

**Outsiders of Battlefield Experience  
The Journey Home for the Civil War Soldier**

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**Abstract**

Present value is applied to the rapid nature of Civil War soldiers' redeployment home. This paper explores the means by which Union and Confederate soldiers found their way home and the obstacles they encountered along the way. The expansion of federal bureaucracy in the post-war years still proved woefully underprepared to meet the needs of veterans, but the lasting relationships forged during combat created a social network that persisted for decades after the canons ceased fire.

**Keywords:** Civil War veterans, journey home, social networks

### **Outsiders of Battlefield Experience The Journey Home for the Civil War Soldier**

When I began this project, remembering the rapid nature of my own redeployment home from Iraq inspired me. In less than two weeks, I went from sitting in the bright Iraqi sun waiting to board the first of four planes, to pulling up to my home in Richmond, Virginia. Those days were a blur of standing in lines, listening to debriefings, being diagnosed with PTSD, and sensing the anxious hum of folks eager to return to “normal” life. I had traveled halfway across the earth in a startling amount of time. I took my four sets of uniforms and packed them away, never to wear them again. It was startling to have choices again. Jarring to be clean, comfortable, and safe. Awkward and dangerous to be alone. Overwhelming to see long-missed faces and hold loved ones. Depressing to say goodbye to so many brothers and sisters in arms.

I wondered, what were the experiences of earlier soldiers? Those who had, not an earth to travel, but at most a few state lines? How long did it take for them to get home? More importantly, how did they view their return to “normal” life?

The Civil War veterans considered here come from the Appalachian eastern third of Tennessee. This region of the state held mixed feelings regarding both the war and their state’s decision to attempt secession. While Unionist sympathy has long been explored in the region’s Civil War scholarship, the opposing sides were more evenly matched and unevenly distributed; often based on population density and access to a marketplace and education. Tennessee only actually spent nine months as a U.S. state in open rebellion. A late attempt at secession followed by a United States occupation of the capital in short time, Tennessee’s experiment in leaving the federal government failed quickly. East Tennessee’s war, then, was a war of occupation, civilian participation, home guards, and tension. In their journeys home, the veterans of East Tennessee challenge historian Noel Fisher’s assertion that the region “was a backwater theater.” While under-developed

Appalachia might not have held many “major cities, ports, rivers, or industrial centers,” recovering from a war of occupation accompanied a direct impact on lasting loyalties, and veteran voices did shape the political landscape.<sup>1</sup>

The proximity of the homefront to acts of war ensured persisting grudges and enduring friendships that affected partisan agendas. It also led to unsafe harbor for returning soldiers on the losing side. James Carriger, upon being relieved from service in North Carolina in May of 1865, “footed it” back to Claiborne County, Tennessee, after “Federals robbed me of my horse on my way home.” John H. O’Neal returned from Confederate service to Polk County, Tennessee (just outside of Chattanooga). Years later he recalled how “the Confederate soldier had a hard time here during the Reconstruction period . . . East Tennessee was very nearly equally divided on the question of secession (sic) and our chances among so many Union men were pretty bad it mattered not how honest or upright a Confrate (sic) was he had no favors from the other side.” Still, these were the lucky Confederate veterans who had made it home. Others would wait months or years upon hearing “it might not be right healthy up here in these mountains” for the losing side. John Moffett, a Confederate POW from New Market, Tennessee, found himself in legal limbo once transferred from his prison in Camp Douglas, Illinois, to Point Lookout, Maryland. As this initial release of prisoners took place, the Lincoln assassination stopped the pardoning process in its tracks. Even after taking the loyalty oath and being granted pardon, Moffett’s family and friends warned him against returning home. He stayed in Baltimore for months, slowly making his way back to Tennessee over the course of years spent in the vain pursuit of access to prosperity. Others, like Jonathon Coffey, encountered warnings on their journey home where citizens talked of the “ill treating” Confederates received. Coffey worked in Ohio for seventeen months before walking over two hundred miles home in relative safety.<sup>2</sup>

The concern for personal safety in East Tennessee immediately after the war illustrated the perils veterans faced and that welcome homecomings did not exist for

everyone. While seventeen months proved long enough for Coffey to return home, some Rebel veterans seeking a peaceful homecoming never found it. Confederate officer Albert M. Lea desired to come home one year after war's end and hoped enough time had passed to ensure his safety. A Lieutenant Colonel in a Texas engineering battalion, Lea requested insight from a local politician regarding the possibility he and his family might be received without hostility. In February of 1866, he expressed his remorse in having served in the Confederate army and claimed his service represented his personal need to "mitigate the evils of the strife." Lea assured the East Tennessean that, aside from his eldest son who also fought for secession, his family comprised "non-combatants" who desired nothing more than to "obey the law & live peaceably" within Grainger County's borders. Without knowing the exact wording of the reply Lea received, or if he received one at all, Lea's postwar career suggests East Tennessee proved inhospitable to his desires. The same year Lea asked if his home state might welcome him back, he applied for a job as city engineer of Galveston, Texas, and never returned to his hometown of Richland, Tennessee. He could not go home because he did not have the support of those he wanted to come home to.<sup>3</sup>

