

# Letters of a Civil War Nurse

Cornelia Hancock, 1863–1865

EDITED BY

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## I A YOUNG QUAKERESS GOES TO WAR

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EVEN on a sand-hill one may acquire a reputation for independence of character bordering on eccentricity by doing nothing more than going quietly one's own way and letting one's neighbor go his; and this was the reputation my family had acquired in the little village of Hancock's Bridge, New Jersey, long before the Civil War broke out.

All through the Township, my father was known as "Thomas Y., the fisherman," and as the one man in those parts who was foolish enough to vote for Frémont in the election of 1856. He was a silent man who spent his time thinking and fishing in the little stream known as Alloway's Creek, a tributary of the Delaware, and I never knew of his having any other occupation except that of reading the newspapers. In order to fish more successfully, he went to bed with the tide and got up when it turned; his days and nights were planned solely with reference to slack water. He owned a canoe built to suit himself and to hold but one person. On it were painted the letters "ItyT"—the title having been invented with great care and ingenuity for the exclusive purpose of baffling idle curiosity. No one could pronounce the word or imagine what it meant, and it pleased him never to tell his numerous questioners that the pronunciation consisted in naming each letter separately. We lived on our inherited property and ate fish every day. As it was impossible for us to eat all the fish father caught in Alloway's Creek, a large number was given away to the village people, about six of the finest being reserved

daily for our own use. It never occurred to my father to sell them or do anything else to add to the income of the family. We had enough to *live on* and if we wanted more we could get it ourselves—and we generally did.

A nonconformist by nature, my father believed that every man should be a law unto himself. He should carefully avoid interference with the rights of others and take as little interest as possible in other people's affairs. These were the cardinal points of his confession of faith. When I told him one day that I had looked into a neighbor's window as I passed by, and knew exactly what she was putting on her table for supper, he replied that he had walked past that window for fourteen years and had never once looked in, and that I might find something better to do—a reproof I never forgot.

A maternal grandmother, of whom my father used to say: "No teakettle could pour fast enough to suit her without she tipped it over," was supposed to have supplied my brother and myself with ambition enough to overcome the inertia on the other side of the house, and after the War had been a hideous reality for two years and more, it seemed to me that the teakettle of life was pouring out very slowly indeed its scalding stream of anxiety, woe, and endless waiting. After my only brother and every male relative and friend that we possessed had gone to the War, I deliberately came to the conclusion that I, too, would go and serve my country. I confided this resolution to my sister's husband, Dr. Henry T. Child, who lived in Philadelphia where he was well known in philanthropic and antislavery circles. He promised to let me know of the first available opportunity to be of use.

The summons came on the morning of July fifth, 1863, when his horse and carriage was sent for me on a Fourth of July excursion boat that was returning to Salem by the Delaware River. It arrived in the early morning and was driven the five miles beyond the town to where I lived. When it was driven up in front of our house, my mother threw up both of her hands and exclaimed to father: "Oh, Tom, what has happened?" I had not risen, but hear-

ing Mother's exclamation, and surmising, I said: "Oh, nothing, Mother. Doctor has sent for me to go to war!" So it proved, and in an hour's time I was off for Philadelphia. I well remember when driving through Salem my friends were going to church, so I hid myself down in the carriage lest I should be stopped to be bidden good-bye or saluted by any of the formalities they might wish to indulge in. Much less did I want to hear them say: "Why, Cornelia, thee is too young to go."

It was late in the afternoon when we reached Philadelphia. The city was wild with excitement over news of a terrible battle which had just been fought on Pennsylvania soil—no one knew exactly where—but it finally became known as having occurred at a little town called Gettysburg. The Rebel army was at first supposed by many to be on its way to Philadelphia. Every hour was bringing tidings of the awful loss of life on both sides. Dr. Child, with a number of other physicians, had determined to leave that night by the eleven o'clock train for Gettysburg. I was to accompany him.

