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Letters home detail the horror, grimness of Civil War service

RIDGEFIELD, Conn. (AP) — "On the Fourth of July, a rain washed the blood from the grass at Gettysburg."

That sentence from an early account of the greatest battle fought in the Western Hemisphere echoes in my mind like a sad bugle call when I visit the graves of Joseph and Nephi Whitlock in the tiny family cemetery across the road from my house.

The Whitlock brothers, both privates with Company C in the 17th Regiment of the Connecticut Volunteer Infantry, were wounded together while holding down the outmost flank of Oak Hill during the fiercest fighting on that first day of the battle of Gettysburg, July 1, 1863.

Joseph, the older brother, just turned 21, had, according to the records of the surgeon general's office, "a bone fracture, right arm broken, bone extracted, hand amputated." He died two weeks and a day later, July 16, 1863, in a field hospital at Gettysburg, either from the surgery, gangrene or both.

Nephi, age 19, blind and nearly deaf, must have been in the 17-mile long train of wagons, most of them without springs, which finally took the wounded away days after the rain had washed the blood from the grass.

Every Memorial Day, the town of Ridgefield or some local veterans organization places new American flags beside the 2 1/2-foot high head stones of the Whitlock brothers. This year the grave tenders forgot to mow the grass, so their plots and the adjoining one holding the remains of their father and mother, John and Salli Whitlock, are choked with weeds almost high enough to hide the inscriptions.

Over the last seven years, thanks to letters and phone calls from readers, I have come to know the brothers pretty well. Sitting here with them in the tiny graveyard overlooking the lake, I feel I'm among old friends. And now that I have just returned from the 40th anniversary of D-Day on Omaha Beach, we have a lot of unspoken things to say to each other about what war is really like and what it does to people.

The Whitlocks have always been well respected, if not always well-to-do, people hereabouts. Several roads and lanes in this area are named for



the family. One Whitlock ran a livery stable in town. Another drove the stage coach to the train depot. A famous Whitlock held the reins for a 32-horse team that pulled a Barnum & Bailey circus wagon a century ago. Ten Whitlocks fought in the "War of Rebellion," as the government called it when Joseph and Nephi enlisted together on July 25, 1862, and were mustered into the ranks at Bridgeport a month later.

Poor farm boys who had never been away from home before, the brothers sent home most of their \$16-a-month private's pay, whenever they felt the Union mail was safe from Confederate raids. Their father was becoming increasingly paralyzed with Bright's Disease, and they were the sole support of their parents and a younger sister and brother.

Their story, including copies of their letters concerning pay packets, is told in the official records of the \$8-a-month "mother's pension" Salli Whitlock applied for in 1883, the year after her husband died and 20 years after her oldest son Joseph was numbered among the 7,000 dead at Gettysburg. She described herself as "an old woman, 72 years of age, with one cow, in needy circumstances having no income except the \$4 a month pension of her deaf and blind son Nephi."

The supporting letters, written to their father, detail the horror and grimness of war even before the brothers saw their first combat. "It snowed two or three days ago," Joseph wrote in his quaint spelling from a nameless encampment somewhere in Virginia. "It fell about 11 inches, deep and it has been so muddy that a wagon could hardly get along. You may calculate its bad going when you see 6 span of horses on one wagon and only have 4 bbls. of coffe and one bbl. of flour and then have to whip and pound the horses half to death and not

stir a peg...

Our troop had to have 16 to 20 horses on one cannon when they fell back from the Raphrahonic this last time."

The Connecticut Yankee appraised the war zone. "You wanted to know if I had seen any land I like," Joseph answered his father. "I have not seen any yet. To tell the truth I would not live down here if they gave me the whole state of Virginia." That first cold winter reduced the regiment to half strength. "We have not been in any combat either," Joseph wrote. "It is sickness which do the work... rheumatics, the yellow jaunders and the bowel complain is very privilent, and the doctors don't do no one no good at all."

Morale in the 17th was low even before the defeat at Chancellorsville, where Confederate Gen. Stonewall Jackson died after an arm amputation similar to Joseph's. "I tell you the soldiers are tired of it," Joseph wrote. "They want to go home, but I want to go home when the war is settled and not before."

Because the Confederates ran out of shoes that summer, both brothers began their sad journey home on July 1, when nothing was settled. Gen. Harry Heath, quite by accident, came scavenging for shoes in the little town of Gettysburg, Pa., and instead found John Buford's Union cavalry. On that first furious day of battle C-Company had four killed outright, 16 more like Joseph who died of their wounds, 15 like Nephi wounded and disabled and 21 captured.

Writing home a year later from Knight hospital in New Haven, Nephi said he hadn't been paid because his records were lost. "I am no worse than hundreds of others here. Their is a good many men here that ain't been paid in a year or 16 months."

As his tombstone states, Nephi died on May 2, 1912, age 68. Some old-timers remember as kids seeing him on his porch, whittling, despite those unseeing eyes, or occasionally helping a neighbor dig a well. And he always put on his uniform and marched in the Fourth of July parade. Proud and sometimes out of step, not being able to hear the music, he marched as it were to the muffled drumbeats of Gettysburg.

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Civil War Vet Marched on the 4th In a Silent and Invisible Parade

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Mulligan's Stew

By HUGH MULLIGAN

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Bob Curran is on vacation.

SADIE
My budget is nothing more than an orderly system...



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for going broke.