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Hard Marching Every Day by Wilbur Fisk
A Review in Light of James McPherson's For Cause and Comrades

In his study of the motivations of Civil War soldiers, For Cause and Comrades, eminent historian James McPherson examines the many factors that brought men into the bloodiest fight in American history. Primarily McPherson deals with private letters of soldiers, eschewing works “intended for publication.” His reasoning behind this is that soldiers would not likely be as candid in memoirs and letters sent to newspapers, etc., as they would be in correspondence that presumably would only be read by close family or friends. McPherson acknowledges that

...letters to a wife or parent or sibling were written for an ‘audience.’ Even a diary was often intended to be read by others. Although the soldier may therefore have been tempted to put the best face on his own motives and actions or to avoid mentioning unpleasant and awkward facts, these letters and diaries were nonetheless more candid and far closer to the immediacy of experience than anything soldiers wrote for publication then or later.¹

One of the works McPherson praises but decides to exclude from his study because it was intended for publication is Hard Marching Every Day, a collection of nearly one hundred letters written by Private Wilbur Fisk to *The Green Mountain Freeman* newspaper of Montpelier in his home state of Vermont. Fisk concealed his identity, signing the letters “anti-rebel.” He took it upon himself to write so that the people back home could get “just such information as my own curiosity chaffed exceedingly to know before I enlisted.” Fisk endeavored to provide “a fair description, as well as I could give it, of what is done here in the ‘Army of the Potomac,’ every day and night.”²

While Fisk certainly was writing with an audience in mind, he was typically very frank, and did not shy away from discussing unpleasant actions or subjects. He presented the world of the

¹ James McPherson, For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 11.

² Wilbur Fisk, Hard Marching Every Day: The Civil War Letters of Private Wilbur Fisk, 1861-1865. Emil and Ruth Rosenblatt, eds. (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1992), 8.

common Union soldier in detail, and because his dispatches came while he was serving, they have an immediacy and increased accuracy that memoirs written years later lack. Fisk did not tell the whole story, a diary he kept from January 1863 to October 1864 still exists in the Library of Congress and the editors of Hard Marching Every Day, Emil and Ruth Rosenblatt, note that although Fisk's letters display more nuance than many sources, his actual private life was even more "complicated." Left out of his correspondence to *The Green Mountain Freeman* is the full story of how he was officially AWOL for a time after being injured, and used his "French furlough" to court a young lady back in Vermont. Also left out of the public version was his religious doubts and his sideline business making a profit off of fellow soldiers by selling paper and ink and generally hustling for any extra money he could lay hands on.³ On other occasions, however, he was quite honest: being caught for stealing from civilians with other troops, soldiers showing cowardice in battle, hypocrisy of army life, violence and death. Can Fisk's letters be reliably used to test McPherson's hypotheses about soldiers' motivations to fight? If there is one area in which Fisk seems to be extremely forthright, this may be it. Let us then look at McPherson's framework and see if Fisk's letters fit his patterns.

McPherson, borrowing from military historians before him, divides his study of what made soldiers fight into three categories: initial motivation (why did they enlist?), sustaining motivation (why did they not go AWOL or otherwise drop out of the war?) and combat motivation (when the bullets were flying and comrades dying all around, why did they not run?).⁴ Within these categories McPherson explores a variety of more specific motivations: "war fever" or desire for adventure, Victorian senses of duty and honor, a desire to not be left out of the great defining events of their generation furnished initial motivation. Sustaining motivation could be found in things like a desire for one's unit to not be the only one to not see combat and affection for officers for example. Combat motivation could come from a variety of sources: fear of being branded a coward, adrenaline, training, discipline and leadership, religion, etc. One of McPherson's central arguments is that ideology played

³ Fisk, Hard Marching Every Day, vii-ix.

⁴ McPherson, For Cause and Comrades, 12-13.

a larger role for Civil War soldiers than military historians often acknowledge. The orthodox interpretation of motivation, especially combat motivation, is “primary group cohesion,” or that soldiers ultimately stand and fight for each other. When “brothers” have “bonded” within a unit, they will fight to protect each other and not let each other down. Ideology is usually seen as failing to really motivate when the going gets tough.⁵ McPherson suggests that the “cause” was actually powerfully felt by these Victorian-era men and was a key at least in initial and sustaining motivation, and to a considerable degree in combat motivation as well.

Of course, the “cause” for most Union men was not anti-slavery but preservation of the Union. McPherson refers to the belief among many that this was the chance to save the idea of the republic, the best form of government, which the Revolutionary generation had fought so hard for. Allowing the rebels to win would be “anarchy.”⁶ Fisk’s writings certainly show this commitment to Union and republican government. Serving on the front line in Northern Virginia, Fisk mused: “when we reflect that we are standing on the outer verge of all that is left of the American Union, and nothing but darkness and rebellion is beyond, and that we are actually guarding our own homes and firesides from treason’s usurpations, we feel a thrill of pride that we are permitted to bear a part in maintaining our beloved Government.”⁷ His sense of duty combined with this patriotism and hatred of “treason” when he traveled through Washington, DC. Seeing the white marble of the Capitol building “enkindled my patriotism more than the best peroration on the Union could have done...[w]ho would not fight, desperately if need be, rather than have this monument of our national greatness fall into the hands of an insurgent power? and who would not blush to acknowledge himself an American citizen, should such a catastrophe occur.”⁸

Statements such as these occurred early in the war for Fisk. So what of the “sustaining motivation” that keeps soldiers from quitting? Certainly many Union troops went AWOL or stayed out

⁵ McPherson, For Cause and Comrades, 86-89.

