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George Kimball, *A Corporal's Story: Civil War Recollections of the Twelfth Massachusetts*. Ed. Alan D. Gaff and Donald H. Gaff. Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 2014. Pp. xxi, 343. ISBN 978-0-8061-4480-1.

Review by William H. Mulligan Jr., Murray State University (billmulligan@murray-ky.net).

A Corporal's Story deals with the Civil War service of the 12th Massachusetts Infantry from its formation in 1861 through the Petersburg campaign, when its surviving members were mustered out of service in Boston, after their three-year term of enlistment. The 12th, part of the Army of the Potomac, fought and sustained heavy casualties at several major battles, including Second Bull Run, Antietam, Gettysburg, the Wilderness, Spotsylvania, and those of the Overland campaign leading to the siege of Petersburg. Cpl. George Kimball (b. 1840) served throughout the period, except for a few short leaves to recover from wounds. A printer by trade, he was a sharp observer of the events occurring around him. Editors Alan Gaff¹ and Donald Gaff (Univ. of Northern Iowa) are well qualified to bring Kimball's story to print.

This book differs from many participant accounts of the Civil War published in recent years. Neither diary, nor collection of letters, nor traditional memoir, it is instead a kind of hybrid. After his service, Kimball returned to the printing trade in Boston. He was active in the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), a fraternal organization of Union Army veterans; with two partners, both Civil War veterans, he published *Bivouac*, "An Independent Military Monthly" from 1883 to 1885. Kimball's contributions to this short-lived periodical described his experiences in the 12th Massachusetts. He also wrote pieces for the *Boston Journal*, *Century Magazine*, and *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, among others (xv). Besides his own memories, he drew on his letters home, articles by other veterans (a popular genre of the time), recollections by fellow GAR members, and early histories of the war. But he never wrote a true memoir, that is, a single, continuous narrative of his experiences. The editors have seamlessly interwoven Kimball's various essays into a highly engaging chronological narrative, no small scholarly accomplishment. (One wonders how many other unheard of George Kimballs wrote about their experiences only in piecemeal fashion.)

A native of Maine, Kimball entered the printing trade at age sixteen. At twenty he moved to Boston to work at the *Boston Post*, a position that will have made him well informed about current events. The line between printer and journalist in those days was still a blurry one and Kimball's fine command of the language is apparent throughout the text. His firm political views are very evident, too: he supported preservation of the Union and opposed slavery. But he shows little animosity toward Southerners, especially as individuals.

The power and interest of Kimball's narrative derives from his particular perspective as a corporal in the Union army. He is not much concerned with grand strategy or tactical matters, beyond occasional expressions of dismay at choices made by superior officers (very much in character for a corporal). But we do learn a great deal about such day-to-day matters as building encampments, the superiority of the Sibley tent over its successor, and changes in the system of distributing rations and preparing meals over the course of the war.

In the early part of the war, ... the army was provided with tents, chiefly of the A or Sibley variety. Each of these accommodated from fifteen to twenty men, consequently each company had five. They were pitched in straight rows by companies, the spaces between the rows being called company streets.... A regimental camp usually covered three or four acres and was very pretty and picturesque, particularly in the evening, when thousands of lights gleamed beneath the white canvas houses and singing and laughter over a joke or story fell pleasantly upon the ear. (69)

1. Author of *On Many a Bloody Field: Four Years in the Iron Brigade* (Bloomington: Indiana U Pr, 1997), *Bayonets in the Wilderness: Anthony Wayne's Legion in the Old Northwest* (Norman: U Okla Pr, 2004), and *Blood in the Argonne: The "Lost Battalion" of World War I* (Norman: U Okla Pr, 2005).

Kimball often refers to what was called the “John Brown Song” (later “John Brown’s Body”) and his admiration for the (in his eyes) martyred abolitionist. He claims the song originated among the men waiting to join active Federal service at Camp Warren in Boston. One of these soldiers happened to be named John Brown; Kimball maintains that the teasing Brown received because of his name provided some of the song’s lyrics (the tune was taken from a popular folk hymn).² Singing and music, including military band music, feature prominently in the narrative. Kimball comments with regret that the bands grew smaller and less prominent as the units began to see serious fighting. Specifically, he notes that combat reduced the size and volume of the 12th’s band.

Kimball’s reverence for John Brown is often apparent. When the 12th comes to Harpers Ferry and environs, we sense that he feels himself to be standing on sacred ground. He visited both the courthouse where Brown was tried and his place of execution. The glorification of Brown is often said to have caused Southerners to see the North as committed to their violent destruction. Kimball’s comments certainly attest to the idea that Brown was indeed greatly admired among Union soldiers.

In his descriptions of combat, Kimball keeps close to his own firsthand experience of the battles fought by the 12th Massachusetts. Of course, every memoirist has the advantage of knowing how events turned out, but there are no signs that the author’s story has been colored by that knowledge. Kimball was wounded twice, the second time nearly mortally. He eventually recovered, however, returned to his unit, and completed his enlistment in active duty.

The most moving part of the narrative concerns the last few months of the 12th’s service. Even though Gen. U.S. Grant’s policy of constant pressure on the enemy put the short-timers of the regiment in constant peril of death in battle, Kimball calls the aggressive strategy long overdue. And he never complains or reports the complaints of any others about Grant. But this is a survivor’s narrative. The Union was saved, slavery was ended, and Cpl. George Kimball made it home alive.

The editors have created a reader-friendly book without being obtrusive. They have, for example, provided brief biographies of almost every individual mentioned in the text.³ And, too, useful maps and many illustrations showing named individuals add much to the account. The publisher is to be praised for ensuring the production values of *A Corporal’s Story* are a match for its editors’ fine work.

2. For details of the many permutations of the Union battle hymn, see *Wikipedia*, s.v. “John Brown’s Body.”

3. One quibble: the editors ought to have included full publication details for the essays Kimball published in *Bivouac* and other journals.