

THREE HEROES OF THE CIVIL WAR.

Further Recollections of the Featherston-Posey-Harris Brigade.

Defending Trenches Before Petersburg During the "Crater" Affair.

The Eventful Retreat of the Confederates to Appomattox.

The Fight at Fort Gregg—Captain Harris' Tribute to the Survivors of the Brigade.

(Note—This is the fourth and last of Mr. Foote's paper, successive installments of which have appeared in Monday's Pleynunc).

At the battle of the "Crater," the entire division was drawn out of the trenches except our brigade, and in their absence we manned their space at a distance of forty feet apart. In case of assault on our lines, the deficiency of infantry was to be supplied by field artillery, batteries of which were in easy distance of us. While the battle was raging just to our right, Generals Lee and A. P. Hill came into our works and scanned the entire front with anxious glances, they apprehending an attack along the division front. Both of them were very much exposed that day, as the federal sharpshooters were active and venomous, and many shot and shell rained close overhead, throwing fragments in every direction. An Irishman from the Forty-eighth, of his own accord, approached General Lee and pointed out the chief danger from the union pickets, and very earnestly remonstrated with him for exposing himself to this danger. General Lee seemed pleased with the man's earnestness and affection and said "he would be careful."

General Mahone, our division commander, was extremely vigilant and very aggressive on his lines. Every man who went out on picket duty was required to carry 100 rounds of ammunition, and was compelled to use it against the enemy's pickets, consequently there was a fusillade day and night for many weeks, and it became very wearisome to all. One dark rainy night, the Forty-eighth Regiment was sent outside the breastworks, taking only their guns and cartridge boxes. This movement was intended as a surprise of the enemy's pickets and endeavor to capture as many as possible. With due silence we crawled up close to the pickets, then made a rush, grabbing prisoners right and left.

A party of us were on outpost duty one night on the Weldon Railroad. A man in front was carefully answered, and directly a union soldier came out of the brush and was immediately laid hold of, to his great surprise. He said he belonged to an Ohio regiment and was out foraging, and hearing our signal in his hall, came to us. He was loaded with vegetables and fowls. I remember a guinea hen tied to his belt. The man's address was great and genuine. "I will be looked upon as a deserter," he kept saying. "I had no permission to leave camp, so I slipped away anyhow and this is the result. Please let me go back to my command, so I can make myself sought with my comrades, and then my family won't be disgraced." His appeal was very strong and touched us, but I am not sure but what he would have been allowed to escape. As it was, the officer of the line came along just behind and curtly ordered him to be sent to the rear, and the last we saw or heard of him he was begging the officer to give him a certificate as to how he was taken, and we seemed to think that his appeal was not in vain. He was a high-toned soldier, and the thought of his probable disgrace was fearful to him. We truly pitied him.

John Uri Lloyd, in his book, "Warwick of the Knobs," aptly says, and we apply the case here: "The men who fought battles, who charge and shoot and cut and shout and swear and kill and die, be they dressed in blue or in gray, be they as were we, clad in rags and shodless and hungry, are men, and respect each the other, be he clad in gray or in blue."

In August the brigade was above Richmond, fighting the enemy there, and was in a few days away down on the railroads below Petersburg, protecting them from the frequent raids of the cavalry. In October, at Burgess' Mill, they fought a heavy force of federals and suffered much loss, mostly in the Forty-eighth. Lieutenant S. B. Walker, of the Forty-eighth, was struck by twenty bullets and almost torn to pieces. His faithful negro servant, Nick Williams, came on to the field and carried the body to the rear, and carefully buried it for identification after the war should cease. (Nick is yet alive and draws a Confederate pension at Port Gibson, and every Memorial day he marches in the thinned ranks of Claiborne's veterans). In February, 1865, the brigade was at Hatcher's Run, bore the brunt of the battle, and made their last grand charge as a whole, and it was characterized as one of the boldest and most effective charges of the war. In this battle General Harris was mounted on his mascot horse "Yankee," and was conspicuous for gallantry and dash. General Harris never tired of talking of this last grand charge of the "old brigade," saying: "It was the proudest day of my command, and the old brigade, though worn thin, was invincible, and would have pulled the hinges off the gates of hell if ordered."