He and the Hon. Judge Kelly had aided Miss Eliza Farnham, a well-known public-spirited woman, with a number of others of "suitable age" to get passes as volunteer nurses. The ladies in the party were many years older than myself, and I was under the especial care of Miss Farnham. At eleven p. m. we were wending our way out Washington Avenue to Broad and Prime streets, then the depot. The darkness, the uncertainty of everything, were appalling, and when we reached Havre de Grace, we heard the cars creaking weirdly on the pontoon bridges over the Susquehanna River. The morning found us in Baltimore where there was stir and some knowledge of events. Here Dorothea Dix appeared on the scene. She looked the nurses over and pronounced them all suitable except me. She immediately objected to my going farther on the score of my youth and rosy cheeks. I was then just twenty-three years of age. In those days it was considered indecorous for angels of mercy to appear otherwise than gray-haired and spectacled. Such a thing as a hospital corps of comely young maiden nurses, possessing grace and

good looks, was then unknown. Miss Farnham explained that she was under obligation to my friends who had helped her get proper credentials. The discussion waxed warm and I have no idea what conclusion they came to, for I settled the question myself by getting on the car and staying in my seat until the train pulled out of the city of Baltimore. They had not forcibly taken me from the train, so I got into Gettysburg the night of July sixth—where the need was so great that there was no further cavil about age.

We arrived in the town of Gettysburg on the evening of July sixth, three days after the last day of battle. We were met by Dr. Horner, at whose house we stayed. Every barn, church, and building of any size in Gettysburg had been converted into a temporary hospital. We went the same evening to one of the churches, where I saw for the first time what war meant. Hundreds of desperately wounded men were stretched out on boards laid across the high-backed pews as closely as they could be packed together. The boards were covered with straw. Thus elevated, these poor sufferers' faces, white and drawn with pain, were almost on a level with my own. I seemed to stand breast-high in a sea of anguish.

The townspeople of Gettysburg were in devoted attendance, and there were many from other villages and towns. The wounds of all had been dressed at least once, and some systematic care was already established. Too inexperienced to nurse, I went from one pallet to another with pencil, paper, and stamps in hand, and spent the rest of that night in writing letters from the soldiers to their families and friends. To many mothers, sisters, and wives I penned the last message of those who were soon to become the "beloved dead."

Learning that the wounded of the Third Division of the Second Corps, including the 12th Regiment of New Jersey, were in a Field Hospital about five miles outside of Gettysburg, we determined to go there early the next morning, expecting to find some familiar faces among the regiments of my native state. As we drew near our destination we began to realize that war has other horrors than the sufferings of the wounded or the desolation of the bereft. A sicken-

ing, overpowering, awful stench announced the presence of the unburied dead, on which the July sun was mercilessly shining, and at every step the air grew heavier and fouler, until it seemed to possess a palpable horrible density that could be seen and felt and cut with a knife. Not the presence of the dead bodies themselves, swollen and disfigured as they were, and lying in heaps on every side, was as awful to the spectator as that deadly, nauseating atmosphere which robbed the battlefield of its glory, the survivors of their victory, and the wounded of what little chance of life was left to them.

As we made our way to a little woods in which we were told was the Field Hospital we were seeking, the first sight that met our eyes was a collection of semi-conscious but still living human forms, all of whom had been shot through the head, and were considered hopeless. They were laid there to die and I hoped that they were indeed too near death to have consciousness. Yet many a groan came from them, and their limbs tossed and twitched. The few surgeons who were left in charge of the battlefield after the Union army had started in pursuit of Lee had begun their paralyzing task by sorting the dead from the dying, and the dying from those whose lives might be saved; hence the groups of prostrate, bleeding men laid together according to their wounds.

