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Some of My War Stories

A Paper

Read Before

The Ohio Commandery

of the

Loyal Legion

By

Allen Ripley Foote

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Some of my War Stories

BY ALLEN RIPLEY FOOTE

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HEN, in 1861, President Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteers to enlist for a three months' service to uphold the authority and preserve the unity of the United States, I, a boy of nineteen, sought the first opportunity that offered, to enlist. I was at the door of the recruiting office long before it opened.

Dr. D. W. Bliss, who afterward became a famous army surgeon and was one of the surgeons who attended Presidents Lincoln and Garfield, gave me the required physical examination. When measuring my height he said—"Raise your heels, you are a little short."

Before my regiment was mustered in, the call came for 300,000 volunteers to enlist for a three-years' service, and we were mustered in for three years.

My regiment was ordered to Washington as soon as it was ready to move. Clad in grey uniforms and armed with old muzzle-loading Harper's Ferry muskets, which had been changed from flint locks, we made a valiant appearance and received ovations from the populace of every city and village through which we passed. This is

especially true of Ohio. At one station all of the ladies of the town turned out loaded with small bouquets of flowers, to which were pinned slips on which they had written patriotic sentiments. These they threw into the car windows. The sentiment on the one I caught read— "The women of Ohio are for the Union--to a man."

Our first camp was at the Maryland end of the Chain Bridge, which crossed the Potomac above Washington. We marched from this camp to Centerville, Va., to engage in the first battle of Bull Run. The first sight we had of war was on the morning of the second day's march, when we came upon some camp fires where the Confederates had cooked their breakfast that morning before leaving for Bull Run.

We arrived at Centerville before noon of the third day and made our camp there. After dinner we were ordered to advance, in light marching order, toward Blackburn's Ford. When near the Run we were deployed to the left of the road in an open field on a hillside sloping down to the Run, which was concealed by a growth of bushes and trees. Here we were ordered to rest. While in this position we were startled by seeing a finely-mounted and uniformed Confederate Officer ride out from these bushes just at the right of our regiment. I presume every man in the regiment saw him. Some three or four of the boys, having the instinct of war in them, immediately raised their guns to shoot him. Seeing this, our Colonel raised his hand in a forbidding attitude and called out,—"Why, boys, you would not shoot a man in that way, would you? Don't shoot!!" The Confederate Officer, after inspecting our position, returned to his command unharmed. In about fifteen minutes, as soon as he could maneuver his regiment, he ordered it to fire. We saw the flash and smoke and heard the roar and the hissing of the bullets. This is the first time we were under fire. I am glad to say we were under it about 20 feet. Every bullet passed over us. Not a man in our regiment was hit.

After this volley we were complimented with a few shots from a battery of six-pound field pieces, which also went wide of their mark assuming that they were shooting at us.

Having received these compliments, we were withdrawn from the field and returned to our camp at Centerville. This was our part in the skirmish of Blackburn's Ford, three days before the first battle of Bull Run.

On the next day we were ordered to establish a picket line between Centerville and Bull Run. When marching out from our camp toward the Run, we could see cars loaded with Confederate soldiers as their train crossed the road we were on. When they disembarked and formed in line the glistening of their bright gun barrels gave the impression they were aiming at us. This excited one of our boys terribly. He jumped out into the centre of the road, swinging his hat and yelling as loudly as he possibly could—"Don't shoot this way!! There are folks in the road!!"

These two stories illustrate what we knew at that time about war.

On the night before the battle I was detailed to do guard duty before General Dick Richardson's headquarters. He was occupying a small house. About eleven o'clock he came out and asked me if I would be on duty there at three o'clock in the morning. I answered "Yes." Then he said pointing in the direction of the Stone Bridge, "About three o'clock in the morning a cannon will be fired over there. When you hear it, call me at once. A great battle will be fought here tomorrow." I needed nothing more to keep me awake that night, nor did the General. He was out two or three times before the alarm gun was fired.

On the day of the first battle of Bull Run, having been on guard duty all night, I was left in camp when my regiment was ordered out. I took advantage of the opportunity to post myself on the Centerville Hill where I could overlook the field of action. Thus it happened that I was on the spot where the Congressional picnic party spread its luncheon. A number of members of Congress, with their ladies, drove out to Centerville from Washington in their carriages to have a picnic and see the battle.

From that position I saw the beginning of the panic when our troops on the right gave way and started for the rear in indescribable disorder. I went to our camp, secured my gun and accoutrements and joined in the stampede. Several times that night, when stopping for a little rest, I, and all about me, was aroused and terrified by the cry—"The black horse cavalry are coming!" The next morning I was safely back across the Potomac on the old Chain Bridge camping ground, competent to certify that the distance from Washington to Centerville is—three days going, and one night coming back.

