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Private John E. Bisbee, The 52nd Mass. Volunteers, and the Banks Expedition

David Boilard and Joseph Carvalho III

John E. Bisbee was a resident of Chesterfield when he enlisted in the Union Army as a Massachusetts volunteer in 1862 at the age of 19. The letters he wrote during his service with the Banks Expedition, a part of the Red River Campaign, were addressed to his father, Osmond, and his brother, Rockwell. Bisbee's spelling was poor and inconsistent. His handwriting was extremely difficult to decipher due to the absence of punctuation. The punctuation in this presentation of his letters, therefore, has been inserted for proper interpretation of his writing. Words which were spelled too poorly for interpretation have been explained in brackets, as well as words which seem to have been left out by Bisbee inadvertently. The majority of his words are spelled phonetically and can be understood by their pronunciation.

Despite his poor spelling and lack of punctuation, Bisbee's letters are rich in description and feeling the various topics he writes of and the ideas he expresses are much like those of U.S. soldiers in other wars: food, climate, daily military routine, and the strong desire to return home.

On August 4, 1862, the War Department issued an order for a draft of three hundred thousand men to serve for nine months in the service of the Federal Government. Many of the states in the North were opposed to a draft and in order to avoid its necessity, sent out a call for volunteers. The quota for Massachusetts was 19,099 men. Hampshire and Franklin counties in Western Massachusetts were enjoined to raise one regiment of 930 men which would be called the 52nd Massachusetts Volunteer Regiment.¹ John Bisbee was a member of Company I, which had 90 men and was recruited from the Chesterfield-Cummington-Williamsburg areas.

The Regiment was gathered together at Greenfield and organized at Camp Miller on September 13. On November 20, 1862 the regiment marched through "a smart rain, and by a circuitous route" to the Greenfield train depot. The streets were lined with townspeople and "many a moistened eye told of the deep sympathy for the departing soldiers."² The regiment moved by rail to New Haven where they boarded the steamship "Traveler." It was reported that the men were not provided with "even a place on the floor."³ That night the majority went sleepless.

Arriving "amid a nasty rain" at New York on the 21st, the 52nd marched to the common in the vicinity of the City Hall. There they were kept until nightfall "standing in the mud and rain, then resting on the marble floors of the passage ways in the City Hall." The next evening, the regiment was quartered at the Franklin barracks in which straw was not supplied, leaving "nothing but the bare floor to sleep upon."⁴

On the 24th, the 52nd received orders to march the nine miles to Brooklyn's "Union race course." Upon reaching the camp grounds the men were informed that the tents would not be distributed until the following day. One soldier wrote that "a cold, raw wind" blew throughout the night and "the only thing the men could do was throw themselves upon the ground and cover their sweating bodies with their blankets for covering."⁵

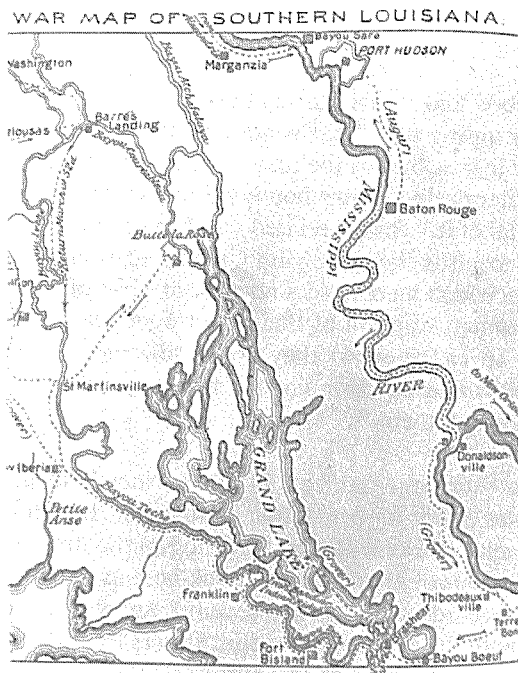
The 52nd sailed from New York Harbor on the "Illinois" as part of the "Banks Expedition" under General Nathaniel P. Banks. On December 2, 1862, they headed for the "Department of the Gulf." The men found life aboard ship both monotonous and tedious. This, coupled with the lack of proper logistical planning for their stay in New York, left many disgruntled. Noting that the ship was divided "in the proportion of one part to a private and ten parts to an officer," a member of the 52nd wrote that the men had become increasingly disenchanted seeing "at one end of the ship the luxuries of a hotel supplied to their officers, and themselves at the other end furnished with only the coarsest necessaries of life." The soldiers complained that the privates were "stowed away in close quarters," where Northampton "south street farmers" would not consider stalling their cattle. He concluded that "it is not strange that the men are discouraged and pray for the expiration of their term of service."⁶

