

**“Individualism and Authority:
Vermont Soldiers’ Attitudes toward Military Discipline in the Civil War”**

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*“Some...boys are mad about it but we must submit to the rules & orders of military discipline.”¹
~ Letter of October 11, 1861 from Corporal Dan Mason, 6th Vermont, to wife Hattie*

The “war and society” approach to military scholarship has transformed our understanding of the Union soldier’s experience.² Many tomes have drawn on the methodologies of social and military history to produce a more representative narrative of Civil War service. Bell Irvin Wiley’s *The Life of Billy Yank* (1952) largely established a field that only reemerged in the late 1980s. Over the last several years, it has seen renewed activity.³ These national studies insist that soldiers generally adhered to authority *or* that individualistic Americans rejected coercion from their superiors. They concur that the system’s most violent aspects – physical chastisement and execution – horrified observers. Yael A. Sternhell recently pointed to the emergence of a twenty-first century “antiwar turn in Civil War scholarship,” a trend that Gary W. Gallagher and Kathryn Shively Meier have also noted.⁴ How historians depict soldierly indiscipline arguably fits into that historiographic debate.

These works prioritize the actual occurrence of disobedience over the soldier’s *representations* of discipline and regimentation to others. Discussions of their constrained daily lives, exposure to or administration of punishment, and (dis)regard for superiors and subordinates illuminates the transformation from novice to veteran. This article explores that rich discourse through the letters and diaries of soldiers from Vermont, a state that has received little scholarly attention in this area.⁵ These personal materials do not objectively reveal the combatants’ hopes and criticisms. Some authors were anxious that their missives not be subject to widespread distribution, suggesting a degree of self-censorship.⁶ Such communications also

cannot reveal the full scope of the disciplinary system. Lorien Foote observes that research lacking the examination of court-martial records and other judicial documentation has vastly underestimated the extent of disobedience.⁷ Instead, they offer insights into how soldiers processed their exposure to military regulations, and recast it textually for friends and family.

Based on over 300 letters, this article contends that Vermont soldiers generally supported authority and discipline, either as banal or specifically positive aspects of military life.⁸ The limited sample prevents a comparison of views over consecutive years (1861-1865), but it problematizes a historiographic tendency to depict troops as recalcitrant individualists. Strongly worded critiques were atypical, as nearly two-thirds of the documents offered *no substantive comment* on the subject. It is unclear whether these men concealed disagreeable anecdotes or believed them of minimal interest. The present work explores the coercive and punitive aspects of military life via three spheres of increasingly stressful (and infrequent) activity. First, the regimentation of drill, marching, and picket duty dominated the soldier's waking hours.⁹ Second, physical punishment exacerbated frictions in the officer-noncommissioned officer-private relationship. Third, desertion and execution constituted the two extremes of soldier agency.

Drill, Marching, and Picket Duty

Discipline constrained Vermonters' tenure under arms. Participants spent much time either in camp or on the move, and as volunteers greatly outnumbered regulars in the Union army, substantial training was a quotidian reality.¹⁰ Eyewitnesses and historians have judged this preparation ill-suited to combat realities with the rifle musket. Earl J. Hess has convincingly argued, however, that close-order formations remained effective, and that drill was a key factor in securing victory.¹¹ As demonstrated by the fourteen-step manual of arms, an elaborate weapons drill, period training was complex.¹² Proper usage of the rifle musket required

precision, for “the correct measuring of distances is one of the most delicate...points...officers should...exercise the soldier at it constantly.”¹³ Changing from line to column formation involved eighteen steps and contingencies.¹⁴ Army regulations specified that troops laboring on fortifications or other noncombat duties should “attend...if possible, one drill in every week.”¹⁵

Training involved controlled movements and concentration under fire, yet most soldiers’ studies have not explored it at length. James M. McPherson notes that regular officers valued it, but “the comparison of a private’s lot to that of a slave was a common one – especially among privates.”¹⁶ Still, he insists that Union troops eventually appreciated their preparations.¹⁷ Wiley claims that “long hours on the drill field, the newness of soldiering, and the good-natured but brutal treatment by the veterans made the life of most recruits a hard one.”¹⁸ Experienced soldiers resented the training requirement, yet complied.¹⁹

Focusing on Vermonters complicates this narrative, which Reid Mitchell encapsulates by asserting that “most...soldiers...underwent a psychological transformation...Military discipline required that their autonomy be curtailed.”²⁰ Those few who discussed training belied the image of civilians chafing against martial strictures. A captain wrote to the *Burlington Free Press* on June 30, 1861, just before First Bull Run, admitting that “our boys are...drilling as many hours as they can possibly stand.”²¹ He continued on July 2, saying that while privates had demanded rations before training, “we are drilled thoroughly each day in the manual of arms... We also practice some at target shooting.” This enthusiasm for regimentation contradicts the tension Steven J. Ramold describes between rural combatants’ independent masculinity and the military’s Victorian stress on “suppression of the individual...to gain status within the group.”²²

Men of diverse rank mirrored this portrayal. One recruit found drill exhausting yet necessary, as “it would be better for us who are not accustomed to severe exercise and labor to

drill here awhile.”²³ Two others enjoyed the process.²⁴ The leadership could be similarly ebullient. According to a second lieutenant, “Our Col....is a firm man and a good soldier. He has put us under U. S. army discipline and the men come into it first rate. Our whole encampment is like a real army encampment in many respects.”²⁵ Stern leaders and regular troops were evidently praiseworthy. One captain unqualifiedly described the daily routine, including ample training, and several more officers shared this bland perspective on discipline.²⁶

Two participants commented more extensively. Bemoaning entrenching duty and training, a second lieutenant declared that “we are going in to it man fashion this time. It is hard for a free spirit to be subject to the petty tyranny of officers...but it...does not fall to the lot of...every generation to take part in such a contest...I meditated, a long while before I concluded to enlist but I have never been sorry for it yet.”²⁷ The phrase “man fashion” implies that shying away from harsh training was emasculatory, differing from the sentimentality of period literature, and echoing veterans’ emotional resilience to battlefield death.²⁸ The author believed his contribution to the war outweighed temporary indignities. Artilleryman Isaac N. Watts judged drill tiresome but superior to more demanding labor or combat.²⁹ Although he once deplored the officers’ tone, it was no rejection of training.³⁰ A tension emerges between these attitudes and a historiographic emphasis on animosity toward professionalism.

