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Infantry

EXPERIENCE OF A CONFEDERATE SOLDIER IN CAMP AND PRISON IN THE CIVIL
WAR 1861-1865

by

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I have often thought before I answered the last roll and passed over the River to join the Silent Host that fell before the roaring cannon and rattling musket that I would give my experiences as a Confederate soldier and as a prisoner of war. I have been often asked by my children and grandchildren for my experiences or war record. After fifty years have passed I have consented to do this, though they were harrowing (especially my prison experience), that it seems incredible except to those who were there and experienced the same, terrible suffering. I can only from a clouded memory give a brief outline, for to do otherwise would make a large volume.

Chapter I

I left my home (near Rose Hill, Jasper County, MS) and loved ones with three other companions on the second day of June, 1861 and went to Corinth, Mississippi where the Miss. Troops were rendezvoused and being drilled for the conflict. I was so afraid that the Yankees would be whipped before I could get there. I would not wait for a company to be formed at home. After looking around a day or two we decided to join the Enterprise Guard, which was designated Company B., and was one of ten companies composing the Fourteenth Mississippi Regiment. I was small for my age, not weighing over a hundred pounds, and tender looking, with not a sign of beard on my face. R.S. Weir was Captain of Company B, when I made application to join his company. He looked at me as though he doubted the propriety of receiving me. He doubtless would have rejected me had it not been for my companions who were with me and older than I. They testified that my parents were willing for me to join the army. However, it was not long before he found that I was made of good tough stuff. I was often detailed to perform some difficult task because I did not give out as some did who were much stouter than I. I suppose we remained at Corinth for two or three months drilling every day. Finally to our great joy we received orders to go to Russellville in East Tennessee. The Union men and Southern sympathizers were having a hot time. The Southern sympathizers were in the minority and were being terribly persecuted by the Union men. We soon restored order and gave all who

wanted to join the Confederate Army a chance to do so. We were next ordered to Bowling Green, Kentucky, where we thought we were going into winter quarters. Some time in January 1862 we were ordered to Russellville, Ky. We remained there a short time and were ordered to Fort Donelson. On arrival we were ordered in the breast works surrounding the fort.

I will describe the battle of Fort Donelson [-1-], more minutely than any other in which I was engaged from the fact that it was my first Baptism of Shot and Shell and was a land and naval battle all in one. Fort Donelson consisted of two batteries on the Cumberland River, protected by breast works surrounding it. On the 12th day of February, 1862, The battle opened with sharp shooting all along the line on both sides. The first day's battle closed with no perceptible gain by either side. Day broke on the 13th to find two armies looking each other in the face. The cannonading and sharp shooting commenced as the day before had. The Yankees brought up one gun boat near the fort and fired about one hundred and fifty shots. The one of our 128 lb. Balls went crashing through her, damaging her so she went drifting out of sight and was seen no more. Along the fortifications the Infantry kept a continual firing on both sides all day, killing and wounding a great many on both sides. The dead and wounded were left on the battle field to take a terrible snow storm which fell that night several inches deep. Some of the wounded scratched around to save their lives from the burning woods that had caught on fire from the guns during the day's battle (which was a beautiful fair day) and remained there to perish in the snow.

Day broke on the 14th to find everything covered in snow. We were without shelter, food, or fire to warm by, except for a few small sticks. Up until this time we scored victory at every point. The enemy attacked our works at every point and were repulsed with heavy loss. While we were rejoicing over victories they were greatly reinforced. At the break of day on the 15th we were far outside the lines of our breast works, attacking; firing volley after volley into them as they huddled by their camp fires. Having taken them by surprise, with less than 8,000 men we waded through the snow and routed 30,000; capturing over 5,000 stands of small arms, six pieces of artillery, and a great many prisoners. Twice that day the 14th Miss. Reg. To which I belonged was ordered to a bayonet charge, but the Yankees would not stand. Gen. Buckner had opened the way for our escape, but instead of that he was ordered by our chief commanders, Floyd and Pillow, back to the trenches we had left the day before.

General Grant had been receiving reinforcements every day, until now his forces numbered over four to one of our worn-out, frozen soldiers. During the night of the 15th a council of war was held. The

same was communicated to General Grant, who proposed surrender. General Forest was in the council and refused to surrender. He contended that the way was open for us to march out and he marched his command (which was Cavalry) all along our lines of works. This was the first intimation we had that we were prisoners of war. So we had nothing to do but stand around our fires and talk of our experiences and narrow escapes during the four days of carnage.

