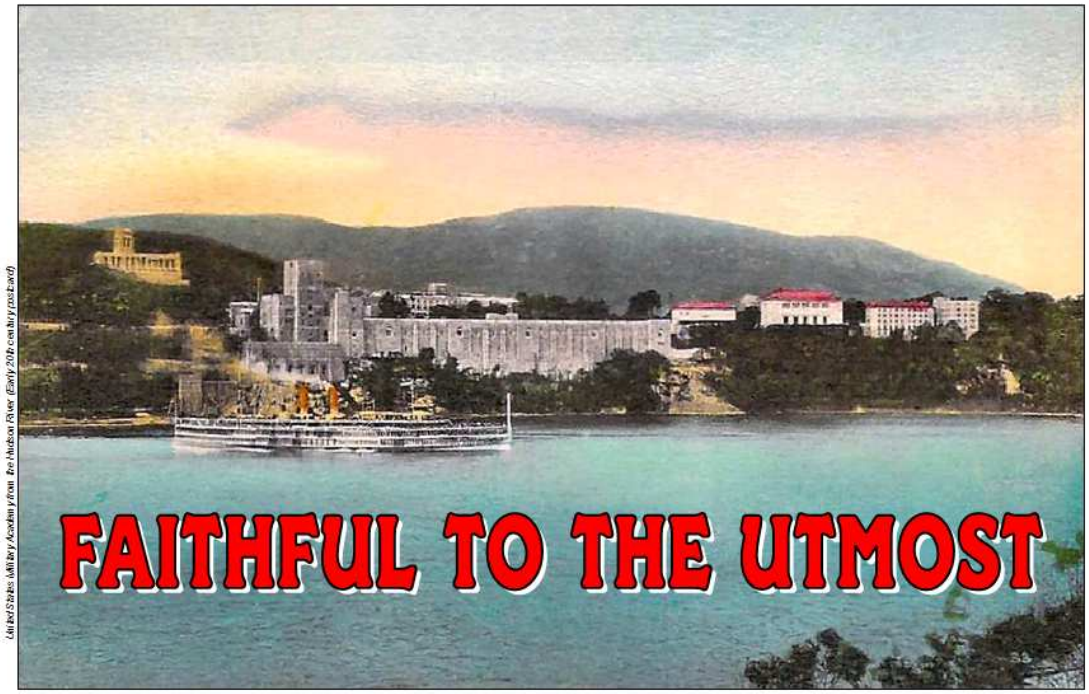

United States Military Academy from the Hudson River (Early 20th century postcard)

Oath of the divided Class of 1861

By Dominique E. De Cleer

Adapted into English by Gerald Hawkins

Beginning of June 1856, some ninety-three boys arrive at the end of their odyssey. Their journey ending at the West Point Military Academy is the beginning of a new life. When they disembark from the steamer that had brought them to New York by way of the Hudson River, and as they move up the steep slopes leading to the barracks, they cannot help thinking of the page they are turning, that of their young life. They come from all walks of life, from southern regions where cotton is king or northern cities experiencing demographic and industrial expansion. Most of them have never left the county where they lived and where they spent their childhood. This journey to a military career is for each of them the beginning of an adventure embracing life and death. All, however, have the same ambition: in a first stage to become a cadet of the most prestigious US military academy, and then promoted to the rank of officer in the army of the United States of America.

These young men know that by signing their engagement commitment, they bind their lives to that of the academy for five years during which they will be trained physically and intellectually for a military career. After physical selection tests and admission exams, Special Order No. 94 publishes the names of the seventy-one admitted. While the "accepted" jump with joy and read their name on the document over and over again, sadness and disappointment mark the face of those who didn't make it. The training program was established in 1854 by Jefferson Davis, at the time he was Secretary of War in the Government of President Franklin Pierce. The new course group will thus be leaving the United States Military Academy in June 1861. It will be known as the Class of 1861[1].

[1] Classes range from 5th to 1st. The *Class of 61* will be the *First Class* in 1860-1861.

As of July, two months of camp mark the beginning of military life. Since dawn, the recruits are made familiar with tactics and evolution of the infantry, weapons handling and artillery drill. Learning the art of cavalry only starts in the second year. The cadets also have to perform guard duties. At night, the elders often scare the green lads by imitating weird animal sounds or approaching them silently to better surprise them. If at first these jokes terrify the most fearful ones, it all ends up with laughter. In September, at the end of this phase of military initiation, Charles Edward Hazlett, a repeater of the Class of 1860, joins the new class although the academic year has already begun.

