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Brahmins Under Fire: Peer Courage and the Harvard Regiment

By

Richard Miller

The record of Harvard students who fought in the Civil War provides historians with a unique opportunity to examine how social class influenced leadership style in combat, an important factor in explaining the remarkably high casualty rates among the University's volunteers. The numbers are more than suggestive. Excluding naval personnel, physicians, chaplains and others who served in (mostly) non-combat positions, all schools of the University contributed a total of 578 officers and men to infantry units; of these, 88 were killed or mortally wounded and 86 were seriously wounded. Excluding deaths from disease and wounds unrelated to combat, 30.10 % of these Harvardians became combat casualties.¹ If one considers only those killed and mortally wounded, Harvard's casualties were 15.22% of total enlistments; this compares with total killed and mortally wounded for the entire state of Massachusetts at 6.4%. In other words, expressed as a percentage, the ratio of Harvardians killed and mortally wounded in combat was nearly 2 1/2 times that of other Bay Staters.²

¹ Dr. Francis H. Brown, *Harvard University In The War Of 1861-1865, A Record of Services Rendered In The Army And Navy of The United States by The Graduates and Students of Harvard College and the Professional Schools*, (Boston, Mass., 1886). If deaths from disease (36) are included, the overall casualty rate rises to 36.33%. The figures used above were calculated using Brown's list.

² Colonel William F. Fox, *Regimental Losses in The American Civil War*, (Albany Publishing Co. Albany, NY, 1869) p. 526.

The importance of social class and leadership style transcends the boundaries of any particular group, and points directly to a broader question universal to war itself: Does a willingness to accept a high risk of death or injury derive from the individual's sense of duty or is it the product of some group dynamic, an attribute of a specific community or social class? Admittedly, this question falsely presents as opposing choices two factors that in life operate together. Political ideology, religion or simple patriotism cannot be diminished as motives; certainly, these factors were influential in many a Harvardian's decision to enlist, seek a commission and endure hardship in the field. But when these men wrote home about their combat experiences, two themes dominate: The desire to survive, but to do so only as "gentlemen."

One group of gentlemen officers who left a significant body of correspondence and diaries are those of the Twentieth Regiment Massachusetts Volunteers. Known as the Harvard Regiment because of the preponderance of Harvard educated officers on its roster, this unit's combat experience was consistent with that of other Harvard volunteers. With 17 officers and 243 men killed or mortally wounded in combat, the regiment is ranked fifth by Col. William F. Fox in his famous list of "Three Hundred Fighting Regiments" of the Union Army. Among Massachusetts units, the regiment is first in overall casualties (409), while the Bay State itself was fourth among loyal states in the percentage of three-year troops killed or mortally wounded.³ In his summary of the Twentieth, Massachusetts, Fox dryly notes its "remarkable fatality in its Field and Staff, losing a Colonel, Lieutenant-Colonel, two Majors, an Adjutant, and a Surgeon, killed in battle."⁴ Almost every one of these officers, and many others lost on the firing line, were gentlemen officers.

The Twentieth's best-known alumnus was Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.; altogether, thirty-one Harvard connected soldiers would pass through its ranks. Including those of Holmes, Jr., a total of twelve officers left substantial collections of letters, diaries spanning significant periods of time or reminiscences that were written during the war. If one is determined to write about Civil War officers of the Brahmin class, there are few regiments that offer such abundant and low hanging fruit in the form of primary sources. Beginning with Mark De Wolf Howe's edition

³ Ibid. pp. 3, 122 and 164. For the Twentieth's overall casualties, p. 471; for Massachusetts's casualties, p. 526.

⁴ Ibid. p. 164.

of *Touched With Fire: Civil War Letters and Diary of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.*, several of these collections have become among the most frequently consulted primary sources of their kind.⁵

These mostly young men were a self-possessed and supremely self-confident group, all residing at the apex of wealth and literacy. Their voluminous contemporary correspondence, diaries and memoirs are replete with shared attitudes about class, courage and army life, about superiors and subordinates and most of all, who was and who was not a gentleman. With many, the importance of maintaining the status of a gentleman appears as something of an *idee fixe*; so pervasive, indeed as to constitute a social belief system. Civil War regiments did not record “body counts,” i.e., some numbering of enemy casualties. The most reliable records are those of their own casualties. As a result, these are the traditional yardsticks of combat worthiness. It must not be forgotten however, that the best of these regiments and the Twentieth was among the very best were highly disciplined and very lethal killing machines that gave as good (and probably better) than they got. Behind this grim efficiency was the social code of the officers, the invisible incentives that steered them in battle and impelled them into the hailstorms of lead.

That the Harvard educated officers, their relatives and the handful of Brahmin strivers constituted a discrete group is beyond question. For those who had in fact attended Harvard, it is clear that by 1860, the connection signified more than a mere educational opportunity. Since the

⁵ These would include Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., *Touched With Fire: Civil War Letters and Diaries of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.*, ed. by Mark De Wolf Howe, (Fordham University Press New York) (Cambridge, Mass., 1946); Henry Livermore Abbott, *Fallen Leaves: The Civil War Letters of Major Henry Livermore Abbott*, edited by Robert Garth Scott, (Kent, Ohio, 1991); Francis Winthrop Palfrey, *Memoir of Wm. F. Bartlett*, (Cambridge, 1878), containing many of Bartlett’s wartime letters; Henry Ropes Letters, Boston Public Library; Dr. John G. Perry, *Letters From a Surgeon of the Civil War*, compiled by Martha Derby Perry, (Boston, 1906); *A Memorial of Paul Joseph Revere and Edward H. R. Revere*, Privately Printed (Boston, 1874), reprinted, 1913; containing many letters of these brothers, both of whom served and were killed in the Twentieth; other less well-known but valuable unpublished papers include the diaries of Charles L. Peirson, Casper Crowninshield, and Charles Walker Folsom, and various collections of unpublished correspondence written by Surgeon Nathan Hayward, and officers Henry Lyman Patten; the foregoing may be found in the Twentieth Massachusetts Papers at the Boston Public Library. Several descendants of Harvard Regiment officers have graciously shared with the author family archives. In particular, the author wishes to thank Alexander Chaulk, for the letters of George Nelson Macy and Thomas Paine and for the letters of Sumner Paine.

1830s, Harvard's governing Corporation had deliberately moved to reshape the ancient institution as a mold of Brahmin class ideals. By 1850, it had become, largely through private benefaction, an institution whose assets were five times that of Williams and Amherst combined and three times those of Yale. Fellows, students and faculty were wealthier, drawn in greater numbers from the Boston area and increasingly representative of the merchant families who were the progenitors of what by 1860 were already known as "Brahmins." In the words of one scholar, a distinct class-based "Harvard style" was promoted by the school, marked by "a reasonably identifiable blend of taste and accomplishments: an appreciation of cleanliness, grooming and fashion; a facility with conversation, alcohol and ladies; an acceptance of the virtues of nature as well as of books; a commingling of sophisticated excess with responsible self-control and worldly grace with physical vigor." The point of encouraging a distinctive style was also in part, to "channel student contacts away from the masses and toward the broader elite community."⁶ This class shared religion (largely Unitarian), residence (Boston area) and education and familial wealth rooted in the emerging textile, railroad, banking and manufacturing industries (which had long since consolidated through intermarriage with the older commerce of shipping and trading).⁷ It would be expected that such a homogeneous group would also evince similar reactions to the experience of war.

The success of these seemingly self-confident gentlemen as warriors began with a curious paradox a lack of personal confidence in their own life's mission. George M. Fredrickson has observed that many of the young Brahmins "rallied to the colors with an enthusiasm which revealed not only a desire to regenerate the nation but also a hope for personal salvation." They were seeking, he declares, "something worth doing, and

⁶ Ronald Story, *Harvard & the Boston Upper Class: The Forging of an Aristocracy, 1800-1870*. (Middletown, Conn., 1980). Story's thoroughly researched book documents the conversion of Harvard University from its pre-1800 semi-public institutional status controlled by orthodox Congregationalists to the largely Unitarian Brahmin governed institution at mid-century. The comparison of Harvard's wealth with that of other schools appears on p. 25; the "Harvard style" on p. 120 and the channeling of students towards the elite on p. 133.

⁷ Thomas H. O'Connor, *Lords of the Loom: The Cotton Whigs and the Coming of the Civil War*, (New York, 1968), p. 33.

the opportunity for a commission in the army seemed an answer to their prayers.”⁸ Although Fredrickson later suggests that what these young men sought was rescue “from an aimless literary or scholarly existence,” the record reveals something quite different. Most of these “fighting Brahmins” were neither scholars nor literati. Quite the contrary.⁹ In the Harvard Regiment, of the 21 officers who had been students at the University and engaged in combat, only two -- James Jackson Lowell (A.B. 1858) and Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. (A.B. 1861) -- had consistently demonstrated any interest in scholarship. What is remarkable-and highly significant-are the number of officers who were very poor students or had significant behavioral problems. At least seven had been suspended or expelled for misbehavior involving violence or vandalism or had been, in the dainty phrase of the time, asked to “take up their connection with the college” due to academic deficiencies. Of the remaining number, most were, except as noted, average or variously above average in class rank. In short, rather than rescue from scholarly aimlessness, their situation seems far more mundane: they were mostly rich men’s sons without particular genius, spared the pinch of want and looking for a means to justify their advantages. Whatever its cause, statements of purposelessness appear through many letters and diaries. Shortly after being commissioned in the Harvard Regiment, Second Lieutenant Henry Livermore Abbott (A.B. 1860) wrote to his mother and proclaimed that enlisting “was the thing I ought to do, that nothing could possibly be so good for me in the way of experience as going in the army.” He continued,

I felt that I had never done any thing or amounted to any thing in the whole course of my existence, & that there was no better prospect in view for a long time, if at all. And what is more, that seemed to be the opinion of every body else, I couldn’t help concurring with every body else, & so got disgusted with being nothing and

⁸ George M. Fredrickson, *Inner Civil War: Northern Intellectuals and the Crisis of the Union*, (Urbana and Chicago, 1993), p.72.

