

Joel Hughes' Civil War Letters

L. Richard Hitt

11 November 2008

1 Background

One of my great great grandfathers, [Joel Hughes](#) (1830-1862), was a soldier in the Confederate Army in 1861-1862. I have copies of some of the letters Joel wrote to his wife, [Elizabeth Gary Hughes](#), at their home in Bellefontaine, MS. The letters came from grandchildren and great grandchildren of Joel Hughes. Transcriptions of these letters, along with commentary, are included below.

Some of the letters are in poor condition and have missing parts or unreadable text. I have placed two question marks, ??, to indicate word(s) that I cannot read. If a word is ambiguous (usually because part of it is illegible or missing), I place my estimate of the word in [brackets].

I am not a historian, or even a history buff for that matter, so my commentary and interpretations should not be taken too seriously. I would welcome any comments, corrections or criticisms sent to genealogy@rhitt.com.

2 Letter from Grenada

On 25 October 1861 in Choctaw County, MS, William N. Pittman formed a company of volunteers called the *Choctaw Rough and Readies*. That company was mustered into twelve-month service in the Provisional Army of the Confederacy on 2 November 1861 at Grenada, MS. It was one of the registration centers in Mississippi at that time that was used to populate the army. It was only about 30 miles from Joel's home in Choctaw County. Joel Hughes was enlisted as a sergeant at age 31.

The earliest letter I know of from Joel Hughes was written 13 November 1861 from Grenada to his wife, Elizabeth ("Lizzie") Gary Hughes. The transcription below was made from a copy of the original letter. The Dickson mentioned in the letter was probably either David N. Dickson or Gilbert Dickson - fellow soldiers. I don't know the Taylor mentioned in the letter. That name doesn't correspond with any of the names I have for Joel's children or siblings[1]. It is possible that Taylor was a farm hand or house servant, but that is just a guess. The name also occurs in other letters of Joel's.

Grenada Nov 13 1861

Dear Lizzie,

I drop you a few lines by Mr. Dickson to let you know how I am. I have had very sore eyes and my throat is very sore now with cold. Except this I am and have been well. We are deprived of the privilege of going home at any time when we wish to now our officers or our company officers are in camp with us and they will not allow any one to go home unless necessity compells them to go. And they think that those who have guns will not stay here more than ten days and it may be that they will not let me go home at all. I cannot hear from you at all and if you knowed how bad I want to hear you certainly would write. I have no chance now to write as Dickson is about starting and I am called and bothered on every side. Mine is a troublesome office. Taylor salt is as will be by tomorrow \$15 per sack, molasses 40 to 45 by barrel, coffee 50 to 60 per pound I guess is how they will exchange

groceries at this price for corn shelled at 75 cts per bushel they do not want it ground into meal.

Lizzie keep my little children away from the spring as they could be easily drowned in that spring and don't let none of them get burned. I want you to write to me immediately and tell me what you have to eat and tell me what sort of cloth you want and how much. I think of you all the time If I had time I could give you a heap of news but they are starting and I must close. Excuse this letter for I wrote it in five minutes on my knees on a plank on the ground.

Yours forever,
Joel Hughes

3 Camp Ross Furlough

At some point after the troops were mustered into service at Grenada, they moved to Camp Anderson near Jackson, MS to assemble with the enlistees from the other registration centers in the state. Major Aaron Hardcastle, who had been traveling the around the state to recruit and enlist, organized the troops into seven companies to form the Mississippi 3rd Battalion [6].

Below is a transcription of a furlough for Joel Hughes from 24 December - 30 December. It is signed by Drury J. Langston who was 1st Lieutenant for Company D (Choctaw Rough and Readies). The note mentions Camp Ross. I suppose that was the name of the camp Company D was using, but I haven't seen that name in any of my references.

To all whom it man concern The bearer here of Joel Hughes a sergeant in W.N. Pittmans Company 3rd Batallion Miss Infantry stationed at Camp Ross near Jackson Miss has leave of absence on special business for this company to get to Choctaw County Miss. and return by the 30th or be considered a deserter.

Description given under my hand at Jackson Miss.

This 24th December 1861 D Langston
Lt Comm ??? Camp

4 Letter from Louisiana

On 26 December, three of the companies of the Mississippi 3rd Batallion departed Camp Anderson in Jackson to join General Sidney Johnston's army in Bolling Green, KY. The other four companies, including Company D, headed to New Orleans to assist in its defense as well as to recruit. The letter transcribed below was written by Joel Hughes when he was in Louisiana. This transcription was made from a copy of the original letter. The letter is in poor condition in places and is very difficult to read.

