

**RECOLLECTIONS OF A  
PRIVATE SOLDIER IN THE  
ARMY OF THE POTOMAC**

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Recollections of a private soldier in the Army of the Potomac by Frank Wilkeson

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## PREFACE.

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THE history of the fighting to suppress the slave-holders' rebellion, thus far written, has been the work of commanding generals. The private soldiers who won the battles, when they were given a chance to win them, and lost them through the ignorance and incapacity of commanders, have scarcely begun to write the history from their point of view. The two will be found to differ materially. The epauletted history has been largely inspired by vanity or jealousy, saving and excepting forever the immortal record, Grant's dying gift to his countrymen, which is as modest as it is truthful, and as just as it is modest.

Most of this war history has been written to repair damaged or wholly ruined military reputations. It has been made additionally untrustworthy by the jealousy which seeks to belittle the work of others, or to falsify or obscure it, in order to render more conspicuous the achievements of the historians. The men who carried the muskets, served the guns,



and rode in the saddle had no military reputations to defend or create, and they brought not out of the war professional jealousy of their comrades. They and they alone can supplement the wonderful contribution made by Grant to the history of the struggle to suppress the rebellion. Who beside the enlisted men can tell how the fierce Confederates looked and fought behind their earthworks and in the open; how the heroic soldiers of the impoverished South were clothed, armed, and fed? Who beside our enlisted men can or will tell their countrymen how the volunteers who saved the republic lived in camp; lived in the field; on the march; what they talked about; how they criticised the campaigns, and criticised their officers and commanders; how oft they hungered and thirsted; how, through parts of campaigns, and through entire campaigns, they slept unsheltered on the ground, and too often in snow or mud; how they fought (honor and glory for ever and ever to these matchless warriors!) and how they died?

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.

I am conscious of imperfect performance of the task I set to myself in the writing of this book. In a later edition I hope to have the opportunity to correct my short-coming. Moderation and forbearance of statement and opinion have been my error. Occasionally I ceased to write as a soldier in the ranks. Too frequently I wrote as a generous narrator a quarter of a century after the events. I ought to have written from title-page to cover as if I were still in the ranks. And the limited com-

pass of the book forbade the consideration of two subjects about which I feel deeply, and which I propose hereafter to treat with what strength I possess. For much thinking over my experience as a private in the Army of the Potomac has confirmed me in the belief I then entertained, that the two capital errors in the conduct of the war on the Union side were ;

*First.* The calling for volunteers to suppress the rebellion, instead of at the outset creating armies by drawing soldiers ratably and by lot from the able-bodied population, between the ages of twenty and forty, of all the free States and territories.

*Second.* The officering of the commands in the various armies with West Point graduates by preference, on the assumption that they knew the art of war and were soldiers, and were therefore the fittest to command soldiers.

It is my purpose in the future edition of this book to show how the resort to volunteering, the unprincipled dodge of cowardly politicians, ground up the choicest seed-corn of the nation ; how it consumed the young, the patriotic, the intelligent, the generous, the brave ; how it wasted the best moral, social, and political elements of the republic, leaving the cowards,