As soon as our regiment got together we were ordered to go into camp on the Arlington Flats, south side of the Potomac, opposite Washington. There it was that Abraham Lincoln gave courage and cheer to the army by driving slowly around among the troops in an open carriage, stopping a moment here and there to speak to or take the hand of a private soldier, his face inspired with the solemn grandeur of an awful duty to prosecute the war for the preservation of the Union to a successful conclusion, or the bitter end. I see his face now, colored and featured as can never be done by brush or chisel. It inspires me now, as it did then, with a resolve such as every soldier in that army felt as he looked upon Lincoln's face that day—a resolve unformed in words but possessing my life—always to do my duty for the cause of human rights and human welfare on every occasion and in every way, as God gives me light to see it and power to do it.

In the spring of 1862 my regiment was transported from Alexandria, Va., to Hampton Roads, when the Army of the Potomac changed its base to start its march "On to Richmond" from Old Point Comfort. We soon appeared before the Confederate fortifications at Yorktown. Here we were ordered to dig. When the digging was done the Confederate forces abandoned their fortifications and marched to Richmond. We followed closely. Their rear guard made a stand at Williamsburg, stopping our advance. The battle of Williamsburg was then on The Confederates had prepared to defend this position by making slashings, digging rifle pits and erecting forts. Fort Magruder covered the main road into Williamsburg. The engagement at this point was brought on by some New Jersey troops. They advanced a battery on this road to a point directly in front of the Fort and very near the rifle pits. Here the battery stuck in the mud, hub deep. It could not be moved further nor brought back. During the day it was captured and recaptured several times.

At that time my regiment, and the Michigan Second Infantry, were part of Gen. Phil Kearny's Division. We were on the left of the road, the New Jersey troops on the right. In the middle of the afternoon, when Gen. Hancock was prepared to make his famous charge on the Confederate left, Gen. Kearny, mounted on a white horse and dressed in full uniform, as conspicuous a figure as can well be imagined, came dashing up to the Michigan Second regiment and

called out—"What regiment is this?" Col. Poe, a regular army officer, immediately saluted the General and said—"The Michigan Second Infantry, Col. Poe commanding." General Kearny said—"I want this regiment." Col. Poe turned to give the required regulation orders, but Gen. Kearny stopped him saying—"None of that! Come on boys!" A captain of his staff, seeing what he was about to do, tried to stop him, saying—"General you should not go into the engagement in this way. Remember, your life is worth a whole regiment to the army" Turning to him like a flash, Gen. Kearny said—"If you do not want to go, stay here." At that he reined his horse into the road and started toward the Confederate lines, waving his sword and shouting back—"Come on boys!" and every man followed, on both sides of the road, pell mell, without order, wading through mud and climbing through slashings up to the rifle pits in order to get there. How I came to be there I do not know, but I do know that I went up that road with my right shoulder next to Gen. Kearny's left stirrup and kept that position until he reached the further edge of the slashing, when he turned and, pointing to the Confederates in their rifle pits, shouted to the men coming after him—"There they are!! Give them hell, boys, give them hell!!"

At this moment, as if by inspiration, a band burst forth with the tune, "All hail, the conquering hero comes." Above the roar of musketry and cannonading came the cheers from the charge Hancock was making. The New Jersey boys again manned their battery and began to play on the rifle pits and on Fort Magruder. The Fort answered and every Confederate rifle in the pits was speaking to us. No one who lived through those moments of strife and sacrifice will ever forget the scenes, the exaltation and the devotion of life to patriotic duty that was there manifested.

Our men struggled through the slashings as best they could, in groups of two or more. A New Jersey boy was with me. We stopped behind a clump of small bushes to watch our chances with the Confederates in the rifle pits less than two hundred feet in front of us. There was a larger group to our left that attracted the attention of the Confederates. Shots were being exchanged as rapidly as heads appeared on either side. Suddenly, out from the group to our left, came a ringing laugh, as joyous and care-free as was ever heard at a

base ball game. My comrade was possessed with a desire to know its cause. Shortly that laugh came again. He declared he would go and find out why they were laughing. I told him if he stirred he would be shot, but he made the attempt. As soon as he raised himself, before he had taken a step, he was shot and instantly killed. Attention having been thus called to the spot, a confederate volley was fired into that clump of bushes. I saved myself by lying down behind the body of my dead comrade.

