

PERSONAL NARRATIVES
OF EVENTS IN THE
WAR OF THE REBELLION,
BEING PAPERS READ BEFORE THE
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THE
MARCH TO THE SEA.

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THE MARCH TO THE SEA.



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SHERMAN'S march to the sea, through the very heart of an enemy's country, without a base of supplies; cut off from all communication with, or support from, other portions of the Union forces, and dependent almost entirely upon the country through which he passed for food for the army and forage for the animals, is almost without a parallel or precedent in military history

Only the folly of his adversary, Hood, in leaving Sherman's front and passing with a wide sweep far around to his rear, in a vain attempt to decoy him out of Atlanta, removed the project from the domain of doubt and uncertainty and gave it, from the start, the assurance of success.

There were, it is true, considerable bodies of rebel troops at Macon, Augusta, Savannah and Charleston,

but these, even if concentrated, could hardly have prevented, although they might have delayed, Sherman in reaching the coast.

In attempting to portray in this necessarily brief and imperfect sketch some of the incidents of that remarkable campaign, I labor under disadvantages readily understood when I say that I kept no diary, and as our postal facilities during the march were very poor, I wrote no letters home, which, resurrected from the dust of ancestral garrets, might refresh the memory dimmed by the lapse of more than twenty years.

Comrades of the old Army of the Potomac will remember that after the Gettysburg campaign we followed Lee, first to the Rappahannock, and then to the Rapidan. While there the news of Rosecrans' defeat at Chickamauga reached us, and the Eleventh and Twelfth Corps were speedily consolidated into one and designated as the Twentieth Corps, under command of General Hooker, and ordered to the West. Had we time, I should like to depict the horrors of that seven days' ride to Tennessee. Huddled like cattle into box cars, with unplanned board

seats running around the sides, and another row down the centre of each car, without ventilation, except such as came from holes made in the ends of the cars by the butts of our muskets ; freezing when the doors were opened, and suffocating when they were shut ; without fires, and deprived of rest or sleep, the journey proved to be anything but a pleasure trip. I should like to speak of our experience that winter in guarding the railroad from Nashville to Chattanooga ; of the inhabitants of Tennessee ; of guerrilla raids ; of attempts by rebel cavalry to destroy the railroad ; of the skillful tactics of the Atlanta campaign ; of its constant skirmishing, flanking and fighting, ending with the remarkable capture of that stronghold of the Confederacy by the matchless genius and ability of our great leader. But you have asked me to write about "the march to the sea."

On the second of September, 1864, the city of Atlanta, next to Richmond the most important in the rebel Confederacy, was "ours and fairly won." Sherman, by a series of brilliant movements had transferred most of his army to the south of the

city, completely mystifying Hood, and compelling him to come out of his entrenchments and give battle for the protection of his lines of communication. In this effort Hood was badly whipped and compelled to abandon the city and withdraw his forces southward. From here, after a few weeks' rest, he attempted in the latter part of September to retrieve his lost laurels by marching rapidly west across the Chattahoochee, and then northward toward Tennessee, threatening Sherman's single line of communication in the vain hope of decoying him out of Atlanta by the use of the same tactics which Sherman had so successfully employed against him. With a weak adversary such an attempt might have been successful, but Hood was dealing with a master of strategy, and his movement was used by Sherman to the furtherance of his own plans.

Sherman let him go (providing meanwhile for a force to stop him eventually) until he had gone so far north as to render it impossible for Hood to return and interpose between Sherman and the sea. Hood had, it is true, detached Wheeler's cavalry to watch Sherman, and this force and some seventeen

thousand Georgians were, with the troops stationed at the points I have mentioned, depended upon to prevent Sherman advancing from Atlanta. The force was, however, entirely insufficient, and with the way thus opened before him, Sherman felt free to put in execution his long-cherished plan of marching through the interior of the Confederacy, tearing out its vitals by destroying its railroads and cutting off the Army of Virginia from a large part of its field of supplies. For it must not be supposed that Sherman had any idea of stopping at Atlanta when it should be won. Neither had he contemplated returning north after he had destroyed it. His objective point, even at that early date, was the city of Richmond itself. It required, however, military genius and moral courage of a high order for a commander to determine to leave a force of fifty-five thousand disciplined troops, such as Hood's, in his rear, and march away to the coast, where he knew he would find fortified cities, formidable as engineering skill and heavy armament could make them, and defended by the concentrated force which he would constantly be pushing before him. To establish a

new base of supplies he must capture a strongly fortified seaport. Had he failed, how great would have been the outcry of condemnation. He took the responsibility alone, and to him alone belongs the glory. Whatever may have been the judgment of those familiar with Sherman's plans as to their feasibility, his soldiers never for a moment doubted his and their ability to carry out any movement upon which he had decided. Never was there greater confidence between an army and its leader; never was it more deserved.

