WAR STORIES.

In the Rifle Pits in Front of Petersburg.

Detroit Free Press.

Name the fiercest battle of the war and yet the loss of human life in the riflepits in front of Petersburg exceeded it by comparison. Lee hung to Petersburg as a last hope. Driven to bay there every Confederate soldier fought with desperation. Up to that time picket-firing was looked upon by both sides as little short of murder, and by tacit agreement was suspended except at long intervals, when it was ordered to cover some movement by one side or the other. Along the front of what is known as "The Crater" the main defenses were only a musket shot apart. In advance of these were trenches and covered ways, and still further in advance the riflepits. The distance between Federal and Confederate pits was not above 300 feet in any case, and here and there, owing to the lay of the ground, there were only thirty or forty. Certain of the pits were reached by covered ways from the rear—others by natural ditches. Some were connected—others isolated. In all cases two men were detailed to a pit, and when the siege had fairly begun they might be relieved at the end of two hours or held prisoners, as it were, for eight or ten. On a moonlight night, as well as during all the hours of daylight, the firing was continuous and vengeful. If the night was a dark one, it slackened off after 10 o'clock, though a person exposing himself anywhere within range was liable to be struck.

From daybreak to darkness the men in the rifle-pits had no other thought except to kill. No mercy was shown on either side, while every trick and artifice was resorted to that a man might be lured to his death. The rifle-pit was only hip deep, and neither wide nor long. Two men not only occupied every inch of room, but were obliged to assume such positions that to be penned up there for two long hours was enough to use one up for the rest of the day, to say nothing of the danger. Each man must "squat" instead of sit or kneel, and ten minutes in that position puts a dozen kinks in the spinal column. From the day those pits were occupied to the hour the soldiers left them it was kill, kill, kill. Many of the men detailed were armed with fine rifles or shotguns. If the latter arm was used it was loaded with coarse buckshot, and its contents were almost certain to wound or kill. To fire with any accuracy one had to raise his head until the eye could glance along the sights. If he had his head up and ready to pull the trigger when one of the men in the opposite pit started to do the same thing, the latter got a bullet in the forehead, or had the top of his head blown off. The advantage was of course with the one who was in the position first. When the occupants of a pit suspected that it was "held up" by the other side, one of the pair got his rifle all ready for a quick shot and the other resorted to trickery to draw the fire of the enemy. There were a dozen artifices practiced. A hat or a cap might be slowly and cautiously elevated on a stick, a hand thrown into the air or a "dummy" head exposed. This dummy was made of wood and shaped and painted to closely resemble a human head. In some cases glass eyes and false hair were used to make the deception more complete. Some would last a week, but most of them not over two days. One of them used in front of Fort Hell had sixty-two bullets sent into it in one day.

If a man was killed in one of the exposed pits at sunrise there was no way of removing the body before night, and sometimes not then. I knew three or four cases where the survivor had to remain with a body for from twenty to thirty hours. If one of the pair was wounded little or nothing could be done, and within two hours he would have emptied both canteens of their contents. I was in a pit one day when my comrade received a bullet in the left shoulder. We were both crouched down and supposed ourselves perfectly safe. The bullet struck a small stone in the loose dirt heaped around the edge of our pit and was deflected downwards. It was a severe wound, and within sixty minutes we hadn't a drop of water left. To stand up meant death as sure as death can be, and yet after suffering for another half hour my comrade determined to leave the pit and make a break for the rear, several hundred feet away. He realized the danger, but all my entreaties were useless. He simply replied that he would rather be killed than suffer any longer. He had to stand up, thus exposing head and breast, before he could scramble out of the pit, it did not seem to me that he had been on his feet five seconds, when he sank down again. To show you how vigilant the enemy were, and how rapidly the hands of death move, I will state that the poor fellow was struck by five bullets in the head and neck. He was not only fired on from the pit opposite, but from those to right and left. Had he got out of the pit he would have been struck by twenty balls before he could make a step.

One could never tell whether a cap was on a soldier's head or a stick. Four times out of five it was hoisted on a stick, but we were ready to take the one chance in five of hitting a head. Old caps were gathered up by the bushel for use in the pits. After being "plunked about five times there was only a handful of rags and batting left. The stick on which it was hoisted would be hit about once out of five shots. I once held a silver three-cent piece aloft on a cleft stick when in a pit sixty feet from the nearest of the enemy. At the second shot, which was doubtless from a hunter's rifle, the top of the stick and coin were carried away. On another occasion I tied a blouse button to a string and held it up. It was a new button and the sun was shining brightly, and it drew the fire of a dozen men. Some twenty shots were fired before the button was hit. Then the bullet which struck it cut it in two, and one of the halves was deflected into the pit and gave my comrade a severe wound on the chin.

