

Letters of Thomas Cary Duncan

Written from a Confederate army camp in Virginia during the Civil War. The first three letters are to his mother, Alice Amanda Piemont Duncan. The last is to an old friend, Theodotus ("Oddy") Capers, whose father was a Methodist bishop.

Camp near Fairfax
October 5th [1861]
My Dear Mother

Lin Weaver arrived in camp this morning and with him came your letter, which I was delighted to receive, and the box of jumbles and cake. Of course they were a treat to me and I should have liked them had they been stale cornbread, coming from "Mother and Gracy," better than the nicest confectionary's all Richmond could furnish.

Poor Garvin Weaver died several days before his father got here. He was a most excellent young man. I used to go to school with him to Mr. Boyd and always liked him very much. He had been for years a Christian and died happily. I felt truly sorry for the old gentleman; he did not know of his son's death until informed by Captain Walker after he reached our camp this morning.

I wrote to you twice since I wrote Pa and hope the letters have reached you ere this. I have not yet put on those flannel shirts. The weather was a little cold for a few days but I will save myself from wearing three until the real cold weather comes. We have splendid fires in camp at night until we go to sleep, and then piled together in our tent as close as we can pack, we are (to use one of Aunt T[ollie]'s elegant and highly poetical expressions) as "snug as a bug in a rug." You must not distress yourself so much. I am very sorry you have been sick. Don't think so gloomily of everything in camp. The rain does come down in torrents sometimes, but we are not by a great deal "ducked" every time it rains, though now and then we do get a little damp. And then you people who stay in houses have no idea how glad one came sometimes be to see the bright sun. Like some of old did, when the sun, after an eclipse which lasted a good while, shone out at length in triumph over the darkness that surrounded him, one feels inclined to shout with all his might and main "Hurrah for the sun." We have our little trials of temper, our tent is hard to stretch, some of the mess won't work any, were are hungry and it's a long time to supper, we grumble (for you must know

"Grumbling is the soldier's pleasure,
Grumbling is the soldier's treasure,
Sweet the pleasure, rich the treasure,
Sweet this pleasure after drill),

and maybe we quarrel a little, but then we are all put in a good humor very easily, and as a general thing live "quite merrily." Especially at night after we have eaten a good big supper and know there can be no more drills, we draw up around our mess fire and (those who use the weed) smoke the pipe of peace (to one another) while the rest of us think and talk about various things. And I am sure we are not oftener mentioned at home than some of us at least think of you all.

We moved our camp yesterday and are now within sight of Fairfax C.H. I have changed

my service today. Calhoun's Battery from S.C. brought two guns more than they had men to manage and Col. Jenkins has got two guns and is going to man them with thirty men detached from his regiment. Bob Miller, Tarrant, McSwain, and myself are the ones from our company. L[ie]ut. Fleming from our company commands the piece I am to be attached to. The cannon are kept right with the regt and we still stay with our company. The reason I joined is that I greatly prefer Artillery to Infantry service and then after we return if mercifully spared to do so next spring and should feel it my duty to come to the war again, Artillery would be the arm of the service I should choose, and therefore I want to learn all I can about it now so that when a company is made up I may stand some chance of getting a higher position than the one I have held. The Artillery after you learn the drill is not so hard service as Infantry. Remember me to all who inquire and accept for yourself and all at home, much love.

Your affectionate son
Tom

P.S. I hope Pa got the relic of the battle I sent him by Maj. Anderson.