There was hardly a tent to be seen. Earth was the only available bed during those first hours after the battle. A long table stood in this woods and around it gathered a number of surgeons and attendants. This was the operating table, and for seven days it literally ran blood. A wagon stood near rapidly filling with amputated legs and arms; when wholly filled, this gruesome spectacle withdrew from sight and returned as soon as possible for another load. So appalling was the number of the wounded as yet unsuccored, so helpless seemed the few who were battling against tremendous odds to save life, and so overwhelming was the demand for any kind of aid that could be given quickly, that one's senses were benumbed by the awful responsibility that fell to the living. Action of a kind hitherto unknown and unheard of was needed here and existed here only.

From the pallid countenances of the sufferers, their inarticulate cries, and the many evidences of physical exhaustion which were common to all of them, it was swiftly borne in upon us that nourishment was one of the pressing needs of the moment and that here we might be of service. Our party separated quickly, each intent on carrying out her own scheme of usefulness. No one paid the slightest attention to us, unusual as was the presence of half a dozen women on such a field; nor did anyone have time to give us orders or to answer questions. Wagons of bread and provisions were arriving and I helped myself to their stores. I sat down with a loaf in one hand and a jar of jelly in the other: it was not hospital diet but it was food, and a dozen poor fellows lying near me turned their eyes in piteous entreaty, anxiously watching my efforts to arrange a meal. There was not a spoon, knife, fork, or plate to be had that day, and it seemed as if there was no more serious problem under Heaven than the task of dividing that too well-baked loaf into portions that could be swallowed by weak and dying men. I succeeded, however, in breaking it into small pieces, and spreading jelly over each with a stick. A shingle board made an excellent tray, and it was handed from one to another. I had the joy of seeing every morsel swallowed greedily by those whom I had prayed day and night I might be permitted to serve. An hour or so later, in another wagon, I found boxes of condensed milk and bottles of whiskey and brandy. It was an easy task to mix milk punches and to serve them from bottles and tin cans emptied of their former contents. I need not say that every hour brought an improvement in the situation, that trains from the North came pouring into Gettysburg laden with doctors, nurses, hospital supplies, tents, and all kinds of food and utensils: but that *first* day of my arrival, the sixth of July, and the third day after the battle, was a time that taxed the ingenuity and fortitude of the living as sorely as if we had been a party of shipwrecked mariners thrown upon a desert island.

## II AFTER THE BATTLE OF GETTYSBURG



*Gettysburg, Pa. July 7th, 1863.*

MY DEAR COUSIN

I AM very tired tonight; have been on the field all day—went to the 3rd Division 2nd Army Corps. I suppose there are about five hundred wounded belonging to it. They have one patch of woods devoted to each army corps for a hospital. I being interested in the 2nd, because Will [her brother] had been in it, got into one of its ambulances, and went out at eight this morning and came back at six this evening. There are no words in the English language to express the sufferings I witnessed today. The men lie on the ground; their clothes have been cut off them to dress their wounds; they are half naked, have nothing but hard-tack to eat only as Sanitary Commissions, Christian Associations, and so forth give them. I was the first woman who reached the 2nd Corps after the three days fight at Gettysburg. I was in that Corps all day, not another woman within a half mile. Mrs. Harris was in first division of 2nd Corps. I was introduced to the surgeon of the post, went anywhere through the Corps, and received nothing but the greatest politeness from even the lowest private. You can tell Aunt that there is every opportunity for “secesh” sympathizers to do a good work among the butternuts; we have lots of them here suffering fearfully. To give you some idea of the extent and numbers of the wounds, four surgeons, none of whom were idle fifteen minutes at a time, were busy all day amputating legs and arms. I gave to every man that had a leg or arm off a gill

of wine, to every wounded in Third Division, one glass of lemonade, some bread and preserves and tobacco—as much as I am opposed to the latter, for they need it very much, they are so exhausted.

I feel very thankful that this was a successful battle; the spirit of the men is so high that many of the poor fellows said today, "What is an arm or leg to whipping Lee out of Penn." I would get on first rate if they would not ask me to write to their wives; *that* I cannot do without crying, which is not pleasant to either party. I do not mind the sight of blood, have seen limbs taken off and was not sick at all.

