

10-12-1965

The Soldier's Letter

Joseph Pagett

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/songstorysamplercollection>



Part of the [Ethnomusicology Commons](#), [Folklore Commons](#), and the [Oral History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Pagett, Joseph. 1965. "The Soldier's Letter." NA65.22, CD100.6. Northeast Archives of Folklore and Oral History, Raymond H. Fogler Special Collections Department, University of Maine.

This Song is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine. It has been accepted for inclusion in Maine Song and Story Sampler by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UMaine. For more information, please contact um.library.technical.services@maine.edu.

Recommended citation: Pagett, Joseph. 1965. "The Soldier's Letter." NA65.22, CD100.6. Maine Folklife Center, University of Maine.

Song: "The Soldier's Letter"

Singer: Joseph Pagett

Town: Markhamville, NB

NA 65.22 CD 100 Track 6

Collector: Sandy Ives

Date: October 12, 1965

"**The Soldier's Letter**" was one of several songs from the American Civil War that became popular in Canada, where it was better known as "The Boy Who Wore the Blue." In Canada, as well as in the United States, it was a popular song in lumbercamps, though it has been printed in but a few folksong collections. It clearly and simply expresses the sorrow of a soldier, grief-stricken after the death of a close friend, who is writing to inform the young man's family of his death on the battlefield. This song was also featured in volume VII of *Northeast Folklore*, "Folksongs from Maine," as sung by Stanley Finnemore of Bridgewater, Maine. That version (which was unfortunately transcribed from a poor recording), was five full stanzas longer (and at its longest the song reached fifteen stanzas total). As noted by folklorist Edith Fowke, versions of this song that survived in Canada were generally much shorter. They pared down much of the narrative surrounding the young man's death, and nearly eliminated the discussion of the two men's friendship. For a comparison, the lyrics from Finnemore's longer version are also included below.

"The Soldier's Letter" was not the only folksong to be simplified as it passed through the years. In fact, this very process helped people remember it. But it was more than just this process of streamlining songs that helped them survive as many popular songs were quite long. With any song it was the connection between the singer (or the audience) and the song that determined whether a song survived or faded away. As Malcolm Laws wrote, "[M]ost ballad singers are unconcerned with events of purely historical importance. Their interest lies in the fate of human beings whose experiences they can understand and share... The survival of only about a dozen real ballads of the Civil War supports the theory that singers tend to forget ballads which no longer have much meaning for them... It will be seen that in half these ballads interest is centered on a young man who is dying; the war is merely the stage upon which the smaller and more meaningful event is taking place. This type of ballad has a much better chance of survival than the type which emphasizes the event rather than the individual." (15) This is true of almost all ballads, but few can claim a more intimate experience than the one that made "The Soldier's Letter" a popular and enduring song.

Pagett's version:

1.

Dear Madam, I'm a soldier boy, my speech is rough and plain,
I am not used to writing, nor do I wish to cause you pain;
I promised one that I would write, perhaps will ease the blow,
And if you pardon rough soldier's speech, I'll tell you how he died.

2.

Oh, he being ten years younger, he seemed to cling to me,
For more than any other one, he sought my company;

The morning of the battle fast fell the shot and shell,
I was standing close by your soldier boy and I saw him when he fell.

3.

I gently raised him in my arms and laid him on the grass,
It was going against the orders but I guess they'll let it pass;
You see it was a mini ball that struck him in the side,
I did not think that wound fatal 'til the night before he died.

4.

And when he saw that he must go, he called me to his bed,
Saying, "Comrade, you will not forget to write when I am dead.
I'll send you back his Bible; the night before he died,
We turned the leaves together as I read them by his side.

5.

I'll keep the belt he used to wear, he told me so to do,
It has a hole in the left side just where the ball went through;
I guess I've done his bidding now, there's nothing more to do,
But while I live I'll always mourn for the boy who wore the blue.

Finnemore's version:

1.

Dear Madam, I am a stranger, my speech is a rough but plain.
I am not used to writing, but I hate to cause you pain;
But I promised him that I would write, he thought it might be so,
It comes from one who loved you, and perhaps it will ease the blow.

2.

By this time you can easily guess, the truth that I would hide,
If you'll pardon a poor soldier, I will tell you how he died;
I being ten years older, he seemed to cling to me,
Somehow more than any other, he sought my company.

3.

The day before the battle your young soldier boy and I,
As we were gently walking beneath the bright blue sky:
He told me of the home he'd left and the friends he loved so we
I have no home to speak of, but I loved to hear him tell.

4.

He told of the morning, when first he went away,
How his friends did weep for him, but would not bid him stay;
He named his sisters one by one, and then a blush came,
He told me of another, but he would not speak her name.

5.

That night before the battle, we lay in a crowded tent,
There was many a brave boy praying and many the knee was bent;
We knew not on the morning our bloody work was done,
How many that was kneeling there would see the set of sun.

6.

That morning in the battle fast flew the shot and shell,
I was standing close beside him and I saw him when he fell;
I gently raised him in my arms and laid him on the grass,
It was against the orders but you see, they let it pass.

7.

You see it was a minnie ball that struck him in the side,
They did not think it fatal 'til the night before he died;
When he found that he was dying, he called me to his bed,
Please don't forget to write to them when you know that I am dead.

8.

"Last night I wanted so to live, it seemed so hard to go,
Today it is my birthday, I am just nineteen you know;
And when I think of all my friends, it seems so hard to die,
But now I'll pray to God for grace and all of my cares they die."

9.

I will send you home his hymn book and the cap he used to wear,
And the lock I cut that night he died from his dark wavy hair;
I will send you home his Bible, for the night before he died,
We turned the leaves together as I read them by his side.

10.

But I will keep the belt he wore, he bid me so to do,
There is a hole all in that belt, just where the ball passed through;
So now I've done his bidding, there is nothing more to tell,
But I will always mourn with you for the boy that wore the blue.

Sources: Ives, Edward D., ed. "Folksongs from Maine," Orono, ME: The Maine Folklife Center. *Northeast Folklore*, VII (1965), 41-45; Fowke, Edith, "American Civil War Songs in Canada," *Midwest Folklore* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1963), 33-42; & Laws, G. Malcolm, Jr. *Native American Balladry*. Revised Edition. American Folklore Society, Bibliographical and Special Series, 1. Philadelphia: American Folklore Society, 1964, 15.