After battles, surviving soldiers often sit down and write letters home revealing their feelings about their experiences. So Captain Thomas Ware Gibson’s missive, the initial letter here, is part of a typical pattern. Yet, it is no flat, ordinary little document, drily factual or vapidly general. What raises it out of the ordinary are the captain’s vivid style, his honesty, his wit, and the assumptions—conscious and unconscious—he makes about himself and the men with whom he served.

On June 9, 1846, a group of Clark County volunteers for the Mexican War was commissioned as a company by the State of Indiana. Called “The Clark Guards,” they were led by Captain Thomas Ware Gibson of Charlestown. On June 22, 1846, a Colonel S. Churchill mustered them into the United States Army at New Albany, Indiana, as twelve month volunteers; they became Company I, Third Regiment, Indiana Volunteers. In early July they left Indiana for New Orleans and by the eighteenth of the month had been shipped from there to Mexico.

In Mexico they joined General Zachary Taylor’s command. At the end of February, 1847, they became involved, at three crucial points, in the Battle of Buena Vista. On the morning of the second day of fighting, after the American left flank had been broken (caused partly by the rout of the Second Indiana), the Third Indiana helped Colonel Jefferson Davis and his Mississippi rifle regiment repulse the Mexicans. Soon after midday the same group broke up a major enemy cavalry charge. Late that afternoon they fought together to aid in saving the American center. Thus Gibson and his men materially assisted in maintaining the American hold on the field of conflict. Even though they did not fight throughout the entire battle (they were held in reserve during the first day and at the beginning of the second), they understandably felt that they had taken a major part in a victory, even if, as Otis Singletary has concluded, “Tactically, it was a drawn battle.”

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1 Captain Thomas Ware Gibson was born May 11, 1815, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. “By occupation he was a lawyer, in politics a Democrat, and in religion a Christian.” He married Mary Wallace Goodwin (born May 23, 1820) of Clark County, Indiana, on December 9, 1838, in Clark County. They had six children: Lydia D., born April 9, 1840; Amelia A., born February 6, 1842; Sarah C., born July 20, 1844; Thomas Ware, born December 13, 1846; Charles H., born June 29, 1848; and George H. D., born September 13, 1851. Gibson practiced law in Louisville, Kentucky. Mary Gibson had a brother Columbus C. Goodwin. William and Mary College Quarterly Historic Magazine, first series, VIII, supplement (October, 1899), 129.

2 See Oran Perry (comp.), Indiana in the Mexican War (Indianapolis, 1908), 47, 73-74, 78, 413. The company was mustered out of the army by the same Colonel Churchill on June 27, 1847. According to the roster in Perry the company had fifty-two enlisted men and officers when it took part in the Battle of Buena Vista.


Captain Gibson's letter, fleshing out some of the bare bones of the action and its aftermath, speaks clearly of the situation. The dead Mexicans stink, surviving stragglers may well starve, one of his men died after the amputation of a wounded leg, the biscuits contain bitter bugs; there is hardship, but Gibson's humor remains. In addition, he unconsciously reveals chauvinism typical of the time in his use of the term "greasers" for the Mexicans. Furthermore, he hints at his basic American Protestant orientation, both in echoing the first Psalm and in suggesting that he and his men feel "almost disposed" to believe that God was on their side.

The other two letters, which reflect the feelings of a concerned brother-in-law and a very worried wife, are important here mainly as supplements to the first. Writing almost a month and a half after the Battle of Buena Vista, they have heard no direct word from Gibson since before the battle was fought. They are not positive he is still alive. In fact, Mary Gibson becomes so disturbed at reports that Indiana soldiers ran away during the fighting that she at least momentarily assumes her husband may have been one of them and chides them all with a general "you." What comes through most strongly and poignantly, however, is her intense anxiety over the fate of her silent husband.

None of these letters says anything momentous about the general military and political issues and realities of the time. On the basic level of human personality, though, they provide important insights into the men who actually fought the war and into the people back home who waited for them.

