Francis Marion Elliott was born 15 July 1842 in Cumberland Valley, Bedford County, Pennsylvania. He was one of Samuel and Margaret (Hemming) Elliott's 12 children. Little is known of Francis' life before he enlisted in the Union Army in Spring 1862. He fought with the Second Pennsylvania Cavalry's Company “E,” which included many young men from Bedford County. Military records described him as 6-foot-1, with a florid complexion, blue eyes, and light brown hair.

Between 1862 and 1865, the years Elliott served in Virginia, he wrote letters to his father, his sister, Harriett (“Het”), and his brother, Thomas. Of the dozen extant letters, the nine more interesting ones provide a picture of Elliott’s emotional reaction to the Civil War. Additionally, these letters, written in an unschooled hand, offer a sample of nineteenth-century southern Pennsylvania vernacular and speech patterns.

During Elliott’s first summer of the war, the Second Pennsylvania Cavalry made up part of the Army of Virginia under General John Pope. On 18 July, Pope issued orders for his Army to “subsist upon the country in which their operations were carried out.” At this time, we first hear from Elliott.

August 10, 1862
Ferrysville [Fayetteville, Virginia]

Dear Brother
I suppose that you haint heard any thing of me since we left Clouds Mills [Virginia] we left there on the 27 July and we have ben on the March nearly evry day since and the way the army is a taring things to peaces it [breaks] evry thing where ever we stop[,] the Salters just goes and breaks open the corn cribs and [graineries] and helps them selfs[.] General Pope has issued an order for his army to forage for themself to what they can find I dont see what the people will live on in Virginia for they wont have a nuf to keep them til winter for the Army is taking it all now they just turn the horse in to a field wheat and let them eat a way at the shocks of grain if they had don this long a go I think that the war would have been ove[r] before this time.

Although Elliott volunteered to go to war, his letters reveal no reasons. In the end, he was unprepared for the psychological burdens of war, for shortly after he wrote the above letter, he deserted and fled to
Elliott’s statement that “this war has Cos[t] the death of one that will never be for gotten I hope that it will be the last[....] I hope that you will tend to thes matters as Soon as you can” refers to his elder brother, John Elliott, who died 1 April 1863 after accidentally shooting himself in the leg. This brother had also belonged to Company E of the Second Pennsylvania Cavalry, having enlisted 31 December 1861 in Philadelphia. While John Elliott was in the Armory Hospital in Washington, D.C., Walt Whitman visited him and later wrote the following to his own mother.

To Louisa Van Velsor Whitman
Washington, Wednesday forenoon, May 13th 1863

Dear Mother,

I am late with my letter this week — my poor, poor boys occupy my time very much — I go every day, & sometimes nights — I believe I mentioned a young man in Ward F, Armory Square, with a bad wound in the leg very agonizing, had to prop it up, & an attendant all the while dripping water on night & day — I was in hopes at one time he would get through with it, but a few days ago he took a sudden turn, & died about 3 o’clock the same afternoon — it was horrible — he was of a good family (handsome, intelligent man, about 26, married) his name was John Elliott of Cumberland Valley, Bedford Co. Penn., belonged to 2d Pennsylvania Cavalry[....]

Walt

There is no correspondence from Elliott between his letter from Cadiz, Ohio, to his father in June 1863 and the next letter in July 1864. He returned to Pennsylvania at least once, to marry Ellen Katharine Sliger on 28 November 1863. In early January 1864, he was arrested in Bedford County — $30 was paid for his apprehension — and he was taken back to the Second Pennsylvania Cavalry. The remainder of his letters encompass the period from the summer of 1864 until the war’s end in 1865, and give details of a hip wound, exciting near-captures by the Confederates, unsettlingly macabre scenes in the aftermath of battle, and disagreement in the ranks over General George B. McClellan’s run for President.
July the 3 [1864]
Camp Near City Point