It is a very beautiful, rolling country here; under favorable circumstances I should think healthy, but now for five miles around, there is an awful smell of putrefaction. Women are needed here very badly, anyone who is willing to go to field hospitals, but nothing short of an order from Secretary Stanton or General Halleck will let you through the lines. Major General Schenk's order for us was not regarded as anything; if we had not met Miss Dix at Baltimore Depot, we should not have gotten through. It seems a strange taste but I am glad we did. We stay at Doctor Horner's house at night—direct letters care of Dr. Horner, Gettysburg, Pa. If you could mail me a newspaper, it would be a great satisfaction, as we do not get the news here and the soldiers are so anxious to hear; things will be different here in a short time.

CORNELIA

*Gettysburg—July 8th, 1863.*

MY DEAR SISTER

WE have been two days on the field; go out about eight and come in about six—go in ambulances or army buggies. The surgeons of the Second Corps had one put at our disposal. I feel assured I shall never feel horrified at anything that may happen to me hereafter. There is a great want of surgeons here; there are hundreds of brave fellows, who have not had their wounds dressed since the battle.

Brave is not the word; more, more Christian fortitude never was witnessed than they exhibit, always say—"Help my neighbor first he is worse." The Second Corps did the heaviest fighting, and, of course, all who were badly wounded, were in the thickest of the fight, and, therefore, we deal with the very best class of the men—that is the bravest. My name is particularly grateful to them because it is Hancock. General Hancock is very popular with his men. The reason why they suffer more in this battle is because our army is victorious and marching *on* after Lee, leaving the wounded for citizens and a very few surgeons. The citizens are stripped of everything they have, so you must see the exhausting state of affairs. The Second Army Corps alone had two thousand men wounded, this I had from the Surgeon's head quarters. I cannot write more. There is no mail that comes in, we send letters out: I believe the Government has possession of the road. I hope you will write. It would be very pleasant to have letters to read in the evening, for I am so tired I cannot write them. Get the Penn Relief to send clothing here; there are many men without anything but a shirt lying in poor shelter tents, calling on God to take them from this world of suffering; in fact the air is rent with petitions to deliver them from their sufferings.

C. HANCOCK

Direct boxes—E. W. Farnham, care of Dr. Horner, Gettysburg, Penna. for Second Corps Hospital. Do not neglect this; clothing is shockingly needed. We fare pretty well for delicacies sent up by men from Baltimore.

If you direct your letters Miss Hancock, Second Corps, Third Division Hospital, do not scruple to put the Miss to it, and leave out Cornelia, as I am known only by that cognomen. I do not know when I shall go home—it will be according to how long this hospital stays here and whether another battle comes soon. I can go right in an ambulance without being any expense to myself. The Christian Committee support us and when they get tired the Sanitary is on hand. Uncle Sam is very rich, but very slow, and if it was not for the Sanitary, much suffering would ensue. We give the men toast

and eggs for breakfast, beef tea at ten o'clock, ham and bread for dinner, and jelly and bread for supper. Dried rusk would be nice if they were only here. Old sheets we would give much for. Bandages are plenty but sheets very scarce. We have plenty of woolen blankets now, in fact the hospital is well supplied, but for about five days after the battle, the men had no blankets nor scarce any shelter.

It took nearly five days for some three hundred surgeons to perform the amputations that occurred here, during which time the rebels lay in a dying condition without their wounds being dressed or scarcely any food. If the rebels did not get severely punished for this battle, then I am no judge. We have but one rebel in our camp now; he says he never fired his gun if he could help it, and, therefore, we treat him first rate. One man died this morning. I fixed him up as nicely as the place will allow; he will be buried this afternoon. We are becoming somewhat civilized here now and the men are cared for well.

