his spectacles, he became aware that we were very busy. A smile broke over his face as he saluted us with " Gentlemen, this is Fast Day, and I am pleased to observe that you are working as *fast* as you can; the proclamation was mine, and that is my interpretation of its bearing upon you."

Then changing the subject he said, " Now we will have a little talk with Governor Morton, at Indianapolis. I want to give him a lesson in geography. Bowling Green affair I set him all right upon; now I will tell him something about Muldraugh Hill. Morton is a good fellow, but at times he is the skeeredest man I know of."

It was customary for Mr. Lincoln to make frequent calls at our office, either for direct telegraphic communication, or to get what he called news.

One day in September, 1861, he called with Mr. Seward, and saying pleasantly " Good morning, what news? " I replied, " Good news—because none;" whereupon he rejoined " Ah, my young friend, that rule don't always hold good, for a fisherman don't consider it good luck when he can't get a bite! "

Once, also with Mr. Seward, he entered. They seemed to have es-

caped from some great bore, and the President appeared greatly relieved as he sank into an arm-chair, saying, " By jings, Governor, we are here! " Mr. Seward turned to him, and in a manner of semi-reproof said: " Mr. President, where did you learn that inelegant expression? " Without replying Mr. Lincoln turned to us and said: " Young gentlemen, excuse me for swearing before you; ' by jings ' is swearing, for my good old mother taught me that anything that had a *by* before it is swearing. I won't do so any more."

Abraham Lincoln will live in the true history of his times as one who was unflinching in his devotion to duty, unswerving in fidelity and one who tried to live a manly life within the bounds of his comprehension of manhood's aims and duties.

WILLIAM B. WILSON.

PHILADELPHIA.

TWO LETTERS OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

(These two, on so widely different subjects, are alike as witnesses to Mr. Lincoln's kindness of heart. What other Chief Magistrate, of any nation, would have been equally ready in the midst of his harassing responsibilities, to allow the mother of a rebel prisoner to visit her son, and to help an unknown soldier to secure employment?)

Executive Mansion, Washington, Oct. 9, 1863.

Hon. Secretary of War:

Sir—Mrs. Thomas G. Clemsin is a daughter of the late Hon. John C. Calhoun, and is now residing near Bladensburg in Maryland. She understands that her son, Calhoun Clemsin, is now a prisoner of War to us at " Johnson's Island; " and she asks the privilege merely of visiting him. With your approbation, I consent for her to go—

Yours truly,

A. LINCOLN.

A short note, Dec. 9, 1864:

I shall be glad if any Department or Bureau can give employment to this discharged soldier.—A. LINCOLN.

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