Chapter II

The next morning after our surrender we were marched to the river where there were several old hulks of steam boats that appeared to be rotted from bottom to top. We were crowded on the lower decks one thousand to the boat. We were much more in danger on the decks of these old boats that we were when we were facing Yankee bullets. We had no idea where we were going. We were carried to Cairo, Illinois; then up the Mississippi by way of St. Louis to Alton, Ill. We were landed there after spending eight days on the lower decks of those old boats, eating and sleeping on stone coal scattered all over the bottom almost knee deep. We were crowded into cattle cars like so many cattle and horses and after twelve hours ride, through a terrible blizzard, we were landed at Chicago, a motley looking set. We had all our cooking utensils with us, camp kettles, skillets, ovens, frying pans, coffee pots, tin pans, tin cups, and plates. We had them on our heads, on our backs, swinging from our sides, and in our hands. Some of our boys were bareheaded, having their hats blown off on the way; some had hats and caps with no brims, and some with no crowns. As we were the first batch of prisoners we were quite a show. The people had to see us so we were marched out in square to square and from street to street with thousands of people running over each other to see us. Some would curse us and call us poor, ignorant devils; some would curse Jeff Davis for getting us 'poor ignorant creatures' into such a trap. I suppose the children had been told that we had horns and tails, for they crowded near us and kept saying, "where are their horns and where are their tails, I don't see them."

After we were almost frozen we were marched two miles to Camp Douglas Prison. Every step of the way was through ice cold mud. Our pants legs up to our knees were frozen as stiff as raw hides. Then people by the hundreds followed us to the very gates of the prison, and from that day on it seemed that they never tired of looking at us. They visited the prison everyday in great crowds until an order was issued prohibiting it. Then some enterprising Yankee built an observatory just outside the prison wall. It was crowded with people from morning until night. Camp Douglas had been erected for a rendezvous and drilling ground for Ill. Troops. Every thing looked new and clean. I

think that we were the first arrival of prisoners. Each barracks had a capacity of 125 prisoners. On each side of the barracks there were three tiers of bunks, one above another, with a narrow hall between and a heater in the center. The prison was laid off in squares and had the appearance of a little town. It had a plank wall around it 15 ft. high with a 3 ft. walk on top for the guards to walk on. There was a commissary in the center where our rations were kept and issued every morning. They fed us very well on provisions they would not issue their own soldiers.

The guards, or Hospital Rats, as we called them, had never been to the front and seen any service and they were overbearing and cruel in the extreme. We had some boys who would not take anything from them. We all got water from Lake Michigan by Hydrant, the guards as well as prisoners. At first when they came for water and found one of our buckets under the pump they would kick it over and place theirs in its place. They never failed to get knocked down when they did this and before they could recover the one who had done it would be hidden in some barracks and we would never give each other away. However, they were not long in learning that it was a risky business.

Sometimes our boys, for some trivial offense, would be punished by putting them in the white oak, as they called it. It was a guard house made of white oak logs twelve or fourteen inches in diameter, notched down close with one small window in the end. Inside, the wall was a dungeon eight or ten feet deep. It was entered by a trap door, a pair of steps led down into this dark foul hole. It was pitch dark in there; one could not see his hand before him when the door was closed. One who had not been in such a place cannot have the least conception of it. I was thrown in this place for a trivial offense, for attempting to get a bucket of water at a hospital well while our hydrant was out of fix. I spent four of the most wretched hours of my life in that terrible place. I was taken out by the same guard who put me in there, and the cursing he gave me when he let me out would be a sin for me to repeat. I opened not my mouth; I knew better. I received one more genteel cursing while wounded in the prisoner's hospital at Nashville, which I will speak of later on. There were some of our poor boys, for little infraction of the prison rules, riding what they called Morgan's mule every day. That was one mule that did the worst standing stock still. He was built after the pattern of those used by carpenters. He was about fifteen feet high; the legs were nailed to the scantling so one of the sharp edges was turned up, which made it very painful and uncomfortable to the poor fellow especially when he had to be ridden bareback, sometimes with heavy weights fastened to his feet and sometimes with a large beef bone in each hand. This performance was carried on under the eyes of a guard with a loaded gun, and was kept up for several days; each

ride lasting two hours each day unless the fellow fainted and fell off from pain and exhaustion. Very few were able to walk after this hellish Yankee torture but had to be supported to their barracks. There was another diabolical device invented; that was the ball and chain route. However that was seldom used unless some of the prisoners attempted to escape and were caught. The chain was riveted around the ankle and the ball at the other end of the chain. It was almost as much as the poor fellow could carry. That was one thing that stuck closer than a brother. It went with him by day and by night, and even lay by his side in his cold naked bunk at night.