In letters to his father and brother, John Bisbee described the voyage and declared: "I have not been well since I left New York." He had not eaten for the first two days aboard the "Illinois." Bisbee asserted that his father "would not know any of the boys if you could see them, for we do not look as we did when he was up to Camp Miller, we look like corps and thar is nothing to us anyway, for we are all sunk in in our brests."⁷ Providing a graphic description of the toll exacted aboard ship by the rough seas, Bisbee wrote, "when we was sick, the floor was covid mor than one inch deep all over it. that is the fact thruth. it was covid with puke and if it did not smell good than I will not say so again."⁸

Having adjusted to being at sea, he told of large sharks, "some as long as a man," he had seen while venturing on deck. Bisbee described the sailors as the "hardest set of human beings that I ever saw in my life, for thay could swer (swear) like fury...." Later, while in Louisiana, Bisbee heard that the "Illinois" had "gon to the botom down to the mouth of the (Mississippi) river." Displaying the animosity he had felt towards the sailors, he exclaimed: "I dont car if the

salors has gon down with her, for thay was a hard set.”⁹ Upon landing at Baton Rouge on the 17th of December the 929 men of the 52nd were assigned to the 2nd Brigade of Grover’s Division, 19th Army Corps.¹⁰

The Army, with its great masses of men cast together, is a place to gather life experiences and to learn of human nature. In a letter to his father, Osmond, dated December 23, 1862, Bisbee said, “if I ever get home I will stay thar now (that) I have found out what a man is....I cannot trust the best frend that I hav got here.” Complaining primarily of the widespread theft, “hooking,” throughout the ship, he stated that “many of the boys, if thay live to come home thay will not be the same fellows as thay was before.”¹¹ Referring to the many instances of thievery among the members of the 52nd, Lieutenant Colonel Samuel J. Storrs wagered that he could take Port Hudson, a major confederate fortification on the Mississippi river, with the 52nd Regiment alone. When asked how he would accomplish such a feat, he replied, “Put them (the 52nd) in camp within 5 miles of Port Hudson, tell them not to touch it, and within 2 weeks they would steal the whole of it.”¹² Bisbee corroborates the Lieutenant Colonel’s assessment, saying: “I hav found out more than I ever hav found out in my life sence I hav been to war. I hav red the testerment almost throug and I liren (learned) more than I ever did before. the war is the plase to lern things of man, to see the diference between one and another, to see how hogis (h) thay ar. if thay can get anything by hooking it thay will.”¹³



When the call for volunteers came, the predominant outlook was optimistic, i.e., the Union armies would put a quick end to the Confederacy. This was substantiated by the fact that the call was for only nine months service. As the war seemed to wear on, the volunteers became edgy, complaining about various aspects of the conduct of the war, hoping to "get on with it" and bring the war to its conclusion.

