

Craryville, New York.

I can't think about war, veterans or the American past without recalling an obscure Union soldier from the Hudson River town of Poughkeepsie, New York, who died 128 years ago this week in a Washington hospital.

His name was Alvah Kirk, and he was 34 years old, a husband and father. He left behind some letters, which I stumbled upon a few years ago at an antique show in a Connecticut meadow. They tell a story tinged with pathos, mystery, tragedy — and a bottle of brandy.

The faded plastic packet labeled "Civil War letters" that I purchased on impulse contained 16 letters from Kirk to his wife Mariah, during the Virginia campaigns of 1863 and '64. The letters are strange and enigmatic: banal on the surface, yet intriguing in their reticence and often mystifying. They reveal little except that their author was poor and troubled — and probably illiterate, since the letters are in several hands.

Stock phrases recur throughout; even the expressions of tenderness seem ritual. There are signs of marital discord, homesickness and the strain of battle. "You must keep up good courage," Alvah tells Mariah repeatedly. "You must be father and mother to the children" — a boy named Tommy and a girl he never names. And should he never return, he says, "I'm in hopes I shall see you in heaven."

A year later, he writes: "I think a little more of you if you would write a little oftener if you don't write I will look out for another woman and see if she will think more of me than you do. . . . From your affectionate husband Alvy Kirk."

Kirk had reason to harbor morbid thoughts. He was a private in Company K of the 95th Regiment, New York Volunteer Infantry. Made up of men from the Lower Hudson Valley, the 95th was in the thick of the fighting in the East: Second Bull Run, Antietam, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, the Wilderness, Spotsylvania, Cold Harbor. Alvah Kirk's life, when he dictated these letters, must have been a nightmare of hardship, confusion and fear.

Through archival and genealogical sources, I was able to piece together a few facts. During the brief span from 1859 to 1862, Kirk lost his first wife and a small daughter to causes unknown; married Mariah Fitzpatrick under hasty and undocumented circumstances; fathered two children by her, George and Annie, and went away to war. (Tommy, it seems, was Mariah's by an earlier marriage.) A younger brother, William, also in the 95th, was wounded at Gettysburg. For a few months in 1862 Alvah went AWOL, probably to go home for the summer. Like many soldiers who returned voluntarily, he wasn't disciplined.

In early May 1864, the 95th New York was engaged at the Wilderness and Spotsylvania —

One Blue Ghost

By JEFFREY SCHEUER



ferce battles a week apart that initiated the final phase of the war, in which Grant, unable to outmaneuver Lee, elected to beat him by attrition. Alvah Kirk was wounded twice that week. Military records indicate he was shot in both legs and one was amputated. A few weeks later he died; the Army listed the cause of death as "exhaustion."

The government he died for could never quite get his name right; it is variously listed as Alva, Alfred, Alvin, Abbah and Oliver. But the military files at the National Archives did record his personal effects: dog tags, one pocket book, one comb and "cash .05 cents." He was buried at Arlington National Cemetery, the supreme national shrine which by 1865 was so swollen with dead that it spilled over onto the grounds of Robert E. Lee's estate.

Last year, as the research well began to run dry, I showed the Kirk letters to Larry Hughes, a journalist in Poughkeepsie. He wrote a column about them, and on the same day got a call from a woman claiming to be Kirk's descendant. Not only that: She and her cousin, with whom she lived, also had some of Kirk's letters.

Hughes was incredulous, and even wondered if the phone call was a ruse. But the woman had mentioned a letter in which Alvah asks Mariah to keep a bottle of brandy ready for his return from the war. When I heard this it rang a bell; I ran a search for the word "brandy" among the letters in my computer and immediately located a letter containing an identical request.

As it turned out, the two elderly cousins were great-granddaughters of Alvah Kirk; they share a house that one of them was born in, and that once belonged to their grandmother, Annie Kirk — just a few blocks away from where Alvah and Mariah Kirk had lived. They were amazed to read in the newspaper column that I had letters from their ancestor.

It felt like a family reunion when I met the two ladies a few days later. They had six Kirk letters and a few fragments in an envelope that had lain for decades in Aunt Mabel's cupboard. Of course, these new-found letters only cast further shadows on my elusive subject. In one, for example, Kirk mentions a daughter named Josephine, and asks Mariah where she is living and whether she has seen her. As far as census and legal documents are concerned, Josephine doesn't exist.

One circle, at least, is completed: Alvah Kirk's known surviving letters are reunited and will go to an institution. They will be joined by another heirloom, which the cousins suddenly produced, to my further astonishment, some time after our first meeting: a fine pastel portrait of Kirk evidently based on a period photograph. As confounding as everything else, it seems to depict a more distinguished and self-possessed man than the author of the letters.

Americans have re-examined the Civil War recently through many fine lenses: the PBS series and the film "Glory"; James McPherson's seminal study, "Battle Cry of Freedom"; Allan Gurganus' comic novel, "Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All," and various eloquent diaries. Alvah Kirk's sad, crude letters provide a counterpoint. They attest to the war's impact on one ordinary soldier and millions like him, to the importance of family history in America and to the singular power of the written word in the unlikely of circumstances. His unpolished words, a fragile bridge across time, speak for all our unremembered dead.

Why Alvah Kirk? Because I was commissioned by fate to be the custodian of his small legacy and to resurrect what little I could of him. Why the Civil War? Perhaps because that bloody struggle over race, rights and the nature of the Union — the defining event of our past — doesn't simply haunt the nation's conscience each Memorial Day. It is our conscience.

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