Camp at Centreville

Thursday night Dec 5th [1861]

My Dear Mother

After being away from my good, warm comfortable home (tent) all day on last Tuesday, and it was with us a most disagreeable day, I found on getting back, Wallace and a letter from you. Of course I was delighted to see my favourite (you must not on any account let Mrs Captain see this - she and Mrs. Dora might get into a slight affray) brother, but was almost as much rejoiced at having another of your letters. I know that with your household affairs, and that everlasting old closet with its innumerable array of bottles, jars, and "little conveniences you may need" there is little time left you for writing and all letters I receive from you I hoar[r]d as treasure. You all know before this that Wallace has been sent to Alexandria. I hardly think he will try to make his way through to his appointment. Sister Sallie says (don't let Mrs. Dora hear of it) he does not like work well enough for that. Viscount Scamperdown (alias Cousin William Duncan) says that the Bishop knew that William Massey was a prominent Black Republican brother, and seeing in Wall[ace] a striking likeness to Aunt Jane, he concluded he had better send him to the other side too. Wall[ace] started up to Leesburg yestgerday afternoon expected to be back Saturday morning and perhaps would stay here with me until Monday. I am very glad you have at last allowed yourself to be persuaded to leave home once more. Four or five weeks, instead of one, away from home would be of service to you I think. I am sure that sister Jennie with no other aid de camp than Lizzie and little Pat would in every way be equal to the task of keeping house while you are gone. Go to Major Rice's and down to Abbeville and (to express it elegantly) all "about in spots" this winter and don't think so much about the war and you would be as fat next spring as Aunt Tollie is or rather was before this war (with the distress it has brought upon her) reduced her to such a skeleton. Major Anderson got here day before yesterday but he didn't bring me those cakes you had fixed up for me. He said could not bring any eatables as he had so many other things of greater importance to take charge of.

You have all heard ere this the very distressing news of poor Ned Ewart's death. After

the Regiment came back from Leesburg he was quite unwell with a cold but kept dragging on for two or three weeks until he was taken down with a regular spell of fever. Then he was sent to the rear to the Hospital at Richmond (as we supposed) and the next thing we heard from him was that he had died on Wednesday the 20th of November up at Warren Springs 56 miles up the Manassas Gap RR [Railroad]. L[ie]ut. Fleming as soon as he heard it did all he could to get leave to go and take his body home immediately but the desired permission could not be gained. L[ie]ut. Evans then got me off to go up and learn the particulars of his death, mark his grave and bring away his things. I found that he had fallen into the hands of old friends. The hospital he was sent to has been lately established by the S. C. Soldiers Society. It looked more like a well kept hotel than a hospital. Do all you can to console poor Mrs. Ewart, tell her all those who were with him in his last hours told me he was prepared to die and said "If the Lord wills it so I am willing to die." I brought all his things down and the Captain has sent them on to Spartanburg by Mr Frank Anderson. We shall all miss him. He never had missed a duty until the illness that terminated his life and by his faithfulness won for himself the distinction of being the best Orderly in the Regiment.

We can but mingle our tears of sympathy with those of his sadly bereaved family over the hero's fall.

Your affectionate son
Tom

Camp at Centreville
Saturday Night December 14 [1861]

My Dear Mother:

Yours of the 5th inst. reached me today having been delayed by being directed to Centreville. Always direct to Tudor Hall P.O. near Manassas Junction. All the troops get their letters from there. Each regiment has its own mail agent who goes to the Junction every morning to get the letters. By being directed to Centreville a letter will be over a day at Manassas and then when it comes up here may stay in the P.O. at Centreville an age before you get it. I had not heard a word from you for more than two weeks and today when the mail came I went in vain for the letter I was confident you had written me. I was certain somehow or other that there was a letter for me from you somewhere about. Accordingly McSwain going over to Centreville inquired at the little post office that I bethought me was over there, and sure enough there was a letter for me with five cents due on it, as he had no silver he could not get the letter. I soon mustered up the five cents and going over to the office got my treasure. You have no idea how eagerly I look forward to the receiving a letter from you and how much I prize it when it comes. I am very glad the letter I wrote you by Martin reached you in good time. As for the money I only regret that I had not twenty times as much to send. I waste more money here than I ought, buying first one thing and then another, such as apples, pinders(?), cakes and all sorts of eatables, but then I have to keep up with the rest of my mess. We draw from the commissary department an abundance of flour and plenty of beef, but never get more than half or a third enough of anything else and have either to buy or do without. We get butter now at 40 cents a pound, (my mess, however, has not bought any for a week or so) and for everything else we have to

