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J. Gregory Acken's updated version of Through Blood and Fire builds on a previously published set of 118 letters written by Major Charles J. Mills, an officer in the Union Army from 1862 to 1865. Gregory A. Coco edited and published these epistles in 1982, though the publisher ran a limited print run and only produced 300 copies. Recognizing the value of these sources, Acken's revised version provides additional annotations and headnotes that give a detailed and novel look at this insightful trove of documents.

The letters consist of Mills's correspondence to his many relatives (mostly his mother) during his wartime service in the Union Army. From a well-to-do Boston merchant family, Mills spent the first year of the war seeking an officer's commission. After a lengthy search, he received an appointment as a line officer in the 2nd Massachusetts. The book's first chapter documents Mills's short stint in this position, as an injury to the thigh at Antietam temporarily halted his military service. Though not fatal, the wound left Mills physically disabled, forcing him to walk with a cane for the remainder of his life. Mills's initial reaction to his wound remains obscure as the letters sent during his recovery have been lost. Despite this setback, Acken researched Mills's social and familial circle to reconstruct his experience during his recovery and found that Mills's thoughts lingered on the war and his brothers-in-arms.

Determined to rejoin the army, Mills eventually found a commission in 1864 that could accommodate his physical limitations. Mills experienced discomfort when walking, but he could comfortably ride a horse, allowing him to continue to serve on the division staff. Upon his return, the army appointed him the assistant adjutant general (AAG) for the Ninth Corps under Major General Ambrose Burnside. Unlike his initial position in 1862, which placed him in the thick of combat, his duties on the staff revealed a new side of warfare—the strategic maneuverings of large armies and the petty infighting between generals.
Mills’s insightful criticism and praise of his superiors became a hallmark of his letters. While in the Ninth Corps, Mills wrote to his mother regarding the missteps of the often drunk Brigadier General James Ledlie, who commanded the disastrous Union effort at the Battle of the Crater. Few Union commanders escaped the shrewd criticism of Mills’s pen. When he first saw Ulysses S. Grant during a review of the 56th Massachusetts, Mills wrote, “I was never more disappointed in my life; a more ordinary, stupid, dirty looking man I never saw in a high position” (p. 75). After the Overland Campaign, the army transferred Mills to the 2nd Corps under Major General Winfield Scott Hancock. Though Mills loathed Hancock’s stern discipline, he marveled at the skilled fighting of the division during Grant’s offensives against Petersburg. After Hancock left the 2nd Corps, Mills served on the staff of Major General Andrew Humphreys, who gained a reputation for bravery by commanding his men close to the line of fire. Though commended for his fearlessness, this reckless tendency would have fatal consequences for Mills. On March 31, 1865, only nine days before Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox, a cannon shot hit Mills in the abdomen, throwing him from his horse and killing him instantly.

Mills’s military service and detailed letters provide unique insight into many questions of historical interest. Perhaps most notably, his experiences contribute to a growing scholarly literature on the impact of death and disability on Civil War soldiers. Mills rarely commented on his injury, demonstrating a stoic acceptance of his condition and a refusal to allow his disability to dictate his life. As soon as he recovered, Mills sought a commission to serve his country, despite his limited physical capabilities. He could no longer command a line, though he dutifully served on the staff. Mills’s letters also help answer more traditional questions in Civil War historiography. For instance, Mills wrote extensively about the 1864 presidential election, which showed a marked change in his assessment of Union leadership. As late as November 1862, Mills wrote unfavorably about the direction of the army and country. He detested General John Pope and faithfully believed that the twice-relieved George McClellan was “the only man who can lead us to certain victory.” In the same letter, Mills wrote that Federal incompetence went to the top, concluding that Abraham Lincoln was “a weak fool” (p. 11). By 1864, however, Mills had a change of heart. He dropped his worship of McClellan and wrote multiple letters to his relatives to convince them to vote for Lincoln. He rejected the peace platform of the Democratic Party and assured his family that Lincoln’s reelection would secure victory for the Union Army. Despite his political shift toward the Republican Party, Mills remained unrepentant regarding race. He quickly developed a negative opinion of black troops in the Union Army and often downplayed their contributions to the war effort. Mills’s nuanced understanding of myriad topics can give keen insight to scholars.

In this updated edition of Through Blood and Fire, Acken demonstrates expertise in his editing of Mills’s letters. He provides detailed annotations about Union Army commanders and Mills’s social circle of elite Bostonians and Harvard alumni. The military maneuverings of the Union Army are also well documented, fitting Mills’s singular vantage point into the broader strategy of the Federal Army. Likewise, Acken’s transitional notes are an invaluable addition to the work, providing a narrative flow where there are gaps in Mills’s letters. Acken’s superb book deserves a space on the bookshelf of any scholar who studies the Union Army, the experiences of soldiers, and newer questions about the impact of death and disability on the men who fought in the Civil War.
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