

Death of a soldier, 1863: Paul Semmes

Introduction

The Civil War was the bloodiest in the nation's history, with 618,000 men Union and Confederate soldiers perishing in the war. Among the nearly 8,000 men mortally wounded at the battle of Gettysburg were twelve commanding generals. This loss of combat leadership, which was the most severe of the entire war, would reverberate months thereafter. Neither the Army of the Potomac nor the Army of Northern Virginia would return to the battlefield until the following spring.

On the day before his death in a Virginia hospital, Confederate Brigadier General Paul Semmes wrote the following letter to his wife. His handwriting is evidence of the severity of his wounds. Such deathbed letters testify to Americans' yearnings to connect with loved ones as they faced their own mortality.

Questions for Discussion

Read the document introduction and the transcript, and apply your knowledge of American history in order to answer the questions that follow.

1. Compare the treatment of soldiers such as Confederate General Semmes who was mortally wounded at Gettysburg with the type of medical aid available to soldiers today in Iraq or Afghanistan.
2. Do you think that Semmes was being honest with his wife when he wrote her: "Main danger over. Stay at home ... God will fully spare my life."
3. How does Semmes acknowledge the heroism and support of his fellow soldiers?
4. In an earlier letter to his wife, two weeks before Gettysburg, Semmes wrote about his concern that the Union forces outnumbered the Confederates three to one. What does this tell us about the character and confidence of the Confederates?

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Image

Martinsburg Va 9 July 1863.
 My Dearest wife,
 I telegraphed you 3 day.
 "Slightly wounded. Man danger over. Stay
 at home - will write."

I was wounded on the 2nd inst. at Gettys-
 burg Penn - I arrived here in an am-
 bulance yesterday, a distance of 60 miles -
 Albur, Tom Cleland & Cody are with me - will
 write soon again. The wound has done re-
 markably well though I traveled part of 4
 days in an ambulance - which was very un-
 comfortable - not having it after being placed
 in it at the Hospital until I got here.
 I am with flat of my Back in a comfortable
 room in a private family, who treat me with
 the kindest hands.

Paul Jones Semmes to Emily J. Semmes, July 9, 1863 (The Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC06823)

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I was wounded in the leg but stopped
 the flow of blood in the field by a
 Tourniquet applied by myself & drawn by
 one of my men, of the color & lost but
 little blood -
 Col Hamer - Ld Chamber Hd -
 killed - Jack Jones kill - & a long
 list -
 My Brigade suffered severely & behind
 will - Much loss to an
 Grappe Hd
 Paul Semmes
 Ellis escaped -

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Transcript

Paul Jones Semmes to Emily J. Semmes, July 9, 1863 (The Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC06823)

Martinsburg Va 9 July 1863.

My Dearest Wife,

I telegraphed you today:

“Severely wounded. Main danger over. Stay at home. Will write.”

I was wounded on the 2 inst. at Gettysburg Penn – I arrived there in an ambulance yesterday, a distance of 60 miles – Abner, Tom Cleveland & Cody are with me – Will write soon again The wound has done remarkably well though I traveled part of 4 days in an ambulance – which was very uncomfortable [*inserted and struck: m*]. not having it after being placed in it at the Hospital until I got here. I now [with] flat of my Back in a Comfortable room in a [*illegible*] family, who treat me with every [*struck: Kindness*] Kindness [2] I was wounded in the leg but stopped the flow of blood in the field by a [*struck: Tornaquit*] [*inserted: Tournequet*] applied by myself & drawn by one of my men of the Co Ga & lost but little blood –

Col Harm –Ltt Chambers Hd –Killed – Jack Jones Kill – & a long list –

My Brigade suffered severely & behaved well –

Much love to all

Yr affec H^d

Paul J Semmes

Ellis escaped –

[*inserted upside-down on page 2: God mercifully spared my life – We all have Cause to be thankful to Him.*]