

## *Diary of an Enlisted Man*

Lawrence Van Alstyne

Lawrence Van Alstyne was a resident of Sharon, CT throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As a young man, he volunteered to be a member of the Union Army in a conflict that had rapidly developed into an all out civil war between the American north and south. Desiring to remember his days as a soldier long after the war came to an end, Van Alstyne kept a journal and faithfully recorded his daily military experiences. As an eye witness to Civil War events, Van Alstyne's diary has great perception into the bald realities of life as young America fought against itself. In his old age, Van Alstyne came to believe that his diary preserved an important aspect of the war that "historians had neither time nor space to write; the everyday life of an enlisted man."

Van Alstyne's daily experiences, as written about in his diary, are listed and described here, along with the greater implications they leave about the Civil War in general.

### **Chapter I: The Recruiting Camp**

Lawrence Van Alstyne opens his journal recounting the earliest moments of his enlistment in the summer of 1862. The tone of his diary's first pages is a combination of enthusiasm with clear apprehension. Van Alstyne is exhilarated to have joined the army, but at the same time, he is relatively unsure of his decision. About his enlistment, he says "It seems to me this is a serious sort of business I have engaged in. I was a long time making up my mind about it. ... There was so much I had planned to do, and to be." Yet ultimately he decided to throw "down [his] unfinished castles" and devote the next three years of his life to "Uncle Sam." He also notes sorrow and fear he experiences when he bids his family and friends goodbye. "Pity was so plainly shown that when I had gone the rounds, and reached home again, I felt as if I had been attending my own funeral." Despite the emotional difficulty in accepting his decision, Van Alstyne eventually heads to training camp in Hudson, NY, where he becomes acquainted, for the first time, with life in military barracks.

In camp, Van Alstyne spends his first days getting to know his fellow soldiers, some whom he was already acquainted with for years. He adjusts to less comfortable living conditions, complaining frequently of such things as poor sleep because soldiers are to lie on hard ground at night. Around this time he is also assigned an army regiment and a captain. Van Alstyne belongs to Company B, 128<sup>th</sup> New York State Volunteers, under Captain Bostwick of Albany. He also begins training, and admits to a keen awareness of his inexperience as a soldier. Referring to many new enlistees, he says "[Bostwick] told us what he would do, and what he expected us to do. I imagine none of us know very well yet what we will do." Van Alstyne is also appointed an army corporal, a position he confesses to knowing nothing about. "Heigho! I'm a corporal!—whatever that may be."

Concluding the first segment of his diary, Van Alstyne speaks of one last opportunity to bid farewell to his home acquaintances. Rumors spread around camp that the regiment will be departing from Hudson, and Van Alstyne holds an impending sense of dread within himself. As he speaks of his last departure from family and friends, he writes, “the goodbyes have been said again, maybe forever.” He also describes a tightening responsibility he feels to fully devote himself to the army, which he does not entirely mind, but still cannot deny the growing military burden upon him. Van Alstyne writes, an “oath of allegiance [was] taken by the regimental officers, as well as the men. Everyday the net is drawn a little tighter. No use in kicking now. We are bound by a bond none of us can break, and I am glad to be able to say, for one, that I don’t want to break it.”

## **Chapter II: The Journey South**

Van Alstyne’s regiment was ordered to move southward, and on September 5, 1862, they boarded the *Oregon* and traveled down the Hudson River to New York City. The soldiers’ departure was met with much unexpected pageantry. Aboard the ship, Van Alstyne looked out to see “crowds and crowds of people [lining] the way from the camp ground to the steamboat landing.” He recalls, “I don’t see where so many people came from. Men, women, and children were waving flags, handkerchiefs, or anything else that would wave. They cheered until hoarse.” As the boat finally left, Van Alstyne took in his sail down the river, a trip thoroughly new to him, and something he found quite “glorious.” At last they arrived in New York, and though he wanted to absorb the scenery of a busy and wholly unfamiliar place, the regiment was on the move and stayed in the city only a few hours.