The sparsity of these references in Vermonters’ letters suggests two possibilities: either soldiers sought to obscure their submission to regimentation, or they judged it a nonevent. This justifies going beyond one-sided narratives of excitement or dejection, for the sheer banality of the soldier’s experience is worth emphasizing. As Barton C. Myers suggests, “we need more military histories that address pointlessness, imbecility, futility, and frustration.”³¹

Marching offers another little-explored means of assessing views on discipline. Steven E. Woodworth depicts it as loathsome, while James I. Robertson Jr. underscores “the...shock [since]...Men were walking more at one time than they had ever done previously.”³² It was an amalgam of dust, mud, heat, poor nighttime coordination, and macabre landscapes wrought by prior combat.³³ While McPherson believes marching fostered troop cohesion, Eric T. Dean claims it encouraged desertion.³⁴ Vermont correspondence exhibits ambivalence as well. Private Hazen Blanchard Hooker related a difficult march to Hagerstown, Maryland:

There has been times when I thought I had been about far enough, but giving up in the army will never do. Anyone who thinks the soldiers life is an easy one, just let him carry what I have carried sixty miles and he will think differently....such is a soldiers life, but if a person has his health he will get along first rate....I am gitting along first rate, never felt better in my life. True we have seen some hard times, but never mind that.³⁵

The man may have ended positively to assuage family anxieties, but he curiously criticized the march, not overbearing officers. Another enlisted man, exhibiting neither outrage nor begrudging acceptance, reported that “many...died...from sunstroke....It is a forced march & they hurried them forward, as rapidly as possible.”³⁶ Was he inured to the hardships, or keeping his opinions to himself? The soldier pondered the cumulative impact of “marching seven days, from 20 to 25 miles each day,” followed by the Battle of Gettysburg, declaring “it wonderful that so many are alive & as well as we are.”³⁷ This unpleasant experience garnered resentment, but no castigation of commanders. In comparison, a lieutenant colonel found “the boys...much healthier when they have hard work to do,” and that despite scarce rations, he felt himself in excellent condition.³⁸ The fact that soldiers did not generally advance harsh critiques of the march suggests that expressing reservations would imperil their masculine physicality.³⁹

Watts faced continuous marching, and declared himself “never more nearly used up in my life.”⁴⁰ He believed “it...hard work to march and not feel well...but suppose I shall have to

take it.”⁴¹ Although resigned tiredness pervades his writings, Watts finished his enlistment and affirmed his willingness to serve after the fact.⁴² Only once did he concede to falling out of step during a strenuous day on the road.⁴³ Whether or not Watts and other combatants respected authority, they did not detail their tribulations. Highlighting neither exhaustion nor manly fortitude, grueling travel was apparently unsuitable for discussion.

Picket duty also involved key elements of military discipline: placing one’s body at the direction of superior officers, facing the risk of enemy fire, and the possibility of corporal punishment or execution for disobedience.⁴⁴ Some Vermonters evinced dissatisfaction with the role. Exemplifying the extant grumbling, Lieutenant Colonel William G. Veazey blamed his lack of sleep on the need to monitor his men all night:

they will kill us all by hard work ere long...Our reg’t have not had a full nights sleep for over a week. I have not slept at all hardly the past week...250 of our reg’t were sent out on picket last night with positive orders not to sleep, with the penalty of death...& yet some of those men had not slept for 60 hours...And then the men have to work on fatigue duty every moment when not on military duty.⁴⁵

One private blamed the assignment for widespread illness, insisting that “they will kill the regiment if they [don’t] stop working us so...Two of our boys...are under arrest for going to sleep on picket.”⁴⁶ Watts referred at least eleven times to serving as picket or guard, writing eagerly about the latter after promotion to corporal.⁴⁷ He admitted to inadequate rest on several occasions, yet favored it over regiment and camp guard duty.⁴⁸ A second lieutenant and major highlighted instead the risk of elemental exposure.⁴⁹ Complaints were limited in both scale and scope – those few who criticized picket duty did not speak against those ordering it. Placed in context against Vermonters’ references to training and marching, the result questions the supposed divergence between individualistic Americans and the demands of service. Soldiers did not exhibit a cultural impetus to depict these ubiquitous activities as impositions on their lives.