The Bingham mentioned in the letter is probably Alfred Bingham, who enlisted in Grenada with Joel [6]. Billy is probably Joel's younger brother, William Hughes. The Mr. Gary in the letter is probably Joel's father-in-law, William Godfrey Edward Gary (1809-1863). I don't know the Allen Moore in the letter. Taylor occurs again in this letter.

??? Louisiana Feb 17 1862

Lizzie

I embrace this opportunity to write you again and to let you know that I have got back to camp and that my health is as good as it was when I left home. I have got the ch??? there are several calls of ?? ?? camps. John is ?? Bingham has had the mumps but is getting well of them. Lizzie, cloth calico & domestic is worth from 25 to 50 cents per yard here and you can tell Mrs. Gary that I would not buy it at that price. It is impossible for me to tell when we will be moved from here. There is four or five thousand troops being moved from this place north at this time and it has been impossible to ship anything from here since I returned on account of soldiers and government stores being sent north. I have bought one barrel of molasses for Mr. Gary but they will not start before

next friday if then. I have also bought molasses and sugar for Billy and Allen Moore but cannot get them shipped before friday. Everything has got very high. Since I left here except sugar and molasses they have fallen since I bought. Lizzie if you want any cloth of any sort for drapes buy it there the sooner the better. It will be very high if the war continues. ?? worth as much again as they was before I went home. ?? things that I would like ?? you and the children but it is almost impossible to send anything ?? and what things you want you can buy them as cheap there as you can here now.

Lizzie we are loosing ground in the north. The Yankees seem to be driving our forces from every position and notwithstanding I am not discouraged there seems to be a deeper gloom cast over our country and it is time for you to begin to think about hard times. Some think it impossible for us to be conquered or exterminated but hopes are not always ?? it may be that you and our children will ?? and suffer of your freedom without any knowledge. Captain Pittman started ?? the same ?? got here. I do not think he will be able to attend the campaign and there is a general dissatisfaction in the company about his being absent so much and they have petitioned him to resign though I do not believe that he will do it as long a he can help it (say nothing about this). Lizzie there was some things that I intended to do before I left that I forgot. I want you to get Taylor to whip Margaret every time she insults you and make her know better. Then [to] [do] [it]. There was one of our men died last night. He was a member of Captain Wolff's Company.

I want to hear from you very bad and you must be sure to write regularly. I shall have to send the most of my letters without paying on them as I cannot get the silver to pay with and they won't receive anything else. I intended to have brought your likeness with me and forgot. If John will come home sometime in March and you must send it to me. Please write often and take care of yourself & children. I [remain] your absent but true friend until [death].

Joel to Lizzie

5 Corinth Letter

This transcription of a letter from camp in Corinth, MS was made by Joel Reuben Hitt (a grandson of Joel Hughes) and his daughter Lucile Hitt Hollingsworth. The original letter was passed from Joel to Lucile, but I do not know where it is today. An edited version of the letter appeared in *The Webster County News* in 1921 [5].

The setting for this letter is a Confederate Army camp near Corinth, MS, where approximately 50,000 Confederate soldiers had gathered in March 1862 to be organized into the Army of the Mississippi by General Albert Sidney Johnston. The four companies of the Mississippi 3rd Battalion that were in New Orleans moved to Corinth around mid-March to rejoin the rest of the battalion that had been fighting in Johnston's army. Johnston was in retreat from defeats in Kentucky and Tennessee. His plan was to reorganize an army in Corinth before facing the Union armies of Grant and Buell again.

At the time this letter was written, Joel Hughes was a Lieutenant in Company D of the 3rd Mississippi Battalion. That battalion, led by Major Aaron Hardcastle, was organized into Brigadier General Sterling A.M. Wood's brigade in Major General William J. Hardee's corps while in Corinth. They marched to Shiloh to surprise Grant's Army of the Tennessee about a week later.

The day after this letter was written, Joel was voted Captain of his company to replace Captain Pittman who, according to the letter, had resigned. I don't have a reference showing the election was the very next night, but that was the story handed down in the family. That he was elected Captain is not in dispute, however, since he is listed as such in Major Hardcastle's official battle report [6].

Joel mentions several Confederate soldiers by name in his letter. He also refers to Margaret, who was a house servant [1]. He also refers to Tay-

lor again. As before, the Billy he mentions is his younger brother.

