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The Toilsome March: An Indiana Soldier's Experience in the Mexican War

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Abstract

Historians have produced a number of full-length monographs on the Mexican War, yet virtually all of them cover the military action between the capture of Mexico City in September 1847 and the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in February 1848 in just a few pages. Overlooked are the soldiers who enlisted for military service, yet did not experience combat. Unnoticed are those whose lives were shaped by time spent in camp, on the march, and fighting boredom, instead of enemies. Many soldiers who dreamed of honor and prestige failed to find even a hint of their naïve dreams. Men who yearned for battlefield glory or the grandeur of heroic service often found themselves pulling garrison duty in a poor, boring, insignificant Mexican village instead. John Towner was one of these men. Seeking fame and adventure, he enlisted in the fall of 1847, though he could never guess how his term of service would turn out.

Towner did not win glory, honor, or treasure. He did not fight in any major battles, engage in any key military movements, speculate about the political ramifications of the army's actions, advocate Manifest Destiny, or provide outstanding leadership to his fellow troops. Towner's experiences reflect those of many soldiers who did not see combat, and thus defined war by their time spent in camp and on the march. A study of John Towner's experiences will demonstrate how non-combat service significantly shaped the lives of many American soldiers in the Mexican War.



Only seventy years after the Declaration of Independence, the United States needed just one more piece to complete a vast continental jigsaw puzzle. By 1846, the American dream of spanning the North American continent from the Atlantic to the Pacific was nearly fulfilled. Beginning with the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 and followed by the acquisition of Texas and the Oregon Territory, the country more than tripled in only four decades. The relatively easy addition of thousands of square miles made many government officials eager to realize the country's Manifest Destiny. Their quest was nearly complete.

This rapid expansion did not go unchallenged, however. Mexico considered the Republic of Texas a rebel province, not an independent nation, and for years had threatened war if the United States tried to annex that territory. When Texas became a state in 1845, Mexico sent troops north to reclaim its lost lands. With the defense of Texas as justification, the stars and stripes went to war with Mexico for a single purpose: to claim territory for the United States.¹ In the brief war that followed, 104,556 men served in the army and 13,768 of those lost their lives. This death rate ranks higher than any other American war.²

Political motives and casualty statistics do not tell the story of the men in uniform, however. Soldiers who enlisted for military service while dreaming of honor and prestige often failed to find even a hint of their naïve dreams. Men who yearned for battlefield glory or the grandeur of heroic service often found themselves pulling garrison duty in a poor, boring, insignificant Mexican village instead. John Towner was one of these men. Seeking fame and adventure, he enlisted in the fall of 1847, though he could never guess how his term of service would turn out. Towner did not win glory, honor, or treasure. He did not fight in any major battles, engage in any key military movements, speculate about the political ramifications of the army's actions, advocate Manifest Destiny, or provide outstanding leadership to his fellow soldiers. Towner's experiences reflect those of many soldiers who did not see combat, and thus defined war by their time spent in camp and on the march.

Most recent Mexican War histories mention the sufferings of common soldiers. John Eisenhower, in *So Far from God*, observes that for the American troops, "only about one death in eight came from enemy action."³ K. Jack Bauer notes that while "battle deaths amounted to only 1.5 percent of the troops, those from disease and other non-combat causes were nearly 10 percent."⁴ Although the conquest of Mexico was "disappointingly easy" in Alfred Hoyt Bill's estimation, "the conditions that [General Winfield Scott] found prevailing among the troops along the Rio Grande were the reverse of satisfactory."⁵ Robert Johannsen's study of the war in the American imagination, *To the Halls of Montezuma*, describes how soldiers endured "unsanitary conditions, strange and unclean food, polluted water," and faced "death and disability" from "Amoebic dysentery and diarrhea."⁶ These and virtually all other Mexican War monographs cover the military action between the capture of Mexico City in September 1847 and the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in February 1848 in just a few pages.

Unnoticed are those whose lives were shaped by time spent in camp, on the march, and fighting boredom, instead of enemies. The brave men who enlisted to defend their country, not a small adobe shack, have been long ignored. A study of John Towner's experiences will demonstrate how non-combat service significantly shaped the lives of many American soldiers in the Mexican War.

