

CONTRIBUTIONS

TO A

History of the Richmond Howitzer Battalion.

Diary of T. Roberts Baker, of the Second Howitzer Company, of Richmond, Va.

(Written from Memory.)

I was elected a member of the original *ante-bellum* Howitzer Company, in the latter part of January, 1860. The company was then commanded by Captain George W. Randolph. J. C. Shields was First Lieutenant. I was a private in the company when the war between the United States and the Confederate States commenced. I think it was in March, 1861, that the company went into barracks in one of the stores under the Spotswood Hotel, on the site now occupied by the Pace Block. The company was then put on a war footing, and we were required to drill with our cannon three or four times a day. Every morning, a certain number of the members were detailed for guard duty, but when not on duty we were allowed to go to our places of business or homes, provided we were punctually present at drill hours. James Ellett was our Orderly Sergeant. He always excused me from guard duty at night, owing to the fact that I slept in my drug store, where I dispensed physicians' prescriptions at all hours of the night. About the middle of April, 1861, we were marched to the Capitol Square one fine morning, where we were all sworn in as enlisted soldiers, belonging to the Virginia forces, by the late Colonel John Baldwin of Staunton, and in a few days afterwards we were marched out to the Baptist College, located beyond the western extremity of Broad street. Here, we were put on a regular war footing, and subjected to all of the discipline and usages of a regular army in time of war. Captain Gray Latham's Battery, and Captain Jefferson Peyton's Battery, were soon sent to join us, and a regular Artillery Camp was organized under the command of Colonel John Bankhead Magruder who had just resigned

from the United States Army, where he had acquired fame as an accomplished artillery officer. When we went into barracks at the Spotswood Hotel, our company consisted of one hundred men, but before we left there for the Baptist College we had recruited to three hundred men. Sleeping about a dozen men in a room, without any furniture in it, on the hard floor, under strict surveillance, soon gave us a prospective idea of the real hardships of war as compared with ornamental military life in a time of profound peace. There was one exception, however, to the strict discipline of military life in this camp which we were not slow to avail ourselves of, and that was the absence at our meals of our army rations of bacon, meal, rice, &c. These rations were simply treated with silent contempt, and instead of these we feasted upon the most luxurious fare, prepared and sent out to us from the city by the mothers, sisters, and sweethearts of the incipient warriors. But this kind of existence was destined to be of brief duration. On the 6th of May, 1861, at 11 o'clock in the morning, we were unexpectedly called on parade. The roll having been called, Lieutenant Brown was directed by Captain Randolph to select his men, for what purpose we did not know and could not learn. Lieutenant Brown passed along the line, ordering each man as he selected them to step to the front four paces. I happened to be one of the fifty thus selected. The remainder of the men were then dismissed, and the fifty selected men were ordered to prepare to march at once. I was detained by Lieutenant Brown, who informed me that he had appointed me commissary, and ordered me to report to the commissary department, where I was furnished with a one-horse covered wagon containing five days' rations for fifty men. With this equipment I was ordered to proceed without delay to the Spotswood Hotel, where I met the balance of the command. It was a gloomy, rainy day, and such was the haste with which we were hurried off to the York River Railroad Depot that I had no time to see any of my relatives and say good bye. For although the men were dismissed to report promptly in thirty minutes, I was ordered to go in search of tin cups, matches, and similar articles for the use of the men when in camp, which consumed the whole thirty minutes. On reaching the depot I was furnished with a box car for the commissary supplies, and ordered to remain with them whilst my comrades

were seated in comfortable coach cars. We left the depot about 2 P. M., and had only proceeded some twelve or fifteen miles when the locomotive became disabled, and we had to send back to Richmond for another locomotive. We were thus detained on the road the entire night, arriving at West Point at 7 o'clock the next morning.

As soon as we arrived Lieutenant Brown directed me to inform the men that they could either have their rations issued to them and cook them themselves, or pay for our breakfasts at the hotel. The men unanimously elected to pay for their breakfasts, which was served in about an hour. After breakfast, having transferred our two brass Howitzer cannon, together with the commissary stores, &c., to the steamboat in waiting for us, we were all marched on board, and concealed between decks. The guns were placed in position in the bow of the boat in such a manner that they could not be seen from the outside, but when the time came for action they could quickly be rolled forward, and operated successfully against an enemy. We were informed that a Federal gun-boat was patrolling the river, and that if we should meet with her on our way down to Gloucester Point (our destination—about twenty miles below West Point), we would be expected to capture her at all hazards.

This, viewed from our stand-point, looked like a speck of war, and many speculations were indulged in by the boys, on our way down the river, as to who or how many would be killed and wounded when we attempted to board the Yankee gun-boat. After a very excited journey of about two hours we were landed, with our equipments, at Gloucester Point. This place we found being fortified, and under the command of Colonel William B. Taliaferro. The boat which brought us down returned at once to West Point. Rations were issued to the men, who were engaged in cooking their dinners, when it was discovered that the Federal gunboat "Yankee" was coming up the river. This boat was guarding the mouth of the river, and her officers perceived, with the aid of their glasses, the arrival and departure of the steamboat which brought us down. They were in pursuit of our steamboat, and evidently had never heard of the Richmond Howitzers. A great scene of excitement immediately ensued. Colonel Taliaferro ordered us to abandon our dinner and prepare for battle. Our guns were placed in position on the

beach and manned ready for action. In a comparatively short time the "Yankee" made her appearance and attempted to pass up the river. Acting under instructions from Colonel Taliaferro, we fired across her bows, as a warning that she would not be allowed to pass. But as she disregarded the warning, we were ordered to fire into her, which brought about an artillery engagement, lasting, I suppose, some fifteen or twenty minutes, at the expiration of which time we had put two balls in at her water-mark. She then careened to one side, and retreated in that position.

