## H-Net Reviews in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Fred Pelka, ed. The Civil War Letters of Colonel Charles F. Johnson, Invalid Corps. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004. xi + 339 pp. \$26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-55849-460-2; \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55849-451-0.

Reviewed by Charles R. Bowery (U.S. Army) Published on H-CivWar (October, 2006)

## Your Charley: Soldiering in the Infidel Corps

"In the office we term them the 'Infidel Corps' and me the 'Infidel Major" (p. 142). In a June 29, 1863 letter to his wife Mary, Union Army Major Charles F. Johnson of the Invalid Corps poked fun at his duties, but his wry sense of humor pointed out a larger problem facing societies at war. How do these societies come to terms with and provide for the huge numbers of wounded and disabled that wars often produce? This remains an important question as the current toll of wounded American service members from Iraq and Afghanistan approaches twenty thousand. Fred Pelka, a freelance writer and researcher on the disability rights movement, adds to our understanding of this question with the collected Civil War letters of one such disabled soldier.

A native of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Charles Francis Johnson was the fifth child of middling parents. He married Mary Ann Davis, a native of Kent County, Delaware, in 1850, and by all appearances theirs was a happy union. Three children followed, two boys and a girl. Johnson did not enlist immediately upon the outbreak of war in 1861, but was caught up in the general rush to defend the Union in the wake of the Confederate victory at First Manassas (Bull Run) in July of that year. On September 17, 1861, he was commissioned as a lieutenant colonel in the 81st Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry. Johnson's regiment formed and trained in Easton, Pennsylvania, before moving to Washington, D.C. and on to the "seat of war" on the Virginia Peninsula.

The 81st Pennsylvania first saw combat during the Peninsula Campaign as part of the First Division, II Corps, Army of the Potomac. It was bloodied on May 31, 1862, at Seven Pines, on the outskirts of Richmond, where Johnson's commanding officer, James Miller, was killed in the engagement. Johnson took command of the regiment the next day, but his tenure was a short one. On June 25, Gen. Robert E. Lee launched a series of attacks designed to push General George B. McClellan's Army of the Potomac away from Richmond. It was dur-

ing these Seven Days Battles that Charles Johnson received the wound that disabled him for the rest of his life. At the Battle of Glendale (Charles City Crossroads) on June 30, Johnson's regiment took part in a counterattack to hold part of the Union battle line. At some time during this confused fighting, Johnson was shot four times in the legs and testicles. After being transferred to a variety of Union hospitals and recuperating at home, Johnson returned to his regiment in time to be present at the battles of Second Manassas, South Mountain, and Antietam. His wounds continued to trouble him, however, and he was medically discharged on November 24, 1862.

No one could fault Charles Johnson's continued dedication to the Union cause. In May 1863 he applied for a commission in the newly developed Invalid Corps, and began the next phase of his military career in June of that year. In Columbus, Ohio, he served as a mustering officer, responsible for forwarding new recruits to their regiments. After two months, Johnson transferred to St. Louis, Missouri, where he served until early 1864 as an Inspector General. In January, he took command of the 18th Regiment, Invalid Corps, responsible for guarding hospitals, prisoner of war camps, and mobilization camps in southern Indiana and northern Kentucky. When General Ulysses S. Grant required more troops for Union campaigns in Virginia, Johnson took to the field once again. The 18th Regiment, now part of the newly renamed Veteran Reserve Corps (VRC), guarded supply depots against Confederate raiders, and saw combat on June 20, 1864, defending White House Landing, Virginia, against an attack by Confederate cavalry. During this engagement, Johnson's commanding officer twice asked if his "invalids" would stand, prompting Johnson to respond, "tell the general that my men are cripples, and they can't run" (p. 27).

After the White House engagement, Johnson made it clear to his superiors that his men were unfit for field duty. The 18th Regiment was transferred to the Wash-

ington, D.C. area, where it guarded railroads and other strategic points for the remainder of the war. With the end of the war came the end of the need for the VRC, and it ceased to exist altogether by December 1865. Johnson's last surviving letter to Mary was written in October 1866, by which time he had been detailed to the Freedmen's Bureau. Johnson spent the period of May 1866 to March 1867 on duty in western Tennessee and Kentucky with the bureau, investigating incidents of racial violence against blacks. He died of complications from his wounds on July 28, 1867.