Physical Punishment and Officer-Noncommissioned Officer-Private Interaction

Scholars stress the often dramatic and painful nature of punishment. Wiley, for instance, refers to tying the guilty up by the thumbs as well as bucking and gagging. This “consisted of setting the offender down, tying his wrists together, slipping them over his knees and then running a stick or musket barrel through the space beneath the knees and over the arms” and “tying...a bayonet or piece of wood in the mouth.”⁵⁰ In this inconsistent judicial system, “punishments [were] usually tolerable,” although authorities could impose unpalatable consequences.⁵¹ Gerald F. Linderman argues that the purpose was to shock men into compliance who then bemoaned “officer tyranny,” while McPherson speaks of pervasive anti-disciplinarian sentiment.⁵² According to Foote, “whenever a unit experienced an influx of...urban roughs, lower-class immigrants, or propertyless rural laborers,” officers perceived them as emasculated and morally degenerate, employing physical coercion more readily.⁵³ Despite the common soldier’s antipathy to impoverished troops, imperious officers elicited widespread resistance.⁵⁴

Some Vermonters conceded the misery of corporal chastisement. A private resignedly mentioned that “one of our men stands tied up to a tree awaiting a Courtmartial I had to help tie him such duty is not very pleasant.”⁵⁵ The author isolated the event from the officer who instigated it, perhaps fearing he would tarnish his reputation as a dutiful, patriotic American. A few days later, he explained that a soldier had refused to hitch his horse in the correct place:

the Lieut then ordered him to stand on a barrel to punish him and he said he would not stand there for spectators to look at he was then tied to a tree...untill he was willing to stand...on the barrel there he hung 36 hours without any thing to eat or drink...about half the regt collected to gether and cut him down in spite of the Officers then they gave the Orderly three groans and called for a rail feathers and tar the rail was brought but the Chaplin made a little speech and advised the boys to return to their tents which they done after giving him three cheers the man was kept under guard four days and released.⁵⁶

This narrative assigns responsibility to the sergeant and lieutenant, and notes the regiment's backlash, but the author never betrays support of or resistance to authority. Given the rarity of such accounts, however, the events must have made an impression on him. There were more overt commentaries, including a private who described a brutal punishment and declared that "the boys are bound to have their rights and we will have them{.} sholder straps cant always order us round and I guess they begin to find it out."⁵⁷ Another deplored the grisly sight of "two men branded with a red hot pron...they are...tortureing the poor soldiers worse than the wild Indian."⁵⁸ If the average soldier avoided criticizing his superiors, as per an unspoken cultural standard, then this blunt tone requires explanation. Officers' wanton cruelty could justify insubordination, and historians have analyzed that expression of agency, yet excoriating the leadership in writing was agency of a less obvious form. Many Vermonters avoided dramatic literary gestures and reaffirmed the power structure. A white captain of United States Colored Troops detailed a cavalier approach to punishing the insubordinate:

Orderly comes in 'Cap'n James K. Polk wouldnt do as I told him went to cussin me' 'Take James K Polk to the guardhouse and put a ball and chain on him for twenty four hours.[?]' Another man comes in 'Cap'n I give head cook my money to keep when I was sick and he's been and gone to work and spent it all and wont pay me.[?]' Cook is sent for. Cook did you have this mans money to keep while he was sick? Yes sir. Pay him back before tomorrow morning or you go in to the guard house for a week in double irons. 'But Capn' 'Not a word. Leave.' That's the way we do things here.⁵⁹

This proud man brooked no challenges to his command, an attitude shaped by racism. He patronizingly described black soldiers' initial experience as guards, but concluded that they would prove superior to white combatants.⁶⁰ The letter was a performance for its recipient, for while the captain described his duties and unit, he took obvious satisfaction in his position. In like manner, Veazey discussed a murderous uproar in August 1861, when he was still a captain:

The boys attempted to tear down the Sutlers shop in camp & a guard inside shot...& killed one...My Co. was the first on the ground to quell the riot, altho they all

sympathized with the rioters...all was soon quiet. but they now swear to kill Col. Hyde & the man who shot....Col Hyde showed the right grit.⁶¹

Considering his acknowledgement of exhausted pickets, Veazey's lack of remorse about the offender's death demonstrates the boundaries of sympathy in Civil War writing. A plaintive tone was permissible concerning working conditions, namely extended hours on picket, and this casts doubt on period Americans' presumed zeal for labor.⁶² Outright resistance, in contrast, manifested in a less argumentative tone. One private explained that when a soldier attacked a lieutenant colonel, the latter "snapt his revolver at him but uut did not go so he turned it the other end to end knocked him down and then chucked him in the guard house and to day he has a court marshal."⁶³ This was no traditional punishment, but rather an officer's quick-thinking response to physical abuse *by* an enlisted man. It shows that observers did not always criticize corporal chastisement. Combatants might rail against autocratic aspects of military life, yet they generally did not consider them either pertinent or palatable to loved ones. In contrast, they highlighted officer-noncommissioned officer-private frictions and perceptions of rank.

Historians have argued that soldiers often acted out verbally and physically against their leaders. Wiley observes that the disobedient castigated officers, ignored commands, and occasionally turned to violence.⁶⁴ Linderman states that "volunteers...fiercely resisted subordination to a military hierarchy," some misbehaving to determine if their superiors were heavy-handed.⁶⁵ Unruly comportment was a way "to defend against officer infringements of the enlisted man's dignity; and to resist excessive punishments."⁶⁶ McPherson finds that privates detested haughty commanders.⁶⁷

Some Vermonters corroborated this interpretation. One sergeant condemned Ambrose E. Burnside's failed Mud March, the January 1863 attempt to outmaneuver the Army of Northern Virginia. He proclaimed that "it is to bad if we are to be made tools of for men to practice with

that are no more fit to take command than an eight[h] corporal.”⁶⁸ This was a denunciation of unqualified commanders rather than authority, and another soldier likewise praised his company’s leadership while faulting its sergeants.⁶⁹ More dramatic was the sergeant who flatly conceded “a great deal of ill feeling towards the Co....He got d__d {damned?} to his face by a number of privates...and a great many men... say they will never take the oath....The Adj. drew his revolver on one fellow who insulted him...but concluded not to fire.”⁷⁰ Denunciations were usually less overt. Discussing a captain’s censure and restoration to command, an assistant surgeon confessed that after he and two colonels had harangued the man, the latter:

offered his inexperience and age as mitigating circumstances and a pledge to do his duty to the very best of his abilities and they let him off with a severe reprimand, and I can assure you that none of us sorry. We should felt bad to have an officer of the 10th dishonorably discharged. You must has in mind that this is stictly confidential.⁷¹