Boarding a train, the regiment stopped briefly at Elizabeth, New Jersey, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. For most of his trip, Van Alstyne records places the military stops to eat and rest, having been famished after many hours without food on their trip. On September 9, the regiment finally reaches their temporary destination, a training camp they come to call “Camp Millington” in Baltimore, MD.

## **Chapter III: Camp Millington, MD**

At Camp Millington, Van Alstyne’s day to day journaling touches on the finer details of army life. He records and reflects on his experiences as they come.

As a new arrival at the camp, Van Alstyne takes time to describe its appearance. He can see “for miles across a sandy plain clear to the waters of the Chesapeake Bay.” The camp is located just south of Baltimore city. A large brook runs in front of it, which is essential for the maintenance of a nearby flour mill, from which soldiers frequently take “loads of flour.” Trains come and go, usually containing soldiers to be brought to and from the camp. Camp Millington occupies roughly one hundred acres of newly seeded land. The lack of established grass in the fields causes the camp to become inordinately wet when rains come. Mosquitoes abound, ever the continual nuisance. In spite of their overall unsavory conditions, however, very few take ill and they are each able to survive adequately. Van Alstyne does take note of some “hard knocks” the

regiment endures in their new camp, though. Early on a “running vine” poisons “a great many,” although none were seriously harmed by the plant. A storm arrives thereafter, drenching the soldiers as they attempted to sleep one evening. Each soldier was covered in a coat of mud to compliment their blue uniforms, something Van Alstyne expresses relatively light-hearted dismay with. Even without a muddy shawl, Van Alstyne finds that “this sickly blue is about the meanest color I can think of. I guess the Government had more cloth than color.”

Van Alstyne undergoes a significant amount of training at Camp Millington. As a corporal, he learns specific duties tailored to his position. On duty for four cycles of two hours each during the day, Van Alstyne is responsible for guarding the camp. He stands on guard until he is relieved, and having a long break of four hours at a time. Altogether, he works eight hours and has sixteen to “lie around headquarters and do pretty much as he pleases.” Though he is essentially always on call, emergencies very rarely, if ever, approach the camp, leaving Van Alstyne with a significant amount of free time. Some days, however, he trains in other areas. He writes of training the entire regiment must complete, such as various forms of drilling. He learns such things as the “double-quick,” a form of running to be used in battle, along with the “knapsack drill,” a way to move along the ground while bearing a heavy load on one’s back.

Camp life provides an array of new social experiences for Van Alstyne. While he makes strong friendships around bonfires and playing cards, he increasingly misses his relationships at home. He finds homesickness to be a “terror” and “more common than [he] thinks.” He can sense the longing for the familiar and comfortable days of home throughout the camp although none are particularly vocal about the difficulties of being away. Van Alstyne writes, “like me [the soldiers] keep it to themselves, or possibly tell it to their diaries.” He also builds ties with soldiers on field duty, those who have seen and fought in war battles. Such individuals tell “tall stories” which cause Van Alstyne, who has not yet experienced war battles, to believe he knows “little of real soldiering.”

Eventually the regiment is moved out of Camp Millington. Just prior to his departure, Van Alstyne, along with several others, fall ill and are sent to “Stewart’s Mansion Hospital” in Baltimore. Van Alstyne makes a fine recovery in a comfortable hospital although others are not so fortunate. Four soldiers pass on.

#### **Chapter IV: On Board the *Arago***

On November 14, 1862, Van Alstyne’s regiment leaves the Chesapeake Bay area destined for Louisiana, where they will spend the remainder of their military service. Aboard the *Arago*, however, the ship commissioned to transport the soldiers, a great many become desperately ill. The passage to Louisiana becomes to Van Alstyne of the worst experiences he faces in the military.

Van Alstyne describes life amidst widespread affliction. Black measles are common and extremely contagious. Traditional bouts with respiratory illness are likewise very prevalent, as Van Alstyne noted, “coughing and sneezing is going on all over the boat.” Soldiers also encounter bouts with jaundice, and according to Van Alstyne, “many men I see are as yellow as

can be.” Cases of scurvy and typhoid fever are also found on board. The outside weather is often “cold and blustery,” allowing sickness to relentlessly make strides throughout the ship. Adding insult to pronounced injury, difficult weather tends to spur seasickness and many are affected by it. Most of Van Alstyne’s duties on the *Arago*, when he himself is not ill, consist of aiding the sick by calling doctors and transporting men to hospitals.

