H-Net Reviews
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Clyde G. Wiggins, III, ed. *My Dear Friend: The Civil War Letters of Alva Benjamin Spencer, 3rd Georgia Regiment Company C.* Macon: Mercer University Press, 2007. xviii + 225 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-88146-057-5.

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Published on H-CivWar (January, 2008)

Fighting to Get Home to Maggie

My Dear Friend is a compilation of letters of Alva Benjamin Spencer with most of them written for the woman he eventually married, Margaret "Maggie" Lucinda Cone. Like the majority of published letters from the Civil War, this group of letters is written from or to a soldier in one of the major armies. Spencer, a twenty-year-old teacher, enlisted as a musician in the Dawson Grays from Greene County, which became Company C of the 3rd Georgia Infantry. The 3rd Georgia saw action as part of the Army of Northern Virginia, and the book includes references to the traditional laundry list of actions in which that army took part.

Clyde G. Wiggins III, the editor of this collection, establishes the love that developed between Spencer and Maggie as the central theme of this volume. As the war progressed, the long-term relationship between the two grew, shown through the evolution of Spencer's introductions from "My Dear Friend" in 1861 to "Dearest Maggie" in 1864. It is in the aftermath of the Gettysburg campaign that Spencer declared his undying love for Maggie and hoped that he would "be courageous enough to tell [her] in person that which [he had] just so feebly expressed" (p. 77). By 1864, he wrote repeatedly about his longing to see her.

Interestingly, Spencer barely mentioned his actions in battle. He relayed many of his experiences that focused on camp life rather than on the fighting that occurred. The reason for these omissions is left to the reader's guesswork. Spencer was always exacting in relaying the information he knew about the military situation at a particular time and remarked when he speculated. His only mention of the Battle of Antietam was to indicate that "my knapsack was stolen from me. I was thereby relieved of everything I had, now I have nothing" (p. 64).

Spencer also remained confident about the Confederacy's chances for victory even while stuck in the trenches of Petersburg during the winter of 1864-65. He railed constantly about the "Lincolnites" and remarked on several occasions about the lack of patriotism of the populace of the towns that he came to be near. The soldier also indicated that Ulysses S. Grant's actions at Petersburg were "barbarous" because he was shelling a city of "defenseless women and children" (p. 132). Though Spencer wanted the war to end, he was more than willing to wait it out "about as well as Grant" (p. 135). In February 1865, after he heard news about the failed attempt from the peace commissioners, Spencer urged Maggie to encourage the people at home to support the war effort with renewed vigor because it did "not look gloomy" (p. 184). He wanted to avoid allowing the people of the South from being subjugated into slavery by northern aggressors.

What truly makes these letters stand out is that early in the war Spencer's regiment received orders to go to Portsmouth, Virginia, where its assigned duty was to protect the Gosport Naval Yard. Spencer referred briefly to the raising of the CSS *Virginia* and seems to have had some knowledge of ships and the sea, though the editor does not posit an explanation for it. In the fall of 1861, a detachment of the regiment was sent to Roanoke Island in North Carolina. During this period, these men witnessed several engagements with naval forces. Spencer correctly identified several of the ships involved. Again, the reader is left wondering how an army musician was able to correctly identify types and specific names of ships. Also, even though there is strong evidence that Spencer knew what he was talking about in reference to naval units, the editor inexplicably identifies the naval officer French Forrest as Nathan Bedford Forrest.

This collection of letters provides insight into the Civil War through the eyes of a musician, but more background information on Spencer and Maggie would be useful. Spencer, a graduate of Mercer and a teacher, seems to gradually have lost his grammar skills as the war progressed. The reader has to speculate as to whether this is a result of increased stress, a product of illegible

writing or crosshatching, or a problem with editing. Nevertheless, this is an interesting set of letters that would supplement the library of someone researching gender politics or as an outside source for information on the engagements that Spencer relayed about the navies.

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Citation: Jeffery Seymour. Review of Wiggins, Clyde G., III, ed., *My Dear Friend: The Civil War Letters of Alva Benjamin Spencer, 3rd Georgia Regiment Company C*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. January, 2008.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14037

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