Camp near Corinth, Miss., March 27th, 1862

Dear Lizzie,

As I have a chance to send you a letter by hand I will write a few lines tonight to let you know that I am well. I sent you a letter day before yesterday by mail giving you a description of my tower of sickness after we came up here. I wrote to you that I had got well but the exposure in getting with the Regiment gave me a bad cold. With this exception I am now in good health. I have no war news to write. It is expected however that there will be a fight near here in a short time. The pickets of the two armies have been fighting some between this place and the Tennessee River a distance of about twenty miles. It is reported by pickets that they are concentrating heavy forces fifteen or twenty miles from this place. We have a heavy force in this vicinity and all along the Railroad between this place and Tuscumbia and it is now believed by all hands that we will have a big fight between here and the river. One or two of the Regiments of our brigade went off in that direction last night after dark without tents or anything but their blankets. We are all ready for them. Our company and Battalion is armed with the finest kind of Springfield muskets plenty of cartridges and all right. The only thing in our way is sickness. There are several of our boys very sick. Tip Holland, Wm. Arnold, James Simpson and several others are very sick. I have 32 in our company on the sick list. We have 100 men in our company; 20 of them are at home and 79 in Camps and 1 in the hospital at Tuscumbia. Poor fellow he is there without any of his friends with him and I fear that he will die. We are going to send one or two of the boys off to a house in the morning. We have no straw or plants to sleep on here. James Ingram is discharged and he will start home in the morning and carry this letter to you. Captain Pittman will also go home if he is able. He has resigned and been discharged or will get his discharge tomorrow. We will elect another

Captain in a few days. I cannot tell who. There are but few however in the Company qualified to discharge the duties of the office. Some of them want me to run but I don't think that I shall.

Lizzie I want to hear from you so bad. It only lacks one or two days of being a month since I heard from you and I am uneasy about you for fear some of you are sick. Poor little children how bad I want to see them all. Lizzie I have forgot how the little babe looked and I cannot recollect how he looked to save my life only by knowing that he favored Jimmy, but it is impossible for me to see any of you at anytime soon as there is no chance to get a furlough home. The 15th Regiment came to Decater Ala while I was there sick. Several of the boys went to see me. They were all nearly worn out. Dear Lizzie, let not our separation depress your feelings too much, but be as lively as possible and take care of your children and what you have around you. Be careful about fire and make Margaret be careful. I am uneasy about the old chimneys for fear they will burn up all you have. Then be careful how the fires are left at night. Don't let none of the little children go to the spring by themselves. There is no day passes by but what I think about these things and it makes me uneasy. Lizzie send me a letter by everyone that is passing. Tell my friends to write to me. There are several of our boys at home. Dennis Dill is there, James Goldson, Nail Dickson. Tell Taylor to find out when they start back and write by them, as letters are uncertain by mail. Tell Taylor to write to me and tell me how he is getting along. If Billy has not volunteered tell him to stay at home until I come home if I ever do. Lizzie it is getting late and I must close my letter. When I go to bed at night I can feel the cold ground under me though the weather has moderated and is tolerable pleasant here now. All of our neighbor boys are well. I saw Jacob Bingham the other day. He was well. They are now at Iuka. Nearly all of our officers are sick except myself and Langston. I have boxed up one pair of pants and my overshirt and started them home. I will not want them nor cannot carry them

with me. I am allowed a company desk, and the Major allows me to carry my trunk in place of a desk. Lizzie do for yourself and children the best you can, and if any of you gets sick have the doctor with you. Write and give me all the news. Nothing more at present but remain your absent friend until we meet again. Goodbye Lizzie.

Direct yours thus:
To the care of Lt. D.J. Langston
Commanding
Co. D of 3 Batt.
Miss. Infantry

Or send your letters to Albert Young and let him back them for you.

Joel Hughes
Corinth, Miss.

This is the last known letter of Joel Hughes. A week later, on 3 April, the Confederate troops began their march to Shiloh. The original plan was to be ready to attack Grant's army at Pittsburg Landing early on the morning of the 4th. But organization problems and poor road conditions delayed the battle. Hardee's corp, which included Hardcastle's Battalion, did not begin the march until around noon. They arrived at the rendezvous point, Michie's house near Shiloh Methodist Church, around midnight, but the corp column extended all the way back to Corinth.

The march resumed on the 4th, but was slowed by muddy roads and swollen streams. By the end of the day, all the Confederate forces, about 46,000 in number, were in the area, but not yet fully positioned.