As the ship carries on, it eventually reaches the coast of Florida continuing onward to the Gulf of Mexico, where weather improves and a temporary disease hiatus is attained.

## **Chapter V: Quarantine Station, LA**

At last, on December 17, 1862, the *Arago* reaches its final destination, Louisiana. Van Alstyne’s regiment is sent to a quarantine station due to the overwhelming number of sick troops. Van Alstyne is relieved to be away from the ship, believing it a vessel of sickness more than anything else. Reflecting on the end of his passage, he writes, “Good-bye Arago! I wish there was a kettle big enough to boil you and your bugs in before you take on another load.” It will take some time, however, before the regiment recovers. Van Alstyne reports fifteen cases of fever and four deaths, including his personal friends, Leroy and Peter Carlo. He writes of hearing rumors that small pox has hit the troops as well, although he witnesses no solid evidence of such a deadly possibility.

While at the station, Van Alstyne spends his days working many duties, as “so many are sick the well ones are worked harder for it” and exploring a country that is quite new to him. He also adjusts to a new climate and a new way of living. Van Alstyne takes note of the solid segregation existing between whites and blacks. These races lead lives involving virtually no interaction apart the minimal, mandatory contact through slavery.

## **Chapter VI: Camp Chalmette, LA**

Van Alstyne and all others not “desperately sick” were transported out of the quarantine station and taken to Chalmette, LA, a city just south of New Orleans. Van Alstyne is happy to be away from that “God-forsaken spot,” but sickness continues to affect his regiment. A hospital is opened in Chalmette and many are cared for there. Van Alstyne himself acquires a severe cough that stays with him for several days. He also takes note of the psychological effects widespread illness is beginning to have on his fellow soldiers. On a January evening, awoken from a “coughing spell,” Van Alstyne sees another soldier attempting suicide. Hearing the soldier utter “I’ll end it all now” sends Van Alstyne scrambling for the soldier’s revolver and quieting the crazed man. The soldier, profoundly ill, is sent to the hospital. Van Alstyne noted a second suicide attempt by another soldier a few days later, who shot himself in the calf but survived the incident. It is gradually becoming more difficult for soldiers to stay emotionally stable after such exposure to severe illness.

Illness is also negatively affecting the spiritual health of the regiment, as Van Alstyne notes. His minister, Chaplain Parker, is increasingly irritated with the rampant disease. In his sermons he

chastises the troops, claiming they “don’t take proper care of themselves, that [they] eat too often and too much.” Although Van Alstyne does not appreciate Parker’s “tongue lashings,” he takes pity on the minister, writing “poor man, [the sickness] is getting on his nerves sure.” Periods of worship are solemn as trying circumstances continue to take a toll on the brigade.

## **Chapter VII: Camp Parapet, LA**

On February 6, 1863, Van Alstyne is sent from Chalmette to Parapet, LA. His first days in Parapet are pleasant. His captain, Captain Bostwick, is wed to Kate Douglass, a woman from Amenia Union, NY. However, Van Alstyne quickly takes ill again, and is hospitalized for two months, from February 16 to April 15. His entries throughout late February and March are succinct as he simply does not have the strength to write a great deal. He reports small details of his day, noting how he feels and if there is any improvement to his health. A month after being hospitalized, Van Alstyne briefly notes, “this getting well is slow business.” Despite his slow though sure recovery, Van Alstyne watches many friends and comrades pass away. He describes a particularly difficult experience he has with the death of Holmes, a fellow soldier and companion. At midnight on April 1, Van Alstyne was awake, well enough to cover duties for a “tired out nurse.” Van Alstyne writes, “Holmes died a few minutes ago. He tried to tell me something, but his tongue was so swelled I could not understand what he said. ...I pretended to understand, and he settled back as if satisfied and only breathed a few times more. His troubles are over, and those of his old father and mother and wife and child will begin when the news reaches them. I am glad they did not see the end.”