⁹ Research is ongoing. This information was derived from Student Records at the Harvard University Archives.

doing nothing, & resolved that if I couldn't do much, to do what so many other young men were doing.¹⁰

Charles L. Peirson, an 1853 graduate of Harvard's Lawrence Scientific School, became a First Lieutenant and Adjutant of the Harvard Regiment. He was taken prisoner after the Federal debacle at Ball's Bluff and was incarcerated in Richmond's notorious Libby Prison. His diary entry for New Years' Day, 1862 was hopeful that in a month he would be released, and bring an end to "this useless, aimless life" of a prisoner of war. However, purposelessness was not new to him; he added despairingly that, "useless indeed has [my life] always been but never quite so thoroughly so as now." A purpose however, would soon find him. After his release, Peirson eventually became Colonel of the 39th Massachusetts, was wounded at Spotsylvania and Weldon Railroad and finished the war as a Brigadier General by brevet.¹¹

Second Lieutenant Henry Ropes (A.B. 1862) defended his decision to enlist and assured his brother that he was not discouraged by the Spartan conditions in camp. "I find here an opportunity to do as much good as I shall find in any profession," he wrote one rainy day in January 1862: "My time is so occupied very fully, and my pay is sufficient, my trade honorable and one that calls out all the ability a man may possess. I have enough of pleasant companions," he concluded, adding that besides, "I can see nothing better to look forward to in life." After giving additional assurances, he proudly declared, "Yesterday I made a pretty good omelet."¹²

Whatever substance the gentlemen officers believed they lacked they found in their more colorful army comrades. The men they found most intriguing were those they believed had led lives of adventure and excitement compared with their own. They were seen as more authentically masculine, free from artifice, timidity and perhaps the over civilized restraints of a Boston society that Charles Sumner had once observed was, "Close and hard, consolidated, with a uniform stamp on

¹⁰ *Fallen Leaves*, Henry Abbott to Josiah G. Abbott, July 11, 1861, pp. 33-35.

¹¹ "Journal of Brevet Brigadier General Casper Crowninshield," entry of January 1, 1862. Unpublished manuscript, Boston Public Library.

¹² Ropes Letters, Volume III, Henry Ropes to John Codman Ropes, January 28, 1862. Weather from Diary of George Nelson Macy, 1862. Author's possession.

all and opinion running in grooves.”¹³ In May 1861, Henry Abbott had described himself as “constitutionally timid,” and confessed to his father that unlike some others, “My tastes are not warlike ...but [rather] literary and domestic.”¹⁴ No wonder then, that when he met Leander Alley, a Nantucketer and First Sergeant of his company, Abbott was awed: Alley was, he gushed, “a regular old salt & used to be first mate [on] a whaler, & is usually a gruff old fellow who isn’t given to flattery.” To his mother he confided that Alley, “for years first mate on a Nantucket whaler [is] a regular old American sailor who despises everything like poppery.”¹⁵ Abbott was devastated by Alley’s death at the Battle of Fredericksburg, telling his father that he had “felt the same pang” he experienced on learning of his beloved brother Ned’s death at Cedar Mountain in August.¹⁶

Henry Ropes, was likewise impressed with a (man’s man). Writing his father for the first time from the field, Ropes relayed his conversation with a man he (mistakenly) believed was Thaddeus Lowe, McClellan’s balloonist. “He has seen a great deal of the world,” Ropes said, “having been with Fremont across the Rocky Mountains, twice crossed South America from Rio to Peru, and once North America from the Hudson’s Bay settlements to the Red River.” If this wasn’t enough, Ropes found the Twentieth’s camp “a most excellent place,” in part because of the exciting people he met there. Fellow officer Charles Cabot was “an old soldier, was with the British in the Sepoy Rebellion, and is considered to be a first rate officer.”¹⁷ Two weeks later, in a passage reminiscent of Abbott, Ropes described one of his NCOs, Sergeant Campion as “an old regular, [who] went through Mexico with Scott and is a man to be depended upon.”¹⁸ Ropes was fascinated with the Seventh Michigan

¹³ Paul Goodman, “Ethics and Enterprise: The Values of a Boston Elite, 1800-1860,” *American Quarterly*, Volume 18, Issue 3 (Autumn, 1966), p. 437.

¹⁴ *Fallen Leaves*, Henry L. Abbott to Josiah G. Abbott, May (?), 1861. pp. 31-32.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* Henry L. Abbott to Josiah G. Abbott, December 16, 1861, pp. 85-88; Henry L. Abbott to Caroline Abbott, February 13, 1862, pp. 102-103.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* Henry L. Abbott to Josiah G. Abbott, December 14, 1862, pp. 148-149.

¹⁷ Ropes Letters, Volume I, letter to father, January 1, 1862.

¹⁸ Ropes Letters, Volume I, letter to father, January 13, 1862.

Volunteer Infantry, which was brigaded with his own. Unlike the Bay State men, who lived in tents, these slightly exotic westerners had with their own hands “built a long row of large barracks, where they are as comfortable as home. They can all use an axe skillfully,” Ropes marveled.¹⁹ Two weeks later, he wrote of the Michiganders, “It is a good Regiment. Men, real stout Americans, full of strength and earnestness. Officers middle-aged men, and good, but not attentive to little particulars of etiquette &c. I am sure it will fight well.”²⁰

Casper Crowninshield (A.B. 1860), who began his distinguished Civil War service as a captain with the Twentieth, was also impressed with the Wolverines. His diary entry for September 9, 1861, summarized his conversation with two “very intelligent Michiganders” of the famed Berdan’s Sharpshooters. “My Michigander was a fine looking man,” Crowninshield noted of one, “[who] said he was a mechanic and that last winter he worked down South on building a bridge, or something of that kind, and in the Spring was called a damned Abolitionist, and driven out of the state without getting a cent of his pay. He did not think much of the Southern Troops,” he wrote reassuringly. These were the kind of men whom the young captain would admiringly describe the next day as the “tall, lank, chewing, whittling, independent Yankees from Michigan, Wisconsin, Indiana, etc.”²¹

Whatever advantages were conferred by the “Harvard style,” a sense of freedom, manliness and authenticity of experience was not among them. Indeed, the army probably represented the first (and perhaps only) time these young men conceded superiority to those they had otherwise regarded as class inferiors. But another experience, that of war, soon changed this. After their baptism by fire, the naive respect accorded these “men of the world” ceased to appear in the gentlemen’s writings. Perhaps the need vanished, for by then, esteems bolstered by surviving combat, the gentlemen had become their own men of the world.

For the gentlemen officers, the army became their first passion. Physically invigorated by outdoor life, nerves kindled by the electricity of war and self-esteem rising, they would quickly adapt to the uniforms they wore and, along the way, experience a personal fulfillment that was

¹⁹ Ropes Letters, Volume I, letter to father, January 1, 1862

²⁰ Ropes Letters, Volume II, Letter to John Codman Ropes, January 14, 1862.

²¹ Journal of Crowninshield, entry of September 9, 1861 and September 10, 1861.

unavailable in civilian life. Their positive reaction to army life was usually immediate. On temporary militia duty at Fort Independence in Boston Harbor, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. wrote to his mother in May 1861 that he was in “bully condition and have got to enjoying life so much.” Distance from home did not diminish these feelings. Camped outside of Washington, D.C. a week after having left Boston, Holmes, Jr., told his mother, “I feel very well & in very good spirits and I think I am learning as I certainly am trying.”²² Learning close order drill, the load-in-nine and mastering the manual of arms was tremendously gratifying for the gentlemen. Captain William Francis Bartlett (A.B. 1862) was stationed at Fort Independence and shortly afterwards, faced with the prospect of returning to Harvard, recalled his satisfaction with army life:

What have I gained during the last month? I have learnt more military than I could have learned in a year in the armory or from books...I value the knowledge acquired in the last month more highly than all the Greek or Latin I have learned in the last year...I look back on the past month as one of the pleasantest and most useful that I can remember.²³

Henry Abbott concurred. “If I any longer cared to shine as a scholar, I have no doubt that I should be envious [of a teacher’s assessment that Abbott’s younger brother was the superior scholar], but I have lost all ambition, for the present, for any thing but the military,” he wrote his father from the Harvard Regiment’s camp in Maryland, adding, “I am now completely absorbed in that, & have no interest in any thing else.” He wrote to his mother the same day and reassured her that “in the long run” he preferred the “the pleasures of civilized life” over the “deuced nice time” he was having in the army. “Still, I like this life much better now because it is a change,” he added, “and because I am in so much better condition, [with] so little ailments of any kind.”²⁴ The Battle of

²² *Touched With Fire*, letters of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. to Amelia Holmes, May 1, 1861, pp. 3-4, and September 11, 1861, pp. 6-8.