Sometime in September after our capture in February we, to our unspeakable joy received notice that we would soon be exchanged and sent back to dear ol Mississippi. We were this time marched to the railroad and packed in horse and cattle cars which were filthy in the extreme; but that was all right. It was a joy ride for us. We laughed, sang, and shed tears of joy at our release from prison. We made a bee-line to Cairo, over three hundred miles through the finest corn region in the world. From Cairo we were sent down the Miss. River to Vicksburg and from there to Clinton Miss. Where we went into camp, electing officers, and re-enlisting for three years of the war. We were furnished our necessary equipment, for the Yankees had stripped us of everything except what we had on.

Chapter III

We were placed under the command of General Johnston, and participated in all of his movements for the release of Vicksburg. When Vicksburg was surrendered we fell back to Jackson. We were ordered to store our knapsacks with all dispensable baggage in the Edwards Hotel, telling us that it would follow us. During the time we had been in Mississippi our mothers had made and sent us plenty of good warm clothing. We left it all in that hotel. Fifty years have come and gone. I have often stopped at the Edwards House and I always think of my old knapsack.

We fell back to Newton. It was while we were there my Captain gave me permission to go home to see my parents, who I had not seen since I joined the Army. He told me he would have me marked present until the next night. I left the camp at dark. I am sure I ran and trotted two thirds of the way home---eighteen miles. The next night my father placed me on a horse, and a negro on a mule and carried me near our camp. No one but my Captain and a few others knew that I had been absent.

From Newton we went to Resaca and in a few hours were plunged into a desperate fight. One member of our company was killed [1] and

several were wounded. General Joseph E. Johnston was put in command of the army and from that day on for one hundred or more days we were constantly fighting, retreating, and destroying railroads. A short time after we arrived at Atlanta General J. E. Johnston was superseded by General J. B. Hood. On the 22nd of July he gave battle. He lost heavily and gained nothing. On the 26th of July he again gave battle and the result was the same. Sherman, rather than attacking us in our breastworks marched his army around us and started for the sea.

Gen. Hood turned his back on him and started for Nashville, Tenn., crossing the Tennessee river at Florence, Alabama. We soon came in contact with Gen. Scofield, who was in command of Federal forces in Tennessee. He retreated before us until he reached Franklin, where he had good breast works and decided to give battle. The survivors of Franklin who were in the midst of the carnage are indelibly impressed with the dreadful events that occurred on that fateful evening and night of the 30th of November, 1864. I went through that terrible carnage with out a scratch and now I believe it was the answer to the prayers of loved ones at home that I was spared. I know I went into the last line of the enemy's breastworks and as far as any Confederate soldier went.

The next morning after the battle I was detailed to help bury the dead. I am sure I do not exaggerate when I say in places the dead were piled upon each other three and four deep. Sometimes we would find a poor wounded comrade pinned down by several dead comrades lying on him. Our brave Commander, General John Adams, rode his horse to the top of the enemy's breastworks. His horse was killed with his fore-feet and head hanging in the inside of their works. Gen. Adams was pierced with eight minnie balls and fell inside the works and died in fifteen minutes in the arms of a Federal Colonel. We dug trenches two and one half feet deep and wide enough for two to lay side by side. A piece of oil cloth or blanket was spread over their faces and covered up. Every one that could be identified a small piece of plank was placed on their head with their names on it. Thus we left them until the Resurrection Morn. We had six brave Generals killed, all lying in a row on the gallery of a private house.

The Battle of Franklin, Tennessee was the worst slaughter pen of all our battles, with a greater loss of live on our side than any other battle of the war, according to numbers and time the engagement lasted. We had nearly 7,000 killed and wounded in less than three hours. Mississippi's loss was greater than any other state. Nearly one third of those killed were Mississippians.

Before daylight the next morning the Federals were in full retreat.

We followed them to Nashville and on the 15th and 16th the two armies clashed again. General Thomas was in command of the federal Army. On the 16th our lines were broken and Gen. Hood's army routed. On the 16th in the evening, I was desperately wounded in almost a hand to hand fight; the Yankees not being more than twenty steps from me. We both shot at each other at the same time. I ran a few yards and fell [wounded in right thigh ~ ed.], and while lying on my back on the ground unable to help myself a drunk soldier who was a Russian would have wounded me had it not been for one of their officers who had stopped near me. He was in the act of running his bayonet through me when the officer gave him a shove. He went on over me and perhaps murdered some other poor fellow.

