

German Letters & Diaries from Waul's Texas Legion

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Several years ago I was approached to translate from German into English a couple of letters written by a participant in the Civil War. These letters piqued my interest because of their fluid style and their observations. Inquiries established a trove of letters by this writer as well as his wartime diaries archived at the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin.¹ Two other diaries were brought to me, as I began reading and translating the pages. They, too, were written in German and they are in the possession of the writers' descendants.² What makes these finds especially interesting is the fact that they were written by soldiers in the same company. Furthermore, additional letters and parts of diaries by other writers in this company are found in various Texas depositories.³ For the purpose of this paper the diary and letters of Robert Voigt are of primary concern, with additional information gathered from the diaries of Herman Klopsteck and of Carl Pfeffer. These documents, written for private consumption, provide first-person accounts of events during the Civil War. They offer glimpses of daily life in the army and concerns over the loved-ones at home, views that are absent in official reports. Judging from the practiced handwriting and the use of proper grammar, these men had more than a rudimentary education.

The three diarists were immigrants from Germany who arrived in Texas in the 1850s and by the outbreak of the Civil War were settled in the Austin County area. In the spring of 1862 Robert Voigt, Herman Klopsteck, and Carl Pfeffer, were members of the Industry Volunteers, an Austin County militia company. Avoiding the impending draft that would scatter men among strangers of other companies, the Industry Volunteers offered their services as one body to the Confederacy. They proceeded to Houston, a recruiting center for the Confederacy army, where

they elected to join Waul's Texas Legion, a unit comprised of twelve infantry companies, six cavalry companies, and two artillery companies. After being sworn into the Confederate Army, the men were ordered to Waul's Camp located near the headwaters of New Year's Creek in Washington County. This was an organizational and training encampment. As a temporary camp, it lacked permanent fixtures. The soldiers lived in tents or on account of the summer heat preferred to build arbors. Here they drilled, performed guard duty, and fatigue or work details such as hauling wood and water and improving roads. Voigt writes in his diary: *A music band was organized and many happy days passed at camp among friends, ladies, wives and children of the soldiers who stayed often for days at a visit.*⁴ The military high command decreed that the Legion was to leave as soon as the soldiers were sufficiently drilled.⁵

In late July 1862 orders came for the Legion to proceed to Arkansas. It moved in three divisions: the first division consisting of cavalry left Camp Waul 30 July 1862; the second division, of about half of the infantry companies, left on 7 August and the third division, that is the balance of the infantry companies left 18 August. The line of march took the Legion from Washington County, in a northerly direction through Burleson County, Brazos County. As the overland march commenced Robert Voigt wrote his wife, "The march agrees with me and with the whole company. Sick soldiers become well and will eat like bears."⁶ In the next letter he informs her, "so far our march has gone well ... Reveille each morning is at 2:30; at 5 o'clock, on the dot, the [baggage] wagon and our back packs are to be packed and each company ready to march. Usually we get to our next camp between 10 and 11 o'clock. The campsite is generally determined by a water source. ...At Davis' Ford on the Brazos, Judge Davis gave us a barbecue."⁷ Klopsteck, the other diarist, remarked that there was plenty of meat at the barbecue but no bread.⁸

About the routine in camp during the march Voigt tells his wife, “Yesterday Ernst, Louise Kosse and I did laundry in the Brazos. We undressed, sat on a log with the laundry and the soap beside us. We had fun doing it. I washed one shirt, one undershirt, a pair of undershorts, three handkerchiefs, etc.” Further down in the letter he remarks, “Louis Kosse sits opposite from me and mends his pants. Ernst and the other lieutenants are stretched out on blankets and smoke their pipes. The other men rest or stand around their camp fire and roast rye for coffee, beat their beefsteak, sift corn meal, repair their clothing etc.”⁹

Performances by the band were a favorite pastime in these camps. It entertained the soldiers as well as the locals. Many times the band played as the soldiers passed through town. The population often showed its appreciation for the soldiers’ commitment. It provided them food that was a welcome reprieve from the military grub.

On 22 August orders came to change their direction of marching, from Arkansas to Vicksburg, Mississippi. General Van Dorn had lost the battle at Pine Ridge, Arkansas, and the need for the Legion shifted to the east.