Agua Nueva Mar. 4th 1847—

Dearest Mary,

I write oftener perhaps than necessary but I do so in the apprehension that many of my letters may not reach you on account of our mails sometimes being captured by straggling parties of the dispersed Mexican army. A party of seven hundred men whom we sent day before yesterday to pursue the retreating enemy returned last night after having followed them as far as Encarnacion, about thirty miles from here. They had all left there, leaving about five hundred of theirs wounded. Santa Anna could

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1 In preparing these documents for publication every effort has been made to represent as closely as possible the handwritten letters. Spelling and punctuation errors have been allowed to remain; [sic] has not been used. No punctuation has been added. The xeroxed copies used in editing often have caused uncertainty about punctuation, particularly in the second and third letters; in such cases the most likely choice has been made. When there is no punctuation, space has been left in order to increase readability. Raised letters have been brought down to the line. When full names or the correct spelling of names are available, they have been placed in brackets in the text.

The original letter from Gibson is in the possession of Miss Jean Aydelotte of Louisville, Kentucky. The original letters to Gibson, which follow sequentially and make up one four page manuscript, belong to The Filson Club of Louisville, Kentucky. Both items are published with the permission of the owners.

2 La Encarnacion was a hacienda located about thirty-five miles from Agua Nueva.
muster but about four thousand men when he left. The number of his killed and wounded has been underrated. We are now satisfied that not less than twelve hundred were killed & twenty five hundred wounded—

The field of battle is still covered with their dead and the stench is most horrible. The stragglers are scattered through the mountains by thousands and must many of them starve to death. You need not expect to hear of any more fighting in this quarter— It took Santa Anna six months to raise his army and in one day we scattered it like chaff before the wind. It is now well ascertained that Santa Anna had twenty one thousand men on the field of battle and we had three thousand eight hundred all told.3

Coombs [Sergeant William Coombes] died on the night of the 27th. His thigh had been amputated the day before. [Private Martin A.] Conoway the other man wounded in my company is doing well.4 John Dunn had his trunk robbed during the battle— they got every thing he had in the world except what was on his back— He had just been paid a couple of hundred dollars in gold which fortunately he had about his person & saved it. About thirty of our wounded have died since the battle making our whole loss killed three hundred— We have had some fighting between here and camargo,6 the particulars of which we have not yet learned— We know however that the greasers6 were whipped. I beleive that our little army could go out tomorrow in a fair field and whip fifty thousand of the best Mexican troops that ever were on a field of battle. One thing is certain, we would be willing to try it.

Dead upon the battle field we found many of our acquaintances from Saltillo who had professed to be great friends of the Americans but who slipped out and joined Santa Anna as soon as he approached. A great many of the Mexican officers brought their wives with them, so confident were

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3 It is very difficult to give accurate figures about the Mexican War. In his study The War with Mexico (2 vols., New York, 1919) Justin Smith says: “One has to be extremely careful here about making assertions regarding dates and numbers. Affairs were in such confusion that even headquarters would seem to have been to a considerable extent in the dark” (I, 480). While Gibson reports “seven hundred” men sent to La Encarnacion, General Taylor's report states only that “A command was finally despatched to Encarnacion . . . .” J. Frost, The Mexican War and Its Warriors (New Haven and Philadelphia, 1849), 119. Taylor also reported “some two hundred wounded” Mexicans at La Encarnacion and total enemy losses and wounded at between 1500 and 2000 men. Frost, The Mexican War, 119. Gibson's assertion about “thousands” of stragglers, however, seems fairly accurate. Santa Anna admitted to over 4000 deserters during the battle. Smith, The War with Mexico, I, 397-99. For the size of the Mexican Army, Gibson seems to use the figure—21,000—given by a captured Mexican. Smith, The War with Mexico, I, 388. Taylor listed his forces at 4759 officers and men. Frost, The Mexican War, 119. Gibson's figure for those killed, however, agrees with Taylor's report of 267 casualties.

4 Coombes was the only battle casulty in Gibson's company. Four other men died of unlisted causes between July 12, 1846, and November 1, 1846. Oran Perry, Indiana in the Mexican War (Indianapolis, 1908), 415.

5 Camargo, northwest of Monterey, was Taylor's former supply depot, which had been very unhealthy for the troops and was broken up the previous December. See Smith, The War with Mexico, I, 210, 356, 484, 493, 506.

