

A REMINISCENT STORY OF THE GREAT CIVIL WAR

FIRST PAPER

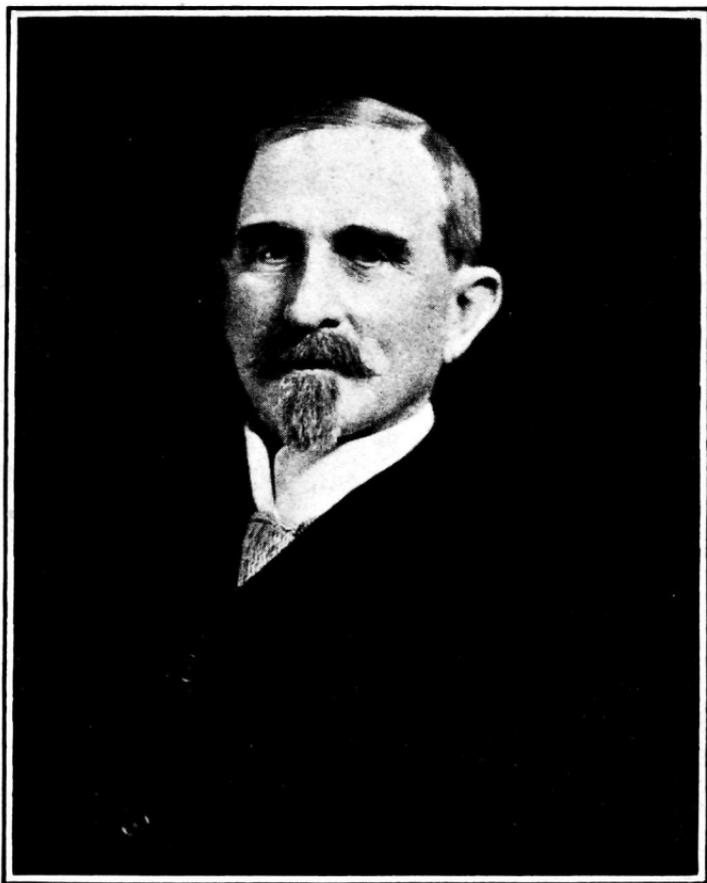
A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

By

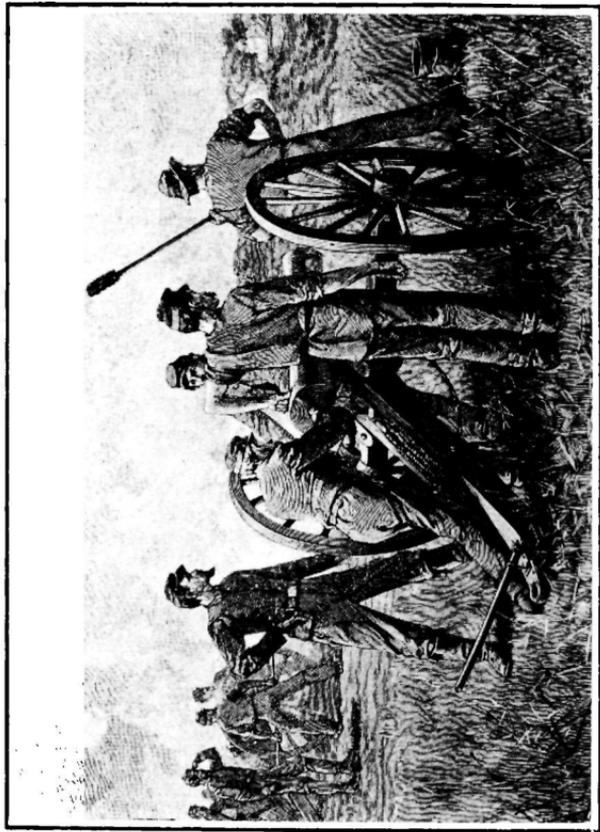
HENRY H. BAKER

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WASHINGTON ARTILLERY DETACHMENT IN ACTION
(FROM COL. MILLER OWEN'S HISTORY OF THE WASHINGTON ARTILLERY)

A Reminiscent Story of the Great Civil War

MY PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

New Orleans, May 27th, 1911.