Charles Johnson's letters may be divided into three general groups. The book's first three chapters, covering the period from September 1861 through November 1862, concern Johnson's service with the 81st Pennsylvania. As with many letters written by veterans of combat, they contain frustratingly little information about battles and engagements. Most concern the mundane details of camp life, but they are entertaining and informative, nonetheless, because of Johnson's literary flair and sense of humor. In general, the reader learns about the struggles of amateur soldiers to form regiments and train for combat. We also learn that Johnson believed strongly in the need to subjugate the Confederacy, but also that Johnson, like so many men North and South, was a virulent racist. He certainly enlisted and served to preserve the Union, not out of an innate desire to free slaves. Of particular interest to military historians is a pair of letters from November 10 and 11, 1862, in which Johnson mourns the relief from army command of George B. Mc-Clellan. In opening the first letter, Johnson tells Mary that "George B. McClellan has left us-the mighty has departed-the hero is gone-our leader has Been taken from us-our heart strings are snapped-our vitality-our life- Our existance is paralized-we stand this day a huge mass of mourning mortality" (p. 127). The next day he writes that "Gen.l Burnsides is our commander [of the Army of the Potomac] a good soldier but not our General" (p. 128). These letters underscore McClellan's immense popularity with the rank and file of his army, even as he clashed with his military and political superiors in Washington.

The second group of letters, from June 1863 to January 1864, covers Johnson's transfer to the Invalid Corps and his service in Ohio and Missouri. Pelka tells us in the book's introduction that the Invalid Corps was organized in May 1863 to meet the Union Army's need for Manpower in garrison and administrative functions, with disabled veterans examined by medical review boards and grouped into units according to their level of functionality. Ironically, the initials I.C. were also used at that time

to apply to the quartermaster's verdict "Inspected, Condemned," covering food or supplies unfit for use; many in nineteenth-century society viewed disabled veterans in the same way (p. 14). Combat soldiers saw the Invalid Corps as a refuge for shirkers and cowards, a perception heightened by the unfortunate decision to clothe its members in distinctive uniforms, a practice wisely ended later. By war's end, however, the VRC boasted twenty-four regiments and more than thirty thousand soldiers, and was much larger than the prewar Regular Army.

Johnson was aware of the stigma attached to service in the Invalid Corps, but served anyway, dealing with almost constant pain from his grievous wounds. His descriptions of wartime life in Missouri are fascinating, reminding those historians who focus on battles and campaigns in the eastern theater that the "real" civil war occurred in the backwoods of the Trans-Mississippi theater. Johnson's commanding officer in St. Louis sent him on a variety of inspection tours throughout Missouri, and he witnessed firsthand the depredations of "Secret Joe," a common term for pro-Confederate guerrillas. At one point, he wished for a force of soldiers that he could lead throughout the state on a mission of extermination.

The book's final four chapters, with letters covering the entirety of 1864, see Johnson begin the year still on duty in St. Louis, after spending Christmas 1863 with his family while back east on Army business. In the middle of January he received orders to report to Indianapolis, Indiana, to take command of the 18th Regiment. It is clear from Colonel Johnson's letters that he was a tireless leader and manager, seeking to organize and train his new regiment and to see to the welfare of his men. He commented frequently to Mary on the political maneuverings surrounding appointments to volunteer regiments, and engaged in a bizarre, but very entertaining, running commentary concerning his bodily functions.

As with Johnson's 1862 letters from the Peninsula Campaign, the letters from 1864 contain little information on the regiment's one and only combat engagement, other than the author's evident pride in his regiment's conduct under fire. Johnson focused more on his administrative battles with the Army's high command to have his men removed from the battle line and employed more in consonance with their physical abilities. It is clear, however, that the high command saw Johnson's worth as an officer; by June 1864, he had fifty-three companies, over fifteen hundred men, under his command. Finally, students of Reconstruction will be frustrated to find only one letter from the period of Johnson's service with the Freedmen's Bureau, a note from October 1866 that be-

trays Johnson's longing to return to his family.

The book's introduction is a useful and informative addition to the collected letters. The editor uses other sources to fill in large gaps in Johnson's correspondence, as well as to provide a wealth of background information on the Invalid Corps and Freedmen's Bureau, and finally on nationwide efforts to provide support for disabled veterans in the postwar period. Pelka's expertise is clearly in the latter area, but that does not prevent him from dealing adroitly with all of these subjects.

The Civil War Letters of Colonel Charles F. Johnson,

Invalid Corps will appeal to a broad variety of interests. Military historians will find much that is useful in Johnson's descriptions of his service in the Army of the Potomac, as well as in his travels and duties in the trans-Mississippi West. Those interested in the broader social history of nineteenth-century America will enjoy Johnson's observations on life in the various parts of the country where his duties took him, particularly in wartime Missouri. Finally, Pelka succeeds admirably in his primary goal of highlighting the struggles of disabled Americans to achieve utility and respect in a society that has often denigrated and pitied them.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at: http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Charles R. Bowery. Review of Pelka, Fred, ed., *The Civil War Letters of Colonel Charles F. Johnson, Invalid Corps.* H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. October, 2006.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12401

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.