Most of April 5 was spent finalizing the position of the troops. More rain fell and slowed the process. General Johnston placed Hardcastle's 3rd Mississippi Battalion along a skirmish line about a quarter mile in front of Wood's Brigade. The attack was postponed again until the next day, so the soldiers slept in their positions in the battlefield. Because of their forward position, many of Hard-

castle's Battalion stood picket through the night [6, 4].

In the predawn around 5:00 a.m., Hardcastle's Battalion skirmished with five Union companies led by Major Powell. The skirmish lasted over an hour. In Hardcastle's official report, Joel Hughes was not among the 2 casualties suffered by his battalion during the skirmish [3].

Hardcastle goes on to describe the action after his battalion was replaced on picket and fell back in line with the brigade.

At about 6:30 a.m. I saw the brigade formed in my rear and I fell back. Captain Hume's [*sic* Hughes'] company, bearing the colors, formed promptly at the command halt. I formed and took position in the brigade line of battle near the right. We advanced, dressing to the right, I charging the first camp of the enemy. I was ahead of my battalion a short distance and lost myself from it by going too far to the left. During my separation of about an hour I fought with the Sixteenth Alabama Regiment and changed front. The battalion had moved a little to the right toward an open field and were there occupied firing on the enemy running across the field. When I rejoined them they were marching forward in line against the enemy on a changed front. We halted on the right of our brigade and received a heavy fire from the enemy. We replied briskly and continued firing for some time. The enemy were driven off by a combined movement from our left.

Our loss was: Killed, Captain Hughes, of Company D, while exposed in front of his company following the colors; Corporal Reeves, of Company E, color-bearer, and 4 privates. Severely wounded, 2 sergeants and 2 privates; and slightly wounded, 1 acting assistant surgeon, Lieutenant Reeves, of Company C; 1 sergeant, 1 corporal, and 10 privates. [3]

Joel Hughes died later in the day in a Confeder-

ate field hospital from his injuries. He was among the first casualties in the Battle of Shiloh.

6 Undated Letters

There are two undated letters from Joel Hughes to his wife, Elizabeth Gary Hughes. The first letter may be from New Orleans. That would place the letter date in January or early February 1862. The 17 February 1861 letter above mentions looking for cloth, so this letter is probably earlier than 17 February.

Duck Hill, mentioned in the letter, is a town in Mississippi about twelve mile southeast of Grenada. The Illinois Central Rail Road had a track that ran from New Orleans through Jackson, Duck Hill, Grenada, and up to Paducah, KY on the Ohio River at that time. Duck Hill was probably the closest train stop to Joel and Elizabeth's home, which would have been about twenty-four miles east of there in what was then Choctaw County (currently Webster County).

Dear Lizzie I did not get to send my letter to the office and I would be glad if you could send your likeness by Capt. Pittman or any one that may be passing. If you have a chance to send it pack it up good so that it will not get injured. If there is any thing that you want do not neglect to let me know it. I have not had a chance to look for cotton cards yet. But if there is any here I will send some to Duck Hill and let you know it. If you can get somebody to pay my tax I will send the money by the first one that passes. I am not willing to risk it in a letter. Nothing more at present but remain your

True Love
Joel Hughes

I speculate that the next letter was written in the late winter 1862 since Joel is concerned with purchasing summer clothing. If this is correct, it would have been written either in New Orleans or Corinth.

Lizzie I send you a twenty dollar piece and I want you to not suffer for anything as long as you have any money. I drew 38 dollars and paid my expenses home out of that. I send you twenty and have five dollars left which I can make out on. I will not need any unless I get bad sick except to get some summer clothing.

Good Bye dear Lizzie
Joel Hughes

References

- [1] Lucile Hitt Hollingsworth. *The Ancestors and Descendants of Joel Reuben Hitt in America 1714-1972*, unpublished manuscript, 1972.
- [2] Charles E. Hooker. *Confederate Military History of Mississippi*, eBooksOnDisk.com, 2003.
- [3] Official Records, X, part 1, page 603.
- [4] Dunbar Rowland, *Military History of Mississippi, 1803-1898*, The Reprint Co., Spartanburg, SC, 1978.
- [5] "Reminiscences of Civil War Revived by Message to Homefolk," *The Webster County News*, 8 September 1921.
- [6] David Williamson. *The Third Battalion Mississippi Infantry and the 45th Mississippi Regiment*, McFarland & Company, Inc., Jefferson, NC, 2004.