This exemplifies how participants subtly balanced critique and reticence in writing. Comfortably detailing the castigation of fellow officers, the man indicated the unsuitability of such commentary in public. Veazey’s assessment of superiors displayed the same blend of grumbling and praise. He explained that “Genl Smith is a ‘hard case’ to be under yet he treats me so well, I cant but like him, altho I cant tell when my head will come off, for...if an officer fails... down he comes....An officer that violates a command even doing well he will punish. I have already committed, what he would call offences, enough to hang a whole reg’t had he known them.”⁷² The author anticipated a new role while dreading physical punishment. This justifies a more nuanced depiction of the officer-noncommissioned officer-private dynamic. Tension could reside not only between those groups, but within the officer corps itself. Offering multiple levels of commentary, Veazey’s describes General Winfield Scott Hancock as:

very exact & severe, yet he has a little compassion. He has given me some very good compliments...I could have got my name in the papers...by taking a step beyond my orders...& probably...got myself in arrest....the generals despise an officer who wants to

do some dashing thing...if a subordinate transgresses an order...I put him in arrest...Its the only way to keep these brainless fellows within reach.⁷³

Veazey boasted of his own adherence to orders and proclivity for arresting errant subordinates. Obedience and personal restraint, rather than individualism, emerge as behavioral norms not unique to commissioned officers. An orderly sergeant balanced the parameters of his duties and a growing ability to work within them without frustration. Among the tasks, he had to:

make a written Report...to the Adjutant every morning at half past Seven and go after my Report Book at noon. and if I fail to be there promptly at the minute I am liable to arrest and be reduced to the Ranks...I have to call out the Co. for Roll calls drills and all other purposes. Once I failed to get my Guard men to the Adjutants on time...I took a good round swearing at and was told if the thing happened again I should be put in arrest. When I first commenced it kept me in a perfect stew but now I have learned to take things cool although I should not work harder if I were at work on a farm.⁷⁴

These men highlighted less enjoyable aspects of service while affirming their commitment. One corporal stated that “our Col....appears to be smart &...pretty strict, if a man is late at Roll Call he goes in the Guard house.”⁷⁵ A first lieutenant remarked that “the Lieut. Col. is...capable...but not so smart or popular as the Col....Our Maj....was not capable but was bigoted and mean. Capt. Tucker is very popular...and makes a fine officer and I think much more of him than I used to.”⁷⁶ Musing on the judicial system’s shortcomings, he claimed there “is no chance for investigation till after the arrest and no inquiry made till after...which may be brought about by the hastiness of a superior officer or by mistake.”⁷⁷ A resigned quartermaster implied that other officers could be domineering, for when “I had Shoulder Straps on...I always treated the Privates as men.”⁷⁸ Such descriptions did not simplistically divide superiors from privates; there was space for selective praise and derision. Vermonters’ views of authority ranged from critiques of poor leaders to approval for troop discipline. Individual characteristics, not stereotypes about rank, shaped personal opinions of the system.

Desertion and Execution

Desertion has received extensive scholarly treatment. Noting the range of punishments, Wiley stresses that “executions for desertion, as for other crimes, were usually carried out...to inspire as much awe as possible.”⁷⁹ Linderman asserts that “public degradations and executions became extreme cases of officer tyranny.”⁸⁰ Dean depicts the latter as memorable deterrents, noting that unmarked burials reinforced “the prospect not only of death, but eternal oblivion.”⁸¹ Whether or not soldiers rebuked deserters as effeminate quitters, support for capital punishment was “almost unknown.”⁸²

Vermont attitudes were mixed. A second lieutenant and captain both favored imprisoning the guilty, the latter after twice mentioning desertion without comment.⁸³ One corporal declared that “two ofisers...went into the Rebel Army...they have to be below the savage,” using Native American stereotypes to portray the turncoat as uncivilized.⁸⁴ Others were less judgmental. Assistant Surgeon Joseph Rutherford contended that “Chase...came back...He is too simple to notion any thing of the kind in him.”⁸⁵ The crime was not so serious if the guilty returned. Private Bradford Sparrow described a pair of deserting draftees as “neither of them half witted,” apparently considering desertion foolish rather than cunning.⁸⁶ The soldier also explained that several substitutes (paid replacements for draftees) had fled to Canada.⁸⁷

Pondering loyalties torn between home and battlefield, some men declared their commitment to the latter. One musician feared separation from friends, but insisted he would remain in the ranks until honorable discharge.⁸⁸ Although the three-year enlistment was onerous, “now I am caught & I can do nothing but surrender.”⁸⁹ Another man remained cooperative despite a miserable experience. Vermont authorities drafted him after his New York enlistment ended. During transit to the front, they imprisoned him for two weeks amid ruffians who beat

and robbed him. Traveling on a boat, guards refused him shelter amid incessant rain, and when the man complained, put him in irons. He marched several miles to reach his unit and optimistically concluded: “you know the old saying is a bad beginning makes a good ending...I ought to have glorious good luck from this time out.”⁹⁰ His outlook changed a year later:

you said you was a union woman...and I want to please you so I play union but really I am getting a good deal sesesh feeling...if it wasent for you I should go over to them they use a private soldier with more respect than they do in our army when they...use the best blod of the north worse than...mules and keep them on worse fodder a fellow ought to get a thousand to come out here and stay three years but when others that never has been out get the spoil it looks to me rather tough.⁹¹