6 “Greasers” was a derogatory term commonly applied to Mexicans or Latin Americans.
they of victory. The 23d was the birth day of Santa Anna and he had promised his army a great ball in Saltillo at night.\(^7\)

You speak of letting Fleschman work the lot again— If you do, let Bill Mc Campbell make the bargain with him and let him understand that he is not to neglect our part as he did before. If Jo Mc Combs would take it, I would much rather he would have it. We have just heard that judge Dewey has been left out & Tom Smith appointed in his place— I regret very much to hear this, but it is just what I anticipated if [Governor James] Whitcomb was elected. I have heard also that G H. Dunn was elected circuit judge of some circuit made this winter. Tell Lydia that the Mountains here are full of parrots but I have no fresh salt to put upon their tails and have not been able to catch her one yet. The flowers I sent by [Corporal Alexander] Shindle you say you did not get. I wrapped them up in the blanket & I suppose they got lost out in some way. I was mistaken in telling you the blanket could be washed with soap— It is true that soap will not fade it, but the Mexicans use a kind of root to wash it with which makes the colors brighter than soap— I will bring some of the root home with me. It is one of the most disagreeable days today I ever saw— The wind is blowing a hurricane & I am looking every minute for my tent to blow down, and the dust is so thick that you cannot see twenty steps before you— Nothing to eat but hard biscuit full of black bitter bugs and salt pork. Pleasant way of living, is it not? In all the biscuit we have had before the bugs were tolerably well flavored, but the last lot, are very bitter. In addition to this the enemy captured our coffee pot during the battle and we have to make coffee in a skillett, but the greatest hardship I have had to endure yet, was doing without cigars on the day of the battle.

Poor Mose was frightened nearly to death— We left him an[d] Mitchell at the ranche in our rear— They stayed there till about ten oclock, when a stray cannon ball found its way down there. This was more than they could stand and they broke for town running every step of the way five miles without stopping. There was a large body of the enemy's cavalry near the road and it is a great wonder that they were not both killed.\(^8\) Just as they got to town an attack was made there, so that they jumped out of the frying pan into the fire. They did not venture to return to camp till three days after the battle. We all supposed they had been killed or made prisoners. Mose says he did not run, he only retreated.

You say Linn has written me four or five letters— I have received but two—one of these I answered the day after I got it—the other I recd the night before the battle and will answer it tomorrow so that he will get my answer by the same mail that brings this.

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\(^7\) The Mexican general's birthday actually was February 21, according to the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (24 vols., Chicago, 1968), XIX, 1036.

\(^8\) Evidently the two men ran toward Saltillo. The Mexican cavalry was probably that of Torrejon or Munoz. Smith, *The War with Mexico*, I, 390.
I mentioned I beleive in one of my letters home to some of you, that John Ross was killed—James Ross was near being killed but Frank Williams saved him by shooting the Mexican who was about to spear him. The Louisville legion to which Col Duersen [William Duerson?] belongs was not in the battle— They were at Monterey— Genl [Joseph] Lane was wounded twice—but did not leave the field— Col. [James H.] Lane\(^9\) was hit three times but not hurt— I was hit but once—the ball struck me a glancing blow on the head and knocked me down but did not hurt me— The ball that killed Coombs clipped my clothes as it passed— I verily beleive that 100 balls did not miss me six inches—and that more than a thousand Musket balls passed among the ranks of my company— How we escaped so well is a miracle—we feel almost disposed to attribute it to a special interposition of providence in our behalf. Tell Lin that Milt [Sergeant Milton McCombs] is a good soldier and fought like a hero all day

I know of nothing more to write you now. Kiss all the little ones for me—good night

Yours affectionately

Mrs Mary W. Gibson
Charlestown
Clark County Ind.

Chearlestown Ind. April 2nd 1847

Dear Tom
I recieved your letter of the ninth a week since in which I learned that the prisoners captured under Gains [Major John P. Gaines] have been shot if they have been shot their lose will be deeply regreted and will no doubt be retaliated in an ocean of mexican blood\(^{10}\) I dont know how the devils dare to do such a thing but it is not the first time they have commited such a daredevil trick. I am glad to hear that your health is good and that of your company I supose you have smelt gun powder in a battle before this time, It may be that you have smelt it and felt it too I don’t know whether you are on the list of the dead, wounded or living Mary says she will not write anny more until she recieves letter—dated after the battle of Buena Vista, We have had several startling rumors here of a terible battle but we have at last got the truth I believe though we have not had the official account of it I think it may be relied upon that there has been a severe battle and that you have had a hand in the bandango.

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\(^9\) Colonel James H. Lane, no relation to General Lane, commanded the Third Indiana. Apparently Captain Gibson once helped him try to extend the regiment’s service beyond the stipulated twelve month term: “On Sunday preceding the battle of Buena Vista . . . Colonel Lane . . . and the other field officers of his regiment were discussing some troubles that had arisen among them growing out of an effort on Colonel Lane, Adjutant Daily and Captain T. W. Gibson to continue the Third Indiana in the service.” Perry, *Indiana in the Mexican War*, 134.

