



Capt J. H. Lewis
of New York

"I have some Civil War letters that I guarantee will change your life when you read them."
This was a challenge put to me by a friend a decade ago and how true his predication was!

My friend rescued the letters from a trash barrel as he was doing some work at a vacant home here in Santa Barbara. The elderly couple who lived in the house had passed away. The outside trashcans were overflowing and he noticed a couple of interesting notebooks lying on top that appeared to contain some old papers. Since the trash truck was rumbling its way up the street, he decided it wouldn't hurt to take the notebooks and have a look at them.

The notebooks contained letters written by Capt. Samuel H. Sims, Company G, 51st New York State Volunteer Regiment. There were also newspaper articles about him, enlistment certificates, sketches, and other pertinent documents to Sims and his family. The man who passed away here in Santa Barbara was Samuel's grandson, Kenneth Sims. He and his wife, Dorothy, had no children and their estate was left entirely to charity. It is assumed that a company had been hired to clean out the house and things not "saleable" were simply discarded.

I took my friend's challenge. He loaned me the letters and papers to read and as I did so, I have to say that I fell in love with Capt. Sims. As I continue to research him, his family and the men of the 51st, I become increasingly more devoted to preserving his memory.

Samuel Harris Sims was born in New York City November 25, 1829. He was a "glass stainer" by profession and was active in the New York State Militia prior to the Civil War. He married Mary Ann Titus on September 12, 1850. They had three children: Samuel Austin Sims (1851), Lucy Hale Sims (1853), and Henry Ridgewood Sims (1857). Mary died of anemia on December 7, 1860 leaving Samuel a widower with the three youngsters.

On April 23, 1861, Samuel answered his country's call to arms and enlisted in the 13th New York State Militia for a 90-day term at the rank of 2nd Lieutenant leaving the children in the care of his sister, Lucretia Sims, at his home in Brooklyn. On August 16, 1861, he re-enlisted in the newly formed 51st NY Vol. Regiment. On September 10, 1861 he was promoted to the rank of Captain and given command of Company G. Joining him in the same regiment was his brother, Palin H. Sims. Their younger brother, Charles (Charlie) H. Sims, enlisted in the 48th NY infantry the following year against Sam's wishes.

The 51st NY was assigned to Burnside's Ninth Corps, which was noted for its extensive travel. The 51st participated in such campaigns as Roanoke Island, NC; New Berne, NC; Second Bull Run, MA; Antietam, MA; Fredericksburg, VA; Sieges of Vicksburg & Jackson, MS; Wilderness Campaign, VA; Cold Harbor, VA; Battle of the Crater, VA; Poplar Spring Church, VA & Hatcher's Run, VA.

Samuel frequently wrote home to his family keeping atop both the business and personal needs of his household, as well as communicating his well being to them as he traveled fighting for his country. He did have a few furloughs and one extended time at home in the Fall and Winter of 1863/64, where he recruited replacements for the, by then, diminished numbers of the 51st.

One of the more poignant letters was written to his mother three days before his death:

July 27, 1864
Camp before Petersburg, VA

Dear Mother,

All of my previous letters have been addressed to Lucretia although I intended them for all at home. This one I will address to you, so you may not think I slight you.

I saw Charlie yesterday he came up to our camp. Charlie is well, so is Palin.

The usual firing continues along our front, so we are almost indifferent to it. There has been a movement of the 2nd Corps across the river some miles from here, and word reached us this morning that the movement was a success.

Matters in our immediate front seem to be approaching a crisis. Certain preparations are nearly complete, and the next forth-eight hours are likely to be of great moment.

Our Corps will be active and prominent in the movement and in all likelihood, there will be stirring times. I wish to assure you all that I am fully conscious of what might happen me and believe that I can meet any event as you would have me. This I endeavor to do, however and I trust that mercies may still be continued to me, to Palin, and to Charlie, for your sake.

Now I feel sufficiently serious in contemplating what may happen, but it will not do for me or any other soldier to be downhearted in contemplating what may happen to me or them when movements are on foot.

I anticipate results which will go a long way towards closing the war, and the thoughts of success make me feel cheerful.

The newspapers perhaps will tell you of what I allude to in movements, so I will not mention them here, but trust to be spared to write or tell you of them.

It is quite pleasant here today. We have had some rain lately, which laid the dust, but made the rifle works rather muddy for comfort. Major Wright assumed command of the Rgt yesterday. I have had charge of it for near a month—with all its business.

Give my love to all and write soon. The paymaster is very dilatory with us. Most of us have near five months pay due us. I suppose he will come along soon.

I would like to be in the midst of peace again, that is that the whole country was at peace. For I have the same feeling now as at the start of the war. We have a brave enemy to contend against, and many hope the struggle will be continued yet a long time. I pray not, for the desolation caused is terrible to think of and this campaign alone has taken all the "glory hunters" spirit quite out of them.

Having faith in God, who doeth all things well, I remain.

Your affectionate son,

Saml

On July 30, 1864, while attempting to rally the regiment after the Mine Explosion at Petersburg, VA, Capt. Sims was killed. His body was brought back to Brooklyn and buried in Greenwood Cemetery. But that is not the end of his story.