Before Lee's lines were broken no man went into the rifle-pits without bidding his friends good-bye. It was considered that the chances of his being killed were five to three. Hundreds and hundreds of men were killed in going to and returning from the pits, and out of eight men who might occupy a pit in rotation for twenty-four hours the loss would sometimes be as high as six and seldom less than two. I do not mean that all were killed, but a wounded man was little better than a dead one for thirty days after being hit. I am sure the Confederates suffered as severely as we did on the average, though they did the finest shooting. Some of them had fine hunting rifles, and the end of a finger held above cover was a target they could not miss. I believe that from 8,000 to 10,000 men were killed in the rifle-pits on our side alone while Grant was hammering away, and these figures were equalled on the other side. In no single instance could I make out the slightest benefit from this loss of life, and I do not believe it prolonged or shortened the war by an hour. It was useless and cold-blooded slaughter, and to most soldiers was the darkest picture of the whole war.

SERGEANT H.

The 10th Georgia at Knoxville.

After the battle of Chickamauga the Tenth Georgia regiment occupied the trenches in Chattanooga for a few weeks, exposed alternately to cold rains from the clouds and hot shelling from the Yankee batteries, which rendered our stay very uncomfortable, and some of us, who had lost our blankets on the way from Virginia, suffered severely for want of bedding. From there we took passage on freight cars to east Tennessee, and after short stops at Loudon, Sweetwater and some other places, we finally confronted Burnside's army at Knoxville. We remained there two or three weeks and had some exciting encounters with the Yankees.

We had one little tilt with them in which both parties of combatants were routed and all fled frantically from each other in opposite directions. One afternoon a detachment from our regment crossed the river below town on a ferry-boat to reconnoitre the hills opposite the town. The expedition was commanded by Captain A. J. McBride, of our company, who was afterwards promoted to colonel. Our company, in command of Lieutenant Fuller, started up a very tall, steep hill or mountain that overlooked the town, and, on account of the unevenness of the ground and the density of the woods through which we had to pass, we marched up in single file, i. e., we were strung out in a single line one behind another and all following in the trail of the file leader, who was in front. When we got within 200 yards of the top we were saluted by some unseen parties on the hill above us with a volley of minie balls that whistled so fearfully close to our ears as they passed down the hill parallel with the line of our heads as to leave no doubt of the sincerity of the implied threat. We all darted instantly behind the most convenient trees, without waiting for orders to do so, and the move was made with such suddenness and haste that several hats were left behind.

For some reason our commander didnt see fit to accept the challenge by returning the fire, but, after a few moments' deliberation, ordered us to retreat, and we obeyed promptly and vigorously, dashing down the hill in the wildest confusion, some of us stumbling and falling headlong down the steep descent as we went. Next day the entire party, in command of Captain McBride, ascended that hill again, and on this occasion our advance was not opposed. We learned from some of the inhabitants that during our fight on the preceding day the Yankees were fleeing similarly in the other direction.

On the night before the battle of Knoxville the Tenth Georgia regiment was selected to make the preliminary advance to drive in the pickets during the night. It was considerably after our usual bed time when we formed in line preparatory to starting. We were kept standing for a considerable time while the details of the movement were being perfected, and during the long, weary moments, some of us were haunted by the most dreadful forebodings. I had hitherto made some slight pretensions to bravery but on this occasion my courage failed me entirely. The air was cold, and the chilliness brought upon us great depression. The night was dark and the darkness seemed to very greatly increase the frightfulness of the terrible outlook. I had always been inclined to a superstitious fear of venturing into strange places in the dark. We had never been over the ground over which we were to pass, and as it had been held by the enemy, our way was probably beset with pitfalls and infernal machines that threatened our destruction. And it seemed that we would be at a disadvantage on account of the fact the Yankees could hear our approach while we, by reason of the darkness, would be ignorant of their whereabouts and they could strike us down before we could prepare to offer any resistance.

When we got ready to move we deployed as skirmishers, at intervals of about five steps apart, and marched slowly and continuously to the front. We had been cautioned to proceed as noiselessly as possible, but the coughing, sneezing, stumbling and the breaking of small wooden sticks under our feet made a considerable racket in spite of our efforts to avoid being overheard. When we got within about forty yards of the pickets they discovered us, fired and fled, but most of their shots were aimed entirely too high to be dangerous to us, as was shown by the direction of the flashes from their guns and so our casualties were few in number and slight in degree. After waking some of their men whom they had left asleep, and sending them back as prisoners, we advanced one or two hundred yards, transformed ourselves from skirmishers into a picket line and spent the remainder of the night shivering on the frozen ground and suffering agonies beyond the power of language to express.

