

### Civil War Treasures: Encrypted Criticism In The 18th New York Infantry

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## Feature Essay

Fall 2017

**Rasmussen, Hans** *Civil War Treasures: Encrypted Criticism in the 18th New York Infantry.*

Discussion of codes and ciphers in the Civil War naturally focuses on those used by armies and governments, but the LSU Libraries Special Collections holds a personal letter in which a sergeant of the 18th New York Infantry Regiment employed a cipher to criticize the lieutenants in his company for their bad character. Whether fearing discovery by nosey comrades, Union censors, or curious relatives, his encryption of key words concealed the most telling details of a message that lamented the low quality of camp life in the Union army at the start of the war.

George Blake (1839-1908) was born in Waterford, New York, on June 22, 1839. He enlisted at Albany, New York, on May 7, 1861, and was mustered in as sergeant in Company H of the 18th New York Infantry Regiment ten days later.<sup>1</sup> The regiment had been organized at Albany on May 13 for two years' service under the command of Colonel William A. Jackson. Company H was comprised of recruits from Middletown and Albany and fell under the command of Capt. Peter Hogan, a highly respected thirty-three-year-old civil engineer and Mexican War veteran from Albany. His first lieutenant was twenty-one-year-old Theodore Caldwell Rogers, also of the state's capital. Rogers was the eldest child of a Presbyterian minister who had traveled widely in his youth and received an engineering degree from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York. Well respected by his friends and his father's congregation, Rogers gave up a promising commercial career to join the regiment. William Ellicott Carmichael of Middletown was the company's second lieutenant.<sup>2</sup>

During his two years of service, George Blake sent numerous letters to his second cousin, Eliza Button (b. 1841), daughter of Lysander Button (1810-1898), a prominent inventor and manufacturer of steam fire engines in Waterford, New York. In an early letter dated October 29, 1861, George Blake candidly yet surreptitiously conveyed his unfavorable opinion of his company's

lieutenants, Theodore Rogers and William Carmichael.<sup>3</sup> Although he wrote mostly in plain (if poorly spelled) English, Blake concealed several telling words with a private cipher that he apparently had arranged to use with his cousin before his departure. Not especially difficult to break, the code was an assortment of symbols corresponding to specific letters (e.g., A = /, D = ), I = V, N = (, O = <, U = ^ ). The decoded passages appear here in **{boldface curly brackets}**.

Camp King Oct. 29 /61

Dear Cousin E—

I will now give you a little a/c of **{my Lieut.}**

He is from Alb— & was considered [*sic*] an active Christian & when we were at the Alb— barracks I heard that I was lucky to be in a Co. with such a c**{omma}nd{e}r** & I was pleased with him to [*sic*] & thought I could make him my friend, but when we came to Camp Harris my opinion of him changed & instead of liking I despised [*sic*] him for not living up to his principles & to his professions, he there commenced swearing at the men & using [*sic*] language unbecoming an officer & a gentleman he was sick in his tent for 2 or 3 weeks from going with certain women in W— or at Alb before we left there, he has been truble [*sic*] since in the same way, he has very little judge in reproof [*sic*] & it makes it very unpleasant for me, for he blowes me for my own faults & very often for his own. He had me **{placed under arrest}** & but for the Lieut. Col. & the Chaplin [*sic*] **{I}** would not be a **{Segt.}** now there was no reason in the World why he did only to spread himself as the boys said. The boys do not like him at all for being so cross & putting on “airs.” He acts as though he did everything right & no one ~~did~~ can do as well as he. Sometimes the Col. speaks to him & as sure as he does 1 of Segts. has to suffer, you must imagin [*sic*] the rest, how I feel & how comforting it is to have such a man for an **{officer}**.**{Our Ensign}** is not much he cam [*sic*] from Middleton [*sic*] & the boys say that he was there 1 of your fashionable St. **{lofers}** his folks being well off in this Worlds goods but judging from him they thought little of World to come. He drinks but does not show it as much as the **{Lieut.}** he swears but they do not seem to be as harsh or come from the heart as the other, he is much livelier than his companion & is better liked by the boys, they would rather see him **{Capt.}** of the 2, he has been unwell with the same truble [*sic*] & I think there is not 10 in

the whole Co. who have not more or less, it makes me feel bad to see sin run rampant as it does through the camp. I ask myself can nothing be done? & I have to answer No it can't be helped. You can have no idea of the way the men talk it makes me feel sick & as though I would like to sink right down *[sic]* so that my eyes would not see more *[sic]* my ears hear the vices ~~iniquities~~ of camp life & nothing would tempt me to stay in the army but the great object for which I at first enlisted & it now with the Grace of God enables me to stand firm & enables *[sic]* to be contented & happy where otherwise I would be the ~~worst~~ unhappiest *[sic]* of beings I have to thank God that he preserves me from the many temptations that are on my right hand & on the left. I know it is he a Private alone that preserves me from the great number *[sic]* that have fallen all around me. Eliza continue to pray for me so that I will be able to remain steadfast to the end. I forgot to mention that the 1st **{Lieut.}** is a coward he proved it at Bull run & I went to Bailey's Crossroad & he act *[sic]* in a manner that showed that he was not one that will be shot if he can only keep out of the way.

The information I give in these *[sic]* letter must not be mentioned to anyone you must remember that of course if I am shot or die from any cause you can do then as you please with them.

Yours Truly

G.B.

P.S. Our Capt. has resigned & will go home next week. Our 1st Lieut. is Theo. C. Rodgers son of Dr. Rodgers Alb— Ensign Wm. E. Carmichael of Middletown.

Capt. Hogan, suffering from bronchitis, could not perform his duties as company commander and resigned effective November 6, 1861. Consequently, everyone was bumped up in rank on that day: Theodore Rogers to captain,<sup>4</sup> William Carmichael to first lieutenant, and George Blake to first sergeant. Whatever misgivings Sgt. Blake had about his new captain's courage under fire, Theodore Rogers ultimately proved himself when he was killed at the Battle of Gaines's Mill, Virginia, on June 27, 1862, deliberately putting himself in harm's way as he bravely rallied his company. Blake himself suffered a wound to his right shoulder at Gaines's Mill. Lieut. Carmichael stayed in the rear that day because of illness and an injury he had sustained earlier when thrown from his horse. He resigned the following month. Sgt. George Blake recuperated and

rejoined his company, finally being mustered out of service with the rest of the 18th New York Infantry on May 28, 1863, their two years' service complete.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ryan A. Conklin, *The 18th New York Infantry in the Civil War: A History and Roster* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2016), 389.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 31-32, 52, 392.

<sup>3</sup> George Blake Letters, Mss. 2449, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La.

<sup>4</sup> Conklin, *The 18th New York Infantry*, 145, 389, 392.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 223-25, 250, 389.