

Transcribed by Terry Crooks.

The original letter is in the *Porter Family Papers*, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, University of Rochester Libraries.

[March 24, 1863]¹
Camp of the 108th

Dear Mother

Your letter of the 21st inst is just received and as I have been prevented by duty and inclemency of the weather from writing home I sit down immediately to answer it.

About a week ago a severe storm set in accompanied by a strong north wind which as I have before mentioned always makes our tent smoke. This although very annoying we are able by long practice to endure, but as to writing that under the circumstances is always an impossibility. I therefore put off all business hoping that in a day or two the storm would cease and the wind once more permit us to live in peace. My hopes seemed just about to be realized when orders for us to be ready at 7 A.M. for picket. This was Friday, and when we came back as about noon the next day our cook (pro tem) [*temporary*] said that the fire [*had?*] not smoked until within about an hour but that the wind had then shifted and he had been obliged to throw the fire out doors, This to us poor tired fellows was rather unpleasant I can assure you. Our troubles were somewhat lightened however by finding that before putting out the fire our cook had prepared quite a nice lunch for us. This we partook of with relish and after eating I took a splendid cold wash and then went to some of our more comfortable neighbors to get warm, while the Capt went to bed and stayed there for upwards of twenty hours recovering from the effects of his previous nights vigil. So it has continued until today (cold and stormy with the wind from the north) and for the last few three days while we have had a fire we have lived with the smoke. I have entered into this long explanation to show you why I have not written sooner and as I think I have made a pretty strong case I will say nothing more but pass to subjects of interest in camp.

As our last picket duty was rather different from any we have previously done I will try to give you a short account of our days proceedings. I have before said we started at 7 A.M. on Friday 250 enlisted men and 13 officers. The roads were very muddy and although we marched at a very rapid pace it was nearly 9 A.M. when we arrived at the Lacey house where we were ordered to report. At this point we were divided into four reliefs of about sixty men and their officers each. The first of these was marched down to the river bank to relieve the men who were then on duty there. The second took possession of the Lacey house while the third and fourth were ordered off about half a mile to a deep ravine where they would be somewhat sheltered from the wind and cold. I belonged to the third relief and of course marched off with them and as soon as we had arrived and stacked arms went to work cooking some coffee to make up for a lost breakfast. I had just finished drinking this when the field officer of the day whose duty it is to visit the picket, came around and we all turned out to salute him. After returning the compliment he ordered an inspection of arms and accoutrements and having satisfied himself that everything was in order retired leaving us to pass the remainder of the time as we pleased. At three P.M. things were changed. The 2nd relief went down to the river & the 3rd to the L house while the first and fourth remained in the rear. This was for me the pleasantest part of the day as we had the house for shelter and nothing to do but look over at Fredericksburg which is just across the river and within pistol shot of the house. This was where we lay two days before the late battle and everything in the City looked

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familiar enough. Outside however the face of the country was entirely changed. Every square seemed cut up with ditches and embankments and if the Rebs have half enough men or guns to defend hem they could give us a warm reception in case we ever cross there again. Their ability to do this however I very much doubt & think the works are now intended merely as a scarecrow. At about six o'clock, I took a survey of the ground where we were to picket and found that the line extended towards the right about a mile and a half and towards the left about half that distance. It was my luck to be ordered towards the right and I wished very much to visit the posts that I was to relieve before dark, but my feet were getting sore and knowing that I should have to go the whole ground over twice I hardly dared try least they should entirely play out. A 9 P.M. with our Co consisting of 25 men and five corps I started for the river to relieve the old picket and begin our share of the work. The night was dark (starlight but no moon) and as we had never been over the ground before we had some difficulty in finding our way. In the course of an hour however I had managed to get all my men posted and then started on my return. In going up the river I had been a little careful of the mud but after getting in once or twice nearly up to my knees I began to pay no attention to it whatever & go it blind. A river road is never any of the best and this one was no exception. It would sometimes run along so near the brink that it was difficult in the dark to get pass, and then it would spread out into low swampy places where you were lucky if you did not get in over your boots. Added to this the sight of the rebels as they stood around their picket fires just across the stream could not but make one feel how unpleasant it would be if they should take it in to their heads to once more commence the practice of shooting pickets and try their luck at you as you passed before one of your own fires.