²³ *Memoir of Wm. Francis Bartlett*, p. 34.

²⁴ *Fallen Leaves*. Letter to Josiah G. Abbott, September 25, 1861, pp. 49-52; Letter to Caroline Abbott, pp. 48-49.

Ball's Bluff, winter quarters and several rain soaked months on the Peninsula did little to change his feelings. "This is a healthy life," Abbott wrote his mother from camp on the Pamunkey River in May 1862. "I have never been in such stunning condition since I went to college."²⁵ After the brutal Seven Days' Battle, Abbott expressed his contentment in a revealing aside to his sister Carry: "War isn't nearly as bad as it is painted. I was a coward before I went & now I ain't."²⁶

Only two weeks after his arrival at camp and months before his first combat experience, Henry Ropes was ready for perspective. On January 14, 1862 he confided to his brother John that,

I can look back now on several periods of my life and events, which I shall not ever know again. I shall never forget my college friends, and often think of them now, [but] I do not in the least regret that I came here, on the contrary, I am very glad I saw my duty to come, but if I ever return, there will be great changes at home and I shall probably be a different man. I am more than satisfied with military life.²⁷

Even those gentlemen who joined the regiment later in the war shared this attitude. Sumner Paine (A.B. 1865), great-grandson of the Signer, had compiled a brilliant academic record at the Boston Latin School but would become a major discipline problem at Harvard. After his second suspension, he joined the Twentieth, arriving in camp on the eve of the Battle of Chancellorsville. "With the exception of doing picket duty in a northeaster," he wrote his father a week later, "every thing I have had to do has been mighty pleasant. The more I see of this life, the more I like it." One reason was the congeniality of his fellow gentlemen officers. To his sister Fanny he wrote, "We had a very jolly evening. There are very few officers here, and all are perfectly social. A lieutenant

²⁵ Ibid. Letter to Caroline Abbott, May 18, 1862, pp. 118-119.

²⁶ Ibid. Letter to Carry, August 10, 1862. pp. 135-136.

²⁷ Ropes Letters, Volume II, Henry Ropes to John Codman Ropes, January 14, 1862.

slaps Macy on the back, etc.” She replied several days later, “I see you are in the right place. You have found your element at last.”²⁸

Military rank dovetailed nicely with the civilian social hierarchy already familiar to the gentlemen officers. In fact, rank provided a means of enforcing class distinctions that were unavailable in civilian life. Moreover, it must be remembered that the three years’ volunteer regiment was a temporary creation of the Civil War. While modeled on Regular Army regulations and traditions, it had no past and was guaranteed no future in peacetime. It was composed almost entirely of civilians, most with no military experience. However the regiment was supposed to function, it was profoundly influenced by the social codes of its officers and men, especially the former. The gentlemen officers of the Twentieth, besides having to remake themselves also had to “make” the regiment.

Military rank and social class conjoined neatly in a letter written by Captain George N. Macy to his parents in May 1862. In disgust, he complained about an unwelcome visit from an enlisted man from another Bay State regiment, on the pretext that he knew the Nantucketer’s father:

You may imagine a small party of officers sitting together at dinner when suddenly there appears a private of another regiment, an utter stranger, very dirty and announces himself in a loud voice as Mr. L. who married a Nant. Woman -- ‘tho’t he’d call round & see how you got along.’ Without removing his hat or offering any salute but a fat dirty hand, while our own men not only never think of entering an officer’s quarters, but never come to the entrance without a salute & hat off. We had a good laugh as it [was] finally at my expense, but I certainly never felt more mortified in my life and don’t want such persons to know where I am. Who in hell he is I can’t conceive. I am just as democratic as any man living, but do wish to encourage good manners.²⁹

²⁸ For evidence of Paine’s academic prowess, see *Boston Daily Advertiser*, “Boston Latin School Exhibition,” May 27, 1861 and “Valedictory in Latin,” *Boston Daily Advertiser*, July 15, 1861. Letter to father, Paine Letters, courtesy Thomas Paine, May 7, 1863. Letter to Fanny Paine, May 5th, 1863. Letter from Fanny Paine, May 11, 1863.

²⁹ Macy-Chaulk Letters, George Nelson Macy, letter to parents, May 23, 1863.

The search for congenial company was not limited to gentlemen. Tribal loyalties had steered many a recruit to likeminded regiments -- one thinks of the Irish Brigade, the Highlanders, the Garibaldi Guards and the many German units scattered throughout the Union army. Of course, it was no different with the Brahmins. In a letter to Lt. Colonel Francis Winthrop Palfrey (A.B. 1851), then commanding the Twentieth, John Codman Ropes earnestly recommended his brother Henry for a commission. "I suggest that among so many vacancies," Ropes wrote his fellow member of the Bar, "one might be selected from among the old friends and College companions, of so many officers of the 20th."³⁰ He knew his brother well. After six weeks in the field, Henry would report that, "I find since I have come here, that there is an excellent class of men who think alike on Regimental matters, comprising all the college men, Sturgis, Murphy perhaps, and in fact all but one or two."³¹

This preference for "all the college men" was perhaps the first characteristic of the gentleman officer. "[William Francis] Bartlett is a splendid officer," wrote Henry Ropes. "So is the Colonel. He and Bartlett look into the tents, smoke &c. like College fellows."³² Harvard Regiment Surgeon Dr. Nathan Hayward (A.B. 1850) wrote to his father just after Thanksgiving Day, 1861: "We are getting on very pleasantly at our camp under our new acting Staff. I certainly have been very fortunate in falling in with a circle of gentlemen so unexceptional [i.e., without flaws] as those that make up our body of officers." He added, "The bad eggs are all gone. Sweeney, Day, Capen and Wollaston and Hirschenroder."³³ These last named men were officers who had resigned just before or immediately after Ball's Bluff. Of the five men, none were Harvardians, and three were ethnics; of the two apparently native-born men, one had been a plumber before the war. None were "gentlemen" in

³⁰ Ropes Letters, Volume I. John Codman Ropes to Francis Winthrop Palfrey, undated. Palfrey and John Codman Ropes were both graduates of Harvard Law School and Boston lawyers.

³¹ Ibid. Volume II, Henry Ropes to John Codman Ropes, February 16, 1862.

³² Ibid. Volume II, Henry Ropes to John Codman Ropes, January 3, 1862.

³³ Reports, Letters & Papers Appertaining to 20th Mass. Vol. Inf. Vol. I. Dr. Nathan Hayward to James Hayward, November 24, 1861. Boston Public Library.

the eyes of their Brahmin comrades. Crowninshield was attracted to Company D for the same reason Ropes was attracted to the Regiment: As Captain of Company D, Crowninshield would have classmate George B. Perry (L.L.B. 1861) as his first lieutenant.³⁴

While the Brahmins adapted supremely well to where they were, they could not escape who they were. For them, social class was everything. It trumped politics, military rank, riches and even bravery under fire. Enlisted men who were gentlemen ranked with the best of the gentlemen officers; fellow officers not deemed gentlemen were purposely shunned in camp and joined the many colonels, generals and especially presidents as subjects of the most vituperative prose found anywhere in their correspondence.

Defining a gentleman is, as Trollope famously observed, a rather intuitive matter.³⁵ Likewise, so confident were the gentlemen of the Twentieth in their use of the term that nowhere in their writings is the word ever defined. But writers and readers alike had little doubt as to who was and who was not a gentleman. The frequent discussions about “gentlemen” were probably prompted by necessity. These officers had special reasons to be concerned with the social status of those they encountered in the Army. Field command often sandwiched them between subordinates and superiors whose characters they would need to understand in order to survive. More than issues of combat reliability and social habits were involved, however. For many it was the first time in their lives that they found themselves in such motley company. Commanding immigrants and working-class men, forced to share command or take orders from those they believed were their social and intellectual inferiors (which, the gentlemen believed, carried great risks under fire), the gentlemen officers simply adapted their social code to the Army to make comprehensible this new situation.

Clearly, there was a balance of factors that combined to produce a gentleman. Some were quite patent: race, white; religion, Unitarian or Episcopalian, and nativity, “American” were the principal gateway

³⁴ Journal of Crowninshield, entry “August, 1861 Camp Massasoit.”

³⁵ For a psychological approach to the “character” of the Civil War soldier, which touches on the subject of the “gentleman,” see Michael Barton, *Goodmen: The Character of Civil War Soldiers*. (London, 1981). In general, Barton emphasizes the role of Victorian values especially those of self-control and impulse mastery in the formation of the character of Civil War soldiers.

credentials. To these would be added more subjective traits of manners, dress, language, education, and in general, an ability to give and properly interpret cues that indicated a familiarity with upper class mores.

