

A Duty to His Country

by Katrina Merrill

Tis' many days since I left home
to join our glorious army,
I thought but of my country's call,
and not of what might harm me;
I vowed to join both heart and hand,
where duty calls you'll find me,
I left my home, and shed a tear
for the friends I left behind me.

This verse from a poem, written by a Civil War army volunteer, symbolizes a strong meaning of duty and love for our country. These feelings were also clearly ingrained in my ancestor who served with the 154th Regiment New York Volunteers during the Civil War. Barzilla Merrill enlisted in the army as the result of President Lincoln's call for volunteers during the summer of 1862. In letters to his wife Ruba, Barzilla described the life of the soldier, encounters with the rebels, the management of the army, and his feelings about being away from family and friends to serve his country.

"While I write this," he said in his ungrammatical way, "I sit on the ground in my tent and my gun bayonet for a candle stick and my writing on my knee and other conveniences about in the same way." This was part of the routine Barzilla used when writing to his wife. In his early letters, Barzilla wrote about drilling and marching. As the regiments drilled, they practiced the various maneuvers needed during a battle. The army marched through many battlefields and saw the horrible destruction. They camped, set up their own tents, and cooked their own food. To Barzilla, the army was very different from being at home. "I came here," he said, "because I thought that it was my duty to come and I expect to stand up like a man and do my duty like a man whatever that

may be and leave the event with God." Barzilla often missed his family and friends and the privileges of his life. He felt very strongly that it was his duty to fight for the old flag and to reunite the country.

As winter turned to spring, Barzilla realized war would be coming soon. One morning, while writing to Ruba, he felt death. "While I write, I hear muffled drums for a funeral procession in some regiment somewhere. I feel anxious that the Lord will spare my life to come home again and live and die with my family." Barzilla knew the time had come to fight for his country.

All soldiers, past and present, make a sacrifice to ensure freedom for their families and all Americans. My study of Barzilla's letters taught me that he loved his country with honor and faith in his heart. Barzilla Merrill was killed at the battle of Chancellorsville, Virginia, on May 2, 1863, at the age of 45 leaving a wife, two children, the memories of his duty for his descendants, and liberty for all generations of Americans.