Towner left his tiny hometown of Brookville, Indiana at one o'clock p.m. on September 22, 1847, making for the Ohio River city of Lawrenceburg. He walked quickly, excited by the hope of signing up with the Fifth Indiana Volunteer regiment. In only a few days the Fifth would depart for Mexico, and the young man meant to leave with them. Towner was only fifteen years old that fall and ever since veterans of the Third Indiana Regiment, participants at the famous Battle of Buena Vista, had returned home in July and told romantic tales of Mexico and battle, his excitement rose to the point "that my studies were neglected and the thought of becoming a soldier haunted me day and night." Throughout the summer he dreamed of "war and brilliant uniforms and strains of martial

music” constantly and for more than two months “neither thought nor talked of anything but Mexico.” An intense desire to experience battle consumed him. The quest to earn glory on a Mexican battlefield became his “sublime passion.”⁷

In the months before he left, Towner had often read newspaper accounts noting the bravery of the men fighting in Mexico. The April 30, 1847 *Indiana American* contained an article titled, “Who is General [Zachary] Taylor?,” which featured a short biography of the famous General that noted several tales of his dangerous and exciting upbringing. The author posed the following question: “Who can say what an affect a boyhood so passed [filled with danger] had in the formation of the character which has so wonderfully displayed itself in Mexico?”⁸ To his adolescent mind, the battlefield experiences that helped make General Taylor a successful, popular man must have seemed like a way to earn such recognition for himself. Towner’s desire to fight Mexicans and earn laurels no doubt had its origin in such ideas.

On the previous day, the starry-eyed youth had overheard men talking about volunteers gathering in Lawrenceburg and told himself, “Well I will go and strive to become what they were and perhaps if I fall I will be as highly honored.” Hoping to enlist “in time to assist in taking the city of Mexico,” Towner developed a plan.⁹ In the morning, he would walk to Lawrenceburg and join the regiment headed for Mexico.

Everything about the military fascinated Towner, especially the bands, the uniforms, and the opportunity to earn glory and distinction. Although the soldiers’ stories excited him, his grandfather, John Hackleman, had served honorably in the War of 1812 and very likely filled his eager young grandson with stories of his own military exploits.¹⁰ Hackleman’s tales probably served as the main influence behind Towner’s decision to join the army because he was the teenager’s strongest male role model.

John Towner’s parents, Dr. Homer L. Towner and Perlina Hackleman-Towner, had married on December 11, 1830. Only five months later, Dr. Towner abruptly died.¹¹ This unfortunate situation left Perlina, then only eighteen years old, pregnant and widowed. Within

six months of the doctor’s death, Perlina’s first child, John H. Towner was born. Her father, John Hackleman, assumed responsibility for his daughter and her tiny child, and for more than eight years helped raise his grandson on a small farm four miles south of Brookville.

In September 1839, two months before Towner’s eighth birthday, his mother married a local constable, Jeremiah O. St. John. Even with a new father figure, Towner remained close to his grandfather. Over the next five years, the rural Indiana boy grew into a young man. He attended school, worked on his grandfather’s farm, and developed an intense fascination with the military. After the Buena Vista veterans returned in the summer of 1847, Towner found a number of powerful role models and a way to distinguish himself. His grandfather’s service record, the veterans’ grand stories of battle, romantic newspaper stories, and his desire to earn glory all led Towner to run away from home and enter the military.

Early on the bright, clear morning of September 22, Towner “saw an account of some battles that had been fought near the city of Mexico” that “added fuel to the flame that already burned within my bosom.” He ate breakfast and left for school, brimming with excitement. During class, his mental preoccupation very nearly gave away his plan. Caught up in his obsession with the war, he “scarce looked over my lessons at all” and “received a good lecture when I went in to the school board to recite.” Over the course of the morning, Towner informed only a few select friends of his intentions, “(knowing that if they were made public my career would be stopped),” and passed the next few hours in restless anticipation.¹² At noon, Towner made for home, presumably to eat lunch. The crafty teenager did not intend to return, however. Finding the house empty and his family on an afternoon trip to his grandfather’s farm, he grabbed a few clothes, filled his pockets with bread and meat, and started off.¹³

About the time Towner was skipping class to join the Indiana Volunteers and “assist in taking the city of Mexico,” General Winfield Scott and his victorious army were busy with the occupation of that very city. Only a week earlier, his troops had stormed the capital and drove off the Mexican army, securing the final objective that would force the disorganized Mexican government to sue for peace.

Although a treaty would not come for more than four months, all the major battles in the Mexican War were over. Towner could have no idea that his dreams of earning glory and honor on the battlefield would go unfulfilled. His service in the military would not be anything like he planned.

