

Written In Stone

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Christmas 2008

This past Friday, the 12th found my family at Ft. Benning , GA attending graduation exercises for the 198th Infantry Brigade, after 14 weeks of intense training. My nephew, Pvt. Jacob B. Baker, joined the Army on his high school graduation this past May. It was an impressive graduation ceremony, with the Army, 2nd Battalion, 58th Infantry putting on the show. They demonstrated the preparedness of our soldiers today: the weaponry used against the enemy, their gear and clothing worn by the modern soldier. As 600+ soldiers marched out from a grove of trees, in my minds' eye, instead I saw a rag-tag, tattered group of Confederate soldiers, as they prepared to celebrate Christmas far from home. The privates who wished to be at home celebrating Christmas with their families, bringing in the tree from the woods, and singing Christmas carols, and carving the ham were instead scavenging for firewood just to stay warm, singing songs around a campfire, and gnawing hard tack to stay alive. The holiday celebration that is most associated with family, friends, home and church was a contradiction then, as in war-time today. Instead of joy, hope and peace, there was sadness, chaos and conflict.

A Cpl. J.C. Williams of Co. B, 14th Vermont Infantry on Dec. 25, 1862 made this observation: "This is Christmas, and my mind wanders back to that home, made lonesome by my absence, while far away from the peace and quietude of civil life to undergo the hardships of the camp, and maybe the battlefield. I think of the many lives that are endangered, and hope that the time will soon come when peace, with its' innumerable blessings, shall once more restore our country to happiness and prosperity." Another soldier wrote at Christmas: 'You have no idea how lonesome I feel this day, it's the first time in my life I'm away from loved ones at home.' Another wrote how during the days before Christmas, he'd received boxes from home, full of comfortable things to remind him of his loved ones.

Christmas was and still is an especially difficult time for soldiers and their families they left at home. On the home front, many women and children widened their responsibilities and suffered hardships by the absence of their husbands, fathers and sons. Most southern children endured meager living during the war, and Christmastime only accentuated the hardship. There were fathers, brothers, sons, and cousins who would never come home again to their southern soil; instead, they lie buried in cemeteries in far away places, like Rock Island Prison, IL or Mound City Cemetery NE of Cairo, IL or perhaps they are in the Confederate Memorial Sections of cemeteries dotted throughout MS, GA, VA, and TN as well as AL.