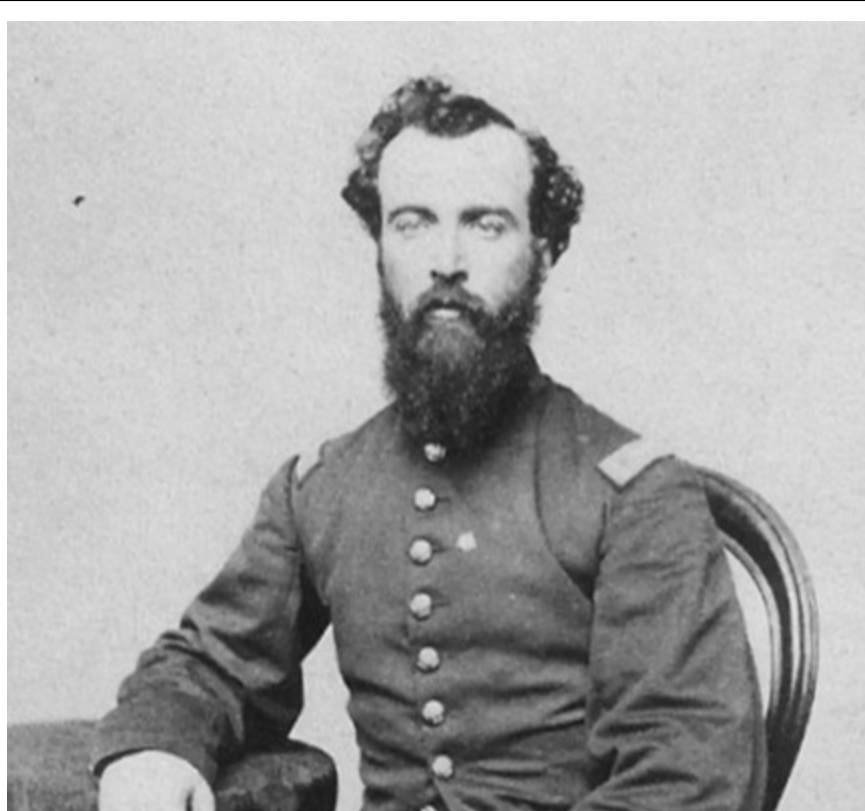




Harlan Page Paige's War Part 1: Early Days and High Hopes

Fergus M. Bordewich, June 4, 2021
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Harlan Page Paige | courtesy of Carlin P. Holden

Harlan Page Paige enlisted as a private in the 4th Vermont Volunteers in September 1861 at the age of 22. He was present for most of the brigade's battles throughout the Civil War, eventually rising to the rank of first lieutenant by war's end. Throughout the war, he wrote copiously to his brother Asa, his fiancée and later wife, Carlin Elizabeth Moulton, and other friends. His letters, never before published, eloquently chronicle his evolution from a callow farm boy into a tough veteran soldier.

Based on those letters, his story unfolds in three parts, the first of which we present today. Stay tuned for the other installations to be published in the future.

Harlan Paige arrived in Washington, D.C., on September 24, 1861, fresh from his family's farm near Barnard, in eastern Vermont. He was unimpressed by what he saw of the nation's sprawling and seedy capital, where he was startled to see hogs running wild in the streets. He was eager to make war. "All we want is a word from McClellan to send us over there [to Virginia] pell mell," he wrote home. Like most volunteers in the war's early months, he expected an easy victory, and an early return to the family farm. While the months passed slowly with drilling and more drilling on the outskirts of the capital, Paige sent home descriptions of his comparatively comfortable living quarters, his health—generally good but for a bout of dysentery—and his occasional battles with the "white horse cavalry"—that is, lice. He also, as he did throughout the war, effusively thanked his family for the contents of every "care package" he received from home, each one a testament to the extremely efficient express services that arose during the war, which delivered packages to the front so speedily that they arrived with still-fresh cakes and mince pies, popped corn, cheese, doughnuts, ginger snaps, and other delicacies, not to mention warm socks, mittens, and good boots.

"I think the war will be pushed forward with the greatest possible vigor now and be closed up soon," Paige optimistically wrote on November 14, 1861. And on January 24, 1862, he confidently predicted, "This war is not to last long as the rebels are pretty well hemmed in already and Government is nearly ready to strike the final blow." Indeed, he worried that he might never even see a battle at all, since "the Secesh is beginning to get rather frightened." In May, Paige finally got his wish when the Vermont Brigade moved south under Gen. William B. Franklin to join in Gen. George B. McClellan's Peninsula Campaign against Richmond. Paige liked the look of Virginia, whose rich farmlands were a contrast to Vermont's stony soil. It was, he wrote, "a splendid country, but spoiled by slavery. Just give it Yankee enterprise and it would be as fine a country as one could wish for."



Harlan Page Paige | courtesy of Carlin P. Holden

He had his first taste of battle on April 16, near Yorktown, when the brigade "had a little squabble with Secesh." He lightly reassured his family, "I am not scratched, though I thought I heard humming birds" – that is, bullets – flying past his ears. A few days later, at Williamsburg, where the brigade was held in reserve, he was again close enough to the action to hear "the whizzing of shot and shell, the popping of muskets and the yells of the men, as they made several charges." A short while later, he first saw the debris of battle: dead draft animals, shattered cannon and wagons, abandoned foodstuffs, "everything spoiled of course, especially the horses and mules, which were smelling nicely." He was still raw enough to find humor in such things.

Hardly alone among his fellow soldiers, Paige couldn't understand why the army was moving so slowly when it was close enough to Richmond to hear the church bells ringing. There may have been a few minor reverses, he admitted, but he urged his family not to be "frightened at the

repulse of four or five thousand men." McClellan was doing "nobly," he said, and "if let alone will do the work before him. Richmond is in a state of siege, and we are fortifying and taking slow but sure means to reduce the place." In fact, of course, despite the huge federal advantage in numbers, the campaign had already reached its high-water mark, and McClellan was forced by repeated Confederate jabs to back away from Richmond and retreat down the peninsula. Apart from the Battle of Savage's Station on June 29, where it lost some 200 men, the Vermont Brigade was not engaged. By July 10, Paige was camped with the army at Harrison's Landing and more puzzled than ever. "Our retreat is a called a strategy of McClellan, and I hope it is so," he wrote. "I certainly can't see the need of falling back when we took our time and whipped the scoundrels in every battle." Disappointed though he was, he remained optimistic. "God overrules all things, and I know he will bring everything out right in the end," Paige sighed.

To be continued: Part 2: From Volunteer to Veteran

Fergus M. Bordewich's most recent book is "Congress at War: How Republican Reformers Fought the Civil War, Defied Lincoln, Ended Slavery, and Remade America."



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