pay as high in proportion. Wallace can tell you exactly how we live in camp (though 'tis true we sorter put on our "Sunday doings" while he was here) and how I am fixed and all about it. we soldiers live much more comfortably while we are at home (our tents) than you all I suppose but there do come times when we have it harder than any one can imagine without experiencing. I have several times since I have been in service just wondered to myself how much more I could endure. Now the cold weather has come we will hardly move about much and with our good large fire place and a strong new tent I think I will be as comfortable as need be when I get that comfort you have so kindly sent me and for which I am ten thousand times obliged. I am sorry I should have caused you to provoke Miss Dora. You must make amends by going back and staying not a week bu a month with her. If you will just have that old closet will all its cares in somebody else's charge for a good little while, I think it would be the very best thing you could possibly do. I am very glad that Mrs. Captain "Bootsy" succeeded in getting somebody to carry those cakes to her old man, that Frank Anderson would not bring me. I am glad "a poor soldier" got them instead of having them left for D'Arcy and the frest of the Philistines at home to devour.

By the way is D'Arcy still going to College or have the exercises closed? You have all doubtless seen the proposition Congress has determined to have made to all the twelve months volunteers. What do you think of it? What would you and Pa advise me to do? I have not much inclination to volunteer again before I see you all at home once more and have time to consider the matter well. We all can see, however, that if all our twelve months volunteers are disbanded and go home, the best part of our army will be destroyed. All the twelve months men will get out about the same time (some time in April) and if they then go home we would be left without an army just at the time when we will need all the troops we can get. This war is upon us and it will never do to give over after one year's struggle. We will have to redouble every effort and exert ourselves even more than we have ever done for the next year's campaign. I don't want to come, however, as a private in infantry any more if I can help it. The artillery I like much better but I don't suppose I will have a chance to volunteer here in the artillery. Our detachment will be broken up I expect the first of January as it is said that Calhoun will then take our guns back to South Carolina. In that event we will have to go back into ranks in our respective companies. Whether to bind myself at all one way or the other before I go home, that is the question! What shall I do about it? I rather think Wallace when he was here was in favour of my going in for the war, though he did not say anything directly about it. I will do whatever you and Pa think best. I suppose you have received the lengthy epistle I sent you by Wallace. I took him to the Junction in our Battery wagon last Sunday afternoon and saw him safely off in the cars for Richmond on Monday morning. I wrote to Sister Sallie by him but have not yet heard from her.

I have two undershirts (one beside the one you sent me), the one you sent is a very good one but the other is pretty well worn out. I don't know if it would not be best to use flannel in place of them and if you can get the material, I would be much obliged to you to make me two flannel undershirts and send them to me by the first opportunity. Let them be full large as they will shrink very much, washed as they will be here. I saw Jim Palmer the other day, over in my old company, the "Palmetto Guard." He was not looking very well though he has stood the campaign thus far first rate. Jim is a noble fellow. I have always regretted that I could not have staid with him. There is no one in my own company who is the friend to me that he has always

been. If I just could have him and Oddy with me I should not care much where I was. Charlie Dunlap (another of my class you recollect) was taken a week or so ago with fever and has gone home very ill. Tell Aunt T[olly] Sam Lewis, her old friend, came over to see us the other night. He is looking very well and is a private in the 2nd Georgia Regiment. It is getting right late and my ideas, none of the brightest at the start, are becoming more and more cloudy so I reckon I had better say good night.