\(^{10}\) Major John P. Gaines was one of the commanding officers of a large party of men from Kentucky and Arkansas forces, which was captured at La Encarnacion
we need not have any fears of the result of the battle as our boys were in it for I know some of them were bullies to fight. The first news we had of the battle was that Old Zach [General Zachary Taylor] was giving the Mexcans hell. Among the wounded as we got the list I am sorry to see was Capt. Sanderson of New Albany. It is to be hoped that our minds will soon be put at rest upon the matter. I do not know whether it would make you laugh or cry to see how eagerly every bit of war news is sought after, but it is not surprising we take into consideration the supposed great danger Gen. Taylor was in being surrounded with such a tremendous Army of black-hearted Mexicans. I have seen Drummond [Sergeant James Drummond] & Shindal. They look remarkably well. We are all well at home. Delilah has not been expected to live from day to day for about two months, certainly the most singular case that ever was.

There has been but one circumstance transpired in Charlestown worth relating since you left and that is with regard to Lin and old gosh. It seems that the old gentleman was determined to marry her any how for a long time she refused all his solicitation but at last after being encountered upon the street every day by the old fellow and his offering her all his property, money, and every thing else a seat in a Lady's chair as long as she should live &c she concluded to accept his offers. The preparations were all made he sent her money to get her wedding doings with but within about two or three days of the time the fight should have been oh: she flew the track. I am writing on your desk and as I have a severe headache I shall leave the rest of this sheet for Mary. if you knew how anxious we all are to hear from you, you would write every opportunity.

Your's C. [Columbus] Goodwin

TW Gibson

Apr 5th 1847

Dearest Tommy

it has been so long since I have wrote to you I have most forgot how to write and what to say. O Tommy I cannot tell you how bad I have felt for the last four or five weeks. I had give up writing and thought I would not write again until I got a letter from you after the battle but Columbus was writing and I thought I would try and say a few words as my spirits have been some what cher'd as your name was not on the

on January 22, 1847, by General J. Y. Minon. The combined party under Gaines and a Major Borland stopped for the night during a rainstorm at La Encarnacion. They failed to post sentries around the hacienda and were compelled to surrender the next morning to Minon's forces which had surrounded the area while the Americans slept. Smith, The War with Mexico, I, 370-71. No source can be located which refers to the killing of these captives.
list we got of the killed and wounded but I am still afraid it is not correct
we have nothing yet official O you can't think how anxious the friends
of your company is to hear from you poor old Mrs Lane was hear this
after noon we were all in hopes we would get letters this evening the
mail came and oh not a single letter from any of you we hardly know
how to wait till the next mail it is reported here that the Indiana troops
shone themselves great cowards it is said they all run when the battle
came on11 if you did I think a good many of you got shot in the back
from the number of officers it seems was killed we all hate that most
prodigiously we all would rather you had stood like good soldiers since
you have gone there Dear Tommy we are all well to night Delilah
is still alive and we have a little hope she will recover Lin has plaid
smash with old Drommond she stays with me at night but lives at Dr Hays
well I must quit my pen is so bad I will write again this week if I get
a letter from you so good night May God bless you and send you home
Mary Gibson

TW Gibson

11 This is a reference to a common misunderstanding which persisted for many
years after the war. Only the Second Indiana Regiment retreated from the battle.
Gibson's company, part of the Third Regiment, was, in fact, one of the most im-
portant and courageous in the battle. Initial reports from the battleground, however,
gave the impression that the entire Indiana detachment had been disgraced. As a
result of the ensuing confusion the conduct of the Indiana forces at Buena Vista was
long a cause of bitterness and anxiety among Hoosiers. The story of what happened
that morning at Buena Vista is well documented and detailed by Smith, Singletary,
Perry, and other authors cited here. Briefly, however, a group of raw volunteers—the
Indiana Second Regiment—was placed in an extremely vulnerable position, without
support, at the outset of the battle. After withstanding intense enemy fire for about
half an hour, General Lane ordered the men to advance in the hope of driving the
Mexicans back. At the same time, however, Colonel William Bowles gave an order
to retreat, and the men soon did so in a confused flight. Smith, The War with
Mexico, I, 390. Many of them later regrouped and fought throughout the remainder
of the battle; some never returned to their positions.