We had carried but little of anything to wrap ourselves in, the bullets from the enemy's lines whistled over us too thickly to admit of our standing on our feet, and to have kindled a fire would have drawn the concentrated firing of the whole line, so we had no other alternative but to wait and suffer. Soon after daybreak our line of battle started forward to storm the fort, and after a desperate onslaught upon it, the gallant little army, which was commanded by General Longstreet, was driven back, leaving many of their number among the killed and wounded.

The Yankees had their position so well fortified and the approaches to it so completely blockaded with obstructions, that our little band of assailants found it absolutely impregnable. After the battle some Yankee officers appeared in our front with a flag of truce. They were met by Captain McBride and one or two other officers, to whom they presented a request from General Burnsides to be allowed to care for some wounded men who had fallen between the lines. The request was granted and the wants of the wounded were attended to. We returned to camp and busied ourselves during the remainder of the day in an attempt to thaw out from our bodies some of the chilliness that frozen beds had inflicted. On the following morning we left Knoxville and went still further up the valley in the direction of the Virginia line. We were subjected to another severe chilling that morning. When we got to the Clinch river we were required to plunge in and wade across where the water for a considerable distance was up to our waists and the weather was still freezing cold. It looked to us like the authorities were determined that we should keep cool in one sense at least. We had skirmishing almost constantly with Yankee cavalry on the way, but it was generally at long range and little damage was done. We finally stopped at Russellville and went into temporary winter quarters. Some of our experiences at that place will probably be the subject of another chapter.

Good Pies.

Here is one of the many good stories Governor Candler tells when he is with congenial company:

Away back in the sixties, and just before the heavy fighting about Vicksburg, the Confederate troops in that vicinity were hard pushed for food. The winter had been a severe one, and provisions had run so low that the soldiers were glad to get anything that looked as if it could be digested.

So hungry were the men getting, and so desperate, that many of them were learning to eat horse flesh with some degree of relish. Of course, there was a large number of soldiers whose tastes were such as to prevent them from going in for delicacies of that kind, but the times were such that it appeared only a question of a very short while before all would be living high on the flesh of their steeds.

One day a boy came into camp with a number of meat pies, and his advent was hailed with salvos of delight. The pies came high, but the men were willing to pay almost fabulous prices, so eager were they for a change of diet. As a result, the young fellow disposed of his wares in a few minutes, and his customers enjoyed themselves hugely. The pies were pronounced the best that had been eaten in years, and those who had dined were wishing the boy would return shortly with more of them.

As a crowd of the men were walking through the camp a few minutes later their attention was attracted by sounds of a heated discussion which came from one of the large buildings near by. Cautiously they advanced and looked around one corner of the house. They beheld the pie boy and another boy engaged in a wordy wrangle.

"I tell you, I've got to have half that money you made on the pies," said the big boy.

"Well, you can't get it" replied the little fellow.

"I'm entitled to it," insisted the other, "because half of them puppies we killed to make the pies was mine."

The listening soldiers waited to hear no more, but fled to their own tents. Their feelings can better be imagined than described.—Atlanta Constitution.

— Wigwag—"Oldback says there is no reason why every man shouldn't have a little spending money." Henpeckke—"What does Oldback know about it? He's never been married."

— THE —

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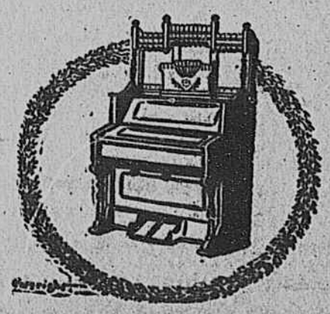

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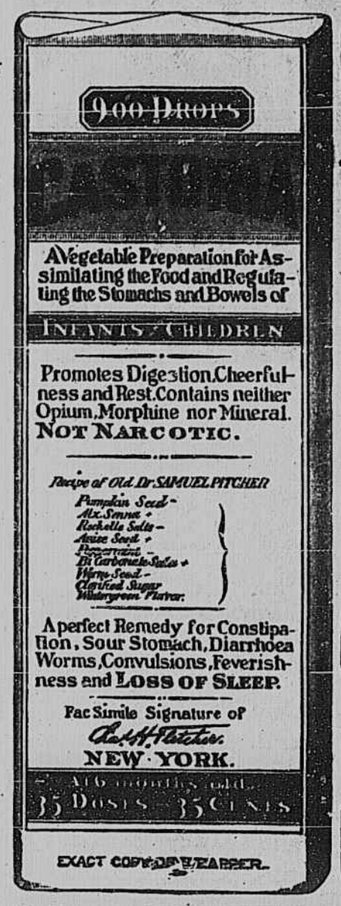

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