While lying there two young men, Illinois soldiers, approached me and asked what regiment I belonged. I told them the 14th Mississippi. They said, "You were at Fort Donelson. We were there too. You fought bravely." About that time an ambulance came along gathering up their wounded. They picked me up and put me in it. The driver cursed and said he would throw me out as soon as he got out of their sight. However, he did not put his threat into execution.

I was carried to a private house that they were using for a hospital for their wounded. I think I was the only Confederate soldier in the building. I was carried to the city the next morning and placed in a hospital prepared for the wounded prisoners. Many of our boys lay on the battlefield next evening and perhaps many died for the want of attention. I got along nicely until about the ninth day, when my wound commenced painning me terribly. One of the hospital doctors examined it and said I had a bad case of gangrene. He had me carried to the Gangrene ward. I was placed on the amputation table, chloroform was administered and they did their cutting without me knowing anything about it. When I came to I was snugly wrapped up in my bunk crying like a baby. In a few days gangrene made its appearance again. I was placed on the table and chloroform was again administered. There were two things that stuck closer than a brother; that was the itch and body lice or greyback as they were politely called. There was always enough filthy ones to keep it alive and going. I had a bad case of the itch. While in the gangrene ward it became very bad; so much that my hands were swollen and my fingers stood apart. Sores and yellow blisters came between them and they ran corruption. I could scarcely touch anything, my hands were so sore. The doctor prepared sulfur and grease for me to rub my hands with. It was placed on a small table at my head. Some one passing by knocked it off on the floor. The nurse, who was a hospital rat, asked if I did it. I told him "No!" He said, "You are a d___ lie" and stood over me and cursed me for five minutes. I never heard such vile oaths fall from the lips of a man. I was in his hands and helpless and said

nothing. However, I got over the itch and the cursing and in a few weeks I was able to travel and set off for Camp Chase Prison.

Chapter IV

Camp Chase was situated four miles west of Columbus, Ohio, the capitol of the state. The prison had a wall around it sixteen feet high. There was a partition wall that divided the prison into two apartments, and was known as prison No. 1 and No. 2. I occupied prison No. 1. Each prison contained seven or eight acres of land and each held 4,000 prisoners. No 2 was called by the prisoners in No. 1 the Razorbacks.

The gates to the two prisons stood side by side and opened into each prison. When we arrived at the gates we were told if we would take the oath of allegiance to the United States and to into Prison No. 2 they would have bountiful rations, plenty of blankets and fires to keep them warm, but if they went into Prison No. 1 they would have no promises to make. As a matter of regret many went into the Razorback Prison. The guards were placed on the wall with loaded guns with instructions to shoot to kill with the least infringement of prison rules. The barracks were on the pattern of Camp Douglas Prison with three narrow bunks, one above another on each side of the barracks. By spooning two could lie in one bunk. We slept on the naked planks, straw being allowed. Some poor bony fellows hipbones were through the skin sleeping on the naked plank. We were not allowed fires in our stove after night. In our emaciated and rundown condition with nothing to wear but our light southern clothing and many of us in rags, you can imagine our terrible condition with zero weather almost half the time. We had no chairs or benches and when we sat we sat on the floor. We were guarded by a heartless set of wretches. They had never been to the front and baptized in the fire of battle; therefore they were cruel and mean in the extreme often shooting unsuspecting prisoners without the least provocation. After taps, as they call it, no lights were allowed and after that all was quiet as death until morning.

As to our rations: there was just enough to keep us ravenously hungry all the time; one half loaf of bakers bread eight inches long divided between eight men, one inch to the man twice a day; with that one tablespoonful of navy beans with a piece of pickled beef or salt pork about the size of a person's forefinger. We had a kitchen sergeant who had the cooking done for his barracks. When ready it was handed to us through a window in a tin cup, with the liquor it was cooked in. The guards would throw down apple cores and peelings and enjoy seeing our poor starving boys scuffle for them. The hospital was just outside the prison wall. There was a ditch four feet wide and three