As the sun was dropping below the western horizon the Confederate rifle pits were captured. Hancock's charge had succeeded. Fort Magruder fired its farewell shot; the Confederate rear guard was on its way to Richmond. The battle of Williamsburg was ended.

The next day, one of a group of Confederate prisoners declared there was one thing about that battle he could not understand. He said he was a sharp shooter; that he could hit a mark quite a distance away every time, and offered to prove it by actual demontration. The thing he could not understand was why he could not hit General Kearny the day before. He said he saw him plainly; knew he was a commanding officer, and that he deliberately shot at him six times. General Kearny was not touched, but the Captain who tried to persuade him not to expose himself as he did was shot through the heart and instantly killed by the side of the General.

An interval of time, a march through mud and water almost waist deep, brought us to Fair Oaks, within sight of Richmond. Heavy rains had made it almost impossible to ford the Chickahominy River which divided McClellan's army. Seeing an advantage in this, General Lee ordered General Longstreet to attack the part of our army that had succeeded in crossing the river. General Casey's division received the brunt of this attack. General Kearny's division was held in reserve to support General Casey. We ate our dinner and then lay on our arms for some little time, just out of range, tracing the course of the action by listening to the firing and watching the increasing number of wounded making their way to the rear. To be thus held in reserve, expecting every moment to be called into action, is the supreme trial of a soldier's courage. In those moments my heart became faint. But, when the bugle call was sounded calling us into action, all thought of self vanished. As eager as an eagle in pursuit

of its prey, we went forward. Longstreet's division was making a final charge. Casey's men passed through our ranks as we formed a line between the contending forces. My Company had the regimental colors, defended by a detailed color guard of sixteen corporals. I was not of this guard, but was a corporal then, on the left of my Company next to the color guard. Our line was hardly formed when we received the Confederate charge. Firing was at short range. Fourteen out of the sixteen corporals composing the color guard were shot almost simultaneously; some killed; some wounded, but the colors did not fall.

I was on my knees in the front rank. The corporal on my left was shot in the head and fell across my legs. He spoke to me. I turned to look at him, and said—"I cannot stop work now to help you." As I said this I was shot, the bullet entering squarely on my breast, cutting off the first shirt button below the collar. It passed through the bone, which turned its course to the right, and passed out between the ribs. I was in the act of loading my gun at its muzzle. I had the powder in. When hit my right arm fell. I tried three times to put the bullet in and finish loading, hoping to give the enemy one more shot. Finding I could not do it, I dropped my gun, unstrapped my cartridge box and crawled to the rear until I came to a cleared field where a battery was stationed firing over the heads of our men into the Confederate ranks. As I raised up to walk, a gunner motioned to me to step aside out of range and then continued firing. I walked around back of the battery and stopped to see it work and listen to the music of its roar.

The Confederate charge was stopped. My regiment lost about one hundred and fifty men in killed and wounded within the few moments the engagement lasted.

That night I lay on the ground under a large tree. Noting that every breath sent bubbles of air through my wound, I called a soldier who was trying to care for the wounded and told him I could not live long on half-rations of air. He looked at my wound, tore some square pieces off a bandage roll, placed them over the wound and punched them into it with his finger and poured some cold water on the cloth. This caused the blood to congeal about the cloth and enable me to get the benefit of the air I was breathing.

The next morning I was taken back to Savage Station where I was placed on Dr. Bliss' dressing table (he was then Medical Director of the Division) to have my wound dressed. As he cut my shirt off I looked up at him and said, laughingly, "Doctor here is a wound you cannot amputate." As soon as he had uncovered it, he said, "It would be much better for you, my boy, if I could."

When my shirt was cut off, I discovered another wound on my left arm about half way between the shoulder and elbow. The bullet had chipped off a spot as large as a silver dollar but had not buried itself in the flesh. The arm was black and very much swollen. My wounds were soon bandaged and I was laid on the ground beside the railroad track to await transportation to Fortress Monroe. From there I was sent to Long Island College Hospital in Brooklyn, N. Y. When convalescent I was ordered to the Invalid Camp at Alexandria, Va. I did not relish the idea of becoming a "condemned yankee" as the members of Invalid Corps were then called. In going through Washington we passed by the Armory Square Hospital, then in charge of Dr. Bliss. I "fell out" and went into his office. Fortunately I found him at his desk. When he looked at me he recognized me at once and said, "See here, young man, this will never do. You will ruin my reputation. I reported you mortally wounded at Fair Oaks and have had you dead and buried in the Chickahominy swamp for six months." I said, "I will improve your reputation by giving you an opportunity to resurrect me." I then told him I did not want to be a "condemned yankee" and wanted him to find a way to save me from going to the Invalid Camp. He immediately called the hospital steward, ordered him to put me in bed and keep me there four days, I protested, saying I was perfectly able to be about. The Doctor said to me in an undertone, "You stay in bed four days; by that time I will have an order assigning you to duty in my office."