Most affectionately,
Your son
Tom

Camp at Centreville, VA

Thursday morning, Jan 16, 1862

Dear Oddy,

Yesterday morning, when I returned cold and wet from a three days picketing down at Germantown, I found your very welcome letter awaiting me and you may be sure I delighted to hear once more from my old "Prep friend." Fortune has favored you but her gifts have been no better than you deserved, and though the letter was written by Captain Capers, acting Adjutant General, in every line there is the manly true heartiness of the same old Oddy, my first, best, and most intimate friend. As Horace once said (I believe he did but if I impute somebody else's words to him I hope Dr. Manes will forgive me as in the "war" I have no way of finding out any better) *Nescio quod, certe est quod me tibi temperat astrum*. I rather reckon, however, that I had better let the Latin alone as it would be rather awkward to get sentimental and let off something that a fellow could not well parse. Allow me to congratulate you heartily on your having obtained a position so much better than that you intended to take at De Weis(?) Inlet. I heard that you had gone into Whilden's company as a private and I did not fancy it much I can tell you. Whilden I thought from what I saw of him a very clever fellow, not troubled with too much brain to be sure (military men you know frequently manage to get along with the least little particle, at least I have found it so in a number of instances in my experience), but I did not like the idea of your serving under him in an inferior position when I knew you were in every way fitted for "better things."

How much I should like to peep in upon you in your large "canvass house" one of these long and cold (where I am, but quite pleasant with you, I suppose) nights! I'll bet you have not got a large splendid fire place like ours, and don't have such elegant roaring big fires as we keep up all the time. Still old fellow I would like above all things to be with you in your mess. I am afraid you live too high for me, however, and after my nine months apprenticeship in eating beef and bread, I don't know if it would not be dangerous to turn me loose on such dainties as you are daily accustomed to.

Christmas day I spent very pleasantly, having been invited over to dine with Jim and my old mess in the "Palmetto Guard." The dinner was worthy of the day and we fell upon it with a relish that none but experienced beef eaters like ourselves could have. First we had salmon, then good old South Carolina ham, then turkey and rice, and numerous little side dishes too tedious to be mentioned. I am sorry however to have to tell you that the "cabinet pudding," which was to have been the desert [sic], was either retained by the cook as toll, or else flew up the kitchen

chimney, as it never appeared to be eaten though we waited long and patiently for it. The fruits, nuts, and so on, old Abe's blockaders would not allow to reach us in time, but I dare say we enjoyed ourselves without them just as well, and we drank to one another's health in pure cold water (unfortunately our wine was just out). I know you would have enjoyed seeing Jim cook that Christmas dinner. The mess had a servant to cook for them, but he departed two or three months ago to parts unknown and they have been doing their own cooking ever since. There are six of them in the mess, all very nice fellows: each one cooks a day, and it happened Jim's turn on Christmas. As I was in the mess with them some time, of course I was home folks, and went over early in the morning and caught Jim in the midst of his cooking. He had a large turkey swung up by a piece of twine before the fire roasting away and every now and then he would give it a turn with all the grand importance of an old French cook. When it was served up, if you just could have walked in and partaken with us, I know you would have pronounced that turkey equal to any you ever tasted. On New Years Day Jim and his uncle came over and spent the day with me. I did not have to cook my dinner, though I think I am equal to the task of serving up a meal that would be by no means despicable. I think Jim and I will have to make a feast one of these days when the war is over, for the "knights" at Glen Eden.

My mess now is composed of McSwain, Ed Dean, and myself. Henry (Ed's boy) cooks for us and we live tolerably well. We had a much better time when we were in the artillery, but they took our guns from us the day after Christmas and we have been back in ranks ever since. I like the artillery service too much better than the infantry and was very loath to go back to my musket.

We have had very fine weather the most of the winter so far—a succession of bright days as warm and pleasant as could be desired, but last Sunday night week, "young Winter" commenced "wreathing his frolic architecture of snow" and since then the weather has been rather disagreeable. While on picket last Monday night the corporal awakened me at 12 1/2 o'clock to go on post, when I was astonished to find my blankets had been covered over with snow, while I was sleeping as comfortably and unconscious of the storm as if I had been at home in a feather bed. The two hours I stood in that snow on the cold bleak turnpike then seemed almost an age to me. As soon as the relief came however, and I got back to the reserve, where we had a roaring fire made of rails (had no axe to cut wood with), you may be sure I knew how to appreciate its warmth. I don't think anyone can ever understand how blessed a boon old Prometheus conferred upon mankind, until he has stood picket on the coldest of turnpikes, and "hit a snowing" all night long. I have at any rate Aeneas' consolation, "Forson olim [hic? hunc?] meminisse jurat." Is that the order the Latin comes in? I am sure I don't know.