As he headed out of Brookville on September 22, the determined young man vowed to win glory on the battlefield, even if it cost him his life. "It is," he thought to himself, "perhaps the last time I should ever see my mothers home [sic]." As he crossed the bridge out of town, the school bell rang, which to John, "seemed like my knell for eternity." He very nearly turned back, but immediately "thought of the jeers of my companions if I acted the coward" and "determined to go at all hazards."¹⁴

Upon reaching Lawrenceburg the next day, Towner found Captain Aaron Gibbs and immediately joined his company. Two nights later, on Saturday, September 25, Gibbs' company boarded the *Swiftsure No. 4*, a steamboat that would take them down the Ohio River to Madison, the rendezvous point for the companies of the Fifth Indiana regiment. Towner had never been on a steamboat before, and though he knew he should try to rest, "the glorious scene of a noble river, a splendid steamboat lighted up by the full moon in all her majesty [sic] and glory throwing her light over the scene and the thoughts, — the glorious thought of fighting for my country would not let me sleep."¹⁵

Upon arriving in Madison, he discovered that several other companies were still enroute, so for more than a week, Private Towner found himself with ample free time. One afternoon, he and a friend, Asa McManaman, left the city to search the woods for apples. On their return, an argument developed between the two, and a brutal fight broke out. Towner snatched up a rock and knocked down his adversary three consecutive times with blows to his ribs. Towner did not severely wound the other private, though once they returned to camp, McManaman reported him to their captain, who, luckily for Towner, dismissed the incident as simply a scuffle between boys. McManaman, however, did not let the issue drop so easily and "borrowed a pistol and carried it about two week[s] with the avowed pur-

pose of blowing my brains out." Eventually, McManaman returned the gun and Towner escaped without injury, but this would not be the first time his love of fresh fruit would get him into trouble.¹⁶

In October, Towner experienced another "first." He had already taken his first steamboat ride, joined his first military unit, and seen his first "action" while in uniform, so he felt no qualms about taking the next important step toward becoming a soldier: drinking. The youthful Towner "had never been in the habit of getting drunk," but one evening he proposed to another private to "take a spree." The boys "got pretty high and cut a good many capers."¹⁷ Already Towner's experiences were shaping his image of military service.

On October 31, after a month of training, long walks, fistfights, "sprees," and war preparations, the Fifth Indiana boarded another steamboat for the much longer trip to the Gulf of Mexico. Only two days into the journey, Towner took sick "with the diorea [sic] and was confined to my bed nearly all the way to New Orleans." In this, he had the unfortunate opportunity to partake of another occurrence common for enlisted men.

The Fifth Indiana docked in New Orleans in early November and after a week of preparations, departed for Vera Cruz, Mexico. They arrived on November 16 and took up residence within the city's public buildings. The next day they moved about two miles outside the city to Camp Butler, where several thousand men made camp. Towner quickly realized that life in the infantry often consisted of living in miserable quarters. The camp rested on a sandy, chaparral-covered plain about a mile from the gulf. Its location forced soldiers to carry water more than a mile and a half and nearby, he noted hundreds of little white crosses marking a crude cemetery. As the crosses demonstrated, the region's prevalent yellow fever and the other diseases common to an unsanitary camp could take a toll far greater than enemy bullets.

One day, as a dejected Towner sat by the cemetery, "thinking of the instability of human affairs," he saw three Mexican women carrying the naked corpse of an Indian who had died of yellow fever. The women "dropped him rudely into the grave and covered him up." Towner, the young man who dreamed of war in "the land of the rob-

ber and beggar” as glorious, received a severe reality check, for “this shocked my feelings very much as I had never seen the dead treated so roughly before.”¹⁸

The Fifth Indiana “took up the line of march for Mexico” on November 26 and Towner immediately “found that marching was extremely tiresome.” Following the dusty National Road, they marched all that day and the next, stopping only at night to make camp. Dirty and monotonous, the march in the ensuing days drained the spirits of the green troops. On the fourth day the regiment reached Jalapa, “a delightful valley remarkable for its fertility,” and passed by numerous trees where “oranges bananas and almost all kinds of both tropical and temperate fruits here grow in the greatest abundance.” Although the officers gave strict orders for the men to stay in ranks, Towner, fatigued, bored, hungry, and thirsty, “determined to partake of some tropical delicacies.”¹⁹

His quest for fresh fruit earned him a fistfight, and nearly a bullet, in his previous venture, but military justice for insubordination could prove far harsher than fists. He dismissed the danger of a court-martial and, when opportunity allowed, slipped out of rank, leaped over a low stone wall, and concealed himself beneath some thick foliage. Unfortunately, just as he cleared the wall, a thorny briar struck his face, causing a great deal of pain. He did, however, succeed in getting as many oranges as he could eat, and filled his cap, haversack, and pockets for his comrades. Towner followed the column three miles to camp and rejoined the regiment without being discovered, though the injury would bother him for months afterwards.