Van Alstyne returns to duties after release from the hospital. He passes the remainder of his time at Parapet working, spending time with other troops, and attending the funerals of the deceased.

## **Chapter VIII: Port Hudson, LA**

In Port Hudson, Van Alstyne’s regiment engages in their first battles with the Confederate Army. After settling in their camp, the regiment receives orders on May 25 to advance. They spend the day “skirmishing” and preparing for combat. Pathways are created through nearby forests the troops are training. Van Alstyne writes, “...everything is in a whirl. Evidently something is going to happen.” As the soldiers brace themselves, some encounter terrible bouts with anxiety over the upcoming battles they must face. A soldier from Van Alstyne’s company is “nearly scared to death,” and “the doctor says he will die of fright if kept in the ranks.” Van Alstyne believes that human nature cannot be overcome even in times where the greatest bravery is required, so it is no surprise that some have “wilted” under the pressure of battle.

As days pass, combat inches its way closer and closer to the brigade. Van Alstyne notes that “every now and then a shell comes tearing through the woods, and so far, in the direction of the 128<sup>th</sup>.” One eventually hits Company B, although none are injured. The shelling worsens, however, until the company is repeatedly hit by an onslaught of shells. Van Alstyne joins a detachment of soldiers from various companies and destroys the source of the shelling, a building known as the Slaughter House providing temporary shelter “the Rebs.”

By May 28, Van Alstyne's regiment was "in the thickest of the fight." In an open field, the Confederate Army opened fire, and the first sensations Van Alstyne reports experiencing was the vibration of rattling trees and hoards of smoke filling the air. Each side was vehemently shelling the other and many were injured immediately into the battle. In spite of the "deafening noise," Van Alstyne could hear wounded friends "groan terribly" and "swear vengeance on the Rebs." He witnessed a multitude of grisly sights, describing such injuries as shattered bone and a "face covered in blood." As the battle progressed soldiers began to go missing, either dead or taken as war prisoners. Nights are filled with shelling and buzzards begin to fill the camp. Eventually the worst of the battle passes, and Van Alstyne with other survivors grow accustomed to the continual sound of firing and shelling in the distance, wherever they may be.

The soldiers take to foraging in the wake of combat, taking advantage of available food and other goods. They eat well and take time to relax, enjoying a break in the midst of all out battle. During this temporary pause, Van Alstyne writes at length on minor experiences, such as sightings of large snakes native to Louisiana and quite unlike anything he has seen before. He also writes of other run-ins with different creatures and takes note of blooming plants, some very exotic to him. The weather is often inclement, however, and Van Alstyne is often drenched and made uncomfortable by frequent thunder showers.

Firing resumes on June 10, and Van Alstyne engages in a number of fairly small battles. On June 17, an order is passed calling on one thousand troops to sign up for a mission known as the *Forlorn Hope*. The troops are to capture Port Hudson "or die in the attempt." Likely saving Van Alstyne's, Company B is not sent on the particularly dangerous mission. He continues to enter combat with the Confederacy, however, throughout the month of June and into July. Due to lack of supplies, the Southern troops surrender Port Hudson and a truce is made between the Union and Confederate soldiers, ending hostilities for the time being.

## **Chapter IX: Donaldsonville, LA**

Van Alstyne leaves Port Hudson for Donaldsonville, Louisiana on July 10, 1863, where he proceeds to enjoy the remainder of the summer in relative comfort. Before he reaches Donaldsonville, however, he passes through Baton Rouge. His time there, empty of high action, causes him to write on various day to day experiences, such as his interaction with Louisiana culture. Baton Rouge living is very different from the rural Connecticut life Van Alstyne is accustomed to, and he cannot help but to feel he is in a peculiar place. "Citizens [speaking] mostly french among themselves" and a high Negro population surprise him. Van Alstyne likewise writes on his experience at a Catholic church as he attends a service quite foreign to his Protestant upbringing. About his experience he dryly notes, "...it was a Catholic church and the sermon was in Latin, so I don't know whether he prayed for us or against us."