Not surprisingly, the Harvard connection was a sufficient (although, as will be seen, not always necessary) credential for inclusion. Casper Crowninshield records a typical instance in his diary entry of September 5, 1861. Wending its way to Washington, D.C., the regiment was feted for supper at the Park Barracks in New York City by various Massachusetts dignitaries, including Governor Andrew. Crowninshield looked about the room, saw that it was “filled with vulgar looking reporters” and then, in a sense, opted for the familiarity of Harvard Yard: “I thought I would dine at some hotel,” he wrote, “so meeting Hazelet Howland and Geo. Wilson my classmates they kindly asked me to dine at Delmonico’s. Holmes, Hallowell, Perry, and Abbott dined with us, and we had a first rate time.”³⁶

In a regiment estimated by Henry Ropes to be “1/2 Irish and German,” American nativity was also required for inclusion in their set. In a letter to his mother, Abbott fulminated about a foreign-born private soldier with pretensions of being a gentleman:

He is a mere flighty, flashy foreigner, all in a blaze one moment & then dying out. Instead of buckling manfully to his work [he was reprimanded] for having the dirtiest gun in the company, & he was actually caught *hiring* another man to do his police work... he was always trying to intrude himself on officers, & giving the men an idea that although nominally a private, he was, in fact, altogether differently situated from them.

It did not help that he had “borrowed \$5 of Ropes’ servant, which he has never repaid” and that he took “\$150 bounty...and then, after two months’ duty, or shirking of duty, gets his discharge because he happens to be a gentleman?”³⁷ Abbott’s distaste for foreigners never abated, even

³⁶ Journal of Crowninshield, entry for September 4, 1861, includes subsequent entries for September 5. Each person mentioned was a Harvard graduate.

³⁷ *Fallen Leaves*, Henry L. Abbott to Caroline Abbott, December 1, 1862, pp. 146-148. Ropes’ estimate of ethnicity, Ropes Letters, Volume II, Henry Ropes to John Codman Ropes, January 28, 1862.

after nearly three years of distinguished service leading a regiment composed of many foreign-born men. In February 1864, referring to the “Garibaldi Guard,” which he described as a “beastly set of Dutch boors, Maccaronis, & Frogratecs” he explained to his mother that, “It is a rule in this army that the more foreign a regiment is, the more cowardly it is.”³⁸ Xenophobia was by no means confined to the gentlemen of the 1860s, and was famously widespread throughout the Army of the Potomac. It would have a special significance for the Twentieth, however. In early 1863, following the loss of several gentlemen colonels, the next in line for command was the German-born and undeniably brave Ferdinand Dreher, who had received a ghastly head wound at Ball’s Bluff. Shortly after joining the regiment, Henry Ropes had described Dreher as “a most excellent Officer and probably the best educated military man in the Regiment;” but when Dreher was up for command six months later, Ropes’ opinion had changed. He complained to his brother of Dreher’s “ignorance, violence and conceit” and that the German, in temporary command, was “uncivil and over-bearing to the last degree.” He was now “a crazy drunken Dutchman,” and the gentlemen officers united in an intense letter-writing campaign lobbying Governor Andrew to supercede him.³⁹

For his part, Dreher understood that he faced a very discreet peer group, and he defended himself to Governor Andrew accordingly. In a heart rending letter, he characterized the gentlemen officers as “young men, belonging to a certain aristocratick [sic] clique” whose purpose was to rid the regiment of him and his loyalists. As Dreher saw it, the Brahmins “came not under the command of either of us[,] rule the whole Regiment as they have done before, and will do so in the future....” He then identifies nine members of the clique, six of whom had Harvard connections with two of the remaining three having blood ties or commercial relations with the Brahmin class.⁴⁰ The letters of Abbott,

³⁸ Ibid. Henry L. Abbott to Caroline Abbott, February 8, 1864, pp. 237-238.

³⁹ Ropes Letters, Volume I, Henry Ropes to father, April 25, 1862; Volume III, Henry Ropes to John Codman Ropes, November 9, 1862 and again, November 12, 1862.

⁴⁰ Anthony J. Milano, “The Copperhead Regiment: The 20th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry,” *Civil War Regiments*, Volume III, Number 1, p. 46. Milano reviews this incident in his article. The six Harvard officers identified by Dreher were, Mason, Patten, Milton, Holmes, Ropes and Abbott; Two of the three remaining clique members were Capt. Cabot, a cousin of Henry Lee, Jr., Governor Andrew’s chief liaison with the Boston

Ropes, Holmes, Jr. and regimental surgeon Nathan Hayward direct more anger towards Dreher than towards the Confederates.⁴¹

If sham and pretence disqualified enlisted personnel, vulgarity, low intellect and radical politics would do the same for officers. Abbott characterized fellow officer Allen Beckwith, who was a clerk before the war, as “a disgrace to our regiment on account of his stupidity, ignorance & vulgarity.” “Ditto,” he said of Lieutenant John W. Le Barnes adding that he “he was a long haired abolitionist & spy of Governor Andrew’s.”⁴² Abbott’s contempt for abolitionists and his loyalty to the Democratic Party of which his father was among the most prominent Massachusetts spokesmen during the Civil War is a persistent theme in his correspondence; indeed, to no surprise, the officers and men of the regiment brought with them the political tensions that divided their civilian elders. However, it is important to recognize that political differences typically stopped at the gates of Harvard Yard. Abbott’s reaction to the death of classmate Robert Gould Shaw (A.B. 1860) is typical: “Poor Shaw,” he wrote sadly to his mother, “He was too good a fellow to be sacrificed for an experiment.”⁴³

His relationship with lifelong abolitionist Norwood Penrose Hallowell (A.B. 1861), who became a captain in the Harvard Regiment, makes the same point. Hallowell, the son of prominent and wealthy Philadelphia Quaker abolitionists, had once served as an armed bodyguard to Wendell Phillips during an especially contentious meeting

Brahmin community and George Nelson Macy, whose commercial connections with Boston Braminism were extensive. Lt. Wilkins antecedents are presently unknown.

⁴¹ Ibid. pp. 47-48. Hayward was less angry but no less convinced that Dreher’s leadership was a tremendous detraction. Writing to his father on November 20, 1862, he declared, “There is much dissatisfaction in the regiment on account of our being under command of Captain Dreher as Colonel, and Shepard as Lieut. Colonel. Our regiment has consequently lost much of its prestige, and is no longer regarded at Head-Quarters as one to be trusted on an emergency as an isolated command.” Hayward recommended that Dreher be discharged for mental incapacity. “Letters of Dr. Nathan Hayward,” Reports, Letters & Papers Appertaining to 20th Mass. Vol. Inf. Vol. I.

⁴² *Fallen Leaves*, Henry L. Abbott to Josiah G. Abbott, March 17, 1862, pp. 106-108.

⁴³ Ibid., Henry L. Abbott to Caroline Abbott, August 7, 1863. pp. 198-199. Shaw, Colonel of the 54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment, was killed leading the assault on Battery Wagner, July 18, 1863.

of the Antislavery Society in Boston.⁴⁴ He would eventually become Colonel of the 55th Massachusetts Regiment. Although there were a number of abolitionist gentlemen officers in the Twentieth, Hallowell was by far the most prominent. As was the case with Shaw, Abbott respected Hallowell, praising his bravery at Ball's Bluff and defending his seniority in the regiment for promotion to Lieutenant Colonel. In fact, when Hallowell wrote Abbott what was apparently a pro-abolitionist letter in 1863 (as he verged on becoming Colonel of the 55th Massachusetts), Abbott refused to accept the possibility that he was in earnest. "I thought at first that he must have been joking," Abbott wrote to Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., "but since I have made up my mind that he was drunk, as the letter is dated from the Parker House."⁴⁵

As they did with Dreher, the gentlemen officers directed their harshest criticism at other fellow officers who were not considered gentlemen. Captain John C. Putnam, a clerk before the war, allegedly lobbied Governor Andrew for the colonelcy of the regiment. Henry Ropes had an opinion on his fitness to command: "Putnam is utterly incapable of taking the Regiment, physically, mentally and morally. He is a notorious drunkard, and has been living on the Government for 18 months doing no duty [Putnam had lost his arm at Ball's Bluff, and was afterwards assigned to recruiting duty in Boston].... [He] has done nothing but loaf about bar-rooms and brothels.... [He] has lost all claim to be considered a man of honor or a Gentleman (in the lowest meaning of the word)." Had Putnam obtained the appointment, Ropes promised that his cheek would be repaid: "[He] will be cut off by every Officer here. He will not be spoke to or written to except as his military rank requires and will be treated hence forward as a dishonorable mean scoundrel."⁴⁶

⁴⁴ "Newspaper Interview," from *Selected Letters and Papers of N. P. Hallowell*, (Peterborough, New Hampshire, 1963).

⁴⁵ *Fallen Leaves*. For Hallowell's bravery, see Henry L. Abbott to Josiah G. Abbott, November 7, 1861, pp. 7-74; for defense of seniority, see Henry Abbott to Caroline Abbott, January 8, 1863, p. 159; for circumstances of the Hallowell's letter, see Henry L. Abbott to Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., May 18, 1863, p. 183. The author has been unable to find the letter sent by Hallowell, and is inferring its abolitionist content from other comments made by Abbott.

⁴⁶ Ropes Letters, Volume III. Henry Ropes to John Codman Ropes, April 30, 1863.

