

**LETTERS FROM THE ARMY
OF THE POTOMAC:
WRITTEN DURING THE
MONTH OF MAY, 1864**

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Letters from the Army of the Potomac: Written During the Month of May, 1864 by Alfred J. Bloor

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ALFRED J. BLOOR

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LETTERS

FROM THE

ARMY OF THE POTOMAC,

WRITTEN DURING THE MONTH OF MAY, 1864,

TO SEVERAL OF THE

SUPPLY CORRESPONDENTS

OF THE

U. S. SANITARY COMMISSION,

BY

ALFRED J. BLOOR.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY.



WASHINGTON, D. C.:

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From the Bureau
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It being found impossible, with due regard to time, trouble, and expense, to supply in manuscript the number asked for of the within letters, a few copies are printed for distribution among the supply correspondents of the U. S. Sanitary Commission.

LETTERS.

No. I.

UNITED STATES SANITARY COMMISSION,
CENTRAL OFFICE, 244 F STREET,
WASHINGTON, D. C., *May 14, 1864.*

DEAR MRS. —: I have just come up from the rear of the Army of the Potomac; and there will, at least, be some variety in my correspondence with you if I tell you what I saw at Belle Plain, instead of, as usual, repeating my Oliver-Twistian cry of "More! more!"

The day before yesterday I started from Washington with four volunteers, two ladies and two gentlemen, three of the party being from your city, and several being accustomed to army travelling and hospital nursing. One of the ladies is the wife of one of our generals, and the other is the writer of that excellent little pamphlet "Three Weeks at Gettysburg." The steamer we were on was well loaded with supplies—somewhere about sixty tons—and a score or two of Relief Agents, to reinforce those already on the field and at Fredericksburg. Reaching Belle Plain—so called from its being a series of high hills—just as the twilight was settling on the beautiful and varied tints of verdure with which the last week or two of summer weather have covered its slopes, we found a repetition of the scenes I have before witnessed at the same place in the spring of last year, and at various other places on the Peninsula and elsewhere, during the dif-

ferent campaigns of the war. A couple of rudely constructed wharves, a mile or so apart, jut out into the placid waters of the broad creek, and lying against these, four or five deep, are steamers and barges of all kinds and sizes, loading and unloading so busily that you might imagine yourself on the docks of Boston, New York, or Philadelphia. Boxes, barrels, and bales pass from the holds and decks of the vessels, on the shoulders of long strings of contrabands, or on trucks, along the crazy wharf to the beach, and are there transferred to army wagons, which, after being filled, join the procession of similar vehicles, each drawn by four stout horses that, with few gaps in the long road up the ascent and along its crest, wind slowly and toilsomely, as far as the eye can reach, towards Fredericksburg and the interjacent camps. So far as the vessels and wharf are concerned, the scene resembles the unloading of vessels in a seaport town; but in a seaport town, one does not—in peace times, at least—see hosts of uniformed and armed men tramp from the decks along the wharves to join the hosts preceding them; nor does one see regiments of troopers tugging at the reins of unmanageable horses, that plunge fiercely among the swaying masses of humanity and the unflinching masses of merchandise that line their way. But what can there be to load vessels with in an out-of-the-way creek, running up into a country from the hills of which one may look all round to the horizon without one's eyes resting on a human habitation?—a permanent habitation, I should say, for every strip of land in sight that is not covered with trees is dotted with tents and bivouacs and army wagons, beneath the canvas and boughs of which are sheltered, as much as may be in the fast-falling rain, such multitudes of weary men as, if collected into houses and streets, would fill many villages, and turn the wilderness into a "populous No." Thank goodness, when the spectator next watches the loading of a vessel in a commercial town, he will see nothing of what he now sees at this warfaring port of Belle Plain. All day long, and the day before, and several days before that,

the ascending procession of wagons filled with rations, and of infantry and cavalry that have gone to reinforce Grant, has been met by a parallel line, a little way off—for the impromptu roads are too narrow to admit of vehicles passing each other—of ambulances filled with wounded men; and it is with these men, carried on stretchers from the ambulances, that the “outward bound” vessels are loaded.