Weeks in a military camp with poor rations can serve as powerful motivation to locate fresh food, and the next day he returned to Jalapa to secure more oranges and bananas. On this trip, the orchard he entered was “surrounded by a stone wall one side of which was built on the side of a steep bank so that on the side next to the street it was very low but on the inside it was some fifteen or twenty feet high.” He climbed “carefully down the wall and was soon staying my stomach by partaking of the delicious fruit. As soon as I had eaten as many oranges and bananas as I wanted I began to look about me for a place of egress. I soon found that I was in nearly as bad a fix as Col.

Crockett was in the bears nest.”²⁰ The high stone wall completely enclosed the orchard, providing no point for escape. Eventually, he managed to climb out and return to camp. He seemed to have learned his lesson, for there would be no more independent missions to find food.

The Fifth Indiana marched for more than ten days, frequently with empty canteens, until they arrived at the village of Puebla. After resting for one day, the regiment continued toward Mexico City, with Towner’s company as rear guard. Before they left, however, many of the men filled their canteens with whiskey instead of water, and “had not proceeded many miles before most of the company was in a state of intoxication.” Their drunkenness quickly led to fights breaking out, soldiers lying down to sleep, and general chaos in the unit that was supposed to be providing rear guard. It could not have come at a more inopportune time. The Fifth “had not traveled more than about two miles from Puebla before we saw something like a thousand Mexicans standing in battle array . . . many of our number were still laboring under the effect of liquor and we numbered only about thirty seven men in ranks.”²¹ With the main body of troops more than five miles away, it looked as if Towner would get his opportunity to fight, although the odds seemed decidedly unfavorable. After a two-hour standoff where the tense American soldiers faced a group of Mexican guerrillas, though almost certainly far fewer than the thousand Towner claims, two of the forward units returned to support the beleaguered company. The Mexican force withdrew without firing a shot. After an exceedingly long and eventful day, the company stumbled into camp at ten o’clock that night.²²

Towner’s regiment marched for another three days, passing extremely cold nights with little fuel for their fires—on two occasions, the soldiers burned fence rails and church pews to stay warm. Finally, on December 17, 1847, nearly four months after he left home, Towner entered Mexico City. Upon arrival, the Fifth began garrison duty, and spent their time patrolling the streets for guerrillas waging personal wars against the victorious American army.

Although the Fifth “again experienced little except for the monotony of camp, occasional skirmishes with guerrillas, and the inevi-

table harassment [sic] of the disease and climate," Towner very nearly became a casualty, although not on the battlefield.²³ One evening as he and two friends, Privates Wood and Jona, were returning from a small village four miles outside of camp, they "discovered about fifty Mexicans standing at the church door headed by a priest dressed in his sacred robes." Without warning, the priest "raised a carbine and fired." Initially they thought to stand and fight, but Towner "had but three cartridges and my companions were likewise poorly furnished and neither of us had a bayonet, and we concluded that it was best to retreat." He felt a "chill of horror [pass] through my frame as I saw their fired and savage countenances, which were rife with pleasure, for they evidently considered us as certain prey."²⁴

The young soldiers immediately sprinted for safety. During the frenzied run for their lives, Wood lost his shoes, a terrible misfortune, for they were traveling through sharp briars and other foot-tearing underbrush. They ran as fast as they could for a mile and a half until Wood, unable to keep up and "about 100 yards behind me began to cry aloud for help." Towner "instantly turned and went back to his assistance," while Jona continued to run. Towner soon found "the brave fellow keeping the enemy at bay with his musket. There were about 30 all within 35 yards of us, but Wood was a determined fellow." The Mexican guerrillas "fired on us several times and hurled stones, bricks and muskets at us and the balls whistled close to our heads but done us no injury." Suddenly, a large man "who appeared to be a leader of the gang came close to me and began to stone us with a vengeance." Towner raised his musket to fire. Before he could shoot, the man "leaped into a deep ditch near by, and our being some twelve feet from the ditch I could not see him except when he would rise to throw."²⁵

He "took aim about the place I knew he must come up, and as he raised I saw at a glance that my aim was correct,—and pulled the trigger; he sprang about four feet into the air gave a horrible scream and fell back dead." Private Wood also fired at a Mexican on horseback, but missed. The two then sprinted for camp, "loading our guns as we went." Eventually, they met Jona, and immediately, Wood and

Towner accused him of cowardice. They did not press the issue, in part because Towner believed that Jona "was struck by a sudden panic or he surely would not have left two comrades in as great danger as ours." All three relieved young men reached camp without any further incident.²⁶

Towner's lucky escape marked the only time that he exchanged shots with an enemy. He spent the remainder of his time in Mexico in the same manner as the other soldiers, where "boredom, fatigue, and camp disorders dominated their lives."²⁷ When the Mexicans signed the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in February, the war officially ended. Early in the spring of 1848, Towner and the rest of the Fifth Indiana regiment mustered out and returned to a hero's welcome in their home state.