The men marched an average of 15 miles a day. Some days on the road were hard on the men; for example, when they trudged through Leon County for about 20 miles loaded down with their backpacks, wading knee deep in the sand in a boiling sun and without a drop of water in their canteen. But there were also lighter moments. Voigt relates, “I must confess that I know that some hog killing and sweet potato stealing have gone on at night but knowing at the same time that such delicacies would hurt my men not in the least I make it appear that I could not see, although my tongue tasted some of the good things also without asking where they came from.”¹⁰ Voigt observed about the soldiers’ attitude, “Otherwise everything is fine, even if the

people are never quite satisfied the way things are. Nothing can be done to change the situation; you get used to the complaining. One has to look at the world from a positive view.”¹¹

On 11 September 1862 Robert Voigt’s company, as part of the third division, crossed over to Louisiana. In his next letter to his wife he related “As I had time in Shreveport I had two ambrotypes done of myself. I have to confess because the picture shows it, the night before in the company of our officer corps we drank all the Rhine wine that could be found in town.”¹²

He goes on to observe the reality of war, “On the entire journey I was in good spirits with the exception when small children in the city streets approached us with outstretched hands and said ‘Good bye.’ Or what I also saw repeatedly when we passed residences where young women dried their tear with handkerchiefs, maybe a brother of theirs or a young husband preceded us. I noticed also an older lady with grey hair, as we passed her she starred at us for a moment, folded her hands and prayed. Pictures like that make me also morose.”¹³

As for the landscape that they passed through, he relates, “The entire eastern part of Texas and this part of Louisiana are almost void of men who went off to war to defend their rights and land. A large number of dwellings are empty and the fields are barren and bleak. Only here and there does one find a home occupied by women and children. Down in Texas you have not yet felt the war and for this reason cannot comprehend these descriptions.”¹⁴ The further the men got from Texas and from their families this concern is voiced repeatedly in the letters. While they have marched through Texas and into Louisiana, they boarded a train in Monroe and proceeded to Vicksburg for about 60 miles. Everybody agreed that Minden, Louisiana, was a most beautiful town.¹⁵

The three divisions – they started out separately from Texas – assembled in Monroe, Louisiana, and finally were paid. A private was paid \$11 a month, received a \$25 clothing

allowance, and was paid 10 cents per mile for the 457 miles marched since they left Camp Waul, Washington County, Texas. As most soldiers had little use for the money and wished to get it to their families but it was not safe to send it through the mail, arrangements were made to have one of their comrades take it back to Texas. About \$9,200 were sent home by this means.¹⁶ After having remarked on the poor land in East Texas and adjoining lands in Louisiana, the observation is made that now they were passing through a more civilized part of Louisiana: "The land to the right and left of the road is cultivated and homes and gardens are well kept."¹⁷ The soldiers also remarked on the ladies' patriotism as they pass through towns. "At every house that we pass, the ladies come on the balcony, greet us with happy faces and throw their handkerchiefs in the air." This lifted the soldiers' spirits

But they also observed the dark side of war. They met soldiers who were furloughed home because of sickness or to visit their families. There were also those who went home wounded, either with a shattered arm or a missing leg.¹⁸ The deeper that they got into Louisiana, the more apparent was the savagery of the war. Voigt observed that "our road led along a bayou. I counted about eighty bales of cotton that were partially burned so they would not fall into the enemy's hands. The shores of the entire bayou are covered with singed cotton." When they arrive in Vicksburg, the impact of the war is further driven home when the soldiers observe the effect of the Federal bombardment of Vicksburg. The part of town visible from the gunboats suffered the heaviest.¹⁹

An observation repeatedly voiced is that Texas has not yet experienced the effect of the war on its economy. Here in Mississippi a civilian had to pay dearly for commodities. For example, a civilian in town paid one dollar for a pound of bacon while a soldier could buy it in the commissary for 18 cents, butter is \$1.50 a pound, eggs \$1 a dozen, and a chicken cost

\$1.25.²⁰ On the other hand, at times the soldiers were issued rations in insufficient amounts or of sub-standard quality, such as spoiled beef and corn meal. This forced the men to supplement their rations with local purchases and then they had to compete with civilians at the local prices.²¹

Captain Voigt observed in a letter to his wife, "About this area and its population I have nothing good to say. The state of Mississippi, what I have come to know, cannot, by a long shot, compare with Texas. The soil is not as good and the land is hilly; most of it is unsuitable for farming.

Everywhere you look there is forest, you feel enclosed".²² One of the soldiers reflects that the present situation should be borne as a citizen's obligation that at time of war everyone has to bear.

Traveling by rail, the Legion arrived in Holly Springs on 10 October 1862. The town was swarming with soldiers who straggled in after the battle of Corinth. Here the infantry in Waul's Legion was issued Springfield Muskets with bayonets, new leather harnesses and ammo pouches with 40 cartridges.²³ On 27 October the Legion was ordered to Coldwater River, about eight miles north of Holly Springs, to block Grant's advance from Tennessee into Mississippi. At this location the soldiers were issued uniforms, grey jackets with blue collars and cuffs, blue pants, and grey caps. Being outfitted with new uniforms called for reviews for the benefit of military dignitaries.