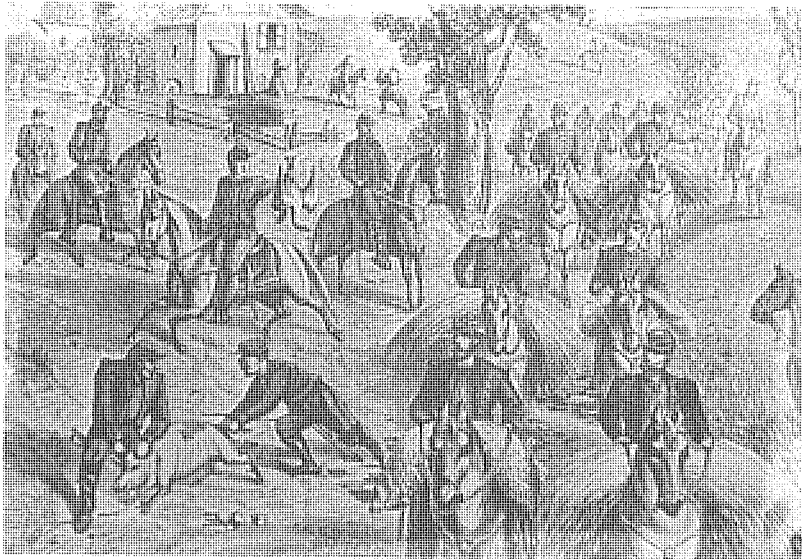
Displaying his frustration, he complained that "that is one thing that I dont like and that is our officers....thar is some old soldiers in this regiment and thay say that the officers is good for nothing." He insisted that the officers were "Mor cat (cowardly) than the soldiers ar." In this letter in which Bisbee lists many "abuses" and "injustices," he angrily expressed his resentment toward the continuing conflict. In a bitter proclamation to his father, he declared that "if the president would let all of the places be burned down to the gound, then the war would be over with before long." Following that statement, he wrote "darn them! if I ever get a chance to get hold of them (the confederates) I will let them hav one shot if thay get ner me first!"¹⁴ As the war dragged on he became more and more adamant in his belief that he had made a mistake by volunteering. He constantly mentioned that he "good ol' Chesterfield" and at one point wrote: "blast the war! if I could see the end of it, it would look like something, but I shall not for some time to come. the boys say that if thay was only at home, the union mite go to the devil and all the rebles with it."¹⁵ Throughout his term of service, Bisbee never tired of pointing out that the war was "a curs to all of the Nation."¹⁶

Private Bisbee told of his anxiety over the sentiments of the population in Baton Rouge by noting that "thar is not one union man in this sitty," and that, "the wumons ar just as bad as the men." He reported that when the casket of a dead Union soldier passed by one house a group of women had "hollard at them that thay was glad of it." Bisbee related another instance of the hatred shown by the inhabitants towards the occupying Union forces. He told of a house he had been guarding in which there lived a number of wives of Confederate soldiers. At one point the women stood in at their front door and, in his own words, they "looked at me so (as though) they could kill me." Angrily continuing, he declared that "it would do them good if my gun had been lotid. I bedarn if I would not have shot them."¹⁷

During the War large numbers of blacks, mostly former slaves, flocked to the Union Armies either for protection or to enlist. In January, Bisbee came in contact with blacks at Baton Rouge. Referring to the displaced slaves in a letter to his brother, he reported: "thay ar as thick here as grasshoppers up there in the sumertime."¹⁸ According to Bisbee's account, approximately thirteen thousand blacks had come to the city for protection. Others from the 52nd expressed their astonishment at the numbers of recently freed slaves who fled the Confederate

countryside for the Union-held city. In a letter to the *Northampton Free Press*, one soldier wrote that it was his impression that these blacks seemed to regard their newly found "freedom" as a "passport to unrestrained license and unmitigated laziness."¹⁹ He looked at their situation unsympathetically seemingly because of his dislike for picket duty at one of the makeshift villages at which large numbers of blacks gathered. Another member of the 52nd looked at the plight of the newly freed slave with somewhat more understanding. In his letter to the *Hampshire Gazette* and *Northampton Courier*, he wrote: "Untouched, except in brutality, ground down through successive generations to a position little higher than that of the beasts, it is not strange that we find him unfitted for self-care...."²⁰

Foraging for food was a common practice by men on both sides of the War between the States, and the 52nd Regiment was no exception. Army rations often times were meager and poorly prepared. As one private explained, the meals "the contractors feed us are not remarkably adopted to dispense hunger, but rather turn the thoughts toward the well laden tables and crowded pantries at home."²¹ Consequently, whenever soldiers had an opportunity, they would depart from their lines to search for whatever edibles they could find. These foraging "expeditions" were not without significant "results". John F. Moors, the 52nd Regimental Chaplain, wrote to his wife on March 5, 1863 stating that "It would not be hazarding too much to say that at least one-half of the cases of sickness and death is to be attributed to some carelessness on the part of the men. It is strange how they will eat anything and everything they can lay hold of in spite of all the warning."²²