On reading the news of the copperhead performance, in a tent where eight men lay with nothing but stumps (they call a leg cut off above the knee a "stump") they said if they held on a little longer they would form a stump brigade and go and fight them. We have some plucky boys in the hospital, but they suffer awfully. One had his leg cut off yesterday, and some of the ladies, newcomers, were up to see him. I told them if they had seen as many as I had they would not go far to see the sight again. I could stand by and see a man's head taken off I believe—you get so used to it here. I should be perfectly contented if I could receive my letters. I have the cooking all on my mind pretty much. I have torn almost all my clothes off of me, and Uncle Sam has given me a new suit. William says I am very popular here as I am such a contrast to some of the office-seeking women who swarm around hospitals. I am black as an Indian and dirty as a pig and as well as I ever was in my life—have a nice bunk and tent about twelve feet square. I have a bed that is made of four crotch sticks and some sticks laid across and pine boughs laid on that with blankets on top. It is equal to any mattress ever

made. The tent is open at night and sometimes I have laid in the damp all night long, and got up all right in the morning.

The suffering we get used to and the nurses and doctors, stewards, etc., are very jolly and sometimes we have a good time. It is very pleasant weather now. There is all in getting to do what you *want* to do and I am doing that.

The First Minnesota Regiment bears the first honors here for loss in the late battle. The Colonel was wounded—Lieutenant Colonel, Major, and Adjutant. They had four captains killed outright and when they came out of battle, the command devolved on the First Lieutenant. Three hundred and eighty-four men went into battle, one hundred and eighty were wounded and fifty-four killed. The Colonel I know well; he is a very fine man. He has three bullets in him; has had two taken out by Dr. Child, the other he got in at Antietam and it is there yet. I do hope he will recover. Most of the men are from New York here now; they are very intelligent and talk good politics. McClellan is their man mostly. Meade they think sympathizes with McClellan and therefore they like him. Hooker is at a very low ebb except as they think he fed them well—a circumstance that soldiers make great account of. Such feeders you never saw.

Pads are terribly needed here. Bandages and lint are plenty. I would like to see seven barrels of dried rusk here. I do not know the day of the week or anything else. Business is slackening a little though—order is beginning to reign in the hospital and soon things will be right. One poor fellow is hollowing fearfully now while his wounds are being dressed.

There is no more impropriety in a *young* person being here provided they are sensible than a sexagenarian. Most polite and obliging are all the soldiers to me.

It is a very good place to meet celebrities; they come here from all parts of the United States to see their wounded. Senator Wilson, Mr. Washburn, and one of the Minnesota Senators have been here. I get beef tenderloin for dinner.—Ladies who work are favored but

the dress-up palaverers are passed by on the other side. I tell you I have lost my memory almost entirely, but it is gradually returning. Dr. Child has done very good service here. All is well with me; we do not know much war news, but I know I am doing all I can, so I do not concern further. Kill the copperheads. Write everything, however trifling, it is all interest here.

From thy affectionate

C. HANCOCK

*2nd Army Corps—3rd Division Hospital  
near Gettysburg.  
July 21st, 1863.*

MY DEAR MOTHER

It is with trouble that I can find time and quiet enough to write to anyone. I have been sick but one day since I have been here, and then I went into a tent and was waited upon like a princess. I like to be here very much, am perfectly used to the suffering and the work just suits me; it is more superintending than real work, still the work is constant. I like being in the open air, sleep well and eat well. The rumors about camp are that this hospital is to be moved down to Gettysburg. I hope it is not so but I expect it is. The field hospital is a number of tents and nothing more; it is in first rate order now, and I am sorry it has to be moved. All the officers will be changed I suppose. The men are very polite to me and I get on remarkably well, but quiet is impossible to obtain at camp.

I have succeeded in getting a washerwoman today which is a great institution here indeed. Old sheets and pads of every description are wanted in my hospital. Food we are scarce of sometimes but it is generally plenty.

I received, a few days ago, a Silver Medal worth twenty dollars. The inscription on one side is "Miss Cornelia Hancock, presented by the wounded soldiers 3rd Division 2nd Army Corps." On the other side is "Testimonial of regard for ministrations of mercy to the wounded soldiers at Gettysburg, Pa.—July 1863."