Although Grant's forces probed the Legion's position, the Legion was pulled back to Holly Springs and redeployed to Salem, about ten miles east of Holly Springs. After a few days there, and based on rumors of an encirclement by the Federal army, the Legion and other units made a hasty and circuitous retreat, a skedaddle, to the south on 9 November 1862.²⁴ The retreat was difficult on the Legion. The weather was cold and it rained very hard which made the roads almost impassable.²⁵ The soldiers marched day and night. They had to do without basic

conveniences such as cooking utensils and tents. These items were carried on baggage wagons and later, when the enemy threatened to outflank them, the wagons were burned. Canteens were used for pots and frying pans.²⁶ They searched the fields for corncobs and roasted them in the fire. This was their bread.²⁷ Voigt observed “that in battle not any more men would have been lost than did during the retreat with those dying from great physical exertion from the cold, rain, and mud of this winter month.”²⁸ From exhaustion many soldiers fell behind their companies, and became prisoners of war of the pursuing enemy.

Another concern by the men was that Texas may be invaded and they could not be home and be of assistance when they were needed. One soldier advised his wife to stock up on groceries.²⁹ This feeling of helplessness was not eased when news reached the men of the German draft revolt in Austin, Fayette and Colorado Counties and of Union sympathizers harassing families at home whose husbands and men served away in the Confederate army.³⁰

On the retreat from Holly Springs the Legion and other Confederate units fell back to Grenada where they regrouped and replaced their lost equipment. Here President Jeff Davis and General Joe Johnston visited the camp and a grand review was held. It lasted 5½ hours. The response to the celebrities varied, some soldiers cheered, while others kept quiet.³¹

From the encampment in Grenada, General Earl Van Dorn with about 3,000 cavalrymen made his famous raid on Holly Springs, a supply depot recently established by Grant’s army. The raiders burnt extensive amounts of Federal supplies but also destroyed their own double-barrel shotguns and equipped themselves with repeating rifles and exchanged their worn footwear with new issues from the Federal stores. They received a jubilant reception, when they returned to Grenada.³² New Year’s eve found the Legion still in Grenada. Officers and soldiers,

separately, celebrated the evening with eggnog, and with both groups making predictions how many of them would be still around next New Years.³³

Another recurring worry expressed in the soldiers' diaries and letters is the lack of mail from home. The men hungered for news from home, especially wanting to hear of the family's well being. When the line of communication broke down between Monroe, Louisiana, and Vicksburg, individuals leaving for Texas were asked to carry personal mail.³⁴

In late January (25 January 1863) the Legion departed from Grenada. The Federal army was increasing its stranglehold on Vicksburg. Unable to subdue the defenders from the river, Federal plans were made to encircle the town from the rear and thereby cut the Confederate forces off from re-enforcements and supplies. Part of this plan called for Federal troops to be moved up through the river system. The Legion was brought up to stop the advance. The men were moved by train and by boat, first to Snyder's Bluff, then to Hayne's Bluff, Greenwood, and Yazoo City, all located up and down the Yazoo River. From Hayne's Bluff the Legion could hear the bombardment of Vicksburg. Outside of Yazoo City, at the Confederate Naval Yard, they observed the construction of the big steam ram *Arkansas No. 2*.³⁵ When the Legion arrived below Greenwood, at the juncture of the Yalabusha and Tallahatchie Rivers where they form the Yazoo River, the soldiers constructed Fort Pemberton³⁶. The place was fortified with breastworks of cotton bales covered with dirt. This defensive position the Legion shared with the 2nd Texas Infantry. The soldiers were to stop the Federal gunboats from coming downriver and joining the fight at Vicksburg. In addition, obstructions were placed on the river. A steamer and a raft were sunk and the Confederate States Navy submersed "torpedoes" or mines; these were demijohns filled with powder. They were very sensitive. A Confederate soldier was killed and

other wounded when the wire was accidentally touched.³⁷ The first gun battle with Federal gunboats occurred on 23 March 1863.

In early May (5 May 1862) the Legion, minus Company “C,” was ordered to Vicksburg to help defend the beleaguered city.³⁸ The soldiers left behind continued with the task of stopping the Federal gunboats’ advance. On 20 May 1863 Company “C” received orders to move downriver to Yazoo City.³⁹ Here, located on the south side of Yazoo City, and covering the river approach from the south, it served in a dual capacity, that of infantry with the addition of manning several artillery pieces.

After the fall of Vicksburg on 4 July, paroled prisoners came out and gave particulars of the surrender.⁴⁰ While the soldiers at Yazoo City were part of Waul’s Legion, but on detached duty, they were not subject to the surrender. They were still at war.

