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## **The Mexican War through an American Soldier's Eyes** **Digital History ID 345**

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Date: 1848

### **Annotation:**

During the first few weeks following the declaration of war, a frenzy of pro-war hysteria swept the country. Some 200,000 men responded to a call for 50,000 volunteers. Novelist Herman Melville (1819-1891) observed, "a military ardor pervades all ranks.... Nothing is talked about but the halls of the Montezumas."

But from the war's beginning, a small but highly visible group of intellectuals, clergymen, pacifists, abolitionists and Whig and Democratic politicians denounced the armed conflict. They considered it an expansionist power ploy dictated by an aggressive southern slaveocracy intent on acquiring more slave states to balance the northern free states in the U.S. Senate. The *Liberator*, risking the charge of treason, expressed open support for the Mexican people: "Every lover of Freedom and humanity throughout the world must wish them the most triumphant success."

As soldiers' letters exposed the hardships and savagery of life on the front, public enthusiasm for the war waned. Troops complained that their food was "green with slime." Diarrhea, amoebic dysentery, measles, and yellow fever ravaged the American soldiers. Seven times as many Americans died of disease and exposure as died of battlefield injuries. Of the 90,000 Americans who served in the war, only 1721 died in action. Another 11,155 died from disease and exposure to the elements. This soldier's letter provides a graphic account of duty in central Mexico.

### **Document:**

Cuernavaca, Mexico

I enlisted on the 19th of March [1847] in Dayton Ohio, under Capt Edward Ring who was recruiting a company for the fifteenth infantry. We arrived at Vera Cruz on the 4th of May and left the beach on the 3rd of June. On the 5th we had a fight with Guerrillas at Tohmas our party being commanded by Lieut Colonel McIntosh. We lost 64 men killed and wounded. We could not ascertain the loss of the enemy. We arrived at the National Bridge on the 10th of June and had another battle. Gilson was right when he said I had been in four hard fought battles. I am a duty Sergt. in

Co. E fifteenth infantry. When I enlisted I said nothing about a noncommissioned office. But there is one thing I can say and that is although the noncommissioned offices were first out filled by those who were so low as to ask for them, I filled the first vacancy without asking for it. My companions will tell you that I learned the drill quicker than any man in the Com[pany] and that I always volunteered on any Hazardous enterprize. I hesitated to tell you that I had been in any battles or that I was a Sergt. out of modesty--I think this extreme modesty was entirely uncalled for towards a parent but my constitution is such that I cannot help it. I have not tasted a drop of intoxicating drinks since I left home. Our living is principally bread and beef. Coffee sugar rice or beans. Vinegar. salt are also furnished. and soap to wash our clothes. Our rations are not as good as at home in time of peace. We are not furnished with a uniform suit, in this country. But we shall get pay for it in money when we are discharged. The term of my enlistment is during the war. My pay is 13 dollars a month. I have not signed the two last pay rolls therefore there is four months pay due me besides 27 dollars which I foolishly lent. But I am glad it was when I was young as I shall profit by the lesson. You spoke of a Lieutenancy. I enlisted as a private as my greatest wish being to do my duty as a good soldier, but if my friends think I am deserving of a commission and are successful in getting it for me I shall accept it with the greatest pleasure. If unsuccessful, I thank them for their kindness. And it will not hurt my feeling in the least as I never expected such an honor!

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