I am sorry I have nothing to "lend eloquence" to me while I respond to your toast. We have a few eggs and I think I must have a "nog" in order that I may drink your health. Your escape in that railroad smash up was truly wonderful. May the same good Being who then preserved you, always guard and protect you against all the perils you are exposed to, whether from the bullets of the enemy or the unseen hand of disease. How thankful both of us ought to be for all the mercies that have been shown us since we parted nine months ago.

Do you recollect Bill Beachum who used to work in the shop at Reidville? He too, poor fellow, has fallen by the unseen hand. His father got to camp a day or two after he was buried. It was a terrible blow to him to have his first born to die away off here in the land of the stranger.

From the account he gave me, Reidville must be very dreary. Mrs. Stone has gone to Spartanburg to live, Dr. Moore and General Miller both moved off to their plantations. The trustees have employed a Mr. Hyde, a minister, to take charge of "our school." He will open in February. What change a year brings about! You recollect the adventures we met with in going over to open last year?

You say you have not a word from Spartanburg since you left. You knew Johnston had been married to Miss Annie Smith though, didn't you? Alice was at the wedding and wrote me a full account of it. The gentlemen were such scarce articles that they had no groomsmen and the bridesmaids had to act their own part and that of the gentlemen too. Alice says, "As there were no beaux handy, the girls laughed and talked as loud as they pleased, and D'Arcy said they took advantage of it to eat as much as they wanted." Brother Gage Whitefoord Smith, and D'Arcy, were almost the only beaux present. Would you not have liked to have seen it? Just imagine how Brother Gage must have bowed and smirked and smiled and smirked and bowed. McCartha(?) too has been married. He and Miss Farrow were united in the "Holy Bonds" one morning, and left immediately for the S.C. Conference. Again, moreover, verily, old Sam Weber has been married, to whom I know not. I heard though that it was a cousin of his, Miss Lander by name. I have not heard a word from or of Hamby, and have no idea where he is or what he is about. The young ladies of Spartanburg lately held a concert and tableaux for the benefit of the sufferers by the Charleston fire. This grand event came off on the 3rd of this month. Alice's description of it just came to hand yesterday. I'll give you part of it.

"The concert was very good and some of the scenes were very well acted and quite interesting. One of them represented the Volunteers' departure, in which D'Arcy acted the soldier and Miss Bettie Smith was his mother. She was dressed as an old lady with a huge old-fashioned cap on, and her finger raised as if in the act of giving him some parting advice. The scene which excited the most applause was "Southern Independence," in which a number of girls were buisy [sic] in various domestic pursuits, one at the wash tub, another spinning, another ironing, another knitting, etc., etc. The last scene was the Southern Confederacy, each state being represented by a young lady. Tweety Choice acted Maryland. She was dressed in deep mourning and was kneeling with her arms extended towards the other states as if imploring aid; she acted it admirably and I never saw her look prettier." Miss Sallie Butler and Miss Mary Vernon both took part in the tableaux. Miss Mary represented Virginia. I heard that Miss Sallie was one of the chief getters up of the whole affair. By the way, did you ever get that picture of Hamby, you, and I from Miss Sallie. If I just had that picture no money could buy it. You must not let it from you without you give it to me.

I am something like you were at Savannah, and as I have no Burns [?] to go to I shall "frank" this letter to you. And now Dear Oddy I have written to you a perfect volume of a letter and to prove that I have not wearied you write me another long, long letter.

Direct to Tudor Hall.

Your ever true friend and chum.

Tom