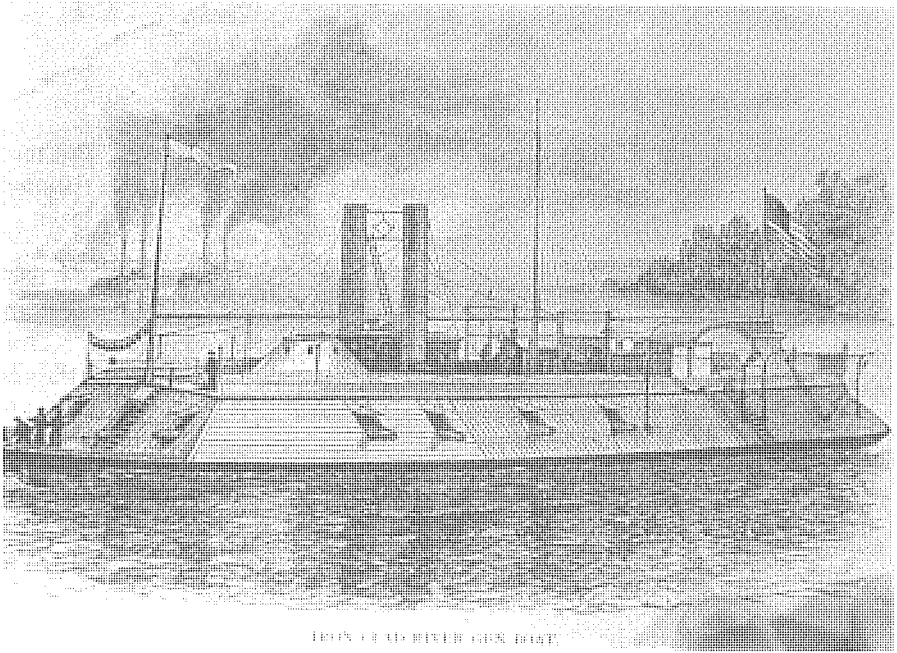
John Bisbee was soon to follow others on these foraging "expeditions." He complained that the troops "do not draw half rations" and that the cooks "ar not good for nothing." He described the early morning meal as consisting of "a little potatoe, only one, and a little slise of stinking meat about as big as your two fingers."²³ In that same letter he told of a nearby battlefield he had passed while searching for food: "the graves ar all around here not a few rods from my tent. now the bones are all in site. some of the ribs stick up in site...here whar the balls had ill them."²⁴ At times, Bisbee seemed envious of the men who were chosen for picket duty, saying that being situated on the outskirts of the camp, pickets had a much better chance of gathering food. He wrote that "every night (the pickets) kill cattle rost some of it and eat it and bring the rest back into camp."²⁵ Having gone beyond the Union picket lines by more than a mile, the private ventured into a deserted "sugar factory." Seeing no one, he and others with him entered a large room where they found, not sugar but "molasses up to our own necks." His letter was filled with praise for "the best molasses that I ever saw in my life...it was so thick that it took me over half anour to fill my canteen full."²⁶

Meanwhile, the 52nd Regiment began to experience increasing exposure to battle conditions as they moved closer to the enemy, also, the build-up for an attack upon Port Hudson had commenced. Bisbee expected a hard fight at Port Hudson due to its well fortified position, but, he added that the 52nd would "waid up to our shollers (shoulders) in blood to take it."²⁷ The Chaplain, J.F. Moors, explained that the 52nd had lived a "weird, monotonous camp life " for three months and that they had been "long enough in this swamp." He asserted that the regiment longed for "the excitement of a change, even if it bring increased danger and hardships."²⁸