My family and friends have often asked me to jot down some of the many experiences of mine while a soldier in the ranks fighting under what we thought the most beautiful banner in the world, the Stars and Bars of the Confederacy. I was but a school boy when Florida, my native state, seceded from the Union. I had been reared almost like a girl by my kind, loving and indulgent mother, who though strict with her seven children, two girls and five boys, was self-sacrificing and watchful of everything effecting their welfare; therefore it was a great shock when her five boys enlisted in the army. I was retiring and even shrinking in my disposition. I suppose because I had not been thrown with many people. Pensacola was a provincial village and there were but few Americans in the town at that time, but when the bugle called us to the front I forgot it all, and boy as I was, I stood side by side with bearded men.

I could not describe the high pitch of enthusiasm manifested by all and the intense patriotism of our people at that time. The boys and girls decked themselves with ribbons and cockades to show their earnestness and sympathy in the movement to protect our homes against invasion. There was a whirl of excitement in the air, and like an electric current

it had permeated every class of society. The women, with one accord, rolled out their sewing machines to assist in making sand-bags to use in constructing breastworks for our soldiers, and preparing bandages for the wounded, and I, like many other boys, assisted them in this work. I was just rounding my sixteenth year, but I was tall, measuring six feet one and a half inches, and as I had been a constant attendant at a gymnasium at home I was strong, active and muscular. I was already a member of a local military company, known as the Pensacola Guards. Most of the boys of this fancy organization, like myself, were from an academy in Pensacola. The captain was a veteran of the Mexican war, Captain Bright, and our orderly sergeant was my brother, James McC. Baker. As soon as war clouds commenced to gather, warning us that real fighting was about to begin, we started to drill in earnest, so as to be ready for any contingency. We had not long to remain idle, for that gallant officer, Col. Tennent Lomax, of Alabama, was already en route to Pensacola with a small battalion and with orders to hasten to Forts Barrancas and McCrea and capture them. These forts were situated nine miles from the city, on the mainland, at the mouth of Pensacola Bay. We at once offered our services to Colonel Lomax, and our company was made part of his command.

We lost no time in starting on this expedition, and trudging laboriously through the deep sands for which that part of the state is noted, arrived at the enemy's gate, Fort Barrancas, the same evening. This was in the early part of January, 1861. A halt was made and our little battalion was lined up, facing the massive wall which surrounds the fort. Colonel Lomax, who sat his horse superbly, wheeled in his saddle and with animation addressed us.

“Boys,” he said, “if they surrender without a fight, act like gentlemen, but if you have to fight, fight like hell.” He then rode up to the ponderous iron gates, and like a knight of old, clanked his sabre in the face of the guard and demanded the fort’s surrender. The corporal in charge called the sergeant of the guard and he, in turn, called the officer of the day. After communicating with Col. Slemmer, the Union officer in command, Colonel Lomax and staff were admitted to arrange terms of the surrender. In a few minutes the graceful folds of the Stars and Stripes were seen to tremble for an instant and then, like a wounded bird fluttering, slid down from the majestic staff which stood proudly in the center of the campus. The sentinels, too, who were pacing their beats, high up on the wall, which encircles the fort, grounded their arms and the gates were thrown open and Colonel Lomax’s battalion marched in to take charge, arrange their quarters and guard their prisoners.

Col. Lomax afterwards commanded the Third Alabama Regiment. He was a man of superb physique, and his men idolized him. He was not only one of the most prominent and picturesque figures in the late drama, but he was also one of the bravest and most daring officers of the Confederate service. He was killed leading his regiment into the first fight at Seven Pines.

While in the barracks I had quite an unexpected experience with a ruffian who had joined our company just before leaving the city. He was an Alabamian by the name of Bidell. His father kept a hotel in Pensacola, but the family were from Greenville, Ala. My brother had put Bidell in the guard-house for getting drunk and violating some rules of discipline, and when he got out he was on the war-

path. I went down to the mess room the morning after his release and I found him there. As soon as he saw me he commenced the most frightful tirade against my brother, addressing his remarks to the cook and telling that necessary adjunct to our mess what he was going to do to my brother when he saw him. I approached him and cautioned him that "I would not allow any one to abuse my brother." He scornfully eyed me and with the most contemptuous sneer said, "Well, Mr. 'Kid,' I will just show you what I will do to you," and with that he drew a big Colts revolver from its holster, saying, "I will just teach you a lesson, my boy." The only weapon about my person was a long-bladed knife, which I always carried in my belt. I quickly grasped the hilt of the knife, but before he could raise the pistol to shoot one of the boys, seeing my danger, dashed into the room and pinioned his hands behind him, until he was well secured and arrested.