Combat did not characterize Private John Towner's service in Mexico. He defined his experiences through day to day routine: marching, making camp, writing, taking walks, rough-housing with friends, standing post, finding better food than his rations could provide, waiting, and seeking entertainment wherever he could find it. Towner's military campaign proved far different than he imagined. He did not earn glory or win medals for his bravery. He did not fight in a major battle, repel an enemy charge, or provide outstanding leadership to his fellow soldiers. He did, however, get diarrhea, march from Vera Cruz to Mexico City, and break military rules while trying to improve his diet and enjoy himself under trying circumstances. He professed his eagerness for battle, but never saw any real action. The battlefield did not shape Towner's war experience; his concept of military service emerged from his time on the march.

As the Fifth Indiana prepared to leave Mexico and return home, they were called to order at Camp Reynolds to receive their regimental flags. General David Reynolds, the camp's namesake, addressed the troops, closing with these words:

Be assured that whether in the toilsome march, slumbering in your white pavilions beside your blazing camp fire, or mingling in the scenes of carnage on the field of battle, my ardent prayer shall ascend to the God of nations, of

arms and battles, that He may preserve your lives and your honor and guide you to a high and honorable and glorious destiny.²⁸

That Towner and the troops of the Fifth Indiana defined war by the “toilsome march” and the “blazing camp fire,” not by “mingling in the scenes of carnage on the field of battle,” makes them no less soldiers than those who died in combat. Although Towner never fulfilled his boyish dreams of glory and honor, his experiences reflected those of many veterans who returned home. He discovered that war is more than martial music, brass bands, or colorful uniforms; war includes the events that take place on the toilsome march.

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Notes

- 1 See K. Jack Bauer, *The Mexican War, 1846–1848* (Lincoln, NE: The University of Nebraska Press, 1992), xxv and John S. D. Eisenhower, *So Far from God: The U.S. War with Mexico, 1846–1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), xviii.
- 2 Bvt. Major General Emory Upton, *The Military Policy of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1917), 216–218 as cited by Eisenhower, *So Far from God*, xviii. Eisenhower's figures estimate the percentage killed at approximately thirteen percent. Bauer lists 118,119 served and 12,876 dead, or nearly eleven percent killed, in *The Mexican War*, 397.
- 3 Eisenhower, *So Far from God*, 369 (footnote).
- 4 Bauer, *The Mexican War*, 397.
- 5 Alfred Hoyt Bill, *Rehearsal for Conflict: The War with Mexico* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1969), 167, 187.
- 6 Robert W. Johannsen, *To the Halls of the Montezumas: The Mexican War in the American Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 89–90.
- 7 John H. Towner, *Mexican War Journal, 1847–1848* [Hackleman-Towner papers, 1847–1861], Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, Indiana.
- 8 *Indiana American*, 30 April, 1847.
- 9 Towner, *Mexican War Journal*.
- 10 Phyllis A. Hackleman, *Hacklemans in America, 1749–1988* (Interlaken, NY: Heart of the Lakes Publishing, 1988.), 112.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 60.
- 12 Towner, *Mexican War Journal*.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 *Ibid.*

- 23 Watt and Spears, *Citizen Soldiers*, 48.
- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 Towner, *Mexican War Journal*.
- 26 *Ibid.* Towner's journal consists of two parts. The first appears in a book-type format, with a table of contents and chapters with titles. In the back of this finished copy is a much more ragged text, which appears to be the original journal. The first part could not have been written long after the war, if that is the case, for Towner died at age twenty-two, less than five years after returning from Mexico. The second part of the journal, however, appears to be his entries from his service in Mexico and written at that time. Towner recorded this incident in the second part, but it does not appear in the first.
- 27 Watt and Spears, *Citizen Soldiers*, 38.
- 28 David I. McCormick and Mindwell Crampton Wilson, eds. *Indiana Battle Flags: A Record of Indiana Organizations in the Mexican, Civil and Spanish-American Wars* (Indianapolis: Indiana Battle Flag Commission, 1929), 26.