Dear Sister
I Have Scan some Hard scans cence that time we was in A Dredful Hard Battle on the 26 ove June and I got A lite Wou[nd] with A pease of it The Shel Struck me on the thigh[.] it was nearly Spent or it would tear my leg off[.] but as good as luck was it did not Hurt me sow much[....] I Cood git away but I tel you that I went of[.] ove the Battle Field on one leg it maid me very sick For A while I did not go to the Hosspitle For I thought I would Be likely to get sick For thare is sow menny Diseases thare.

yor Brother
Francis M. Elliott

July the 19 1864
Camp near the James river

Dear Friends
Cence I rote to you last I Have Met with an axident the twelfth day ove this month we was in A Hard Battle and my Hors was Shot From under me and He Fel on my leg and I made out to git loos But I pool my bo[ot] ove my foot I came very near being taken Prisiner But I maid my escape I lost...the Shirt that I Fech From Home and thay got it the [enemy] was [with]in t[w]o rods ove me and you May [k]now that I Had rund

I wash that I was Home to Help Harves and git something good to eat once more. For we Have Hard living don Hear you may think that you see Hard times up thare but I wil tel you that you never Heard tel ove Hard [times.] Shits what the poor soalgers Sees.

Yor Brother
Francis M. Elliott

August the 3 1864

Dear Sister
you [ap]pear to be very uneasy A bout me Being wounded[.] I am glad to tel you that it is wel[.] oanly I can feal it in My Hip by jaring
wel Het I think this is the Hottes Cuntry I evry was in it is nothing but Sand Hear and the Sun is Sow Hot

Sow good by
Francis M. Elliott

Francis M Hafer is our ordurly Sargin and I guess that He wil get to be lietenit He sends his love and best respects to you all. I will send you some rebbele money to look at[....] I am much A bige [obliged]to you for thum stamps.

On 25 August 1864, Elliott participated in the Battle of Reams’ Station, one of the largest battles he saw. About 1,000 Union soldiers were killed or wounded, with the Confederates taking 2,030 prisoners (including 80 officers). Although the Confederates lost 1,500 soldiers, they came out victors by maintaining control of Reams’.

September the 10, 1864

Kind Sister
I Was in the Battel at [R]eam[s’] Station[,] it was the Hardest batel that ever saw[,] it is said to be the Hardes Batel that ever Ben Fought in this War[,] you Cooden walk For the ded Men the rebels lost More then we did we was in Brest works and the rebels tribe to drive us out they Charge on us three times and was defeated and the Fourth time they Charge with Four liens ove Batel and drove Some ove our Men oue the Brest works with Bayonents they wave thare Flag

U.S. General George B. McClellan
over the Brest works and one ove our Men grab at it Seven times and was struck with the Bayonent ever time there was a balls Cum thrue the Brest works [past] Both Sids ove My head and nock the Splinters in My Fase. Her I never Cood think that Men Cood go thrue Such plaies and come out Safe I am tired ove Fighting in this unjust war[....]

In this same letter, Elliott mentions for the first time General McClellan’s bid for president. After finding McClellan ineffective and at times a headache as head of the Army of the Potomac, President Lincoln relieved him of his duties on 7 November 1862. McClellan, however, remained very popular with the enlisted men, who dubbed him “Little Mack.” The general accepted the Democratic nomination for President on 8 September 1864, two days prior to a letter in which Elliott begs his family to support McClellan.6

I want you all to do the Best you can For McClellan For he is our onlly Hope think of yor Friends that is in the Battel Field at this time and the Men that Have Fel For the Cares ove aboliliosism [abolition] it is Said that the Solgers will Have a vote and if we Have I intend to Vote for little Mack the Solgers is nearly all For Him

Francis M. Elliott

During the fall and winter of 1864, Elliott fought in a number of battles resulting from the Union’s tightening of the noose around Richmond. In a 29 October letter, Elliott writes his sister of the gruesome aftermath of the Boydton Plank Road battle that left 166 Union soldiers dead, 1,028 wounded, and 564 missing.7