The private’s limited tolerance for overbearing officers reveals the performative aspect of letter writing. He may have detested the experience, but acted stolid for loved ones. One corporal avowed that he would keep a deserting friend’s flight a secret.⁹² Another insisted that if his unit returned to New York, “I would cum home if I had to mack out my own Furlough.”⁹³

Vermonters’ powerful commentary on the execution of deserters did not involve the castigation of authorities. Barton mentioned “two men shot...for disirtion...both drafted men or Substitutes,” and as the one soldier’s wife learned “he was shot the other day...perhaps she felt as bad or worse than you did when your yankee went to war.”⁹⁴ It is unclear whether the author considered the deaths disturbing or justified. Watts commented that “the principal affair to furnish excitement to day was the execution of three men who attempted to desert...They were hung at noon in sight of here but I didn’t think it worthwhile to favor the execution with my presence.”⁹⁵ Embarrassed at his regiment’s desertion rates, however, one captain testified emotionally to the visual shock of capital punishment:

three men...deserted to the enemy...and after awhile were taken...and sentenced to be hung and were accordingly executed. I have seen death in many forms on the battle field but never anything so horrible as to see those men swinging in the air giving their lives... it is just, but delvier me from ever seeing anything of the kind again as long as I live.⁹⁶

The captain, *both* horrified at the spectacle *and* supportive of authority, could not normalize this bloodletting. One verbose private described “a painful sight; even to the long tried soldier who has stood unmoved under the shower of leaden hail while the air is thick with the larger missiles of death... while his comrades are fast falling... Such scenes... are not compared to... the shooting of a comrade for desertion.”⁹⁷ Whether or not battlefield violence was more mentally damaging than a ritualized death sentence, the man *perceived* it so, and his written statements illustrate that authority had to be remarkably harsh to challenge norms of critique:

The troops were drawn up in a hollow square... and, he, who... in a moment of despondency, deserted his country's flag, was marched between them, preceded by the band “playing the dead march” and a strong guard, seated on his coffin... then he... took a look into his grave Ah! Did he not shudder when he thought of his home and friends, and ere many minutes must sleep in its bosom; he was left alone with the chaplain... shook hands with him and the officer who was to give the fatal word “fire” then was seated upon his coffin & the guards were at their posts, at the word ready their muskets were leveled at his breast, and... the command of “fire” was given and he fell to rise no more; this is the 2nd one who has been shot here this winter and six have been hung in the 6th Corps that I know of for the same offence But I fear I weary your patience.⁹⁸

Focused on the performative nature of execution, the private levied no outrage toward officers, and his reference to annoying the reader implies that these topics were unsuitably depressing. In contrast, a sergeant declared that “there is not much news hear there is three men hung hear evry Friday { . } there is going to be till thay hang fifty { . } thay are Diserters... fighting against Uncle Sam they dont get much pity hear.”⁹⁹ This man's callousness and belief that executions were not newsworthy illustrates the diversity of opinion on capital punishment.

A restrained critique typified most views on execution. Watts, for example, stated that “a deserter was shot... at noon to day. Did not witness the execution.”¹⁰⁰ Rutherford recounted a similar proceeding.¹⁰¹ Later in the war, he spoke of a like incident, declaring “it is a solom thing to think of and I most wish... that he might live though he richly deserves his punishment { . } But it seems such a terrible thought to be knocked out of the world in such a manner that one cannot

help feeling that...his fate could be everted. I shall not go to see the execution as I dislike such scenes very much.”¹⁰² The author’s anguish captures a struggle between what these men felt was just, and the unpleasant mechanisms that ensured conformity.

Conclusion

This study justifies thinking more expansively about soldiers’ perceptions of discipline, which encompassed drill, marching, and picket duty. Combatants advanced few grievances, and generally abstained from denouncing their superiors. Context, not tropes about oppressive commanders and suffering subordinates, influenced their views of punishment and rank. Deserters elicited both sympathetic and judgmental commentary, their execution a moral dilemma for men averse to brutality yet supportive of obedience. Ultimately, rejections of authority focused on the action rather than the actor.

The sampled Vermont soldiers did not wholly reveal their opinions, neither recounting disorderly exploits with pride, nor complaining about superiors. Their combination of truth, obfuscation, and posturing highlights the fruitfulness of social and cultural approaches to military history. This contributes to the debate Gallagher and Meier, as well as Sternhell, elucidated several years ago. Simple binaries are a poor means of typifying these men. They were not flagrantly resistant or compliant, not merely the victims of an oppressive experience or heroic figures. Civilians turned soldiers, they were all these things, and studies of the soldier’s experience should embrace their multi-faceted character.

¹ Dan Mason to Hattie Mason, 11 October 1861, Dan Mason letters (MSA 89), Vermont Historical Society website.

² For the evolution of military history, see Tami Davis Biddle and Robert M. Citino, “The Role of Military History in the Contemporary Academy” (white paper for Society for Military History, November 30, 2014), <http://www.smh-hq.org/docs/SMHWhitePaper.pdf>.

³ This paper will periodically draw attention to historiographic trends and its own contribution to that scholarly exchange. Recent additions to the literature, to be discussed in more detail below, include Lorien Foote’s *The Gentlemen and the Roughs: Violence, Honor, and Manhood in the Union Army* and Steven J. Ramold’s *Baring the Iron Hand: Discipline in the Union Army*.