I was given charge of making out the papers for the soldiers discharged from the Hospital. I frequently urged the Doctor to order me to my regiment, but he refused, saying I could never serve as an enlisted man since receiving my wound. Being convinced there was no hope of ever being permitted to join my regiment, I made out my own discharge paper and placed it in a package I submitted to the Doctor for his signature. After he had signed all of the papers, I took mine out of the package and showed it to him. He endorsed it, "Able to serve as an officer, but not as an enlisted man."

I will stop my story here, only adding that after returning home I re-enlisted as a private in Company B. 21st Michigan Infantry, then with the Army of the Cumberland at Chattanooga. I was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant before I left the State to join that regiment. By chance, that commission was dated on January 26, 1864, my twenty-second birthday.

Such memories as these are among the most precious products of my life.

The gains of life are various. Some objects we pursue disappear as we grasp them. We are children, chasing with excited delight beautiful bubbles floating free in air. We touch them and they vanish. Some objects are as enduring as the eternal truth of God. We pursue them with the stern courage of men upborne by the strength of a moral conviction. Though, in the hour of trial and triumph, a crown of thorns be pressed upon our brow, the memory of a right act, courageously done, will enrich the soul forever.

The memory of such actions is the richest endowment and the most sacred acquisition of the loyal volunteer. How little all that can be given him as a reward for his services must ever be in comparison with that which he has by right of his own achievement.

Ask him now how he values his memory of that day when, with his regiment, he first left home for the scenes of war. Can the picture ever fade? Streets thronged with the populace and decorated with the flag he was to defend! Can he ever forget the holy inspiration of the silent cheer from his speechless father, mother, sister or lover as he passed them?

Ask him how he values his memory of a thousand incidents of army life that are never recorded by a single line on the page of history, but which revealed comrade to comrade, knotted life to life, and gave opportunity for the expression of nobility by noble men.

Ask him how he values his memory of the hours of conflict when the magnetic touch of elbow to elbow, comrade to comrade, gave courage and the line grew firm as adamant; when the spirit of those who fell entered into those who remained, as the dying transformed their unwilling groans into cheers for the living. In the crucible of conflict men become molten. Their blood mingles. Their souls blend. Their lives are fused into the life of the Nation. Who that has felt the mystic power, the grand exaltation, the unutterable

joy of that supreme moment when his heart's blood leaped forth as he fell at his post, would call back one drop of it for all that can be given him in return?

Ask him now how he values the memory of that day, when, duty done, his mission accomplished, with tattered battle flags, clothes soiled and torn, bronzed face and hardened muscles—it may be with scarred and disabled body—he returned to his home with the survivors of his regiment. Again the streets are thronged with the populace and decorated with the National colors. The storm cloud passed, all are wild with joy made solemn by thoughts of those who could not come, remembered by none more tenderly than by those by whose side they fell. The glory of flowers, mingled with the voices of music, enchant the eye, perfume the air, exalt the soul. Suddenly, from out the mass of eager faces there darts a father, a mother, a sister or a lover, as some looked-for-one is recognized. The heart can endure the strain no longer. He is snatched from the ranks and embraced amidst the cheers of all observers.

Words!! There are no words for such moments! But the entry written by the recording angel that day will forever read—"Thank God! My boy, my brother, my lover has done his duty."

The days of trial and victory are passed, but memory causes them to live forever in the eternal NOW.

Such memories are the true reward of loyal duty courageously performed. They can be possessed only by those who have earned them. Find such a one, become acquainted with him, and you will find one who will exact least from the defended and is most generous to the vanquished.

These memories stir within old soldiers their best manhood, and thrill them with noblest pride as they look into each other's faces. They only are capable of appreciating at their true value the comrades of the campaign, the veterans of the battlefield. They, better than all others, know how to honor him that was loyal and performed the duties of loyalty when the Nation had need of his services.

All who seek to perpetuate the history of war for the preservation of the Union by pen or brush or chisel; all who speak about or ponder over the events of those days, must ever stand uncovered in the presence of him who can say of the first battle of Bull Run, of the last grand review, or of any of the battles between—"I performed the duties of Loyalty—I was there."

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