⁶ McPherson, For Cause and Comrades, 98-99.

⁷ Fisk, Hard Marching Every Day, 7.

⁸ Fisk, Hard Marching Every Day, 16.

of the fight. Fisk himself did so on occasions. On other occasions, however, he and his comrades persisted. This despite difficult weather, long marches, homesickness, bad food, and the almost certainty of eventual combat and bloodshed. What sentiments shed light on the sustaining motivation of the Vermonters? While serving in the peninsula campaign, Fisk and his unit grumbled about being ordered to fall back after their initial contact with the enemy, showing the sense of pride and desire to be involved in the action (also showing, incidentally, that the individual soldier had practically no sense of the overall situation on the battlefield and why they were receiving the orders they were). On another occasion Fisk described the shooting of an enemy picket, who he referred to as a “secesh.” This description comes up regularly in Fisk’s letters. In that same battle, he noted: “our vindictiveness had been aroused to an uncommon degree that morning by the loss of one of our number.”⁹ The attachment of soldiers to their fellow “primary group” members comes through here.

What of the mission to end slavery? Fisk himself supported an anti-slavery position but notes that among his fellow soldiers there was wide disagreement about abolition as a war aim. This furthers McPherson’s assertion that although ideology was important, it was a pro-Union mindset and not an anti-slavery mindset that motivated most troops. On “the inevitable negro question,” Fisk wrote:

...that inexhaustible subject claims preeminence in camp as well as court, and there are almost as many opinions expressed in regard to it in a tent’s company as there are in Congress. The boys think it *their* duty to put down rebellion and nothing more... Negro prejudice is as strong here as anywhere and most of the boys would think it a humiliating compromise to the dignity of their work to have it declared that the object of their services was to free the repulsive creatures from slavery, and raise the negro to an equality with themselves.¹⁰

Of course, this observation came in May of 1862, prior to Antietam and the subsequent issuing of the Emancipation Proclamation. One cannot accuse Fisk of later on trying to be “on the right side of history” because he was writing and sending these letters at the time, and does appear to genuinely be sympathetic to the abolition cause himself, even if most of his fellows were not.

⁹ Fisk, [Hard Marching Every Day](#), 22.

¹⁰ Fisk, [Hard Marching Every Day](#), 29.

Finally, what of combat motivation? McPherson mentions primary group cohesion, and certainly the Vermonters had that. Also the idea that training discipline and leadership were there for the men to fall back on once the bullets began to fly appears in Fisk's account. Many accounts of otherwise boring drill bear witness to these attempts to instill training and discipline. In a letter from the summer of 1862, Fisk observed: "[s]oldiers, when they are not in the ranks armed and equipped and under the influence of discipline, and not directly under the control of a leader, feel just as other people are supposed to in times of danger...it is the most natural thing in the world for even soldiers to feel inclined to run...".¹¹ On the particular occasion Fisk was describing, his unit did not run, but he freely acknowledged on other occasions when men, including himself, fled the field in disorder.

By April of 1863 any naivety had gone from the battle-hardened Vermonters, and yet they fought on, suffering terrible casualties but still going into battle. "Yes, we are *willing* to go forward,-not anxious from mere love of excitement, but like men in earnest, who know they have a great and important work to do, and can comprehend its magnitude. We have seen too much of war to desire its novelty, and we have seen too much of it to shrink from its horrors."¹² Describing an uphill charge the first day at Fredericksburg, Fisk noted how tenuously the outcome hung as both rebels and Union troops looked ready to turn and run at a key moment. In this instance, it was the Union troops who rallied under their officers and drove the rebels from their positions. Fisk describes the considerable bloodshed and then offers this veteran observation: "It is difficult to realize in the time of an action, the extreme peril one's life is in. Death there seems of less consequence than anywhere else, one gets so used to it....[b]ut when the excitement is over and we go back to camp and see so many comrades whose society was our pleasure, missing, we feel very keenly the loss we have sustained."¹³

It is fortunate for ourselves and our country today that men like the 2nd Vermonters were willing to sustain such losses to preserve our union, and make it more perfect. One has to marvel, as

¹¹ Fisk, Hard Marching Every Day, 31-32.

¹² Fisk, Hard Marching Every Day, 59.

¹³ Fisk, Hard Marching Every Day, 79-80.

McPherson does, at the dedication and self-sacrifice these men made in the face of almost certain death. True, sometimes they did try to stay out of the fight, but given the horror of Civil War combat, it is astounding that any man who had once been in battle dared to ever enter the fray again. Their motivations may have been varied, but they were strongly and deeply felt. Letters like Wilbur Fisk's help reveal this mid-century American mindset that led men to give their all, up to and including the "last full measure of devotion."

Works Cited:

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