⁴ Yael A. Sternhell, “Revisionism Reinvented? The Antiwar Turn in Civil War Scholarship,” *The Journal of the Civil War Era* 3 (2013): 239-240, doi:10.1353/cwe.2013.0023. Gary W. Gallagher and Kathryn Shively Meier claim that “while amateur enthusiasts... remain entranced by the traditional – generals, storied national armies, battles, and soldiers in the ranks – academics seldom value the expertise required to probe any except the last of these topics (and only some aspects of it).” Gary W. Gallagher and Kathryn Shively Meier, “Coming to Terms with Civil War Military History,” *The Journal of the Civil War Era* 4 (2014): 487-488, doi:10.1353/cwe.2014.0070. They point out that “the most recent incarnation of the increasing focus on victims in Civil War history appears to be our scholarly preoccupation with the war’s ‘dark side’ – studies that emphasize, among other things, atrocities, cowardice, needless bloodshed, physical maiming, or mental breakdowns among soldiers and veterans.” *Ibid.*, 492.

⁵ No academic work devoted to Vermont Civil War soldiers exists, although popular historian Howard Coffin has written several narratives over the past twenty years. See also the postwar contribution: George G. Benedict, *Vermont in the Civil War: A History...*, 2 vols. (Burlington: The Free Press Association, 1886-88).

⁶ About five percent of the over 300 letters examined for this study contain admonitions against sharing or publishing their contents.

⁷ Lorien Foote, *The Gentlemen and the Roughs: Violence, Honor, and Manhood in the Union Army* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), Kindle edition, 129.

⁸ The letter and diary excerpts quoted here will not include “sic” to denote period grammar and spelling errors. Barring the removal of extra spaces, the occasional addition of a word will be indicated by curly braces ({ }). Grammar changes made by the editor of published letters will be indicated by square brackets ([]).

⁹ This is not to suggest that soldiers’ lives lacked periods of relaxation and even boredom. As Steven J. Ramold explains, “Adding to the lack of dedication, the long stretches of mind-numbing tedium also sapped the soldiers’ will to fight as the glamour of combat and army life disappeared.” Steven J. Ramold, *Baring the Iron Hand: Discipline in the Union Army* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010), 54.

¹⁰ Relative to time spent in camp and on the march, battles were infrequent. Consider the Army of the Potomac’s stasis from First Bull Run (July 21, 1861) to the start of the Peninsula Campaign (March 17, 1862), or from Fredericksburg (December 13, 1862) to Chancellorsville (May 1-4, 1863). For the small size of the Regular Army on the eve of the Civil War, and its rapid expansion via volunteers, see Russell F. Weigley, *History of the United States Army* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 199-201.

¹¹ For changing views on the rifle musket, see Earl J. Hess, *Civil War Infantry Tactics: Training, Combat, and Small-Unit Effectiveness* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015), 223, 235; for quote, see *ibid.*, 227.

¹² William J. Hardee, *Rifle and Light Infantry Tactics* (Memphis: E. C. Kirk & Co., 1861), 8-9, <https://archive.org/details/hardeesrifleligh01hard>.

¹³ Cadmus M. Wilcox, *Rifles and Rifle Practice: An Elementary Treatise...* (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1859), 67, https://books.google.com/books?id=JNtEAAAIAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false.

¹⁴ Silas Casey, *Infantry Tactics, for the Instruction, Exercise, and Maneuvers...*, vol. 2 (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1865), 19-24, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/nyp.33433008592564>.

¹⁵ *Revised United States Army Regulations of 1861* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1863), 127, <https://archive.org/details/revisedunitedst00deptgoog>.

¹⁶ James M. McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 47.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁸ Bell Irvin Wiley, *The Life of Billy Yank: The Common Soldier of the Union* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1952), 51; for quote, see *ibid.*, 54.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 54-55.

²⁰ Reid Mitchell, *Civil War Soldiers* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 56-57.

²¹ In some cases, the rank and identity of Vermont soldiers cited in this article is unclear based on letters and diaries alone. To verify this information, their names were compared against a detailed listing of names and service records contained in the appendix of Jeffrey D. Marshall, ed., *A War of the People: Vermont Civil War Letters* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1999). Where necessary, this information was crosschecked against Theodore S. Peck, comp., *Revised Roster of Vermont Volunteers and Lists of Vermonters Who Served in the Army and Navy of the United States...* (Montpelier: Watchman Publishing Co., Publishers and Printers, 1892), https://archive.org/stream/cu31924080774148/cu31924080774148_djvu.txt, and the database of Vermont in the Civil War, <http://vermontcivilwar.org/>.

²² Ramold, *Baring the Iron Hand*, 5.

²³ Joseph L. Perkins to brother, 23 April 1861, in Marshall, *A War of the People*, 22.

²⁴ See Justin F. Gale to Charley Gale, 7 February 1862, *ibid.*, 60-61.; William H. Daniels to Blake, 16 February 1862, *ibid.*, 64.

²⁵ Roswell Farnham to Mary Farnham, 5 May 1861, Special Collections, University of Vermont, Burlington, Vermont, <http://cdi.uvm.edu/collections/getCollection.xql?pid=civilwar&title=Vermonters%20in%20the%20Civil%20War>. All further citations from this archive will include the author, address, date, and the abbreviation "UVM."

²⁶ William Y.W. Ripley to Kelie (Cornelia) Ripley, 26 May 1861, in Marshall, *A War of the People*, 28; for other officers, see Henry E. Dunbar to father, 31 July 1861, *ibid.*, 44; Walter W. Smith to sister, 9 March 1862, *ibid.*, 66.