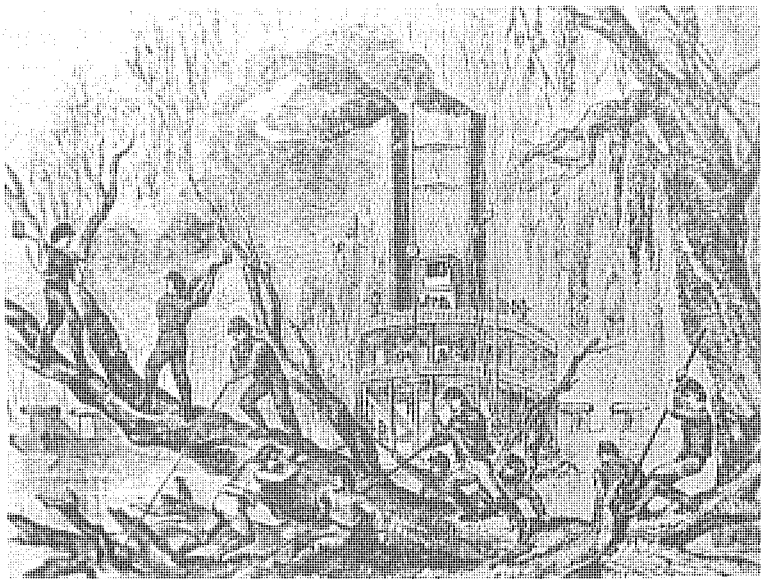
Along with Vicksburg, Port Hudson stood as a major obstacle to complete Union control of the Mississippi river. The plan for the Mississippi campaign was for General Banks' Expedition to eliminate Confederate resistance from New Orleans northward along the river to Vicksburg. General Grant could then complete the isolation of the city, and at the same time divide the Southern forces to the east and west by controlling the Mississippi. However, Southern forces at Port Hudson and west in the vicinity of the Red River kept Banks' army in check. In February, the "Queen of the West" and the "DeSoto", a ram and a gunboat, managed to run the Vicksburg batteries enabling the union forces to temporarily control the river. The shocking news of the capture of the two ships in March reversed the naval situation. Admiral Farragut requested that General Banks divert the attention of the southerners at Port Hudson. On March 13, 1863, the 52nd moved from Baton Rouge as part of a 17,000 man diversionary force which by the 14th had camped within a few miles of the Confederate fortifications. The "Hartford" and its tender, the "Albatross" were able to slip through to the north under the guns of Port Hudson. The remaining five ships

failed to accomplish the same feat. It has been considered as "one of the Admiral's hardest and least successful fights."²⁹ Banks' force contributed nothing to the result and it quickly returned to Baton Rouge on the 16th.

On March 27th, the 52nd moved as part of the 2nd Brigade of Grover's Division to Donaldsonville. From there they moved by rail to Brashear City (actually camping on the Bayou Boeuf). Private Bisbee described this new environment to his brother, Rockwell, saying that, "thar is alagators here, lots of them too...and snakes. the land here is all swamps and there is forest all around here (where) the Rebles get into the woods and shoot at us."³⁰ The terrain was extremely difficult to move in, which made long marches seem even longer to the foot soldier. On one such march a companion of Private Bisbee was unable to keep up with the pace of the rest of the regiment and began to fall behind. Some of the men around him helped him up and carried his equipment for him. At one point the man asked one of the mounted officers to let him ride but "thay gave him a shove and told him to go on. Bisbee wrote that "the poor fellow did and the officers drove him till he fell down dead in the road."³¹



The 52nd under Grover's Division landed at Irish Bend on the 13th of April by steamboat. From there, they moved towards the Confederate Fort Bisland. During the ensuing battle, the 52nd was held in reserve. Meanwhile, General Banks had driven the Sothern forces under General Taylor from a fort on the Teche River. The 52nd was then employed in pursuit of Taylor's retreating force.

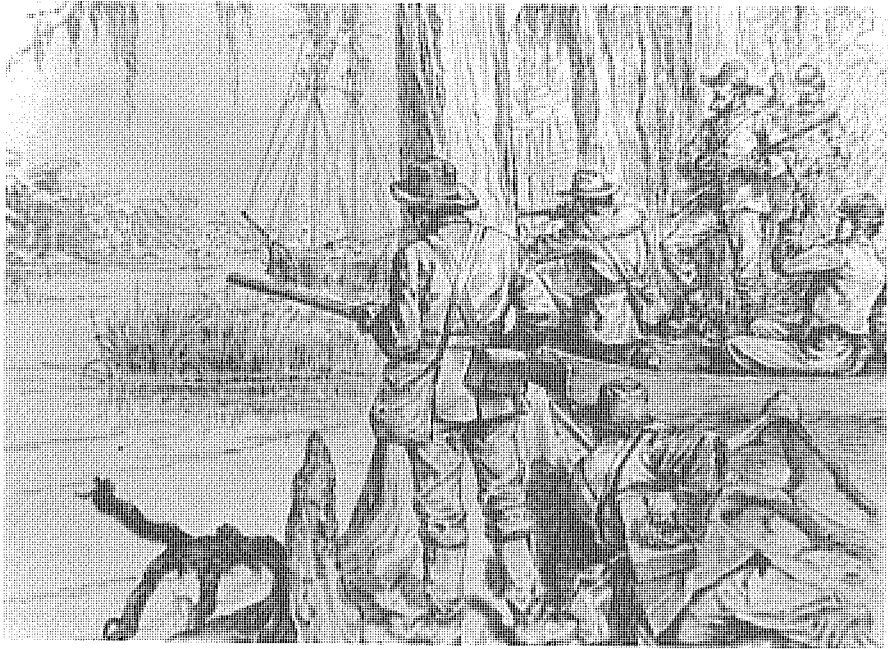


"Removing obstacles from the river."