April 1, 1865, found them on the James river, in sight of the shipping, at the mouth of the Appomattox river. That night they were ordered under arms. Silently and cautiously they moved out of the works and aligned on a highway. One hundred men were left on picket duty, as they could not be relieved without exciting the suspicions of the enemy, but a few yards to the front. They had orders to follow when relieved and remained on the march to Appomattox. Cautious as they were, the enemy got wind of the movement and soon cannon after cannon sent shot and shell amid them. The ground around them was torn, trees ripped to pieces, while ricochet shells drew sparks from the stones of the highway, and overhead the bursting bombs made it almost as light as day. Erect, firm as adamant, they passed this stream of fire and they appeared as if on parade; then, head of column, on to Petersburg; and, to fate.

At sunrise they eventful morning. April 2, 1865, General Lee, whose lines had been badly ruptured the day before, anxiously inquired of General Mahone: "Can you spare me some men?"

General Harris and 400 of his Mississippians are close at hand; they are under your orders," said General Mahone. After passing through Petersburg, the brigade went south and were met by General Wilcox, who ordered General Harris to take positions at the junction of the Boydton and squirrel level roads. In fact, our late winter quarters. Later, the enemy demonstrating in heavy force, he was ordered to "occupy and defend Fort Gregg to the last man." Ammunition was hastily placed in the works and every preparation made for a desperate struggle. Inside the fort were already collected many stragglers from the broken lines. These men were unorganized. There was also a detachment of the Washington Artillery, two guns, under the command of Lieutenant Frank McElroy.

As soon as the command began taking position in the fort, a majority of this unorganized mass left the fort, evidently not liking the surroundings, though some remained and fought well. The Twenty-fifth and Sixteenth Regiments died in the fort and took position. These two regiments, numbering about 150 men, were found ample for the defense. The Nineteenth and Forty-eighth were assigned to Battery Whitworth (called Fort Baldwin by the enemy).

Fort Gregg was commanded by Lieutenant Colonel J. H. Duncan, of the Nineteenth, and Battery Whitworth by General Harris in person. The assault began on Fort Gregg, and was persistently kept up by regiment after regiment, of which they were most disastrously repulsed. Between 12 and 15 o'clock the place was invested on three sides, and then by concert of action, they assailed from front and sides, and the regiment was felled on the parapets.

A deadly clinch followed, which lasted for twenty-five minutes—one officer (union) says twenty-four minutes—and ended in the garrison being disarmed and captured—overwhelmed, but not vanquished. General Turner, a federal officer, says "his command buried fifty-six of the defenders." No statement has ever been made as to number of the wounded. The Nineteenth and Forty-eighth were not idle while the assault was going on, they firing at 600 yards range in flank, and materially assisted in the defense. They ceased firing when the enemy obtained footing on the works, as they were as liable to hit friend as foe.

When Gregg fell, the assault on Whitworth began, and the two regiments fought until the enemy were within forty yards of them, when an officer arrived hastily and ordered General Harris to fall back to Petersburg. This was done under fire, and many were wounded there, among them Colonel Jayne, who was captured also. His sword was surrendered to General T. M. Harris, of West Virginia, who, after twenty-eight years, returned it to him. Captain J. H. Duncan, commanding the Sixteenth Regiment in Fort Gregg, surrendered his sword to Adjutant J. E. Northrup, of the Eighty-ninth New York, who, in 1901, returned it to his surviving brother in Virginia.

Battery Whitworth was an indefensible work, being a washed-out redoubt only, and not over knee high; nevertheless, with the spirit that ever actuated the men of the brigade, they fought until ordered to retire. The federal regiments who stormed and captured Fort Gregg, after losing, one report says, 646, and another says 1,212, were the following: Thirty-ninth Illinois, Sixty-second Ohio, Sixty-ninth Ohio, One Hundred and Ninety-ninth Pennsylvania, Tenth Connecticut, Eleventh Maine, One Hundredth New York, Eighty-ninth New York, One Hundred and Fifty-eighth New York, Fifty-fifth Pennsylvania, Eighth Maine, One Hundred and Sixteenth Ohio, Thirty-fourth Massachusetts, Twelfth West Virginia, Eleventh West Virginia, Fifteenth West Virginia, Fifty-fourth Pennsylvania, Twenty-third Illinois, a battalion of sharpshooters, and a battery. The brunt of the loss fell upon the One Hundred and Ninety-ninth Pennsylvania, 115 men; Eleventh Maine, 112 men; Tenth Connecticut, 104 men; and the Sixty-second Ohio, 101 men, and their loss was almost double that of the defenders. Several of these federal regiments were presented golden eagles by General Gibbon, corps commander, to surmount their colors, in recognition of this assault and capture.