As noted above, a Harvard connection was sufficient but not necessary for gentleman status. Dr. Nathan Hayward numbered Major George Nelson Macy among “our little band of gentlemen officers,” although Macy’s highest degree was from Nantucket Public High School. The fact that he was the son of an important merchant and a descendent of an old Nantucket family, coupled with his pre-war employment with a prominent State Street mortgage broker was probably sufficient burnishment.⁴⁷ Captain Charles F. Cabot, whose service with the British in India had so impressed Henry Ropes, had likewise never attended Harvard. Nonetheless, when Cabot traveled to Boston, Ropes asked his father to receive him, explaining that he had “the very highest regard for him, both as a soldier and a Gentleman.” The fact that Cabot’s father resided on Beacon Hill (on Chestnut Street, just around the corner from the Ropes’ at 92 Beacon Street) and was a kinsman of Henry Lee, Jr., no doubt enhanced the son’s regard.⁴⁸ William Raymond Lee the Harvard Regiment’s first colonel, was adored by his Brahmin officers and their letters rarely mention his name without praise. Lee had descended from a prominent Revolutionary War family and had attended West Point; afterwards, he had a notable career as a civil engineer building railroads in Massachusetts. So notable indeed, that Harvard University awarded him an Honorary Masters of Arts degree in 1851; more remarkable, he had served on the visiting committees to the university, something quite rare for a non-alumnus.⁴⁹ Not surprisingly the gentlemen officers regarded him as one of their own. When health forced the 56 year-old Lee to resign the colonelcy in December 1862, the officers tendered their official thanks in adulatory terms that mirrored the sentiments contained in their private correspondence. Composed in camp ten days after the regiment’s huge losses at the Battle of Fredericksburg, they wrote: “Your example taught us more perfectly than we could learn

⁴⁷ Nathan Hayward to his father, December 27, 1862. *Reports, Letters & Papers Appertaining to 20th Mass. Vol. Inf. Vol. 1*. After the war Macy became Treasurer of the Suffolk Bank, one of Boston’s elite financial institutions.

⁴⁸ Ropes Letters, Volume II. Henry Ropes to father, February 11, 1862. Cabot’s address is derived from his obituary and confirmed by the *Boston City Directory of 1861*. Ropes’ address is also listed in the *Boston City Directory of 1861*.

⁴⁹ “William Raymond Lee,” Overseers Records, Volume VIII, p. 485; Corporation Records, Volume 9, p. 183. Harvard University Archives.

elsewhere to strive not only to acquire the discipline of soldiers, but the high feelings and patriotic self-sacrifice of chivalrous gentlemen.⁵⁰

One did not forfeit the status of gentleman merely by serving in the ranks. Francis Vergnies Balch (A.B. 1859, L.L.B. 1860) came from a prominent (and antislavery) family; in August 1862 he had enlisted as a private in the Twentieth. Otherwise anti-abolitionist Henry Ropes was among others who had difficulty treating him as a subordinate, in spite of Balch's insistence that military proprieties be observed. Ropes wrote to his brother that Balch "goes about, and [be]comes the heavy respectful, and salutes and tries to make himself a most exemplary private, but it is impossible for any of us to treat him personally as a private. He is a splendid fellow, and really tries to do everything a private should do." Ropes added that to Balch's credit, he "rather avoids the Officers and will not go with them and be treated as one of them."⁵¹ Abbott, in whose company Balch served, agreed with Ropes. If anything, Balch's status as a gentleman was enhanced by his service in the ranks. Excepting "physical weakness," Abbott described him as a "model soldier" and that his file mates "appreciated him fully & knew that he was a gentleman sacrificing his position, so much so that the last day he was with them, every one of them called him Dr."⁵² It is worth noting that shortly after Lt. Colonel Palfrey resigned his commission he formed a law partnership with the former Private Balch.⁵³

Colonel Lee, reputedly the second oldest serving officer in the Army of the Potomac, was taken prisoner at Ball's Bluff and then mistreated by his captors; nonetheless, he insisted on returning to his regiment despite ill health. Balch had taken a rank below his station although he "never had the constitution for a soldier's life;" nonetheless, he bravely soldiered on "without groan or complaint, until one morning he actually couldn't stand." Both men epitomize another trait expected of the gentleman officer self-sacrifice.⁵⁴ Sharing the hardships of

⁵⁰ "Thanks to Colonel Lee," *Boston Daily Advertiser*, January 3, 1863.

⁵¹ Ropes Letters, Volume II. Henry Ropes to John Codman Ropes, August 14, 1862.

⁵² *Fallen Leaves*, Henry L. Abbott to Caroline Abbott, December 1, 1862. pp. 146-147.

⁵³ Advertisement, "Counselors At Law," *Boston Daily Advertiser*, May 13, 1864. Balch had been discharged in November 1862 for disability.

⁵⁴ *Fallen Leaves*, Henry L. Abbott to Caroline Abbott, December 1, 1862, pp. 146-147.

campaigning with the ranks was also deemed an especially praiseworthy form of self-sacrifice. Palfrey, Abbott's obituarist in the *Harvard Memorial Biographies*, noted that,

He shared with his men the fatigues and anxieties, the hard marching and hard fighting, of the seven days; and at Glendale, on the 30th of June, while cheering and directing his men with voice and gesture, in a peculiarly exposed and trying position, he was shot through the arm which held his outstretched sword. But his wound did not dispose him to leave the field. He continued to command his company till the end of that sharp action, and commanded it again the next day at Malvern Hill. When our weary army reached the James River, he went home by direction of the surgeons, but he came back to his post before his wound was fairly healed.⁵⁵

If the gentleman's code lauded self-sacrifice, its opposite – selfishness was behavior that, if egregious enough, could defrock a gentleman. In the Harvard Regiment, virtually all instances where gentlemen officers were thought to have behaved dishonorably involved claims of selfishness. Jealousy of comrades, vanity and a willingness to place personal above regimental interests were typical accusations. For example, Henry Abbott believed that Crowninshield was guilty of “base & dishonorable behavior” when, after transferring to a cavalry regiment, he went tale bearing about his fellow officers. Abbott believed the motive was jealousy. Crowninshield, who was “perfectly selfish & indifferent to everybody else,” Abbott wrote his father, had seen “Bartlett reorganize the regt. after the battle [Ball's Bluff] & make it better than it was before.... He saw Bartlett do all this & properly get the praise for it, while he did nothing & got praise accordingly.... And that is the reason Casper left. His pride won't let him be second fiddle & his energy isn't enough to make him first.”⁵⁶

⁵⁵ *Harvard Memorial Biographies*, (Cambridge, Mass., 1866), Volume II, p. 99.

⁵⁶ *Fallen Leaves*, Henry L. Abbott to Josiah G. Abbott, December 20, 1861, pp. 88-92.

One important episode in the regiment's history illustrates how tensions among the gentlemen could flare over the issue of egotism. In August 1862, Major Paul J. Revere (A.B. 1852), who had shared a cell with Colonel Lee in Richmond after Ball's Bluff, accepted a staff position with Major General Edwin Vose Sumner.⁵⁷ He left the regiment but never formally mustered out; essentially, although in a new position, he was still carried on the regiment's "books," and thus, continued to accumulate seniority from his original commission date. In the spring of 1863, two events triggered a succession crisis in the regiment. First, Sumner died in March 1863. His staff was dissolved and Revere was suddenly without portfolio. Second, after Lee had resigned the colonelcy in December, his successor-in-rank, Palfrey, resigned his commission in April 1863; in fact, badly wounded at Antietam, he had never returned to the field. The next officer in line was Ferdinand Dreher, the German-born "Forty-Eighter;" but Dreher had left the Army in December, and died in April 1863 from wounds received at Fredericksburg. The next senior officer in the field was Major George Nelson Macy. Brave and exceptionally cool under fire, he was extremely popular with his fellow gentlemen and had led the regiment in its last three battles. Macy wanted the promotion, and in the view of many, had earned it. "If a man deserved the Colonelcy that man is Macy," Ropes wrote to his brother on May 6, 1863: "Besides, [he] was recommended by every superior Officer, including Hooker."⁵⁸

Unfortunately for the Nantucketer, Revere ranked him. He now successfully lobbied Governor Andrew for the appointment, and in the process, provoked the crisis. Having served only six months with the unit since its inception twenty-two months earlier (the balance of the time was spent in Libby Prison and on Sumner's staff), his return was seen as grossly unfair to Macy, and as a result, selfish and dishonorable. "Had Revere stuck by the Regiment we should have rejoiced to see him Colonel," Ropes wrote to his brother. "But now Macy fairly deserves it, and to take advantage of a legal technicality [i.e., that his seniority was due to never having mustered out] to oust out an Officer who has fairly won his position is a thing I cannot think Col. Revere capable of."⁵⁹

⁵⁷ *Revere Memorial*, pp. 140-141.

⁵⁸ Ropes Letters, Vol. III. Henry Ropes to John Codman Ropes, May 6, 1863.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, Vol. III. Henry Ropes to John Codman Ropes, May 8, 1863.