On January 31, 1857, there are only sixty-two candidates in the Class of 1861. That same day, Charles Drake, clerk at the Court of Orange County in the State of New York, is requested to go to West Point to receive the oath of the cadets. One by one, the young soldiers swear their loyalty with these words: *"I, Erskine Gittings*[2] *of the State of Maryland, aged sixteen years and nine months, commits here, with the consent of my 'Guardian', to serve in the army of the United States for eight years, unless relieved of my duties by the authority, and I, cadet Erskine Gittings, give my word of a gentleman to faithfully abide by the rules and articles of war, of army regulations, those of the Military Academy and, similarly, to obey the orders of the President of the United States and those of the officers who will command me, in accordance with the rules and discipline of war ."*

From that moment on, the candidates are admitted into the corps of West Point cadets. In autumn 1861, the wording of the oath is amended to incorporate a paragraph that leaves no doubt on the obedience due to the President and the US Constitution: *"… beyond any allegiance, sovereignty or loyalty that I may have to a State or County."* Ten cadets of the class of 1866[3] flatly refused to pronounce this new oath fraught with meaning and were discharged immediately.

In the late fifties, rumors of war between States using black labor and Northern antislavery ones are increasingly threatening. This information is published by the New York press and widely read by the corps of cadets. The raid by John Brown and his band on the arsenal of Harper's Ferry, Virginia, and his attempt to generate a black uprising in this town deeply offend the students from the South.

On December 3, 1859, following the hanging of this fanatical abolitionist in Charles Town, some cadets hang an effigy of John Brown from a tree, opposite the military buildings of West Point. This rag doll would swing for some time until a policeman came to remove it. This event is the first that creates a significant tension among the defenders of the Southern cause and the supporters of black emancipation; lively discussions sometimes degenerate into fistfights. Dark clouds are now looming over the great military institution.

The fall of 1860 is particularly important for the future of the nation. Abraham Lincoln is the Republican presidential candidate on November 6. In the North, his rival is the radical Stephen Douglas. As for the South, it presents John C. Breckinridge as future head of State. Tully McCrea[4] wrote to his sister: *"We expect very exciting times. The Southerners say they are all going to secede if Lincoln is elected. I think they will be blessed for Old Abe is almost certain to be elected."*

In one of his letters, Henry du Pont writes: *"I am pleased that the elections will end shortly. I expect great uncertainty for the future of the South. There is a very unhealthy atmosphere on the question of secession … I do not see our appointment as joyful as before. If it is our duty to cut the throat of our countrymen and fight against our dearest friends, I sincerely regret coming here."*

---

[2] Gittings was the youngest of his class. After serving in the US artillery, he became a coach at West Point from 1865 to 1867. He died at the age of 40.

[3] That is to say one year after the end of the war.

[4] A West Point cadet in 1860.

On November 9, 1860, South Carolina calls for a secession convention. Its senators and representatives in Congress leave Washington. On the 19th, the first cadet resigns: Henry S. Farley[5] of the Class of 1862 leaves the military academy and enlists in the army of South Carolina.

Three words keep coming back to the mind of the cadets who are now at odds: the term "Duty" seems to have lost its meaning, "Honor" fractures the friendship that prevailed for five years and "Country" has no longer any meaning at all.

The Superintendent of the military academy at West Point, Pierre G.T. de Beauregard, is removed after having informed a cadet from Louisiana that he would join his State if it left the Union. Alfred Mordecai, a native of North Carolina, doesn't know what to do: to serve his native State or remain faithful to the Union? His father, Alfred Sr. has already resigned from the army and advises his son to do what his conscience dictates him; he will serve the Union. Henry Kingsbury from Connecticut intends to remain loyal to the North. Although his decision is made, he spends sleepless nights; his sister is married to Simon B. Buckner, a strong supporter of the South. He had planned to marry a daughter of the Taylor family in Louisiana. Deciding to join the Rebels or the Yankees is also a particularly difficult choice for the cadets coming from the Border States.

Some will stay until they are promoted second lieutenant, others, such as Samuel C. Williams of Tennessee, prefer to quit. The latter leaves the Academy on February 2, 1861 and James Kennard from Mississippi on March 23. John Pelham and Tom Rosser, two good friends who share the same room, want to finish the academic year and obtain their graduation certificate. After seeking the opinion of Alabama's representative in Congress, the politician offers Pelham an important rank in the army if he immediately joins his State after it has seceded. Pelham does not respond to this proposal, convinced that he will graduate. Thomas Rosser writes to the governor of Texas, Sam Houston asking him what position to adopt. A staunch Unionist, Houston recommends not to leave West Point and stay loyal to the Union. The situation worsens: on February 22, Rosser and Pelham draft a letter to Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederacy, offering their service to his army. However, they dare not send it for fear of being imprisoned should they receive a positive reply from the secessionist government. Finally, it is Pelham's father who sends their request to Montgomery, the then capital of the Confederacy.