That night, in common with the army, the remnant of our brigade retired from Petersburg, and en route were joined by 100 men left on picket on the James river. On the retreat to Appomattox Courthouse they had many brushes with the enemy's cavalry, who tried to seize our trains, but we easily beat all of them off, and preserved the integrity of the brigade to the last. The long wagon train assigned to them for protection was brought through safely, and was turned over at the surrender. With the remnant of Mahone's Division, they turned over 500 prisoners, 400 of them being captured by them, and another brigade near Farmville. There were surrendered at Appomattox, April 9, '65, officers and 330 men. This number included details of all sorts, provost guards, wagoners, artisans, clerks, hospital corps men, cooks, litter bearers, quartermaster, commissary and ordnance departments. Of the writer's company also were paroled. The company originally had 108 members, and this handful represented them in the finale. Thus passed into history a brigade made famous by its commanders, and its commanders made famous by them.

Probably to-day Harris' Brigade is more widely known than any other of that famous army that "for four years bore the revolt of the southern states upon its bayonets, and only by annihilation were they overcome." After the surrender, with guns stacked, paroles in their pockets, they turned their weary heads towards "the Father of Waters," distant 1,300 miles, and commenced that journey that would in time bring them home, perhaps to find that home ruined, family scattered, and an added stone in the churchyard; and when home was reached, they were quietly absorbed in the body politic, and ever trod the highways with a consciousness that they, at least, had done their duty as men.

Several years ago Captain W. N. McDonald read a paper before the Southern Historical Society, at Richmond, Va., and extracts from it are as follows: "When Harris' Mississippi Brigade, of Mahone's Division, were informed of the surrender, and ordered to cease firing, most of the officers and men refused to obey, declaring they would never surrender. Mahone went and expostulated with them, but they would not listen to him. Finally Lee came and made a personal appeal. For some time even his authority was disregarded. Many of the officers and men gathered around him and implored him not to put on them such disgrace. With tears they begged him to trust himself to their care, swearing they could and would carry him through safely, and telling him once in the mountains he could soon raise another army. But Lee told them in broken accents and with many tears that he could not break his word; that his honor was involved. Finally he asked them, if they who had so long followed him and stood by him so faithfully were ashamed to share his fate." This appeal they could not resist, though with heart-breaking sobs they yielded. "There is hardly a doubt that this brigade would have carried Lee safely had he let them try it." Mahone called them his "Invincibles," and he often selected them for quick and desperate work. "What shall we say, then, of those who not only covered with their bodies the retreat of a broken army, but with their own life-blood kept alive a dying cause; who unappalled by repeated disasters (to others) still turned, like lions at bay, upon their pursuers, and who, though ready to drop from watching and marching and famishment, never gave up to the bitter end."

It may not be amiss to say that the writer was detailed as courier to General Harris, as we marched to Petersburg, and in those eight days I saw much to admire in the general. While carrying an order to the skirmish line my horse was killed, and I did not succeed in getting a remount for several days, and when I did it was a poor, broken-down captured one. He was young and hardly bridled, and had a habit of going just where you didn't want him to go. I had two scraps with men who thought I was riding over them intentionally. One day I dismounted to give him a feed of peas, which I found spilled in the road, but which he wouldn't eat. When I pulled myself into the saddle, the horse being so weak, actually fell across me, pinning me to the ground, to my disgust and the merriment of a fellow-courier. On the morning of the surrender a man of the Forty-eighth came into camp, mounted on a magnificent stallion, black as a coal, and as bristful of action as a bottle of soda water. General Harris knew the animal was stolen, so he took him away from the man and told me to use him until the owner came for him. Being a poor rider at the best, I was not pleased with the charge, for I knew that when I mounted that fiery beast, and he plunged around, I would be the target for every man in the union army in range. For this reason the surrender did not hurt me as much as it did others.

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