Abbott however, was certain what Revere was capable of. Furious, he wrote to his mother that, “from Paul Revere, I did expect ...the ordinary honesty of a gentleman.” But Revere did not behave as a gentleman; instead, he went “mousing round the imbeciles at Washington until he gets them to declare that the ...regiment is still his & that Macy’s appointment is illegal.” Worse, Abbott fumed, the real reason Revere had left the regiment “at a most trying moment [was] because he disliked Palfrey & got an uncommonly good staff berth with an increase of rank & pay.” Revere had expressly ignored the feelings of his gentlemen comrades. As Abbott made clear to his mother, there would be consequences:

I tell you he has no more right to [the colonelcy] than any civilian there in Boston & that if he sticks to this nasty little technical subterfuge that a gentleman would be ashamed to mention, after getting the letter I have written him expressing the feelings [of] the officers, he will be declared unfit... to associate with gentlemen, all but the barest official intercourse will be refused him, &...he will be left ...to howl & snarl out ridiculous orders until he gets publicly kicked out for shameful ignorance & inefficiency.⁶⁰

Revere, having proved by his actions that he was unworthy to be a gentleman, would now be shunned by other gentlemen and in effect, separated from their community. “He will meet a cold reception when he gets here,” Sumner Paine sniffed to his sister.⁶¹ But as the case proved, Revere did not and probably could not ignore the feelings of his fellow gentlemen. It is likely that the gravitational pull of class overcame the centrifugal force of self-interest. He wrote to Macy and assured him that “he should dislike very much to oust *so esteemed a friend*, & accordingly, he will kindly allow Macy to retain his place, while he himself will take the colonelcy.”[Italics in original]⁶² On May 12, 1863, Ropes was able to write his brother that as Macy had since waived his

⁶⁰ *Fallen Leaves*, Henry L. Abbott to Caroline Abbott, May 7?, 1863. pp. 178-179.

⁶¹ Paine Letters, Fanny Paine, May 5, 1863.

⁶² *Fallen Leaves*, Henry L. Abbott to Caroline Abbott, May 7?, 1863. pp. 178-179.

claim to the colonelcy, “it is not for us to differ about it, and I am glad all is settled harmoniously.” Still, Ropes complained that it was an “injustice.”⁶³ Several weeks later Macy wrote to his parents and hinted that perhaps all was not settled harmoniously:

Col. Revere is here, downstairs. He lives by himself. I was disappointed in his being made Col. but never mind. I am sure my good fortune is at the end of it all. One can't help believing in a Providence after passing through so many changes, troubles and dangers which I have, and out of all the doubt and dangers, I have come right.⁶⁴

It was left to Brahmin historian Francis Parkman to clearly articulate the gentlemen's code of courage. He had never worn a uniform nor been to a war; yet he was certain of what qualities some men needed to lead other men under fire. Writing from his library on Beacon Hill, he declared that officers should be those who know “what the point of honor means, and on whom the brand of cowardice would bring results more terrible than death.” Such an officer must be a man “in whom his soldiers can recognize [that] by nurture, by associations, by acquirements, by character, has an inherent claim to their respect.” Not surprisingly, Parkman knew where to look for such men. “[They] are to be found,” he concluded, “in all the intelligent classes of society.” In other words, they must be gentlemen.⁶⁵

What is remarkable about Parkman's view is how many of the battle-hardened gentlemen of the Twentieth concurred. Months earlier, Henry Ropes, at ease after the grueling Seven Days' Battles, wrote to his brother and related his experience with Federal troops under fire. “With the exception of some Mass Regiments, and a very few others,” he observed, “the troops *do not fight*. They will go in and fire and run up and run back and make a splendid charge as long as the Rebels run the

⁶³ Ropes Letters, Vol. III. Henry Ropes to John Codman Ropes, May 12, 1863.

⁶⁴ Macy-Chaulk Letters, Macy to parents, May 23, 1863.

⁶⁵ Francis Parkman, “Why Our Army Is Not the Best in the World,” *Boston Daily Advertiser*, October 14, 1862. This is one of a series of letters Parkman wrote to the *Advertiser*, insisting that only the “gentlemen” could lead America out of its crisis, and exhorting his fellow Brahmins to do their duty.

other way, but they will not stand up and fight steadily, in regular formation, and keep at it and stick to it.” Ropes thought he knew the reason: “[L]ine Officers,” he declared, “are not Gentlemen.” He continued,

I say this after deliberate reflection. In a battle the tendency to give way to fear is of such a nature that a merely good, honest, plucky man, is very little good as an Officer. An Officer, if he feels afraid must hide it and be above his men. With good Officers the men will do anything.... I find that a merely naturally brave man (I mean a common man) is of no particular good as an Officer. His men are his equals, they see just how he feels, and they must feel the same, and if anything goes, all goes together.⁶⁶

The importance of control over emotions especially fear has long been recognized as a characteristic of Civil War soldiers. They dreaded the possibility that they would be proved cowards under fire. As one scholar has observed, “Often the most powerful fear was that one’s fear would be revealed and that meant a prohibition on discussion, frequently even among comrades, of the topic of greatest concern to each soldier. Fear was not an anxiety to be shared but a weakness to be stifled.”⁶⁷ In the University Chapel at Harvard the need for self-control was often stressed. Many a future officer (Federal and Confederate) had heard Harvard President and Rev. James Walker inveigh against the dangers entailed by the loss of self-control. In a sermon entitled “Character” Walker warned that even men with no bad habits were still subject to “bad and dangerous *impulses*.” He asked his young listeners “what is to hinder these from breaking out, from time to time, into acts of license and crime, unless they are restrained by one good habit at least, that of self-control?”⁶⁸ [Italics in original.]

⁶⁶ Ropes Letters, Vol. II. Henry Ropes to John Codman Ropes, July 7, 1862.

⁶⁷ Gerald F. Linderman, *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War*, (New York, 1987), p. 23.

⁶⁸ James Walker, D.D., *Sermons Preached in the Chapel of Harvard College*, (Boston, 1861), pp. 173-4. See also pp. 222, 332-3 and 336 for other references to self-control. It is

But Henry Ropes believed that it took more than just self-control to master at least one “bad and dangerous impulse” that concerned the gentlemen officers -- cowardice. Having already explained why common men made poor officers, Ropes now defined what, or more exactly, who, was required and the reasons why: “Officers, as a class, must be men to whom the slightest taint of cowardice or the exhibition of fear before an enemy would be perfect destruction and everlasting indignity. They must have a gentlemen’s sense of honor and regard for character.”⁶⁹ In other words, a mere desire to control fear could not produce competent leadership under fire. It must be buttressed by another force -- the fear of disgrace and loss of social position, to those for whom these things mattered. In short, as Ropes saw it, “courage” required more than self-control -- it was a distinct product of the group dynamic specific to one social class: Gentlemen. As long as they feared each other’s opprobrium worse than the possibility of death, they would emulate the motto sewn on the regimental colors: *Stand In The Evil Day*.⁷⁰

This attitude was widespread among the gentlemen officers. Henry May Bond (A.B. 1859) had served with another gentlemen’s regiment, the 45th Massachusetts, before joining the Twentieth as a lieutenant. He described his feelings just before his first combat experience in Kinston, North Carolina: “I had sometimes expressed a fear that I might prove myself a coward in battle, but I was determined, if my will could effect anything, my friends should not be thus disgraced.” As the battle line advanced, Bond offered a prayer that his minister, the Rev. James Freeman Clark, had once assured him would always be heard: “God help me! help me keep my self-possession for the sake of my men.” In Bond’s case, controlling fear was necessary both to avoid the opprobrium of peers and to discharge the responsibilities of leadership.⁷¹

When Ropes declared that an officer must be “above the men” he meant so in the context of social class. During his first battle, Henry

worth noting that during this time at Harvard, chapel attendance was compulsory for undergraduates.

⁶⁹ Ropes Letters, Vol. II, Henry Ropes to John Codman Ropes, July 7, 1862.

⁷⁰ George A. Bruce, *The Twentieth Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, 1861-1865*, (Boston, 1906), p. 74.

⁷¹ *Harvard Memorial Biographies*, Volume II, p. 14.

Abbott found his strength in his class. Confiding to his father afterwards, he admitted feeling fear beforehand although he hoped that his “feelings of duty, pride & honor would keep me up.” In action, however, he was surprised to discover that he was not frightened, and his reason was class pride. “Indeed, it would be hard to be frightened,” he explained to his father, “when men whom you are accustomed to think more ignoble than yourself are cool all around you.”⁷²

The nature of the Civil War battlefield reinforced this gentleman’s dynamic because men could actually observe one another in combat. While the picture of taught lines of battle advancing shoulder-to-shoulder is considerably overdrawn, the fact remains that during Civil War infantry combat, soldiers from the same company and usually the same regiment were often within a few feet of each other. This should be distinguished from the chief characteristic of modern infantry warfare -- wide, broken field deployments where men often cannot see or hear one another. In relating their experiences under fire, the gentlemen officers invariably mention the presence of their peers, who were always close by. Thus, several days after his baptism by fire at Ball’s Bluff, William Francis Bartlett informed his mother that “I was surprised at first at my own coolness. I never felt better, although I expected of course that I should feel the lead every second, and I was wondering where it would take me.” Fortunately, he did not have to endure his trial alone. He continued:

I kept speaking to Little [Abbott’s nickname], surprised that he was not hit amongst this rain of bullets. I said two or three times, ‘*Why Lt., are n’t you hit yet?*’ I remember Macy was lying where the grass was turned up, and ‘roughed’ him for getting his coat so awfully dirty. Lit. was cool and brave as I knew he would be.⁷³

Abbott also shared his trial of baptism under fire. Writing to his father, he described the same event as Bartlett, and marveled at the latter’s courage and luck. “Though we were lying down, our men were shot on

⁷² *Fallen Leaves*, Henry L. Abbott to Josiah G. Abbott, November 7, 1861. pp. 71-74.