It is indeed a sad sight; but there is a great satisfaction in reflecting that one is standing in the midst of all kinds of comforts and delicacies, to reinforce the stock which has already been provided for these very men, and in recognizing within hailing distance a handsome flag, inscribed with the words “U. S. Sanitary Commission,” streaming from its staff, on the deck of a portly barge, comfortably lined with numberless good things for wear and diet, at that very moment—we can imagine with a strength equal to conviction, for not even “with the aid of a powerful glass” can our point of sight enable us to discern behind the intervening boxes and barrels—under process of distribution to the poor fellows, as they are carried past to the boats that are about to convey them to Washington.

It is now dark. The rain has somewhat abated, but even if it poured as much as ever, it would not be possible to restrain the ladies from entering at once on their self-imposed duties. So I help them into a boat, and we are rowed to the dock, and are soon on board our barge, or store-boat as it is called. But the procession of wounded men is over for the night, and those that have come before are on their way to Washington, while those *in transitu* from the battle-fields are resting in wayside stations, or in the ambulances conveying them—a poor way for wounded and sore men to pass the night, but such as the cruel necessities of war render unavoidable. Dr. Steiner tells us that the nearest of the Commission's feeding lodges is some half mile up the hill, and that its capacity will not admit of any more attendance than that with which it is already supplied. As the ladies come to render aid where it is needed, not to

supplant that which is previously provided, they think it advisable not to wade up to the lodge knee-deep in Virginia mud, nor do they consider that the cause of humanity demands the waking up of some poor fellows who are waiting the next boat, and the administering to them of pound-cake, pies, and surreptitious draughts of bad whiskey; so we presently get into the row-boat again, and the ladies are before long occupying the pilot house—the polite and ejected captain seeking other quarters—while the men dispose themselves for the night upon the decks, those that have rubber coats or blankets to keep off the rain, now descending faster than ever, feeling their great advantage over those who, rubberless, vainly seek dry spots wherever there are no leaking places in the ceiled roof.

The next morning—very early indeed, the sleeping accommodations offering few inducements to people of sybaritic tendencies—the Relief Agents are almost all started for Fredericksburg, and our small party enter the lists as Relief Agents on the spot. The scene of yesterday is renewed in all its details, and as the wounded men are borne in, hour after hour, in one long string, the pale and often blood-stained occupant of every stretcher is furnished, according to his needs, by one or other of the party, with crackers, beef-tea, coffee, wine, water, or lemonade. The wine and lemonade are given only on the advice of a medical man, and sometimes the one is intensified into brandy, and the other into the unmixed juice of the lemon. But for men exhausted with lying on the battle-field for many hours, sometimes for a day or two, without food or drink, thence passed to the operating table, and thence to the ambulance, the other things may be given, in most instances, in such quantities as they crave. Poor fellows, they clutch at them—but always with a “thank you”—as if they thought they could swallow the basket or bottle along with the contents, but a few mouthfuls is generally all they have strength to manage. It is best for each one of such a relief party to confine oneself to the distribution of a single article—the

cracker man never trenching on the lady's coffee pail, and the coffee lady leaving the beef-tea religiously to another. Infinitely more may be done by systematically pursuing this plan of speciality. If, when the beef-tea is being carried round, some poor fellow shakes his head, and imploringly asks for water or stimulant, one must not set down the beef-tea to be kicked over before one gets back, and rush off to spend half an hour in searching for water or stimulant, so depriving a hundred men of beef-tea, for the sake of trying to get one man something which will probably be furnished him by the allotted water or whisky bearer in three minutes after. One must humanely harden one's heart, and say with stern tenderness, "Yes, my boy, all right, a lady will be along with some delicious iced water in a minute or two;" and he will probably smile and say, "Thank you, sir, all right, I can wait. Say, mister, there's a fellow right acrost there—that one with his leg off and his head bound up, he belongs to my company—he ain't had nothing to eat since the day before yesterday. I guess he'd like some o'that 'ere stuff. Won't you please give him some?"

But the giving of sustenance is not all the work. One man complains of his head being too low, and his overcoat has to be rolled up—or, failing that, the straw around him has to be gathered up—so as to form a pillow for him. (The pallets and bedding have given out, though the first boat loads sent off were as comfortably provided for as if in the wards of a general hospital, and the men we are tending are lying on the docks on straw; but this they count luxury after the battle-field and ambulance.) Another wants a handkerchief, and another a pair of socks. This man's shirt is all torn and bloody, and must be replaced by another. One man complains of the intolerable heat, and some of his clothing must be removed; another is shivering with cold and more clothing, or an extra blanket must be provided for him. Here is one who feels the hand of death upon him, and the head of that one of our party who is tending