²⁷ Dustan S. Walbridge to Clara Walbridge Rogers, 15 September 1862, in Jutta R. Scott and Michelle Arnosky Sherburne, comp. and ed., *A Vermont Hill Town in the Civil War: Peacham's Story* (Peacham: Peacham Historical Association, 2012), 38.

²⁸ One such study claims that "sentimental individualism...during the war...received new energy within the realm of popular literature." Alice Fahs, "The Sentimental Soldier in Popular Civil War Literature," *Civil War History* 46 (2000): 110, doi:10.1353/cwh.2000.0040. It continues that "the concept of manliness included feminized components that late in the century would be excised from new concepts of masculinity." *Ibid.*, 118. The notion that Victorian literature maintained a certain elevated tone is something Hess explores in relation to veterans' postwar writings. He notes that some combatants avoided discussing the most unpleasant aspects of their service because "literary standards and the dictates of polite society convinced many men to soften or sidestep certain issues." Earl J. Hess, *The Union Soldier in Battle: Enduring the Ordeal of Combat* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997), 182. In regards to veterans' resilience, Gary Laderman cites Elisha Hunt Rhodes: "death is so common that little sentiment is wasted. It is not like death at home." Gary Laderman, *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Toward Death, 1799-1883* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1996), 139.

²⁹ For tiresome, see 2 February 1864 entry in diary of Isaac N. Watts, in Scott and Sherburne, *A Vermont Hill Town*, 60; for preference of drill over fatigue, see 21 January 1864 entry, *ibid.*, 59; for combat, see 28 November 1864 entry, *ibid.*, 87.

³⁰ 31 January 1865 entry, *ibid.*, 95.

³¹ Barton C. Myers, "The Future of Civil War Era Studies: Military History," *The Journal of the Civil War Era* 2 (2012): 4, <http://journalofthecivilwarera.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/Final-Myers.pdf>.

³² For loathsome, see Steven E. Woodworth, ed., *The Loyal, True, and Brave: America's Civil War Soldiers* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 2002), 151; for shock, see *ibid.*, 153.

³³ *Ibid.*, 154-156.

³⁴ McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades*, 58; Eric T. Dean, *Shook Over Hell: Post-Traumatic Stress, Vietnam, and the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 68.

³⁵ Hazen Blanchard Hooker to parents and brother, 6 November 1862, in Scott and Sherburne, *A Vermont Hill Town*, 47-48.

³⁶ Royal D. King to sister, 16 June 1863, in Marshall, *A War of the People*, 156-157.

³⁷ King to sister, 9 July 1863, *ibid.*, 171.

³⁸ William D. Munson to wife, 29 June 1863, *ibid.*, 160.

³⁹ Examining period norms of masculinity, Bruce Tap highlights "the self-seeking individualist who accompanied the market revolution that unevenly impacted the United States in the early nineteenth century." Bruce Tap, "Inevitability, Masculinity, and the American Military Tradition: The Committee on the Conduct of the War Investigates the American Civil War," *American Nineteenth Century History* 5 (2004): 25, doi:10.1080/1466465042000257846. He cites Joe Dubbert, who contends that such a person disregarded "the needs of others...[because such behavior] would have signaled sentimentality, a symptom of weakness." *Ibid.* Although an affinity for violence and physicality – ranging from childhood dares to adult duels – was a central theme, "as boys became men, they were expected to restrain their aggressive instincts with reason and calculation." *Ibid.*, 25-26. In this context, the idea that Vermont soldiers tried to downplay their physical limits is unsurprising.

⁴⁰ 24 May 1864 entry in diary of Watts, in Scott and Sherburne, *A Vermont Hill Town*, 67.

⁴¹ 27 May 1864 entry, *ibid.*, 68.

⁴² 1 December 1864 entry, *ibid.*, 88.

⁴³ 31 May 1865 entry, *ibid.*, 104.

⁴⁴ Unless otherwise stated, the term "picket duty" denotes picket *and* guard duty. Some soldiers made a careful distinction between these two activities, but according to one technical manual, the Union army used a variety of

terms to describe similar activities. “In the field there are, in addition to campguards and police-guards, advanced guards, outposts, pickets, and reconnoissances....ADVANCED GUARDS are guards thrown out to the front in the direction in which the enemy is expected, to guard against attack or surprise....OUTPOSTS are isolated advanced guards of greater or lesser strength. When composed of small detachments, they are called ‘picket-guards.’...RECONNOISSANCES are made by troops against the enemy for the purpose of finding out his position and strength....PICKET...is used differently, and has different meanings in various works. It is used in our army to designate the advanced *sentinels* of an ‘advanced guard.’” August V. Kautz, *Customs of Service for Non-Commissioned Officers and Soldiers* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1864), 44-46, <https://archive.org/details/customsservicef00kautgoog>.

⁴⁵ Wheelock G. Veazey to Julia A. Veazey, 14 September 1861, UVM.

⁴⁶ Moses A. Parker to Eliza Hale, 19 September 1861, in Marshall, *A War of the People*, 46.

⁴⁷ 28 March 1864 entry in diary of Watts, in Scott and Sherburne, *A Vermont Hill Town*, 64.

⁴⁸ For inadequate rest, see 29 March 1864, *ibid.*; for favored, see 7 May 1864 entry, *ibid.*, 66; for versus guard duty, see 31 January 1865, 4 February 1865, and 18 March 1865 entries, *ibid.*, 95, 96 and 98 respectively; for differences between picket and guard duty, see footnote 53.