Van Alstyne also discusses rumors he hears on war developments outside his line of duty. On July 15, Van Alstyne receives a New York newspaper, headlining the Battle of Gettysburg. Knowing little of the profound Union victory, Van Alstyne believed his "forces" to have gotten "the worst of it," although he knew the paper only reported the "first day's fight." From other

details he reads and hears, however, he speculates that the South did not win the battle, on the contrary, Confederate General Lee was injured and the troop's line of retreat cut off.

Van Alstyne receives mail on July 22 including a newspaper from Pine Plains, NY, reporting the death of his brother, John Van Alstyne, in line of duty. This leaves Van Alstyne feeling saddened, anxious, and distressed for some time, although he is comforted by simply knowing that his brother was "instantly killed. To know he did not suffer, as some have to, [provided] great relief" to Van Alstyne.

Van Alstyne spends the remainder of his time in Donaldsonville warding off illness and performing regular duties. He is transported to Plaquemine, Louisiana, where he writes primarily of unfavorable weather, sickness among his fellow soldiers, and largely insufficient rations.

## **Chapter X: New Orleans, LA**

On August 31, Van Alstyne completes a diary entry indicative of shock and minor distress. He is transferred from Company B to a different regiment, "Corps de Afrique." A total of eight others are transferred along with him, and though his new assignment is a military honor, Van Alstyne does not entirely embrace it. Corps d'Afrique extends his military service, causing "the [army] shackles" to be tightened around him for "three years more, if the war should last that long." His greatest "regret," however, "is leaving the boys," the many close friendships he built while with Company B. He also briefly notes the individual promotions of those transferred along with him, and Van Alstyne himself is made a second lieutenant.

Van Alstyne leaves for New Orleans on September 2, and spends nine days aboard the *Mississippi*. His first entry from the ship talks at length on rumors that revered Union General, Ulysses Grant, is also riding the *Mississippi*. Van Alstyne reports never having seen him directly, although he notes briefly a short conversation he had with a rogue soldier he saw on the ship.

Van Alstyne writes only of a simple, pleasant ride on the *Mississippi* until he the ship malfunctions on September 9 and Van Alstyne must spend the day in Pilot Town, Mississippi, while the vessel is repaired. He finds Pilot Town, a small port city, "a curiosity," as there is "no dry ground" and its inhabitants "are as ignorant as can be on all subjects except for that of their trade, piloting."

## **Chapter XI: Brashear City, LA**

As a member of the Corps d'Afrique, Van Alstyne is transferred to commence his new duties to Brashear City, Louisiana. It took five days for a transporting ship to arrive, however, five days Van Alstyne merrily spent "tramping about the city" of New Orleans. He walked along the English speaking sector of the city, observing, from his perspective, what are its many peculiarities. He writes of "cars... all drawn by mules" which serve as a taxi service. He

comments on New Orleans homes, which consist of “low squatty buildings” in the French section and much larger, ornate ones where English speaking people reside. He also speaks of a funeral service he attended, describing it to be radically different from such services he prior experienced. Van Alstyne found the entire funeral “so strange.” It was far more grandiose than he was accustomed to. He had an entire funeral carriage to himself and noticed the cemetery graves to be “like little brick houses, all whitewashed or painted white.” There was so much “pomp,” Van Alstyne wrote, that “the only thing that seemed real was the mother’s grief” over her lost son.

Van Alstyne arrives in Brashear City on October 3, 1863, and writes at length on his experiences. He gives particular attention to his interaction with the black community of Louisiana, revealing inner prejudice although race is not as deep an issue in his northern home as it is in the American south. On October 16, Van Alstyne’s regiment seeks to enlist African American troops. Many are quick to sign up, easily motivated by the promise of freedom, and Van Alstyne writes, “they were more anxious to enlist than we were to have them.” He goes on to describe a specific incident he witnessed involving a black person, and his descriptions are clearly less than favorable. Van Alstyne’s colonel, Colonel Parker, sought to purchase a horse from an African American, a person who ultimately sought to take advantage of the colonel by demanding payment but never turning the horse over to its new owner. The colonel, Van Alstyne, and others present are enraged, and seek the individual’s life. Van Alstyne was ordered to get his “picket rope ready,” a hanging was in order if the horse was not immediately turned over to Colonel Parker. After a very near execution, the horse was given to the colonel and the thief’s life spared. Despite his unsavory actions, however, a profound amount of discrimination is applied to the African American, and Van Alstyne freely uses a host of racially bigoted words while discussing the incident. He reveals the sense of de facto segregation that existed in the north, even if discrimination was politicized to be relatively unacceptable there.