Of course the news of the first naval engagement of the war in Virginia waters spread rapidly through the neighborhood, and for several weeks our camp was daily visited by the ladies and gentlemen of Gloucester county, who, grateful almost beyond expression for the service we had rendered them in driving away that much-dreaded gunboat, came in their carriages loaded with presents in the shape of fresh meats, cakes, strawberries, vegetables, fresh milk, &c. Mr. John R. Bryan, a prominent citizen of the county, placed at our disposal a negro boy, named Charles, who was an excellent cook, and informed us that everything on his plantation was at our service. So that once more we began to turn up our noses at our army rations. About the latter part of May General Magruder came down from Richmond and established a military post at Yorktown, on the opposite side of the River. As we belonged to his command, we were ordered over, and established our camp near the beach, just under a high bluff, on the brow of which a fort, bristling with heavy Columbiads, was afterwards located. With this transfer all of our happy hours in company with the charming Gloucester ladies, and their substantial accompaniments, at once vanished, and we again became the victims of a rigid military discipline.

In a short time after our arrival at Yorktown, we were joined by the remainder of our company—the Second Howitzers—who came down from Richmond with the Third company. Then came regiments of infantry and several companies of cavalry.

About the 1st of June our battalion Commissary was called to Richmond, and I was ordered to take his place. This caused me to be absent from the command when the battle of Bethel was fought, on the 10th of June. The Commissary returned

from Richmond a day or two after the battle of Bethel, and I then resumed my place in my detachment.

About the 15th of June our company was ordered to march. We left Yorktown at 2 o'clock P. M., arriving at Bethel at 11 o'clock that evening. When we were within two miles of Bethel, the column was halted for the purpose, it was said, of sending in our report to headquarters. We remained for one hour exposed to a drenching rain, when the order "Column, forward," was given along the line, and we soon reached Bethel, wet, tired, and hungry. The first thing that every man wanted was something to eat, but no rations were issued until next morning. The next thing was some place to sleep—out of the pouring rain. But all available shelter had been secured by the soldiers of infantry regiments who had arrived before us.

One of my comrades called me aside and shared with me some Bologna sausage and crackers which had come into his possession. Feeling very much refreshed by my unexpected supper, I entered the church in company with several of my comrades in search of some place to sleep. We found the entire floor covered with sleeping soldiers, and there was no place where another man could lie down. The officer of the night was a Zouave Sergeant, who approached our party and offered any one of us the use of his lounge, saying that his duties would compel him to remain up all night. My comrades, very generously, unanimously insisted upon my accepting the kind offer, and I was soon sleeping soundly on a comfortable lounge, when all others in the church were lying on the hard floor, and many others outside on the wet ground, with the rain pouring upon them.

The next day we put up our large Sibley tents and began to feel at home. The Zouave Battalion (six companies), two regiments of infantry, the Second and Third Howitzer companies, and a company of cavalry were in camp here, under command of General J. B. Magruder. After three or four days of camp routine a sensation was created by the arrival at our picket line of a flag of truce from Old Point, with a request from General B. F. Butler for the body of Major Winthrop, who was killed at the battle of Bethel while gallantly leading his men in a charge. The body was disinterred, wrapped in a sheet, and placed in a cart. A detail of Howitzers acting as escort, under the lead of

General Magruder, Colonel Hill, of the First North Carolina Regiment, and Major Randolph, of the Howitzers, proceeded with these remains about three miles down the road, where they were met by Captain Butler and several other Federal officers, who had in waiting a handsome hearse. The remains of Major Winthrop were delivered to these officers, who entered into conversation with our officers and took occasion to praise the bravery and skill of the Richmond Howitzers. They said that their most experienced men had never seen cannon more skillfully handled. Before taking leave of our officers they invited them to a social glass of the best French brandy, accompanied with genuine Havana cigars. A few days after the visit of the enemy under flag of truce, as just described, one fine morning, just after breakfast, the entire camp was thrown into great confusion by the excited appearance of several videttes, who came riding in from the picket posts which lay in the direction of Fortress Monroe, exclaiming that the enemy, three thousand strong, were only three miles below and were rapidly approaching. The different commands were rapidly formed in ranks, and the command given by General Magruder to march, went sounding along the lines. Every one of us expected to be under fire in a very short time. The Zouaves, who were disappointed because they did not arrive in time to participate in the battle of Bethel, seemed pleased beyond description at the prospect of a fight. They were doomed to be again disappointed, however, for as soon as we reached the main road in column, orders were given to double-quick towards Yorktown, reaching there that evening. It was afterwards ascertained that the videttes had reported a false alarm, and, in fact, there was no enemy nearer than the neighborhood of Fortress Monroe.

My active connection with the company ceased about the latter part of July, 1861, when I was ordered by Major Randolph to report to Dr. W. C. N. Randolph, Surgeon of the Howitzer Battallion, for service in the Medical Department, and I assisted Dr. Randolph in organizing a large hospital a few miles above Yorktown, on the York river. My name remained on the roll of the Second Howitzers until the summer of 1862, when Captain Watson sent me an official discharge.