

Recollections of a Private

Warren Lee Goss

In the weeks that followed the attack on Fort Sumter, thousands of men on both sides volunteered to fight. Among the early enlistees was Warren Lee Goss of Massachusetts.

"Cold chills" ran up and down my back as I got out of bed after the sleepless night, and shaved preparatory to other desperate deeds of valor. I was twenty years of age, and when anything unusual was to be done, like fighting or courting, I shaved.

With a nervous tremor convulsing my system, and my heart thumping like muffled drumbeats, I stood before the door of the recruiting office, and before turning the knob to enter read and reread the advertisement for recruits posted thereon, until I knew all its peculiarities. The promised chances for "travel and promotion" seemed good, and I thought I might have made a mistake in considering war so serious after all. "Chances for travel!" I must confess now, after four years of soldiering, that the "chances for travel" were no myth; but "promotion" was a little uncertain and slow.

I was in no hurry to open the door. Though determined to enlist, I was half inclined to put it off awhile: I had a fluctuation of desires; I was fainthearted and brave; I wanted to enlist, and yet—Here I turned the knob, and was relieved. . . .

My first uniform was a bad fit: My trousers were too long by three or four inches; the flannel shirt was coarse and unpleasant, too large at the neck and too short elsewhere. The forage cap¹ was an ungainly bag with pasteboard top and leather visor; the blouse was the only part

1. **forage cap** cap worn by infantry soldiers.

Literary Analysis:
Diaries, Journals, and
Letters What details
of Goss's writing style
indicate that this is an
entry from a diary or journal?

which seemed decent: while the overcoat made me feel like a little
mashin of corn in a large preponderance of husk. Nothing except
"Virginia mud" ever took down my ideas of military pomp quite so low.

After enlisting I did not seem of so much consequence as I had
expected. There was not so much excitement on account of my military
appearance as I deemed justly my due. I was taught my facings, and at
the time I thought the drillmaster needlessly fussy about shouldering,
ordering, and presenting arms. At this time men were often drilled in
company and regimental evolutions long before they learned the
manual of arms, because of the difficulty of obtaining muskets. These
we obtained at an early day, but we would willingly have resigned them
after carrying them a few hours. The musket, after an hour's drill,
seemed heavier and less ornamental than it had looked to be.

The first day I went out to drill, getting tired of doing the same
things over and over, I said to the drill sergeant: "Let's stop this fooling
and go over to the grocery." His only reply was addressed to a corporal:
"Corporal, take this man out and drill him"; and the corporal did! I
found that suggestions were not so well appreciated in the army as in
private life, and that no wisdom was equal to a drillmaster's "Right
face," "Left wheel," and "Right, oblique, march." It takes a raw recruit
some time to learn that he is not to think or suggest, but obey. Some
never do learn. I acquired it at last, in humility and mud, but it was
tough. Yet I doubt if my patriotism, during my first three weeks' drill,
was quite knee high. Drilling looks easy to a spectator, but it isn't.
After a time I had cut down my uniform so that I could see out of it,
and had conquered the drill sufficiently to see through it. Then the
word came: on to Washington! . . .

Critical Reading

1. **Respond:** Would you have volunteered to fight during the early days of the Civil War? Why or why not?
2. (a) **Recall:** What events does Mary Chesnut describe in her diary entries? (b) **Interpret:** What does her diary reveal about her attitude toward the war?
3. (a) **Summarize:** Describe Warren Lee Goss's feelings on the day he was to enlist in the army. (b) **Analyze:** How did Private Goss's attitudes and expectations change after he enlisted?
4. (a) **Recall:** According to Goss, what takes a long time for a recruit to learn? (b) **Infer:** What do you think happened to cause him to say, "I acquired it at last, in humility and mud, but it was tough"?
5. **Apply:** How might Chesnut's diary have been different if she had been from the North?

Reading Strategy
Distinguishing Fact from Opinion Identify one opinion in this description of enlisting.

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For: More about Mary Boykin Chesnut and Warren Lee Goss

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