feet deep. It was planked up side and bottom and from the hospital it passed through our prison, and in it all the filth of the prison was deposited, including the scraps from the hospital, such as scraps of meat, bakers bread, onions and beef bones, etc. At the head of the ditch was a large tank. It was pumped full of water every day by a detail of prisoners. We all knew when the flood gates would be raised and the water turned loose. It would come sweeping down, bringing the garbage with other filth deposited in it during the day. Our boys would be strung along the sides of the ditch and as it came floating by they would grab it and eat it like hungry dogs. Beef bones was a choice morsel. We would take them and pound them up and place them in tin cups and boil them until the marrow was boiled out. When cold there would be a thin cake of tallow on top. We would spread it on our bread like butter. Had Lazerus been laid out at (our) gate he would not have gotten a crumb. A little snowbird would have starved to death at our feet. I now, after fifty years, recall some of the fitful scenes of the starved, emaciated young men. Those once proud Southerners who had been victorious in many a battle kicked and cuffed, starving and sick at heart, and in despair with no hope sitting waiting for the scraps from the hospital to be washed to their feet with the garbage and excrement all clumped in the same ditch together. There are no words adequate to depict the outrageous cruelties and barbarities perpetrated upon helpless prisoners by some of those who had them in charge. The small pox was raging all the time but we cared nothing for that. We did not have vitality enough to produce a scab. I used the blanket of one of my comrades that was carried to the pest house and was glad to get it. The scurvy was also terrible, eating the gums away and the teeth falling out, leaving the victim a perfect wreck, all for the want of proper food. There was another species of suffering that befell the tobacco users. It was pitiful to see them following those who were lucky enough to have a little money to buy tobacco, watching until they threw it out of their mouths to pick it up off the ground and put it in their own mouths or take it to their quarters and dry and smoke it.

Chapter V

In making this statement of my war experiences and prison life, I have endeavored to state the facts as they occurred to my mind after a lapse of over fifty years. I have only given a sketch, especially of the live and hardships of the Confederate soldier on the march, of short rations and often none, and of the forced marches by day and by night, through rain, snow, and ice, cold mud; thinly clad, oft times barefooted with bleeding feet, all for a cause so dearly loved. About the 10th of April, 1865, we were told General Lee had surrendered to General Grant. We received the news with great sorrow for we wanted to be exchanged so we could have a chance to even up

with the for their cruelty to us. We were told we would be released on taking the oath of allegiance to the United States Government in squads of two to three hundred every day until all were released. There were a good many of us who said we would not take the oath but we were plainly informed that was the only way we would be released.

On the 13th day of June, 1865, the oath of allegiance was administered to us and we, through the providence of God, walked out of the prison gates free men with free transportation papers in our pockets to our homes. My comrade, M. F. Roberts and I walked to Columbus; from there we went to Cincinnati, where we stopped over for several hours. We were conducted to the 5th Market Square; there the Ladies Aid Society met us with canned goods and second hand clothing; all of which we greatly needed; from there we went to Louisville, Ky. We were conducted by the ladies to a tobacco shed where we were again supplied with all kinds of canned goods and second-hand clothing. Some of us were in rags. My pants legs were worn off almost to my knees. I had not a coat and but one old ragged shirt, which I had worn since the day I was captured. A good merchant took pity on me or was ashamed to see me walk the streets of his city (especially when my back was to him) in my garb and took me into his store and gave me a good pair of pants and a shirt. From Louisville we went to Memphis; from there we went down the Mississippi River to Vicksburg. We walked twelve miles to Big Rock, the railroad having been destroyed. From there we went by rail to Jackson and to Hickory, where I arrived on Sunday evening on the 26th of June, 1865. I struck a trot for home a distance of twelve miles. In two hours I was in the arms of my dear mother, having spent only one night under my father's roof in four years and twenty-four days.

Signed:

M. A. Ryan

PS: I want to say in conclusion I have long since forgiven those who had us in their power and were so cruel. I have not the least spark of bitterness in my breast against them. I pray they have repented and have been forgiven and that we will meet on the shores of sweet deliverance.

I saw and talked to two men, one from Chicago and the other from Columbus, Ohio. I asked them about our dead at each of those two places. They said the cemeteries were enclosed with a stone wall five feet high and at the entrance a beautiful arch with the word "AMERICANS" and the graves were decorated every year as were the union soldiers.

While it is true it has been over fifty years since the war has ended yet there are things we can't forget and were hard for us to forgive the diabolical deeds perpetrated by men who called themselves Union soldiers. In our meditations our minds run back upon that field of 5600 young lives that went out at Camp Douglas and the 2300 at Camp Chase, all among strange people far from home with no fond and loving mother to speak a loving word to tell them in their dying hours or to close their eyes in death. There they now rest in their rude pine coffins with their old Confederate blankets as their shrouding. When we think of our deceased comrades we can but wonder was it neglect, disease, or starvation. The all wise God only knows.

M. A. Ryan