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Mama, I Am Yet Still Alive
A Composite Diary of 1863 in the Confederacy

BOOK REVIEW – Rusty Carter

War, in their own words
New book captures lives of Confederates, families

Who better to tell the story of Confederate soldiers and their families during the Civil War than those who lived it.

That's the crux of Williamsburg resident Jeff Toalson's third book, *Mama, I Am Yet Still Alive*. Released in the spring, Toalson takes readers through the heartbreak, humility, and humor of a war that consumed the nation for four years. The 'voices' are not those of generals, politicians or professional writers. The 'voices' are found in the letters between family members and the detailed diaries kept by the common soldiers and civilians [50 women & 220 men].

Toalson writes that the war can best be described in 26 words he came across in a January, 1863 note from Pvt. Charles Thomas of the 56th Virginia to his wife:

"I washed my old shirt and draws yestady. My old pant is verry nasty and my ass is out and these is all I have got . . ."

"Is there anything else to say?" Toalson asks rhetorically. "How could I begin to describe the situation as well as Charles has detailed it to his wife?"

Toalson, one of three historians whose books rely on the voices of the Confederate soldiers and civilians to tell the story of the Civil War, pulls his latest compilation from the files of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, specifically 20 large file drawers of previously unpublished correspondence he was shown in 2008.

The messages include words of despair:

"In this engagement in Murfreesboro our regiment went in with 600 men come out with 200," wrote Pvt. Theodore Harris of the 8th Tennessee Infantry. *"We sustained a heavy loss charging a battery across an open field."*

And playfulness:

“Some think [Longstreet] is going to give the most deserving furloughs . . . if that is so your man will come in for one,” noted Pvt. Nimrod Nash of the 13th Mississippi Infantry, *“now wont that bee fine for me to come home and see your big fat self.”*

As the war completed its second year, views about its progress varied.

“I don’t see any probability of pice.” Wrote Pvt. Milton Barrett of the 18th Georgia Infantry after picket duty in Fredericksburg. He boasted the Confederates *“never was in better fix for fighting than they are now.”*

Serving in Vicksburg, Mississippi, Pvt. Grant Taylor of the 40th Alabama Infantry had a different take. *“I see some of the papers are pretty confi[dent] that peace will be mad[e] some time this year.”* He was skeptical. *“I do not believe but very little I see in the papers.”*

Despite what took place on the battlefield, the two sides could be cordial. Barrett writes in February, 1863, *“everything is stil a long the line . . . We stood close together and cold talk to each other, then when the officers were not present we exchanged papers and barter tobacco for coffee.”*

Confederates would set a small boat to sail. It would cross the water by itself. Union soldiers would send it back.

“Some of our boys went over and staid a while,” Barrett added. *“The Yankees would let us know when to come back.”*

Those at home could be less forgiving.

“The Yanks evacuated as quietly as possible about 3 o’clock this morning.” wrote Miss. Kate Sperry, just after returning to her Winchester, Virginia home in June, 1863. *“We captured, wounded or killed at least 7,000 . . . Old Milroy hadn’t many more – he managed to make his escape, but we got all his stores. It’s been a joyful day for us.”*

Toalson relies on four women and a dozen men to serve as his ‘tour guides’ through *Mama, I Am Yet Still Alive* and his previous book *No Soap, No Pay, Diarrhea, Dysentery and Desertion*. Together his collected ‘voices’ tell more than 2,000 stories from the accumulated pieces of personal correspondence.