Several days after this incident, when passing through the campus, I saw that I was about to meet Bidell coming from the opposite direction, and I made up my mind that there was going to be a fight. I was surprised, however, to see him approaching me with an extended hand, at the same time saying, "You are all right, Pal; take my word for it, if you ever get into trouble call on me. I will stand by you through thick and thin."

This was my first experience as a soldier, but not my last, as my tattered uniform and bleeding feet would attest were it not that half a century has passed since, full of hope, enthusiasm and patriotism, our command marched through the beautiful valleys and climbed the picturesque hills of dear old Virginia, under the banner of that peerless leader, R. E. Lee. But to continue my story.

The Pensacola Guards remained at Fort Barrancas for some time. We had included Fort McCrea in our capture, but Fort Pickens, where Col. A. J. Slemmer was allowed to retire under the terms of his surrender, still frowned ominously at us from across the channel. A secret movement was started among the non-commissioned officers and privates of our battalion to take Fort Pickens, and a picked squad was selected to do the trick, and I was chosen to be one of the squad. We had arranged our scaling ladders and secured the service of a tug to land us on the island near the fort. But Col. W. H. Chase, the Confederate commander of that district, heard of the project in some unknown way and sent for our officers, who, by the way, knew nothing about it, and told them that "he would hold them to a strict accountability if the expedition was carried out," remarking, "I will not be the first officer in the Confederate army to shed blood." His prompt action put a stop to the expedition and Fort Pickens remained a Union stronghold to the end of the war.

We were relieved of our duties at the forts by a Georgia regiment and while I was standing at the gate of the barracks one morning, just before leaving for home, watching the Georgia boys' mount guard, one of our soldiers said to me, "the officer of the day has your name, H. H. Baker." I walked over to the lieutenant and, introducing myself, asked him if his name was H. H. Baker. He said it was. I then told him that was also my name, remarking that I was from Pensacola and was named for a Mr. Henry Hyer, the most prominent merchant of that city, of whom my father had been very fond. He said he was from North Georgia, but that he had also been named for that same Mr. Hyer of Pensacola. We shook hands cordially and pledged ourselves to

uphold the honor of the name and try, if possible, to cover it with glory. Poor fellow, he was killed at Gettysburg, where I also had been erroneously reported among the dead.

Our command returned to Pensacola and called a meeting of the company to ascertain their views as to enlisting for the war. The majority, however, voted against the proposition. I at once wired my brother Marion A. Baker, who was at that time city editor of the Picayune, to send in my application to the Washington Artillery, which had just enlisted for the war. He telegraphed me to come over immediately, that I had been accepted. After arriving in New Orleans Captain B. F. Eshleman of the Fourth Company, to which I had been assigned, detailed me to help drill the most deficient members of the company. After we had made every preparation to depart we marched out of New Orleans to Virginia on the 27th of May, 1861, just a half century ago.

It would be almost impossible to describe the high pitch of enthusiasm of the citizens of New Orleans at that time. May 26th, a Sabbath morning, our four companies in their gay uniforms, bearing aloft the battalion's beautiful silken flag, a present from the ladies of the city, marched to Lafayette Square, where we were mustered in to the Confederate service by Lieutenant Phieffer, C. S. A. The sight was one to be long remembered, for the square was crowded with the relatives and friends of the young men of the command. After the muster the battalion marched to Christ Church, where now stands the Maison Blanche department store, on Canal street. The colors of the battalion were placed against the chancel rail and Dr. Leacock, rector of the sacred edifice, delivered his sermon, which mostly

contained allusions to the trials and tribulations which we all might encounter in the army.

