

**Hanford L. Gordon, [A soldier's poem].**  
Camp Stone, Maryland, November 12, 1861.

## Introduction

Approximately 3.5 million men served in the Union and Confederate military during the Civil War. Recent scholarship indicates that at least 750,000 men died. Lewis Mitchell of the 1st Minnesota Volunteers was one of those men. On October 21, 1861, during the Battle of Ball's Bluff, Virginia, his regiment was stationed near Edward's Ferry, away from the main fighting. The unit lost only one man—Mitchell.

A few weeks later, Mitchell's friend Hanford L. Gordon wrote the poem featured here. Gordon recounts how he learned of Mitchell's death and gives a visceral description of his friend's last moments. He concludes the poem with a patriotic observation about a soldier's fate: "And as each grave is filled / We will but ask our Chief to say / 'Only a private killed.'" In these verses, a soldier comes to terms with the death of a comrade and the possibility of his own death in the early days of the Civil War.

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Lines on the death of my friend Louis Mitchell of Co. I 1st Reg<sup>1</sup> Minnesota Vols: who was killed in a skirmish on the Virginia side of the Potomac Oct: 21<sup>st</sup> 1861. The events and circumstances are literally true.

We've had a fight a Captain said  
Much rebel blood we've spilled  
We've put the saucy foe to flight  
Our loss – but a private killed!

"Ah, yes!" said a sergeant on the spot  
As he drew a long deep breath  
Poor fellow, he was badly shot  
Then bayoneted to death!"

When again was hushed the martial din  
And back the foe had fled  
They brought the private's body in  
I went to see the dead.

For I could not think the rebel foe  
(’Tho under curse and ban)  
To vaunting of their chivalry  
Could kill a wounded man.

A minie ball had broke his thigh  
A frightful crushing wound  
And then with savage bayonets  
They had pinned him to the ground

One stab was through his abdomen  
Another through his head  
The last was through his pulseless breast  
Done after he was dead.

His hair was matted with his gore  
His hands were clenched with might  
As though he still his musket bore  
So firmly in the fight

He had grasped the foeman’s bayonet  
His bosom to defend!  
They raised the coat cape from his face  
My God! it was my friend!

Think what a shudder thrilled my heart  
’Twas but the day before  
We laughed together merrily  
As we talked of days of yore

“How happy we shall be,” he said  
When the war is o’er, and when  
The rebels all subdued or dead  
We all go home again!

Ah little he dreamed, that soldier brave  
(So near his journey's goal)  
That God had sent a messenger  
To claim his Christian soul!

But he fell like a hero fighting  
And hearts with grief are filled  
And honor is his, though our Chief shall say  
"Only a private killed!"

I knew him well, he was my friend  
He loved our Land and Laws  
And he fell a blessed martyr  
To the country's holy cause.

Soldiers our time will come most like  
When our blood will thus be spilled  
And then of us our Chief shall say  
"Only a private killed."

But we fight our country's battles  
And our hopes are not forlorn  
Our death shall be a blessing  
To "Millions yet unborn";

To our children and their children  
And as each grave is filled  
We will but ask our Chief to say  
"Only a private killed."

H. L. Gordon

1<sup>st</sup> Regt Minn. Vols.

Camp Stone Md: Nov: 12<sup>th</sup> 1861

Read the introduction and the poem. Apply your knowledge of American history and literature to answer the following questions:

1. Describe the circumstances that led Hanford L. Gordon to compose his poem "Only a Private Killed."
2. Why does the poet repeat the refrain, "Only a private killed"?
3. Who is the "Chief" referred to in the poem?
4. How does the poet feel about his enemy? Give examples to show why.
5. What is chivalry?
6. What does the poet wish for "the millions yet unborn"?
7. What is a martyr? Why does the poet consider his friend a martyr?