



Recollections of a Private Soldier in the Army of the Potomac (1886)

Frank Wilkeson

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Frank Wilkeson (1848 – 1913) was an American journalist, soldier, farmer and explorer. He wrote several books, including an autobiography of his service in the Union Army during the American Civil War. He was among the first white men to explore and map the Cascade Pass in the state of Washington.

Wilkeson was sent to serve in the Army of the Potomac in Virginia, where he took part in the Overland Campaign of General Ulysses S. Grant. Wilkeson's unit was not actively engaged in the Battle of the Wilderness on May 5–6, 1864, so Wilkeson, overcome by youthful curiosity, took an unauthorized leave of absence from his battery and fought as an infantryman alongside elements of General Winfield Scott Hancock's Second Corps using a discarded musket he picked up on the battlefield. The following day he returned to his battery where he was punished for his absenteeism, then diligently remained with them during the subsequent Battle of Spotsylvania Courthouse, Battle of Cold Harbor, and opening stages of the Siege of Petersburg.

“Recollections of a Private Soldier“ brings us nearer our own day. This book is written from the standpoint of the rank and file. It is certainly interesting and thoroughly readable. It gives a better idea of the reality of a soldier's life than many of the more pretentious histories of the War. When the author enlisted the Rebellion was at its height, and the first flush of excitement in volunteering was over. He speedily found himself among eight hundred or a thousand ruffians, most of them bounty-jumpers, who were guarded by heavy lines of sentinels. and were almost to a man cowards and bullies. His description of his life among these wretches until he found himself in camp gives a vivid picture of unrelieved misery. And there is a good deal about camp life and drill which comes in for criticism, though not in a spirit of mere faultfinding. The story of Grant's last campaign is graphically told. The impression had got abroad in the ranks that Grant was a fighting general, and veterans shrugged their shoulders and said : “ He can find all the fighting he wants.” The author states that the soldiers of the Potomac had the highest opinion of Lee and his army, and recognising the fact that it required the best kind of generalship to overmatch them. Human life was sacrificed in a constant and fruitless endeavor to drive the army of Virginia from their defenses. The author states that on one occasion, at the battle of Cold Harbor, after a terrible repulse accompanied with immense loss of life, the order to charge was again given but not a man obeyed it. “ The army to a man refused to obey the order, presumably from General Grant, to renew the assault. I heard the order given, and I saw it disobeyed.” Many of the enlisted men had been up to and over the Confederate works. They had seen their strength and they knew they could not be carried by direct assault and they refused to make a second attempt.

Wilkeson writes:

"I was one of these private soldiers. As one of them, I make this my contribution to the true history of the war. And I call on those of my comrades in the ranks who yet survive, in whatever part of the country they served, to make haste to leave behind them as their contributions, what they actually saw and did, and what their commanders refused, or neglected or failed to do. Very many of you were the equals, and not a few of you were the superiors, of your officers in intelligence, courage, and military ability. Your judgment about the conduct of the war, by reason of the vastness of your number, will have the force of public opinion. That is almost invariably right. The opinion of the rank and file of an army of Americans will be equally right. The grumbling of a single soldier at a camp fire may be unreasonable and his criticism abusive. The criticism

of 100,000 American soldiers will be absolute truth."

Originally published in 1886, reformatted for the Kindle.

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