He enjoined all to remember that they were educated to be gentlemen and represented the chivalry of the South and it behooved them to bring back their characters as soldiers and gentlemen unblemished. After the discourse the colors were held aloft before the altar and the benediction pronounced. Early next morning, May 27th, everybody was astir, and one could hear the cry on all sides, "the Washington Artillery is going to the war." As we marched through the streets, escorted by local commands, every thoroughfare and balcony was crowded with relatives and friends of our battery, ladies waving handkerchiefs and the great throng wishing us God-speed.

Many a mother, wife, sister and sweetheart were bathed in tears at the sight of their beloved ones departing to engage in a conflict which might mean death to them, yet they were proud and glad that they had a dear one to offer to their country. Passing the City Hall, the Rev. Dr. Palmer made us a patriotic and stirring address. Along the entire route from New Orleans to Virginia we met with one continuous reception and our military train was literally pelted with flowers by the ladies all along the way who had heard of our coming, and a continuous cheer greeted us as we sped through Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee and Virginia. Our first stop was Lynchburg, where a grand banquet was prepared for us and a cordial welcome extended the battalion. The citizens were so earnest and sincere in their welcome that they insisted upon taking us to their various homes.

Colonel Eshleman and I were entertained by Mrs. McDaniels, whose husband was a prominent banker of

that city; in fact, all our command were royally entertained by the hospitable citizens of that city. They made heroes of us before we could show the good people of Virginia what stuff the Louisiana boys were made of. Leaving Lynchburg, our next stop was at Richmond, dear old Richmond, that we were to know and love so well afterwards.

From Richmond we were ordered to a point near the afterwards famous Bull Run. One morning while we were peacefully resting in our tents orders came to dispatch the second company of our command to the front, supposedly to engage the enemy, who were, it was reported, advancing towards Bull Run. I sought Captain Eshleman and requested that he give me a transfer to the Second Company. I had been placed in Captain Eshleman's charge by my brother, Marion, because he thought I was too young to take care of myself. Captain Eshleman asked me why I wanted a transfer. Being cornered, I replied with a subterfuge: "Captain," I said, "I have more friends in the Second Company than I have in the Fourth." The dear, kind captain smiled and said, "Now Baker, I don't want to lose you and I promise you that you shall get in the first fight of the war if you stay where you are, in my company, the Fourth." I told him I was satisfied. That night on the slope of a mountain we laid down to rest and sleep. Our commissary wagon had gone astray and I was hungry and fatigued, but nevertheless I slept the sleep of the blessed. Just before the break of day I was disturbed by some one shaking me to wake me up. I was startled for an instant, but I saw my captain, who had come to keep his promise. "Now, Baker," he said, "if you are in earnest you have the opportunity this morning. Get up and go over to the First Company and ask for Sergeant Payne. I have

arranged with him to take you with his detachment.” The First Company was to engage the enemy at Blackburn’s Ford. I was soon with Sergeant Payne and the company was off in a jiffy to meet the enemy. We halted for a few minutes on the roadside, and as we were without rations, we filled our caps with blackberries, which grew in great profusion. Our battery had not long to tarry, however, for a courier dashed up and ordered the guns forward at a gallop. Cannons were booming from the opposite side of Blackburn’s Ford, warning us “to be quick,” for there was serious work for us to do there. Excited horses with wagonloads of supplies were dashing pell-mell over the fields, ambulances scurrying hither and thither, picking up the wounded. All the animated confusion, and the dead lying on the roadside as we passed to the front, presented a very exciting and harrowing scene, particularly to the mind of a young and inexperienced boy like myself. Just across the field, well up in the front, stood General Beauregard, holding a small riding whip, switching his trousers as unconcerned as if he were merely a looker-on, when in reality he was directing the placing of the troops. Our battery was halted for an instant behind a neck of woods, so that we might select a commanding position; then we unlimbered and the battle commenced in earnest. The enemy having gotten our range, we were literally pelted with shot and shell. We hastened to advance our position, so as to get out of their range, and while their shot screeched over our heads our guns were having telling effect and doing great execution. I was acting as a supernumerary on Sergeant Payne’s detachment, and my duty was to carry ammunition from the caisson to the guns. George Muse, whom I