Marching for five days, they moved from Irish Bend to Opelousas. The town surrendered and the 52nd marched off to Barre's Landing located on a tributary of the Atchafalaya River.

Most of the month of May was spent at Barre's Landing. While there, news that a military draft was beginning spurred hopes of returning home and multiplied the complaints of army life. In response to earlier rumors of a Draft Act, Bisbee exclaimed: "I am glad that the draft is coming on to make the rest start out...our time is up in June...I say let the darn lazy scamps come and try thar luck!"

On May 21st, the regiment broke camp at Barre's Landing and moved southward to Brashear City. Once there, word came that General Banks had assaulted the enemy at Port Hudson, but had been repulsed on the 27th. The next day the 52nd was sent to Algiers on the Mississippi opposite New Orleans and then on to division headquarters near Port Hudson. Private Bisbee gave his brother an account of the battle: "Banks is fitting them evry day now and has lost thousands of men all redy. some regmints went into the fight with 400 and com out with 70 men." Continuing his account he wrote that, "sevrel regmints were into the fight and got cut all up, but thar was two regmints (that) charged barnets (bayonets) on the Rebs and took two battaryes from them." He related an incident in which Banks sent out a flag of truce and negotiated with the



“Rebs” in order to agree to a cease fire while each side collected their dead. The Confederate commander agreed, provided that his men were allowed to retrieve their dead first. Later, once the southerners had taken their dead within the walls of the fort, they commenced firing before Banks’ men could reach their dead comrades. Bisbee declared that “Banks was mad!” and that he ordered the artillery to “let into them like fury.”³²

On June 7 the 52nd was sent as part of a force to march to Clinton with orders to pursue and engage a Confederate raiding party under the command of Governor Alfred Mouton. Upon reaching Clinton, they found that the enemy had dispersed; the regiment then returned to camp. An assault on Port Hudson was planned for June 14th and the 52nd was to participate. On the 13th the order for the attack was issued by General Banks. The 52nd, under General Weitzel, was to act as “flankers” for a brigade assault column. Colonel Halbert S. Greenleaf of the 52nd described his regiment’s position: “we were now in line at about right angles with the head of the main column in the ravine, facing the enemy, and fully exposed to his murderous fire. The whole plateau is commanded by his (the Confederates’) well trained batteries, and swept by a constant shower of rifleballs. It is really like unto a leaden hail.”³³ Although the 52nd reached its objective, the majority of the advancing Union troops were forced to turn back due to heavy losses. The assault was a failure and General Banks resorted to attempting to reduce the fort by regular seige operations.



A NIGHT ATTACK BY CAVALRY.

The enlistment period for the 52nd was quickly running out and the men were anxious to return home.³⁴ Bisbee wrote that he was hoping to “get home time enough to help some in haying if thay (the army) do as thay agree...if thay hold us any longer than nine months,” he expected that “thar will be a fuss in a hurry.”³⁵ The situation at Port Hudson delayed their return home on schedule. On June 18th, Chaplain Moors wrote: “In three weeks we ought to be at home; but there are very few signs of going....Banks is in a very tight place — an unconquered fort in front and a large rebel force, we hear, at th rear.” He observed that “the army is largely disquieted, as many feel that their time of service is out.”³⁶

The seige lasted until July 9th when the Confederate commander, Major-General Frank Gardner, heard of the fall of Vicksburg and proposed the surrender of Port Hudson. On July 20, 1863, the 52nd Massachusetts Volunteer Regiment was “elected” for immediate shipment North due to its service, there having been “no instance of refusal to do duty or of insubordination.”³⁷ The 52nd departed from the Department of the Gulf on the 23rd and boarded the steamboat “Henry Chateau.” Their route took them home by way of Cairo, Indianapolis, Cleveland, Buffalo and Albany. When the Regiment finally arrived in Northampton on the 3rd of August, the *Northampton Free Press* reported that “a more sunburnt, wary and worn lot of men was never seen here before.” It was also noted that some of the men were “so emaciated it was with great difficulty that they were recognized.” However, “with the exception of a few, they were all in the best of spirits.”³⁸ The newspaper made no mention of the eleven men who died in battle, or the eighty-five who died of disease.