Van Alstyne spends the remainder of October with relatively little to do, complaining frequently of wet weather, his daily adventures to find food to compliment his government rations, and his interactions with the African American members of Corps d’Afrique. He describes a light-hearted incident while on the topic of food, which was his foiled attempt to filch oranges from a nearby farm. While meandering about orange trees, the owner of the farm approached Van Alstyne. He writes, “As I went into the yard a young lady came out and, in a tone and with a look that almost froze me, asked what I was doing in her yard. ...I never saw so much scorn from a face before. ...If the Rebels were all like her I would resign and go home at once, for she actually did scare my wits all away from me.”

On November 6, Van Alstyne completes a very compelling entry on the issue of slavery. Though his personal views are not progressive, he has an encounter with abused slaves. He describes them as “scarred from head to foot where they had been whipped. One man’s back was nearly all one scar, as if the skin had been chopped up and left to heal in ridges.” He notes the slaves’ great devotion to “Massa Linkum,” or President Lincoln, who they feel is their only hope to gaining freedom.

Van Alstyne concludes his journal entries at Brashear City describing in depth his many comrades and their individual military responsibilities. Van Alstyne's headquarters are moved in late November, and on the 20<sup>th</sup> he transfers to the "Louisiana Steam Cotton Press."

## **Chapter XII: The Louisiana Steam Cotton Press**

At the Louisiana Steam Cotton Press, Van Alstyne spends the months of November and December preoccupied with duties. He drills new recruits and takes specific orders from Colonel Bostwick, which he enumerates in his diary. His November 28 entry is simply a copy of an order he received which provides insight into his duties. The order begins with the following: "Roll call at half-past 5 A.M. Immediately after the sound of the bugle the men will arise and arrange their knapsacks, blankets, and overcoats in neat and compact order. The bunks swept, the blankets folded in the knapsacks, shoes polished, clothes brushed, muskets stacked and accoutrements hung on them." Completing his many responsibilities occupy the majority of Van Alstyne's time.

Van Alstyne applies for army leave of absence in December, an application he feels quite sure will be rejected. He has a great deal of anxiety about his request to return home for a short time, desiring so deeply to visit his family and friends that the disappointment of a denied request is nearly impossible to bear. He even goes to a great length of visiting a local fortune teller, a "Great Indian Astrologist," attempting to discern whether or not he will be permitted leave. Van Alstyne writes, "[the teller] told me I was born to disappointment, that my plans had been upset as fast as I made them, and this would continue until after my forty-fifth birthday." The teller's words trouble Van Alstyne, who interpreted them to indicate a sure refusal of his leave of absence. To calm his disturbed feelings, he seeks the opinion of a second teller, who affirms the fortune of the first. In spite of unfavorable predictions of his future, however, Van Alstyne writes on January 12, "Glory, Hallelujah! I'm going home." His request for leave was approved after all, and Van Alstyne embarks on a journey home beginning on January 15.

He finds time with family and friends to be utterly enjoyable, although some of his visiting is diverted by a responsibility to tell some families that their loved ones were killed while away. He boards a ship returning to Louisiana on February 23.

## **Chapter XIII: On Board the *McClellan***

Van Alstyne boards the *McClellan* returning to camp, a journey he finds daunting. He is informed that the ship is a "government transport," and it contained many former soldiers now criminalized for war crimes, such as deserting and "bounty jumping." Van Alstyne has great distaste for the discharged soldiers, believing to have "never seen such evil-looking faces on human beings as some of them had." They cause immense trouble aboard the ship, and Van Alstyne ultimately takes a lead role in arresting their impromptu leader. Once captured and confined, the other criminals, without a ring-leader, discontinue their mischief making.