was assisting, would dive down in the caisson chest and hand me the cartridge. Taking it quickly, I would dash up to the front with it. On one of these trips I missed Muse. I looked around and saw him lying on his back with a crucifix to his lips and the blood gushing from his shoulder. I quickly bent over him and asked him what had happened. He replied, "Baker, I am done for; I am going to die." I tried to assure him that he would be all right soon, and binding a handkerchief about the wound to try to stop the flow of blood, I left him to resume the carrying of cartridges alone. Poor Muse died that night. In one of these runs I was suddenly brought to a halt by a stinging lick, which carried me to the ground. I was lifted by two infantrymen, and little dreaming that I had been seriously wounded, I waved my hand to the boys and assured them that I would be back in a minute. I was deposited in the rear of my battery, and soon afterwards it was announced that the enemy had retired from the field. The battle of Bull Run had been fought and won by the "boys in gray," and the Washington Artillery had defeated the crack artillery corps of the Union army, Sherman's battery, thereby winning the first laurel which was to be added to in each battle of the war, thus rolling up honors for the battery and winning for them the first place among the great commands of the country.

Sherman's battery was commanded by Captain Ricketts of the U. S. army. I knew him personally, as he and his family had been constant visitors to my mother's home in Pensacola when he was in command of the post in that district. Captain Ricketts was severely wounded, captured and removed to Richmond for medical attention, where his beautiful daughter nursed him, she having been al-

lowed to come through our lines for that purpose. I was anxious to see him and pay him some attention, but I was unable to do so, confined as I was to my room.

Those of the Washington Artillery who were wounded and were able to bear the trip to Richmond were removed from Manassas Junction and placed on the floor of a boxcar. In the party besides Captain Eshleman were J. A. Tarleton, H. L. Zebal, H. Tully and myself. A carriage awaited me at the depot when I arrived in Richmond, brought there by a Mr. Smith, who had learned that some of our Command had been wounded, and believing that I might be among those who were to arrive on the train from Manassas, came in a carriage, accompanied by his son, to see that I was cared for. I had been recommended to him favorably by Durant Da Ponte, who was a war correspondent for several Southern papers. Mr. Smith kindly asked me to "choose one of the boys to go with me," and I turned to Tarlton. He, with pleasure depicted on his face, agreed to go. We were soon on our way to what was to be our home for several weeks, a beautifully furnished front room on the ground floor of a residence located in an attractive quarter of the city. We were royally entertained by a Mr. Davis, who was a warm personal friend of Mr. Smith, both being wealthy and patriotic Jews of Richmond. My brother, P. M. Baker, who was a member of the Louisiana Guards at that time, was detailed to take care of me during my illness. He acted as grand master of ceremonies. We needed him, too, to receive the visitors, who came in great numbers to extend their sympathy and offer financial assistance, if needed. Carriages were constantly rolling up to our door, with the most beautiful women in Richmond

carrying flowers and dainty sweetmeats and delicious morsels of every description to tempt the appetite. Tarlton and I were fretfully eager to catch a glimpse of these radiantly beautiful girls, who were lavishly bestowing upon us such honors, cherishing the hope that at some future day we might know them. Who does not remember the wit and beauty of these exquisitely charming women who reigned with grace in the capital of the South? Among them were Misses Page Waller, Hettie and Constance Cary, Kate Brandner, Jennie Cary of Baltimore, and many others whom I knew afterwards.

As soon as I was able to be moved I was urged by Mrs. Kennon to come to her home, where she could nurse me back to health. Mrs. Kennon was a Miss Fisher of North Carolina, and she knew of our family, and therefore I needed no introduction. She was a sweet and lovely character, and I shall never forget how tenderly and lovingly she watched over me during my stay there. When I was able to walk, with the aid of a stick, I accepted the kind hospitality of Col. Wren, who had a beautiful country home, "Occaecchi," just out of Richmond. My stay there proved a great delight to me. Nothing was left undone by his noble wife and charming daughters to make my stay delightful, and "Occaecchi" was, during the war, whenever I was near Richmond, my Virginia home. Mrs. Wren always spoke of me as her "soldier boy." Durant Da Ponte, who was a great friend of my brother Marion, enjoyed the friendship of many people in Virginia, and I appreciate the fact that it was mainly through his effort that such a pleasant road had been paved for me there. No doubt my youth and inexperience appealed to him, but I am sure he entertained for

me, besides, a very warm regard, as was proven at a later date during the dreadful struggle.

