

Disease killed more Civil War soldiers than bullets

The Civil War was the deadliest war ever fought by American soldiers with losses totaling more than 600,000 young men. The Civil War soldier's chances of surviving the war were about one in four. However, more than twice as many soldiers died of disease than were actually killed in battle.

More than 1,200 named battles were fought in the four year period from 1861 until 1865. Confederate soldiers were outnumbered more than two to one by Union forces. As a result of those battles the Union had 110,100 killed in battle and the Confederates lost approximately 94,000 young men. (Confederate statistics are not exact since many records were destroyed.) However, diseases such as measles, typhoid fever and pneumonia contracted in camps killed 224,480 northern soldiers and 164,000 southern soldiers. Younger men and boys were much more susceptible to disease than older soldiers.

The following letters are from 21-year old George W. Poe from Fayette County (Newtonville) writing to his parents within 2 weeks after his enlistment. The spelling and grammar are reprinted as he has written them.

May 21, 1862:

"Dear father and Mother it is with greate pleasurer that I take pen in hand to let you know that I am not well tho I hope amt dangros bad off I hav got the flu I recon but I hope theas few lines may find you all well and doing well I shal tell something a bout our travel we left Tuscaloosa on the 14 and came on foot to nuborn and thar we took the car (train) and traveld on it 41 Mile to Selma and thar we took the boat and landed hear (Mobile) at a leven o Clock our far on the boat was bad tho I hope I will get plenty of bul beaf I expect we will hav to stay hear our camp is in 3 miles from hear on the bay we haint got to the Camps yet

The Yankeys is in site and they ar expictin an attact hear our company is dicing (digging trenches) tho only 18 at a time out of our company at a time I must tel you somthing a bout our fare from Tuscaloosa to Nuborn most of the sitisens of Green County is white folks and I thank them for thear kind ness thar is more corn in Green County you may think this is a lye but I dont I saw more corn in one half a days than I ever saw in my life and the most of it was from nee hy to waste hy which was a butiful site I wold be glad to see you all one time mor but I dont know [if]ever I will or not but if I dont I wold be glad to hear from you I want you to rite as soon as this coms to hand and rite what has become the Conscript boys we heard that thay was ordered out to go in Camps for 3 Months I hope they wont hav to go for if they do bad is the Consequence I must quit for to nite and turn over and read for your self"

On reverse side;

"May the 23 1862 this leavs me well and hoping this will find you well I am hear in camps 3 miles below Mobile we have to stand gard or dich 6 hours every day we don't drill any atall I dont know how long we will stay hear we had a terable tim coming down hear I had rather ride on a car than a boatt the boy is not well John Rogers is sick tho he is in Camps yet he is the wort off of any of the boys I have got a mity bad cough I went to dicing this morning and diked 3 hours and then come off and went on gard 2 hours tho I dont mind that if my feet wasent sore I want you to giv my best respect to all my friends and tell them this is the way to get thear money back I must quit til I hav more time I will [write] somthing else next time I remain yours until death George W Poe to father and mother brother and sister I cant say wher for you to rite for I don't know"

Last letter home from George W. Poe written on June 15, 1862.

“Dear father mother brother and sisters all It is with pleshur that I tak my pen in hand to let you know that I am not well but I hope that these few lines may come to hands and find you all well the meesels haddent went in on me till I tuck the new money (pneumonia) I think I am a little better tho I am bad off yet I had a verry bad pain in my left side but it has changed to my right side the doctor tends on me verry well he gives me meddeson all the time I have left the horspittel where I was the last time when I rote before and have com to the ladys horspittel in town I staid in the horspittel wher i had the meesels three days after i tuck the new money and I never got no mederson but one dose of saults if I had staid there eney longer I now I wold a died the most of the foaks that waits on me ses that I will get well again and if i get well and abel to travel I am going to try to get a furlow to go home I laust the use of my right leg a bout too weaks ago and it ant got no better yet I want you to rite to me as soon as this comes to hands and rite how all of the peopel is and how all the crops looks W S Poe (George’s brother) has had the meesels but he is getting over them R T Amerson has had the meesels and is getting over them but he has took cold in his hed and the doctor ses it will rise tho it don’t hurt him mutch yet So I must close rite soon and fail not to rite more the next time I have rote a half dosen letters to you I have never got but one G W Poe to all”

The following is a letter to James and Mary Poe, parents of George W. Poe, from R. T. Amerson written on June 26, 1862.

“Dear frend I this day tak my pen in hand to let you no that I am well at the present time hoping these few lines may come to hand and finde you all well but I am Truly Sorrow to inform you that George dide to day I waited on him the best i could i don all for him that lay in my power he was doin as well by hear as if he had a bin at home he left behinde a bright testimony that he was a going to heaven he profest religion and was babtised a bout a weak before he dide it was what we call a sprinkling I believe that george is gon to rest and i wont us all to meet him thare me and W S Poe tride to get to carry him home but tha wouldn’t let us you must bare it the best you can I am going to Camps to morrow Sho this letter to father and mother i cant rite mutch now it was the new money that killed him So no mor at this time but remain your frend till death R T Amerson to Mr. James Poe and family tell father and mother that I am well at this time”