⁷³ *Memoir of Wm. Francis Bartlett*, Wm. Francis Bartlett to Mother, October, 25, 1861, pp. 19-33.

every side of us, he wrote. "And yet Capt. Bartlett, though standing up nearly all the time, wasn't so much as scratched."⁷⁴ These two gentlemen not only mirrored each others "courage" but also served to monitor each other against the social risks of flight.

Perhaps the best surviving illustration of this dynamic is found in Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.'s description of the moments just before being wounded at Ball's Bluff. Two days after the battle, he wrote to his mother that, "I felt and acted very cool and did my duty I am sure -- I was out in front of our men encouraging 'em on when a spent shot knocked the wind out of me & I fell." Sensibly, Holmes "crawled towards the rear" and was helped to his feet by his company's first sergeant. Holmes continued:

... & the Colonel [Colonel Lee] who was passing said, 'That's right Mr. Holmes -- Go to the Rear' but I felt that I couldn't without more excuse so up I got and rushed to the front where hearing the Col. cheering the men on I waived my sword and asked if none would follow me when down I went again by the Colonel's side [this time the bullet was not spent.]⁷⁵

Holmes acknowledged two pressures: an internal urge to duty [he could not leave the field without more excuse] and the power of an external, peer driven example [he rushed to front where he heard the Colonel cheering the men on, so he followed suit]. Clearly, these pressures fairly overlapped. Holmes did not make his decision in a vacuum but in a battle. Subordinates, comrades and superior officers surround him; men were both dying and fighting around him; no doubt the power of peer example flowed simultaneously with the instinct of duty. But two different yet reciprocal forces were clearly present. In refusing to leave the field, Holmes, Jr. displayed a courage that a few would evidence in most wars; by imitating the aggressiveness of Colonel Lee, his fellow gentleman officer, Holmes, Jr. imitated by example, something probably more common in the close-ordered combats of the

⁷⁴ *Fallen Leaves*, Henry L. Abbott to Josiah G. Abbott, October 22, 1861. pp. 60-66.

⁷⁵ *Touched With Fire*, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. to Amelia Holmes, October, 23, 1861. pp. 13-19.

19th Century. Indeed, the gentlemen officers' willingness to take the risks that produced such great results (and enormous casualties) at Fredericksburg, Gettysburg and the Wilderness probably arose when the urge to duty met the living example of duty done.

Of course, one's peer group included more than just friends. Lt. Herbert C. Mason (A.B. 1862), after writing his father about the regiment's bloody experiences at Fredericksburg, concluded with this assurance: "I must close here with the promise to you, that whatever happens I will endeavor to conduct myself as [a] gentleman should in the hour of danger."⁷⁶ The approval of superiors was craved, particularly when couched in the language of social class. Colonel Norman J. Hall, a West Point graduate, was commander of the brigade that included the Twentieth and was much admired by the gentlemen officers. In March 1863, Holmes, Jr. proudly wrote his father that Hall, "a man thoroughly educated to his biz. Well-bred, [and] knowing what's what" had said of the Harvard Regiment, "Yes, your Regt. is more like old times' (meaning thereby the old Regular Army, where Officers *were* Gentlemen) than anything I have seen in the Army." [Italics in original]⁷⁷

The gentlemen's code also served to limit aggressive behavior after the battle. While not always effective—for example, the Twentieth's officers joined the ranks in the notorious looting of Fredericksburg during the December 1862 occupation the code could exercise powerful restraints in the face of enormous temptations. A common temptation was the urge to continue killing after the shooting stopped. One instance of this occurred after the Battle of Fair Oaks, fought on the Peninsula in May 1862. Many in the Twentieth believed that the Confederates had intentionally shot Federal soldiers attempting to surrender after the Battle of Ball's Bluff, the regiment's last major engagement. At Fair Oaks, some sought revenge. Many years later, Norwood Penrose Hallowell remembered that after considerable fighting, the rebels "finally were beaten and broken, [and] in utter disorder they streamed out of the woods across our front, and were shot down in a merciless manner." In a spirit of "sympathy and weakness" he immediately ordered his company to cease firing. One of his men cried, "Remember Ball's Bluff!" But

⁷⁶ Mason Letters, Philadelphia Historical Society Collection, Herbert Mason to Jonathan Mason, December 14, 1863.

⁷⁷ *Touched With Fire*, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. to Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., March 29, 1863. p. 90.

Hallowell sought to end the action. He recalled, “[This soldier] had in mind the shooting of our men as they swam the Potomac. I told him that that was just what I did remember.”⁷⁸

Significantly, when, after the same battle, Confederate General Pettigrew was captured by the regiment, Henry Ropes reported that Colonel Lee “treated him in the kindest manner and had his wounds dressed.” When Pettigrew expressed surprise at his good treatment, “Col. Lee told him he had fallen into the hands of a Mass. Regiment and would be treated as Gentleman.”⁷⁹ Thus Colonel Lee, although himself mistreated by his rebel captors just months before, was able to establish his moral superiority over his enemies while simultaneously setting a gentleman’s example for his men. Sooner or later, the Hallowells of the regiment were influenced by his example. Six months later, they would acknowledge as much in their public letter of farewell to Colonel Lee.

With peer influences such as Lee’s, the gentlemen officers’ behavior during the Battle of Fredericksburg represents another important instance of how class ideals worked to restrain aggression. On December 11, 1862, the Twentieth was ordered to capture the town of Fredericksburg in perhaps the most horrific instance of house-to-house combat of the Civil War. Confederate sharpshooters were concealed throughout the town in basements, attics, behind fences and stonewalls and in rifle pits. Macy, in temporary command of the regiment, had received orders to “bayonet every *male* found *take* no prisoners.” However, this was an order with which the gentlemen officers refused to comply. Henry Ropes seemed to speak for his comrades when he wrote to brother a week after the engagement: “The orders to the whole Brigade was to bayonet every armed man found firing from a house, this being, I believe, contrary to the rules of war, but was not of course obeyed.”⁸⁰

Perhaps the greatest off battlefield test of the gentlemen’s ethos occurred in the aftermath of Ball’s Bluff. Colonel Lee, Major Paul Revere, his brother, the regimental surgeon Edward H. R. Revere (M.D. 1849), Lt. George B. Perry and Lt. Peirson had been taken prisoner along

⁷⁸ *Selected Letters of Hallowell*, pp. 12-13.

⁷⁹ Ropes Letters, Vol. II, Henry Ropes to John Codman Ropes, June 9, 1862.

⁸⁰ Richard F. Miller and Robert F. Mooney, “Across the River and Into the Street: The 20th Massachusetts Infantry and the Street Fight for Fredericksburg,” *Civil War Regiments*, Volume IV, No. 4. Macy and Ropes quotation on p. 114.

with 108 enlisted men. At first incarcerated in Libby Prison, prospects darkened when Col. Lee and Maj. Revere were selected with five other officers as hostages in retaliation for death sentences that a New York court had pronounced on several Confederate privateers from the captured brig, *Savannah*. Seeking formal prisoner of war status for the privateers, the Confederate government announced that the selected officers would be held as felons and executed if sentence was carried out in New York.⁸¹ Accordingly, Lee, Revere and the other hostages were transferred to a 17 by 11 1/2 foot wide cell in the Henrico County Jail. In this 195 square foot room, seven men would spend almost three months. As Col. Lee delicately phrased it some years later, these men would be forced “to perform all those personal duties which constitute the economy of animal life.” Compared to the late war standard of an Andersonville, the Henrico Jail would seem like a resort; yet in 1861, this dark, damp, malodorous cell, with two tiny windows overlooked a whipping post for “refractory Negroes,” seemed like an atrocity.⁸²

How did Lee and Revere cope with this confinement? If showing the white feather was unbecoming to a gentleman, so was having to defecate and urinate in the presence of six other cellmates, five of whom were previously unknown to the Colonel and his Major. The principal first-hand accounts describing the experience are the letters of Paul Revere and the reminiscences of Col. Lee. Perhaps not surprisingly, they emerged with their sense of class integrity (if not their physical condition), undiminished. Colonel Lee wrote Paul Revere’s obituary in the Harvard Memorial Biographies and remembered his friend in the Henrico Jail:

It is certain that he never did forget what was due to his position as a gentleman, if manly fortitude and Christian bearing be typical of that character. A prison companion, [Lee refers to himself in the third person] writing to a member of his family after [Revere’s death at

⁸¹ A brief account may be found in George A. Bruce, *Twentieth Regiment Massachusetts Volunteers*, (Higginson Book Company, Salem, Mass, reprinted 1997). pp.65-70.

⁸² Colonel Lee’s phrasing can be found in his “Memoir of Col. Paul Joseph Revere, Twentieth Mass. Volunteer Infantry, by Col. William Raymond Lee,” unpublished manuscript, Boston Public Library. The phrase “refractory Negroes” appears in Bruce, p. 67.

