Union Soldier Turns Medic
at Gettysburg, 1863
(GLC03685)
After three days of fierce fighting on July 1-3, 1863, nearly 40,000 battered soldiers lay scattered across the blood-soaked fields of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. As the torrential summer rain poured down on the wounded, Private Elbert Corbin of the First New York Light Artillery was thrust into an unexpected role when he was ordered to remain behind and take care of his fallen comrades. In this rare letter, penned by the soldier turned medic, Corbin provides extraordinary detail of his quick rudimentary training that helped in assisting his wounded compatriots. Corbin’s account also presents the paradox he faced when asked to help save the lives of his enemy. Several raw descriptions of the operations and procedures he performed are included in Corbin’s letter to his wife. Written at the end of an emotionally draining day, Corbin states, “Help to wound and kill men then patch them up I could show more suffering here in one second than you will see in a Life at home. It is strange how I have disciplined my feelings to see Dying and suffering men and have no feelings.” The language seems to try to convince, both himself and his wife, of his ability to “discipline” himself enough to ignore the gruesome tasks before him. Through the stories he shared with his wife it is obvious that Corbin’s experience troubled him greatly. At one point he notes, “I can see an Arm or Leg taken off and it has no more affect on my feelings, than cutting so much Beef.” It is evident that Corbin wrestles with the disturbing realization that he is becoming numb to the atrocities of war.
Head Quarters A N V

April 11th 1865

(Corp W. F. Thorn – wounded both Feet)

(“ Hooker “ Run over Rt)

John M Scovil “ Rt arm & sides Minnie B.

Lt.-A.S. Shelden Rt. & Lt Groin “)

S. Sherman Gun Shot Lt Arm

August Rogers, Rt Leg amput’ed upper leg & gun shot in Rt arm

Coraden Wallace Lt Foot Gun Shot

A.B. Mallery Shell, Head

Geo Rabb, “ “

Theod Deneyer “ “

O.S. states Lt. arm gun shot

Sarg Childs Bruised leg

John Buckley Rt upr leg slight

Pat Mc Gowan Lt Sholder Gun Shot

89 Horses killed – 3 wheels smashed 3 [Cassions] smashed – nearly all our clothing – this is all I can say this Sabbath Eve – I want to rest A kiss love. Kiss our Darlings. God Bless us –

Monday Eve July 6th. 10.O’Clock – Em I have passed another bussy [sic] day – Lieut Shelden was fixed up by me and made as comfortable and sent off with some other officers I am left here in Care of the Boys – Several of the boys who had very slight wounds are with the Battery. We have Patched up just so as to man 4 guns all told and the Battery is ready for the front- I have an other Recommend form Lieut Shelden [2] for a Commition in an Independant Command,- if you can use it – Charly Minard has been clerk at Head Qtrs of our Corps a long time and Gen Hays is in command of our Corps now- And he would not keep on his staff- a Volunteer Officer, there was a splendid Officer who was Adj’t Gen. and he would not keep him because he was a Vol and has put in a Pumpkin head – (A Regular) – All tell me to give that up, and try for A Com in some of the new Batteries, Independant –

It is a long time since I got a letter from you but I hope in time we shall get a mail – After getting off Lt. S. I dressed our Boys wounds then 15 or 20 of the Boys of other Batteries then I was sent to work assisting to cut out Balls and dress the wounded Rebels and we now have an quantity of them and I shall have to help tomorrow I can do up wounds from shot or shell or Bullits quite like an M.D. – I have had quite a Dicipline I do it for that-I can see an Arm or Leg taken off and it has no more affect on my feelings, than cutting so much Beef – Dead men and plenty here and I saw plenty [3] of them in all shapes on the field – Help to wound and Kill
men then Patch them up I could show more suffering here in one second than you will see in a Life- at home It is strange how I have disciplined my feelings to see Dying and suffering men and have no feelings only a passing thought, I have some [illegible] that were cut out of men I have had quite a chat to day with Rebels – We get no mail of any kind here – I hope you will get my last letter It is a bright starlight night and I hope a dry day for the morrow I think of you at home and I know you know of this Battle and I think of your anxiety- for me- I think of you as at home- But cannot know what news you have rec’d of this Battle, – Give God the Glory so to him with me in prayer and thank him that he has kept me through this Bloody Battle – Oh that I was more thankful to him His mercy endureth forever- such a 4th of July- such a Sabbath I shall long remember and these days work here among the wounded & dying – But I have learned much – I must say a little only we suffered so much in this Battle and I think if Capt Pettit had been here instead of this fool of a [illegible]-we should have lost [4] far less The first day we [illegible strikeout] (ie our Corps) was thrown in to fill a Gap in our lines where the enemy were massing and here we suffered much – we were driven back about ¼ mile took another Position and held untill we had No support and were ordered out – the second day the line of battle was the same shape only farther Back, the enemy had their Artillery concealed much – and then the Position that our Capt. put is [sic] in was the worst we could have Capt Pettit would never have put us in such a Place. I will mark out a little and show a little as to our Position and the Position Capt would probily have taken had he been here. I cannot map out the whole but will where we were- (the center)…”

text from a map contained on page four:
crest of hills where rebels were with their Artillery behind
rebel sharp shooters behind fence and logs
small stream illegible
our sharp shooters
crest of hill our lines
distance from Artillery to artillery from ½ mile
A House & barn
B struck works infantry behind
C our cassions
D our 4 runs down slope off hill
O Infantry behind, hill
Pond]
I saw the giant dog who
was howling.

The sun was setting and
the sky was dark.

The soldiers were
advancing and
the smoke was rising.

The cannon balls were
shooting and the
men were running.

The battle was
intense and
each side was determined.
By the committee in camp. I am
independent camp, if you
can see it. This morning
I got the letter of my
city a long time in camp
and I was very glad to
hear from home. I was
sick the last few days
and now I am better.

And he sent me a letter to
read, if I have time. I got
the letter from you and I
was very glad to hear from
home. I was sick the last
few days and now I am
better.

I heard that you had
written to me. I am very
glad to hear from you and I
was very glad to hear from
home. I was sick the last
days and now I am
better.