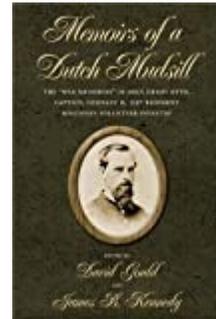




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A Dutch Mudsill in Lincoln's Army

Memoirs of a Dutch Mudsill is an excellent addition to the ever-increasing number of published primary sources written by Civil War soldiers. Captain John Henry Otto kept a journal during the war and though he later reworked that journal into a memoir of his service, the narrative retains the immediacy of first-hand accounts. Yet, Otto's narrative also benefits from the perspective that comes from reflecting back on past experiences and placing them in context. In describing Sherman's march through the Carolinas, Otto defends the actions of the commander and his troops against the "northern Copperhead papers" (p. 327). After listing a series of grievances against South Carolinians, he muses, "Was it any wonder that the men hated South Carolina and put in practice the very rules and teachings laid down by them?" (p. 328).

John Henry Otto was born in Westphalia, Germany on September 22, 1822 and became a member of the Prussian army around 1845. He served in the war between Prussia and Denmark in 1848, and in the suppression of the revolution in southern Germany in 1849 before receiving a discharge. Otto had passed officer's exams during his first term of service with the Prussian army, but

had no desire to spend his life in military service. Around 1850, after being called back into service for another two years, Otto deserted the Prussian army, traveling first to Holland and then to England before finally arriving in New York in 1853. Otto later immigrated to the United States and settled in Wisconsin. By the time Otto enlisted in the Union army in August 1862, he was forty years old, married, and the father of five children.

Age and prior military service made Otto an astute observer of human behavior, particularly the actions of the officers he served with and under. Throughout his narrative, Otto offered candid descriptions of his comrades. As the 21st Wisconsin organized, Otto assessed the ability of the men, noting that "none of the men had the least Idea of military discipline and obeying orders" (p. 4). According to Otto, the best soldiers "were mechanics and farmers and laborers" rather than the "sons or relatives of real or petit politicians" (p. 5). Otto reflected that perhaps his status as a "sauerkraut dutchman who only kept a cabinet shop and wareroom in town" was an "insult to their native dignity" when he attempted to drill and instruct them in military matters. Otto had been recruited

and promised an officer's commission by company commander John Jewett, Jr. Initially, Otto did not want to serve under Jewett because he believed the officer "would make a poor commander" (p. 3). When Otto learned that the 26th Wisconsin had received too many applications for enlistment from German immigrants, he decided to join his friend Henry Turner in Jewett's company in the 21st Wisconsin. Jewett, however, failed to deliver the promised commission to Otto. As Otto suspected, Jewett was indeed a poor commander who often played favorites among his men and failed to tend to their needs. Still, Otto's descriptions of Jewett's shortcomings reflect little hostility over Jewett's deceit. Rather, in Otto's narrative, Jewett's failure to deliver the promised commission is yet another example of the officer's inability to lead his men.

Otto's unsparing observations were not limited to the men he served with. His own behavior also came under his scrutiny. During the Atlanta campaign, Otto refused to go on picket duty. Of his behavior, Otto wrote: "So the dice was cast. I had made myself liable to be cashiered and dishonorably dismissed the service of the United States. I was in the same box as Capt. Steffens had been in Chattanooga. True I had insulted no superior Officer. But I had s[h]ir[k]ed duty without reason, which was about as bad. It must not be t[h]ought that I had acted merely on the spur of the moment. By no means. I had contemplated such a move for a long time" (p. 280).

Otto was not dishonorably discharged from military service for his behavior during the Atlanta Campaign. In fact, having received a second lieutenant's commission in the spring of 1863, he was again offered a captain's commission, this time in December 1864; however, Otto once again refused to leave his company, even for a captain's commission, and instead accepted a commission as a first

lieutenant of Company D. With reference to Otto's refusal, Colonel Fitch noted Otto lacked one military quality: ambition. As Otto explained, "that depends much on how the term 'Ambition' is interpreted or analyzed [sic]. My ambition is to stick to the boys with whom I enlisted to the last, unless I am transferred by a positive Order [sic]. I know and understand the men and they me, and the result is harmony" (p. 320). In the spring of 1865, Otto finally received his well-deserved commission as captain of Company D. Of the presentation, Otto wryly noted, "The boys gave a hearty cheer, so much so that I felt somewhat embarrassed" (p. 370).

Otto served from 1862 through the end of the war in many of the battles and campaigns of the west. He participated in the battles of Perryville, Stone's River, Chickamauga, and Lookout Mountain. Otto also fought in the Tullahoma and Atlanta campaigns as well as Sherman's march through Georgia and the Carolinas. His participation in the western theater as well as his unflinching assessments of the people and events of the time make this a valuable resource for scholars.

After the war, Otto produced two handwritten copies of his memoirs from his Civil War journal, one for each of his sons: August C. Otto and George Myers Otto. The latter copy burned in a house fire. The former, fortunately, was placed with the State Historical Society of Wisconsin in the 1930s. In this edition, Otto's book has been edited by David Gould, Otto's great grandson, and James B. Kennedy of the Wisconsin Historical Society. While the editors cut a little more than half of the original manuscript in preparing Otto's text for publication, Gould and Kennedy clearly explain the criteria they used for doing so. Their judicious editing of Otto's memoirs and their copious notes make for a highly readable first-hand account of a Dutch mudsill in Lincoln's army.

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