⁴⁹ For second lieutenant, see Samuel Sumner to parents, 12 November 1861, *ibid.*, 52; for major, see William Wells to Anna Richardson, 25 March 1864, *ibid.*, 217.

⁵⁰ Wiley, *The Life of Billy Yank*, 200.

⁵¹ For inconsistent, see *ibid.*, 210, 215; for quote, see *ibid.*, 223; for consequences, see *ibid.*, 194.

⁵² Gerald F. Linderman, *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War* (New York: The Free Press, 1987), 56-59; McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades*, 57.

⁵³ For quote, see Foote, *The Gentlemen and the Roughs*, Kindle edition, 128; for emasculate and morally degenerate, see *ibid.*, 120.

⁵⁴ For impoverished, see *ibid.*, 120; for resistance, see *ibid.*, 127.

⁵⁵ Henry A. Smith to mother, 14 September 1862, UVM.

⁵⁶ Henry Smith to family, 24 September 1862, UVM.

⁵⁷ Peter M. Abbott to family, 31 August 1863, in Marshall, *A War of the People*, 179.

⁵⁸ Solomon G. Heaton to father, 24 November 1863, UVM.

⁵⁹ Arthur P. Morey to cousin, 4 February 1864, in Marshall, *A War of the People*, 206.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Veazey to Julia Veazey, 21 July 1861, UVM.

⁶² Surveying the years leading up to the Civil War, Eric Foner writes that “belief in the dignity of labor was not, of course, confined to the Republican party or to the ante-bellum years; it has been part of American culture from the very beginning.” *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 12.

⁶³ Albert Kinerson to Truman Kinerson, 7 February 1862, in Scott and Sherburne, *A Vermont Hill Town*, 32.

⁶⁴ Wiley, *The Life of Billy Yank*, 199.

⁶⁵ For quote, Linderman, *Embattled Courage*, 36; for misbehaving, see *ibid.*, 47.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁶⁷ McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades*, 55.

⁶⁸ Frederick Godfrey to Sophia, 29 January 1863, in Marshall, *A War of the People*, 133.

⁶⁹ Willard M. Thayer to Esther Thayer and children, 17 October 1862, *ibid.*, 116.

⁷⁰ Joseph Spafford to Mary Jane Spafford, 20 September 1861, UVM.

⁷¹ Joseph Rutherford to Hannah Rutherford, 6 April 1863, UVM.

⁷² Veazey to Albin Beard, 8 September 1861, UVM.

⁷³ Veazey to Julia Veazey, 4 October 1861, UVM.

⁷⁴ Ransom W. Towle to Rufus and Sebra Towle, 7 December 1861, UVM.

⁷⁵ Dunbar to father, 31 July 1861, in Marshall, *A War of the People*, 44.

⁷⁶ George W. Quimby to Emeline B. Masta, 10 February 1862, UVM.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Aldis O. Brainerd to Ann Eliza Smith, 13 June 1862, in Marshall, *A War of the People*, 84.

⁷⁹ Wiley, *The Life of Billy Yank*, 206.

⁸⁰ Linderman, *Embattled Courage*, 59.

⁸¹ For deterrents, see Dean, *Shook Over Hell*, 68; for oblivion, see *ibid.*, 69.

⁸² For effeminate quitters, see *ibid.*, 202, 180; for quote, see *ibid.*, 127.

⁸³ For second lieutenant, see Alfred Horton Keith to father, 22 October 1861, Horton Keith letters (MSA 82), Vermont Historical Society website; for captain advocating imprisonment, see Valentine G. Barney to Maria Barney, 10 February, 1863, in Marshall, *A War of the People*, 136; for mentions of desertion, see *ibid.*, 12 October 1862, UVM; *ibid.*, 18 December 1862, UVM.

⁸⁴ Henry Harrison Wilder to mother, 28 April 1862, UVM.

⁸⁵ Rutherford to Hannah Rutherford, 5 July 1863, UVM.

⁸⁶ For quote, see Bradford Sparrow to parents and brothers, 16 April 1864, UVM.

⁸⁷ Sparrow to parents and brothers, 18 February 1864, UVM.

⁸⁸ James E. Hart to Nellie, 16 June 1861, in Marshall, *A War of the People*, 32.

⁸⁹ Hooker to parents and brother, 30 April 1864, in Scott and Sherburne, *A Vermont Hill Town*, 53.

⁹⁰ Edwin Horton to Ellen Horton, 28 September 1863, in Marshall, *A War of the People*, 181.

⁹¹ Horton to wife, 19 August 1864, Edwin Horton letters (Mss-21#016), Vermont Historical Society website.

⁹² Hosea B. Williams to Parker, 28 September 1863, in Marshall, *A War of the People*, 181.

⁹³ Abbott most likely to parents, 15 August 1864, *ibid.*, 254.

⁹⁴ Lyman Barton to Melissa Barton, 1 December 1863, UVM.

⁹⁵ 16 December 1864 entry in diary of Watts, in Scott and Sherburne, *A Vermont Hill Town*, 89.

⁹⁶ Darius J. Safford to sister, 17 December 1864, in Marshall, *A War of the People*, 280.

⁹⁷ Parker to Hale, 5 January 1865, *ibid.*, 285-286.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Londus W. Haskell to mother, 1 January 1865, *ibid.*, 285.

¹⁰⁰ 6 January 1865 entry in diary of Watts, in Scott and Sherburne, *A Vermont Hill Town*, 93-94.

¹⁰¹ Rutherford to Hannah Rutherford, 18 September 1863, UVM.

¹⁰² Rutherford to son, 8 March 1865, UVM.