Gettysburg] spoke of his deportment, while confined as a hostage, in terms which will be understood and appreciated by all who were familiar with his characteristics: -- 'In the cell of Henrico County Prison, with its horrible experiences and painful suspense, there was a moral grandeur in his conduct of which I can give no idea. All were strangers except Revere and myself. How much depended, how much of ordinary comfort even rested, upon decorum and self-respect in act and speech; how strongly yet delicately Revere restrained undue license in each!'⁸³

Colonel Lee's letter, sent some sixteen months after their release, probably reflected Revere's own view of his deportment while imprisoned. On February 24, 1862, as he steamed towards Baltimore and freedom, Revere wrote that his captors had:

continued their personal indignity to the last, never having released us from the position of hostages formally. However, it does not matter now, and they never for a moment, with all their outrages, made one of us forget our position as gentlemen.⁸⁴

The issue of courage and its relationship to Civil War casualties is best understood in the context of highly defined peer groups, consisting of members who profoundly influenced one another's behavior under fire. The gentlemen officers were only one such peer group, attractive to the historian for their bountiful legacy of letters, diaries and memoirs. Yet the history and identity of many Civil War regiments suggest that the presence of powerful peer groups may have been the most socially significant fact of Civil War Army life. These groups were varied and began with the regiment itself. This basic combat unit was a creature of the states at a time when the state comprised a large, and in some cases, the largest portion of a citizen's political identity.⁸⁵

⁸³ *Harvard Memorial Biographies*, Vol. I, p. 227.

⁸⁴ *Revere Memoir*, Paul J. Revere to family, February 24, 1862.

⁸⁵ For example, phrases such as "for the honor of good old Massachusetts" or "for the name of Massachusetts" appear frequently throughout the gentlemen's correspondence.

Soldered on to this were the deliberately ethnic compositions of many regiments -- African American, Irish, German, Scotch, Scotch-Irish and Italian. Regiments in turn consisted of companies, and at the company level, peer groups were even more sharply defined. Large percentages were drawn from the same town or county; fathers, sons, brothers, cousins, neighbors, best friends, co-workers and school mates fought in the same lines of battle, and were present to witness -- and audit -- the behavior under fire of those with whom they shared a past and more importantly, a possible future. The Harvard Regiment itself boasted at least one familial constellation that typified exactly how well defined peer groups could be: Officers Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., William Lowell Putnam, James Jackson Lowell and Charles C. Cabot were all kinsmen and all gentlemen; three of the four had attended Harvard; all were from Boston or Cambridge. Their service records are similar and significant Cabot, Putnam and Lowell were killed in action, leading their companies; Holmes, Jr., escaped death, but not injury, being shot at Ball's Bluff, Antietam, and Chancellorsville. How the "audit" function worked can be inferred from Holmes, Jr.'s recollection of the last time he saw cousin Jimmy Lowell alive: "...I looked down the line at [the battle of Glendale.] The officers were at the head of their companies. The advance was beginning. We caught each other's eye and saluted. When next I looked, he was gone."⁸⁶

Of the 45 three years' Union regiments with combat casualties greater than 200 men, only three had enough gentlemen officers to make the case that the peculiarities of the Brahmin class influenced leadership style.⁸⁷ But what is striking is the large number of units which, like the Harvard Regiment, had sharply defined characters from inception: The list includes the self-consciously western regiments of the Iron Brigade; the Irish of the 69th New York, 9th and 28th Massachusetts; the Scotch Irish of the 100th Pennsylvania ("Roundheads") and Colonel Cross's 5th New Hampshire. Some regiments, such as the 105th Pennsylvania were recruited from one occupation (lumbermen); others, such as the 145th Pennsylvania, the 111th and 51st New York, chiefly from one county. It

⁸⁶ *The Essential Holmes: Selections From the Letters, Speeches, Judicial Opinions, and Other Writings of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.*, Edited and With an Introduction by Richard A. Posner (University of Chicago, 1992), pp. 80-87.

⁸⁷ *Regimental Losses*, pp. 2-3. The three are the 20th, 15th, and 22nd Massachusetts.

seems that the more definable a peer group, the greater likelihood that, all things being equal, combat casualties would increase. How else to explain the fact that tiny Vermont, which furnished 21 regiments had 9 that were included on Fox's list of "Three Hundred Fighting Regiments?" Or equally small New Hampshire, which furnished 20 regiments, had 8 on the same list? These sparsely populated and small states probably sent units containing very high proportions of soldiers who, by kinship, occupation or residence, constituted powerful peer groups.

A final word must be added concerning any attempt to link social factors to combat casualties. Certainly one objection to making this connection rests on that of accident: gentlemen officers usually did not choose their battlefields, had no way of knowing before any action whether it would prove bloody or not; and in all cases, given the lethal nature of close-quarters Civil War combat, anyone exposed, farm boys or gentlemen were likely to sustain enormous casualties. There is certainly truth in this. But it also begs an important question. Civil War regiments were typically not deployed by accident or assigned their positions by lot. Reliable units were posted where needed -- usually in critical assault positions or as rear guards to cover withdrawals. In spite of the notorious fickleness of battles, Civil War commanders knew where their blows would land and often correctly anticipated where enemy blows were likely to fall. Subject only to the exigencies of manpower, they deployed regiments accordingly. The question being begged then, is not, whether tough spots decimate farm boys and gentlemen alike, but rather, why did certain regiments find themselves perpetually cast as either the anvil or the hammer?

The experience of the 20th Massachusetts at Fredericksburg is a case in point. Consider Acting Major George Nelson Macy's account of the council of war convened on December 10, 1862, the night before the planned assault on the town:

[at] a council of war, held the night previous, Gen. Couch was given the advance. Gen. Couch turned to Gen. Howard and said, "Your division will have the advance." Gen. Howard turned to Col. Hall and said, 'Your brigade will have the honor of leading the Army of the Potomac across the river.' Col. Hall gave the 20th the front, and told me that I should lead the Brigade.

Well, I felt proud of that -- felt ready for anything -- felt sure that I have penned my last letter -- however, I felt that I could lead the 20th and I knew they would follow.⁸⁸

Corps, division and brigade commanders knew exactly what they were doing. When Howard gave Hall's Brigade "the honor" of leading the army across the river, he had special reason to know about at least three of its regiments. Just two months earlier in his report written after the Battle of Antietam, Howard had singled out the officers of the 19th Massachusetts and the 7th Michigan for "drawing off their regiments without breaking" following the disastrous entry into the West Woods. When Hall gave the 20th Massachusetts "the front," he also knew his business: in his Antietam battle report he states that immediately after the West Woods debacle, "I found Colonel Lee with his regiment, Twentieth Massachusetts volunteers, in perfectly good order and with very full ranks." This was after the regiment had suffered 124 casualties. Because of this good order, they were the first regiment Howard mentions as being able to march to the support of a nearby battery whose fire was believed critical in checking the Confederates in the West Woods.⁸⁹

Chance certainly played its part. At Fredericksburg, no one could know that on December 11, rebel sharpshooters would prevent the pontoon bridge from being laid across the river, and that Hall's Brigade would have nothing dry to traverse; that as a result, the 19th and 20th Massachusetts and the 7th Michigan would be forced to paddle across the river in boats and take the town in bloody, house-to-house fighting. Not foreseeable, perhaps, but in battle, the concept of reliability is based on coping with the unforeseeable, and at Fredericksburg, the army had the units to do it. It was neither an arbitrary hand nor an accident that placed Hall's Brigade closest to the river. And when the Brigade had finally crossed the river, Hall was forced to make another decision, arguably one

⁸⁸ As quoted in Miller and Mooney, p. 104.

⁸⁹ U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: The Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington, DC, 1890-1901), Series I, Volume 21. "Report of Brig. Gen. Oliver O. Howard, U.S. Army, commanding Second Division, of the battle of Antietam," pp. 305-308; and, "Report of Col. Norman J. Hall, Seventh Michigan Infantry, commanding Third Brigade, of the battle of Antietam," pp. 321-322. Also noteworthy is that both reports single out five ADCs for praise--three of them from the Harvard Regiment, and two of these severely wounded while serving on staff.

of the most important of the day: which regiment to assign the task of clearing the town? Of the three units, he chose the 20th Massachusetts, thereby consigning it to its bloodiest day of the war. Why the 20th Massachusetts? Hall's well-known statement to Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., parts of which have already been quoted, provides some insight:

Yes, your Regt. is more like times (meaning thereby the old Regular Army where Officers were Gentlemen) 'than anything I have seen in the Army.' Wh. in connection with other remarks about the perfection of their present condition and their behavior in the Field rather pleased me -- [Colonel Norman J. Hall] said 'The 20th have no poetry in a fight' and there is about as little excitement & hullabulloo on these occasions as may be.⁹⁰

The linkage between peer groups and casualties is certainly not deductive; rather, it requires a consideration of many factors, especially why a given regiment found itself where it was at the moment of action. Some peer groups gentlemen officers of the 2nd and 20th Massachusetts, the Irish of the like named brigade; the farm boys of the Iron Brigade, the New Hampshire men of Col. Cross's 5th Regiment, among others, had a certain consistency of experience, that of constant exposure, battle after battle, to the savagery of Civil War combat. While one may point to this or that battle where completely accidental positioning occurred, over four years time and on average, most regiments were precisely where corps, division and brigade commanders wanted them. And for the 20th Massachusetts that was more often than not in the center of the crucible.

⁹⁰ *Touched With Fire*, p. 90.