October the 29th 1864
Camp 2nd Pennsylvania

Dear Sister
Wel Het We Had A Fight on the 27 ove this Month and I Woulden go over that Battle Field now for no money For thare is Hundreds ove our Men laying thare now and Wil rot on the top ove the ground this country is covered With Bones ove Humans Men the Battle Field is A Site that [no] one nead Want to see if you Would see one you Woulden Want to See another its not that I am A Fraid that I Haint[....] but it is the grones and cries ove the Wonded and the dying the cutting to Peases ove Men it seams like the Sinfulless Work that Men can do
I diden think the other day that I Would Be

able to [raise] another Pen to rite you it Was A Plase that you cood see the Canon Balls and the Shells Fly and thay Was not Sceary

With the general election coming, Elliott again mentions his support for McClellan in an undated letter, but this time he notes that the general won’t get all the soldiers’ votes.

I Wil vote For George B McClellan and I Want Pap and Thomas not to mis thare vote there is some Hear thinks that He is A trater if A man tells me that I Wil nock him don or kill my self tring to thare is men in this Company Big[g]er then I that is For leken [a “lickin’”] I talk as I Pleas to them But I think that the soalgers Will go For little Mack I hope that He may Beat

Francis M. Elliott

At the Battle of Reams’ Station, Virginia, both forces suffered heavy losses, but the Confederates “won” by controlling railroad facilities in the area.

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February the 9, 1865
Camp 2nd Penn Cavalry

Dear Sister
Excuse my Bad Writing and Spelling. I think that it is Harder to Serve our Country then it is to Serve God.

Francis M. Elliott

March the 17, 1865
Camp 2 Penn Cavalry

Dear Sister
the year 1864 Has lernt Me A lesson that I Will never For Git. A man Don't know what Freedom is til He is in Bondageouche [bondage]

times is terning With us now. But I Hope that this Cruel War Wil Soon Be over and that Free-
dom May rule this land once more and I Hope that the Sound ove the Canon May not need to Be Heard [no] more. I must Close For the Present time I remane you aftenexent Brother

F M Elliott

Three weeks after this letter was written, the Confederacy's Army of Northern Virginia — the force that the Second Cavalry had fought the year before — surrendered. The war ended for Francis Elliott. He mustered out on 31 May 1865 at Clouds Mills, Virginia. He returned to Pennsylvania, to his wife, Ellen, and to a son born in September 1864, just 10 months after Francis and Ellen had been married and eight months after Francis had been arrested and forced back into the war. Eventually the Ellithords had 12 children.

Francis Elliott resumed the life of a farmer, an occupation he pursued until his death in 1924. His battle-worn rifle, powder horn, pouch and saber are still in the possession of descendants, some of whom still live on the ancestral Elliott property in southern Bedford County.

1 Elliott's military records do not provide his date of enlistment, though the earliest muster roll found for him bears the date 5 June 1862. Reference is from Elliott's military and pension records, Military Service Branch, National Archives and Records Service, Washington, D.C. Here I must thank my third cousin, Carolyn Munger of Greenville, Ohio, for her permission to use Francis Marion Elliott's Civil War letters, the originals of which are in her possession. Munger is the great granddaughter of Elliott, and the granddaughter of Blanche (Elliott) Somerlatt. I am also gratefully indebted to my Aunt Marie (Roy) Wilder of Lake Oswego, Oregon, for initially transcribing and collecting the letters for my use.


4 There is a family tradition that after losing his boot and being unable to retrieve it from under his dead horse during the heat of battle, Elliott was forced to walk around minus one boot for some time. He was 6-foot-1 and, it is said, had large feet for his size; it took a while to find them, but he
eventually confiscated large enough boots from a dead soldier.


6 In the election of 1864, the Democrats attempted to capitalize on war weariness to defeat the Republicans, with McClellan campaigning for a quick prosecution of the war. President Lincoln, however, defeated McClellan in the general election, 212 to 21 electoral votes and 2,213,665 to 1,802,237 popular votes.

7 Long, 589.