FOOTNOTES

1. As of August 29, 1862 the *Northampton Free Press* announced that, "the State military authorities acting under the orders for drafting from the National War Department are willing to accept nine months volunteers in lieu of drafted men." cited from: *Northampton Free Press*, August 29, 1862 p.2., col. 3.
2. *Hampshire Gazette and Northampton Courier*, November 25, 1862, p.2, col. 4.
3. *Ibid*.
4. An anonymous letter from a member of the 52nd — *Hampshire Gazette and Northampton Courier*, November 25, 1862, p.2, col. 4.
5. *Ibid*.
6. *Hampshire Gazette and Northampton Courier*, January 6, 1863, p. 1, col. 3-4.
7. John Bisbee to Osmond Bisbee, Baton Rouge, December 23, 1862. The Bisbee papers are in the Westfield State College Archives.
8. John Bisbee to Rockwell Bisbee, Baton Rouge, January 26, 1863.
9. John Bisbee to Rockwell Bisbee, Baton Rouge, February 15, 1863.
10. One soldier died en route; William N. Richmond, December 7, 1862.
11. John Bisbee to Osmond Bisbee, Baton Rouge, December 23, 1862.
12. J. F. Moors, *History of the Fifty-second Regiment Massachusetts Volunteers*. (Boston, 1893), p. 56.
13. John Bisbee to Osmond Bisbee, Baton Rouge, January 10, 1863.
14. J. Bisbee to Osmond, Baton Rouge, December 23, 1862.
15. J. Bisbee to Rockwell Bisbee, Baton Rouge, December 28, 1862.
16. John Bisbee to Osmond Bisbee, Baton Rouge, January 17, 1863.
17. *Ibid*.
18. J. Bisbee to Rockwell Bisbee, Baton Rouge, February 15, 1863.
19. *Northampton Free Press*, June 5, 1863, p.2, col. 1.
20. A letter dated January 7, 1863 in the *Hampshire gazette and northampton courier*, February 3, 1863, p.1, col. 4.
21. *Hampshire Gazette and Northampton Courier*, December 2, 1862, p.2, col. 4. & letter dated November 27, 1862).
22. Moors, *History of the Fifty-second Regiment*, p. 65.
23. J. Bisbee to Osmond Bisbee, Baton Rouge, January 17, 1863.
24. On August 4, 1862, eighteen Union regiments and four batteries encountered the Confederate forces at Baton Rouge. The battle was fought for six hours at the end of which the Confederate forces fell back to Port Hudson, 25 miles up the Mississippi river.
25. J. Bisbee to Osmond Bisbee, Baton Rouge, January 17, 1863.
26. J. Bisbee to Osmond, Baton Rouge, January 24, 1863.
27. J. Bisbee to Osmond, Baton Rouge, February 18, 1863.
28. Letter dated March 1, 1863, Chaplain Moors to wife, Baton Rouge, cited in: *History of the 52nd Regiment*, p. 64-65.
29. Lieutenant-Colonel and Brevet Brigadier-General John C. Palfrey, "Port Hudson", *The Mississippi Valley, Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama, 1861-1864; Papers of the Military Historical Society of Massachusetts*, Volume VIII, (Boston, 1910), p. 30.
30. John Bisbee to Rockwell Bisbee, Brashear City, April 10, 1863.
31. *Ibid*.
32. J. Bisbee to Rockwell Bisbee, Port Hudson, May 31, 1863.
33. Moors, *History of the 52nd Regiment*, p. 167.
34. When the nine months men were recruited, it was reported that "the government will not, and should not disclose its purposes with regard to its soldiers. Only one thing is certain, that whatever services the nine months men are put to will last only nine months."-*Northampton Free Press*, August 22, 1862, p.1, col. 5.
35. J. Bisbee to Osmond Bisbee, New Orleans, June 4, 1863.
36. *History of the 52nd Regiment*, p. 177.
37. Col. Robert N. Scott, Third U.S. Army, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, (Washington; Government Printing Office, 1889), Series I-Volume XXVI-Part 1, p. 648, Charles P. Stone, Chief of Staff, Department of the Gulf to Maj. General N. P. Banks, Port Hudson, July 20, 1863.
38. *Northampton Free Press*, August 4, 1863, p.2, col. 1.