Union soldiers, in stark contrast, almost immediately returned home and began enacting their pre-war routines. Anything remotely similar to a demobilization effort was rapid, at best, or, more often than not, nonexistent. As they walked, rode horses, and hopped trains home, returning soldiers immediately faced their new place in society. New definitions of citizen and new interpretations of loyalty required experimentation, and veterans would test the limits of the new world in which they lived. The large numbers of survivors brought with them a requisite expansion of bureaucracy. A postbellum society that attempted any sort of reconciliation during Reconstruction would be a world the veterans made. Still, beyond the most diligent efforts in crafting a societal and governmental policy that recognized both the needs and power of a veteran collective, gaps existed, and the old soldiers turned toward themselves. Beyond the Southern Claims Commission and the

pension system, beyond the Soldier's Homes and service related organizations, individual connections made on the battlefield persisted decades into peacetime. Informal social networks litter the *Tennessee Civil War Veterans' Questionnaire*. Barely literate men who might not be able to spell the name of their hometown could, when asked, provide extensive lists of surviving veterans, local and long distant, more than sixty years after the end of the war. Similarly, the surviving letters of Civil War veterans point to enduring support despite long distances. In 1866, Chase Linde wrote a letter to his former comrade, John Moffett. His letter referenced eighteen men they had served with, either informing Moffett of their current situations or inquiring about them. "On Sunday last I met with Lt. Carmack . . . and where is Charlie & Will? . . . a few months ago Col. Jas Brazelton and family passed through . . . John writes me from Lexington . . . Butler has been in M(emphis) once or twice since I came here . . . What has become of Tip? . . . have not heard a word from John Alexander since the surrender . . . Do you know anything of the McCampbell Boys? . . . John and Tom Pryor I suppose are in V(irginia) . . ." In his postscript, he asked "Where is Sam Scott!"<sup>4</sup>

Once veterans develop themselves, formally and informally, into support systems that befit their past and present, the status of service transforms into something beyond condition. Veterans of war were not a population that required treatment for the ailment of having served. The title, instead, evolved into a lifelong descriptor that required systems and mechanisms be developed to facilitate and bring attention to political and social issues. The American veteran is a construct, and studying it as such yields a better understanding of their history and better questions being asked about their experience.

So why does this matter? What does an investigation into the journey home and the development of social networks teach us about veteran studies beyond history? I'll bring this back to myself here. Last month, I received a phone call from a friend and fellow veteran. She had had a really bad day and knew I would answer my phone to commiserate no matter how petty issues might seem. After speaking for a few minutes, she abruptly

interrupted herself and asked, “Kate, can I give you a phone number?” The number belonged to a man named Jason. No last name known, no location known. But my friend knew that Jason was a Marine, a combat veteran, and was contemplating killing himself that night. I called him, this random stranger living or possibly even dying somewhere in the United States, and he did not answer the phone. I tried to leave a message but his voicemail mailbox was full. I had no information on how to find him. Needless to say, it was a sleepless night that night. When the sun finally came up, I got a text message from Jason. He was alive and seeking help. He had been overwhelmed by anonymous veterans who called and texted him throughout the night. Instead of depending on letter writing, Jason experienced the anonymous social networking that can take place on a digital platform. These social networks evolve alongside technological developments and persist when the government structures that currently exist fail to catch those individuals in trouble. The informal networks of comrades work to fill in the gaps. They’ve done so for an incredibly long time now. Because once the moniker of veteran is ascribed, the journey home to a “normal” life never ends.

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### **About the Author**

Kate Dahlstrand is currently working on her PhD in History at the University of Georgia under Dr. John Inscoe. A Tennessee native and combat veteran, she studies Civil War veterans and their transition to civilian life in East Tennessee. She is also developing a history course that examines the American veteran throughout American history.

### Endnotes

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2. Gustavus W. Dyer and John T. Moore, compilers, *The Tennessee Civil War Veterans Questionnaires*, vol. 2, ed. Colleen M. Elliot and Louise A. Moxley (Easley, SC: Southern Historical Press, 1985), 461. (Hereafter this source will be referred to as the *TCWVQ* with the volume and page numbers provided.) Also *TCWVQ*, vol. 4, 1656; *TCWVQ*, vol. 1, 407; John Moffett to William Moffett, May 18, 1865, William H. Moffett Papers, McClung Historical Collection, Knoxville, Tennessee; *TCWVQ*, vol. 2, 531.
3. A.M. Lea to O.P. Temple, February 22, 1866, O.P. Temple Papers, University of Tennessee Special Collections Library, Knoxville, Tennessee; W.T. Block, “A Towering East Texas Pioneer: A Biographical Sketch of Colonel Albert Miller Lea,” *East Texas Historical Journal* 32, no. 2 (1993), 29–30.
4. Chase Lide to John Moffett, January 11, 1866, Sallie Moffett Papers, McClung Historical Collection, Knoxville, Tennessee.

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