On 13 July the enemy was closing in on them. From the diaries, letters, and a contemporary map showing the company’s defensive position, a detailed account can be reconstructed of the men’s fate over the next 24 hours, 13-14 July. Federal gunboats were moving upriver toward Yazoo City. Gunfire exchanges took place between the Federal gunboat *DeKalb* and the Confederate artillery on shore. Captain Robert Voigt had trained two crews to man the artillery pieces. They succeeded in incapacitating the boat, but it did not change the inevitable. Federal troops on land threatened to surround them. A hasty retreat was made late in the afternoon with the enemy’s cavalry in pursuit. East of Yazoo City, the company turned off the road and found a suitable place to camp for the night. Shortly two Federal regiments came from Yazoo City looking for them. They marched by the camp without noticing them.⁴¹

Early in the morning of 14 July 1863, a Federal courier stumbled upon the camp, and with no means to escape the company surrendered. It was ironic that the Confederate soldiers

captured at Vicksburg were paroled and sent home, but after 4 July this Federal policy changed. The men of Company “C,” Waul’s Texas Legion, who were captured after that date, were sent north to prison camps, the officers to Johnson Island and the enlisted men to Camp Morton. Here, they remained until the end of the hostilities.

Today it is surprising is that these diaries survived the years of confinement and then for several more generations. It is also a wonder that the descendants of these soldiers held on to the diaries and letters, in spite of the fact that they were not fluent in the language that they were written in or that they could read the alien script. Today these diaries, combined with the letters written to loved-ones at home, offer the soldiers’ view as they observed the world around them while they fought a war.

¹ Robert Voigt, Diaries and Letters, Box 3K/123, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin. Hereafter quoted as CAH.

² The diarists are Herman Klopsteck and Carl Pfeffer. Both diaries are in private possession.

³ John Amsler and L. P. Amsler letters, The Texas Collection, Baylor University, Waco, Texas

⁴ R. Voigt, Diary, page 5 [June/July 1862], CAH.

⁵ Edwin E. Rice, Diary, May-July 1862. Original at the Rosenberg Library, Galveston, Texas

⁶ R. Voigt, Letter of 21 August 1862. CAH

⁷ R. Voigt, Letter of 24 August 1862. CAH.

⁸ H. Klopsteck, Diary entry of 22 August 1862. Diary in private possession.

⁹ R. Voigt, Letter of 24 August 1862. CAH

¹⁰ R. Voigt, Diary entry for 27 August 1862; CAH. – Carl Pfeffer, Diary entry for 4 September 1862; document in private possession.

¹¹ R. Voigt, Letter dated 1 September 1862. CAH.

¹² Ibid, Letters of 11 and 17 September 1862. CAH

¹³ Ibid, Letter of 17 September 1862. CAH.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ R. Voigt, Letter dated 28 September 1862. CAH

¹⁶ R. Voigt, Letters dated 5 and 12 October 1862. CAH

¹⁷ R. Voigt, Letter dated 5 October 1862. CAH.

¹⁸ C. Pfeffer, Diary entry for 10 October 1862. Document in private possession.

¹⁹ R. Voigt, Letter dated 5 October 1862. CAH

²⁰ J. Prahme, Letter dated 26 October 1862. Document in private possession.

²¹ C. Pfeffer, Diary entry of 1 October 1862. Diary in private possession

²² R. Voigt, Letter dated 18 November 1862. CAH

²³ R. Voigt, Diary entry for 18 October 1862. CAH

²⁴ R. Voigt, Letters of 6 November and 9 November 1862. CAH

²⁵ R. Voigt, Diary entry for 2 December 1862. CAH

²⁶ R. Voigt, Diary entry for 19 November 1862, CAH

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- ²⁷ J. Kreitel, Letter dated 19 November 1862. Document in private possession.
- ²⁸ R. Voigt, Diary entry for 1 December 1862. CAH
- ²⁹ R. Voigt, Letter of 18 November 1862. CAH
- ³⁰ R. Voigt, Letters of 18 December 1862, 11 February 1863, and 30 March 1863. CAH; Bill Stein, The German Draft Revolt *in The Journal*, German-Texan Heritage Society, Volume XIV, Number 3 (1992), pp. 221-224; *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*. Washington, 1880-1901
- ³¹ C. Pfeffer, Diary entry of 25 December 1862. Document in private possession.
- ³² R. Voigt, Letter dated 29 December 1862. CAH
- ³³ C. Pfeffer, Diary entry for 1 January 1863; document in private possession. R. Voigt, Letter dated 7 January 1863. CAH
- ³⁴ R. Voigt, Letters dated 7 January 1863 and 18 January 1863. CAH
- ³⁵ R. Voigt, Diary entry of 27 January 1863. CAH
- ³⁶ *Ibid*, 19 February 1863
- ³⁷ C. Pfeffer, Diary entry of 9 April 1863. Document in private possession.
- ³⁸ *Ibid*, entry of 6 May 1863
- ³⁹ R. Voigt, Diary entry of 20 May 1863. CAH
- ⁴⁰ R. Voigt, Diary entries for 11 and 12 July 1863. CAH
- ⁴¹ R. Voigt, Diary entry for 13 July. CAH