The local press reports that five members of the Class of 1861 have been appointed first lieutenant in the Confederate artillery. In fact, only two cadets joined the rebel gunners. Some time later, Pelham, Rosser and Thornton are notified of their appointment to the rank of first lieutenant in the Confederate Army, but they insist on finishing the school year and do not offer their resignation. On April 22, the three cadets of company "D" of the Class of 1861, together with other Virginians and Carolinians leave West Point. They pass along the training ground, the rows of oaks, the South Dock and the banks of the Hudson River on their way to New York, a new nation.

On May 6, 1861, forty five candidates of the Cadet Corps of the United States Military Academy obtain their officer's commission.[6] Before receiving their diploma, each new ranker must take the oath of allegiance to the United States. No cadet refuses, although many of them come from slave States. The next day, the War Department orders them to report without delay to the Adjutant General in Washington to get their assignment. All had hoped for a few days off.

On May 21, the tactical instructor, Lieutenant Fitzhugh Lee, resigns from the army. Four

[5] On April 12, 1861, at 4:30 am, Henry Farfey sent the first shot of the war on Fort Sumter.

[6] Because of the outbreak of the war, the Class of 1861 graduated one month earlier than scheduled. The cadets of the Class of 1862 were commissioned in June 1861 instead of June 1862. George Armstrong Custer who belonged to the Class of 1862 graduated last in his class in June 1861.

days later, Liewellyn Hoxton and Nathaniel Chambliss, two former cadets of the Class of 1861 also resign. On June 6, it is the turn of Charles Patterson, Charles Campbell and Olin Rice to leave the cadet corps. All perjured themselves with regard to their allegiance to the President of the United States. Once their decision taken, Patterson, Chambliss and Rice say farewell to the cadets of the other classes gathered in the mess hall. The ovation they receive is second to none with applauses and cries reaching their height when Henry Kingsbury, a class comrade enters the room. Moved by the display of sympathy for him, Kingsbury improvises a speech on his behalf and that of his class; the words he uses are so filled with sorrow, hope and friendship, that most cadets gathered in the mess have tears in their eyes. The class is fractured, but the bonds created during the past five years at the academy will never be jeopardized.

The names of Adelbert Ames, Judson Kilpatrick, Thomas L. Rosser, John Pelham, Orville E. Babcock, Henry du Pont, Edmund "Ned" Kirby, Emory Upton and many others, all of the Class of 1861, still echo in the buildings of the Military Academy of West Point. They are now part of the history of the war between the American States and the history of the academy for would-be officers. Of the fifty-two cadets of the Class of 1861, forty-one served the Union and eleven the Southern cause.[7] Fifteen of them became generals and five were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor[8], the highest military decoration in the United States. All wore the same ring on the little finger of their left hand. The wearing of such a jewel, a sign of recognition of the various classes, is at the time a tradition since more than thirty years[9]. Besides the emblems of the different arms, the ring of the Class of 1861[10], topped with a hematite stone, bears the French words *Fidèle à Outrance*[11], the oath of a divided class!

The old Class of 1861 held meetings until 1911, its fiftieth anniversary. Twelve former cadets were still alive at that time. On May 6, half a century after being promoted lieutenant, only four veterans were still there. Adelbert Ames was the last survivor. He died on April 13, 1933 at the age of 97. On May 20, 1863, he was promoted brigadier general at the age of 28, which earned him the nickname "Boy General".

Overlooking the Hudson River stands the Battle Monument on which are engraved the names of the 2,042 officers of the regular United States Army issued from West Point, who were killed in action or died of their wounds in combat. Ten of them were cadets of the Class of 1861. Somewhere on this pink granite monument are carved in invisible letters the names of Kennard, Patterson and Pelham. They had chosen their side, one that would lose.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Boatner M.M.: *The Civil War Dictionary*, McKay Co. Inc., 1959.
Bushong M&D : *Fighting Tom Rosser*, Beidel Printing House, 1983.
Chroniques (Editor.): *Chroniques de l'Amérique*
Hassler W.W.: *Colonel Pelham, Lee's Boy Artillerist*, U. of N.C. Press, 1960.
Long E.B.: *The Civil War Day by Day, an Almanac*, Doubleday, 1971.
Milham C.G.: *Gallant Pelham, American Extraordinary*, Old Soldier Books, 1987.
Sergent M.E.: *They Lie Forgotten, The Class of May, 1861*, Prior King Press, 1986.
Simpson J.: *Officers and Gentlemen*, Sleepy Holow Press, 1982.

[7] Of the 278 cadets in November 1860, 86 were from Southern States; 65 of them resigned, were dismissed or were discharged.
[8] Adelbert Ames, Eugene B. Beaumont, Samuel N. Benjamin, Henry A. du Pont, Guy Vernor Henry.
[9] This tradition is still perpetuated by West Point cadets. Currently, the ring is worn on the left hand.
[10] The USMA has no ring of the Class of 1861in its collection. Amazingly, the Academy is missing quite a lot of class rings in its collection, even from classes from the 1970's, 80's, 90's and even from 2007-present.
[11] *Faithful to the Utmost.*