Three years ago to-day the veterans of the Washington Artillery assembled at a banquet at the St. Charles Hotel, to commemorate the forty-seventh anniversary of the departure of the command to the seat of war, that brave and dashing soldier, Gen. W. J. Behan, presiding on that occasion. My brother Page was to have been present, but at the last moment was prevented by illness, but I was there, however, to respond to a toast to the Press. On my right sat Col. B. F. Eshleman, whom the boys adored, and on my left sat that old warrior, our guest, Gen. E. P. Alexander, who commanded the Artillery of Northern Virginia. Both of these splendid officers and gallant soldiers have since joined the silent army. To-night what is left of our gallant old command will assemble at a banquet at the Grunewald Hotel, to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Battalion's departure from New Orleans to the seat of war in Virginia.

In this brief and hurried narrative I regret that I cannot extend my story to the operations of our battalion around that dear old city, Petersburg, which nestles so peacefully on the banks of the Appomattox, and where so many of my fondest memories cluster. It was in the "Cockade City" that our ragged and half-starved boys encountered untold hardships, for we not only had to stand guard day and night, but we had to strengthen the breastworks around the city, digging and wheeling tons of earth in barrows high up on the casements behind which we hoped to lessen our danger from attack.

The heroism of the good people of Petersburg should be an example for future generations to emulate, and their patriotism and self-sacrifice will live

in history along with the deeds of valor of her matchless soldiers.

Her brave and cultured women, though bereft of every comfort and sorely pressed for the necessities of life, found time and means to administer to the crying wants of the Southern soldiers, and gave freely and generously of their scant means, even sending out to the trenches, under fire at times, provisions to the hungry, worn and weary men, who night and day were at their posts of duty, without the necessities to keep body and soul together.

We would lie in our trenches at night with our eyes upturned, watching the play of the deadly fireworks, mortar shells with fuse aflame, darting across the heavens in graceful curves, presenting a grand meteoric display. No matter how beautiful to the eye, it was appalling, because it meant, possibly, the destruction of the besieged city.

These frightful messengers of death crashed through sacred edifices, residences and business places alike, making living in that beautiful city almost unbearable. The people of Petersburg, however, were made of fine metal, and through it all were undaunted and determined to resist to the very last. As an illustration of the stubborn determination and the grim and daring bravery of the people at that time, I must cite an incident. One lady asked me to go and rescue an old lady from her residence, which had been almost demolished by the rain of shot and shell which was being hurled relentlessly into the city by the long-range siege guns of the enemy's batteries. I sought her and urged her to go to a place of safety with me. She replied: "Let them do their worst; I will not be driven from my home." I pointed to the heaps of brick and mortar

lying on the floor, caused by the crashing of shot and shell through the walls of the building, to no avail. She would not stir from her home.

This was the sublime spirit which, like a burning fire, kept aglow in the breasts of these grand people during the trying times of the siege of Petersburg. The same determination and the same spirit of patriotism and heroism glowed in the breast of every Southern soldier. Is it a wonder, then, that our worn-out and ragged little army should have held in check for so many weary months the grand and imposing army of the Union, composed, as it was, mainly of drafts upon the nations of the world? It has been said, and said truly, that "when the Confederate army laid down their arms at Appomattox they did not surrender to Grant's army, but to all the nations of the world."

My heart throbs with varied and conflicting emotions when I review my career as a soldier, but above all comes the sad recollection of those who served us so faithfully, who have been left behind on the battlefields. And then, again, since the war so many have gone from us to their last resting places. All those wounded with me at Bull Run have answered their last roll call. My dear brother, Page M. Baker, with whom I had been associated for a half century, one year ago passed over the silent river, to rest under the trees, leaving me alone out of the five brothers who enlisted in the army, but the saddest part of it was that just as his beautiful daughter, his only child, Constance, was budding into womanhood, he was taken from her.

This is the first chapter of my experience in the army, and as it is written entirely for my family, I trust I may not be charged with egotism, for I have never sought notoriety; on the contrary, I

have always avoided anything savoring of vain-glory. I have simply related incidents just as they happened when my mind was young and retentive, that is all.

NOTE: This paper will be followed by a series dealing with the same subject.