Notwithstanding all these drawbacks it has been a question with me and though I am not quite sure I think I enjoyed the walk. At three in the morning our party was relieved and I then went to the Lacey house and slept on the floor until morning when I rejoined the Co at the ravine before mentioned. At 9 A.M. the 132 Penn relieved us and we started for camp which we reached about noon rather the worse for wear.²

Sunday Port made me a short call. He was accompanied by H. Hamilton whom I then saw for the first time since the battle of F. He was looking well and had a pair of leggins which I almost envied him. If there are any more to be had where Arthur got them I wish you would buy me a pair. Mr. Chapin and Son have been here for a day or two³ and left this morning for the camp of the 13th.

Lt. Col Powers returned a few days since and took command of the Regt for the first time on dress parade last night. He complimented our appearance and said that he was pleased to see how we had improved since his departure from us. Cpts Fuller and Andrews have also returned to the Regt and their commands. We still wait for our Col and I suppose will have to so for some time to come.⁴ Among the arrivals I forgot to mention Lt. Bloss. He came a day or two ago but I am afraid judging from his looks that he will not be able to stay with us long. Burrell is expected to day and when he comes we shall hope to have some thing to remind us of home. I was very much surprised to hear that S. Gould and Hatch were engaged recruiting for the heavy artillery. If he were coming out here it might do him some good; but to send a boy into a New York garrison, for reform is I am afraid a rather poor plan. Since my last I have received several letters one from Arthur and one from Mary neither of which I am afraid I shall never be able to answer. Give my thanks to Aunt Maria for the good thing sent by her.⁵

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Love to all and believe me your affect son

Sam Porter
Lieut Co. F 108th NY

P.S. My postage stamps are most out and I shall be very much obliged for a fresh supply. Thank Father for the tooth picks they cam safe. I wish you would try to find one of those gutta-percha tooth brushed that close so that you can carry them in your pocket, and send it to me.

Sam

Notes:

¹ The date of the letter is confirmed by internal evidence. Porter writes that Powers took command of the regiment “on dress parade last night” [my emphasis]. Powers took command on March 23, 1863 [*108th New York*, p.118; Powers Pension File – NARA]. Interestingly in mid February Powers was mistakenly dismissed from the service, then promoted to Colonel of the 108th NY (for details see *Rochester’s Forgotten Regiment*, p.76, endnote 16).

² Captain Byron Thrasher, obviously Porter has not quite got over the mess with Thrasher’s promotion.

The last picket duty March 6-8 (*108th New York*, p.117). At this stage of the war, there was usually a tacit agreement between Union and Confederate pickets not to fire at each other. The enlisted men honored the agreement but often officers –usually upper echelon- would insist on observing the rules of war and treat the enemy pickets as combatants.

132nd Pennsylvania, 1st Brigade, 3rd Division, 2nd Corps. The Adjutant (Hitchcock) of this regiment would write a spurious and damning “memoir” of the 108th NY and its supposed cowardice, especially that of its Colonel, at the battle of Antietam (Hitchcock, pp.60-61).

³Porter Farley, 2nd Lt, 140th NY, Co.G, was Sam’s cousin
Henry G Hamilton, is Lt. 13th NY then transferred to Co. H, 140th NY.

Arthur Hamilton, Henry’s younger brother.

Mr. Chapin and Son, these were probably visitors to Lt. Col. F.E.Pierce. Edward Dwight Chapin was an ex-student of Pierce’s so may have been there with his father.

⁴ Captain Eugene P. Fuller, Co.H, 108th NY
Captain William H. Andrews, Co.C, 108th NY

The comment about the Colonel indicates that Sam does not realize that Powers has been promoted and is now in fact the Colonel of the 108th NY which may explain his comment about Powers as Lt. Col..

⁵Lt. William W. Bloss, 2nd Lt. Co. A, suffered a severe nasal wound at Antietam and would shortly be discharged on March 14, 1863 because of the wound.

George Burrell, Pvt. Co. F.

Seward F. Gould – captain transferred from 11th NY Heavy Artillery to captain of Co. K 4th NY Heavy Artillery.

Andrew Hatch - 1st Lt., 11th NY Heavy Artillery transferred to 1st Lt. Co. K. 4th NY Heavy Artillery.
The 11th NY Heavy Artillery was to be raised in Rochester by Feb 7, 1863. The deadline was not met so on July 29th 1863 the four companies raised in Rochester were transferred to the 4th NY Heavy Artillery.

Sam’s somewhat condescending remark re: Seward Gould being a boy is odd since Seward was 19 in April of 1863 and Sam was only a year or so older. Just why Seward needed reform is not specified any where else in his wartime letters. Sam obviously did not need to worry about Seward since Seward finished the

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war as a full Major (Nov.16,1864) –a rank which Porter only achieved as ‘Brevet’ and was never mustered into it. (Phisterer, 2, pp.1309,1310, 1462, Vol 4, p.3279).