After providing a sufficient force to cope with Hood, all surplus stores, non-combatants, and sick, were sent to the rear, reducing the army to the lightest marching order, and bringing it into the most effective possible condition. Orders were then given for the destruction of the railroad to the rear, severing all communication with home and friends, and the long march of twenty-seven days to an unknown destination, with all its possibilities of success or disaster, began.

Our army was composed of two wings. The right, commanded by Major-General O. O. Howard,

was composed of the Fifteenth and Seventeenth Corps, commanded respectively by Generals P. J. Osterhaus and Frank P. Blair. The left wing was commanded by Major-General H. W. Slocum, and consisted of the Fourteenth Corps, General Jeff. C. Davis, and the Twentieth Corps, General A. S. Williams. The cavalry was commanded by General Judson Kilpatrick, and consisted of two brigades, numbering together about five thousand men. The total effective force under Sherman's command was a little over sixty thousand men of all arms.

The march from Atlanta was preceded by its destruction. On the fourteenth day of November, 1864, our corps, the Twentieth, which had been stationed in Atlanta, was moved just outside the city limits, and as "night cast her sable mantle o'er the earth" we were startled and awed by seeing vast waves and sheets of flame thrusting themselves heavenward, rolling and tossing in mighty billows—a gigantic sea of fire. It was a grand but awful sight, testifying to every beholder, in the most vivid of object lessons, the terrible destructiveness of war. God grant that it may be long before our beloved

land shall again witness such scenes. The destruction of Atlanta was not a mere wanton act of vandalism. It was a military necessity. Its vast depots, magazines, arsenals, warehouses, repair and machine shops had made it, next to Richmond, the most important and valuable place in the Confederacy, and its capacity for injury to the Union demanded its destruction.

On the following morning the march began. Each corps marched upon a separate road, generally parallel to, but from five to fifteen miles apart from, the corps upon its flanks. In this way a strip of country about forty miles wide was covered. The right wing moved southwardly, feinting on Macon, while the left wing marched toward Milledgeville, the capital of the State. The Twentieth Corps, to whose movements I shall principally confine myself, was on the extreme left flank, and marched almost due east to Madison, destroying the Augusta and Atlanta railroad for a distance of about seventy miles, and then turned southward to Milledgeville. The other corps were also actively engaged in railroad demolition, and the work, both here and clear across the

State, was most thoroughly done. The methods employed were simple, yet very effective. A regiment would march up to a section of road, stack arms, and then, at the word of command, seize one side of the track, lift it up the whole length of the regiment, and then at the word, step back and let it drop. One or two repetitions of this treatment would loosen every chair and rail, so that the more stubborn ones could easily be pried off by using a rail as a lever. Ties and sleepers were then piled up in the shape of cob-houses, on which the rails were laid, the match applied, and the rails, when heated, were bent and twisted out of all possibility of future usefulness. About four hundred miles of railroad were thus destroyed, and as the road mentioned, and the Central Georgia, which was also demolished, were the only ones then connecting the Gulf States with the Carolinas, the injury in the then impoverished condition of the Confederacy was irreparable.

The weather during most of our march through Georgia was delightful; the army was in splendid condition and in buoyant spirits, full of confidence

in themselves and their leaders. The day's march seldom exceeded fifteen miles, and as food was abundant, and *cheap* and good, the march was one continual pleasure trip. The country upon which we almost immediately entered had never before been occupied by an opposing army, and we found it rich in all agricultural productions. The harvest had just been gathered, and barns and granaries were invitingly full. General Sherman had issued orders to "forage liberally upon the country," and the order was implicitly obeyed. Never was a country more worthy such an order. Jeff. Davis, in a speech delivered at Augusta only a month before, had said: "Once we imported the commonest articles of daily use, and brought in from beyond our borders even bread and meats. Now the State of Georgia alone produces food enough, not only for her own people, and the army within it, but feeds, too, the Army of Virginia." I presume that by "the army within it" he referred prophetically to Sherman's army. Whether he did or not, Sherman's army was fed, and mighty well fed, too. Our men, never very inefficient as foragers, seemed to understand that

extraordinary efforts were expected of them, and soon displayed a brilliancy of talent in helping themselves that left nothing to be desired (or to the farmer either), and has made the name of "Sherman's bummers" historic. In every town and village that we entered, and at every plantation we passed, the utmost ingenuity had been displayed by the alarmed inhabitants in secreting not only provisions of all kinds, but jewelry, plate, money and clothing. Buried in holes dug in cellars, gardens or graveyards, or loaded into wagons and carried into the deepest recesses of swamps or forests, it was all in vain; the "bummer" would make friends with the negroes, and by coaxing, or threats, or bribes, would soon worm out the secret and discover the hidden treasure. In this way many articles were lost to the owners that would never have been disturbed had they been kept in their proper places, for stringent orders had been issued against entering private houses for purposes of plunder.

At the outset, regular details of foragers, under command of commissioned officers, were made, but it was soon seen that these orderly details were not

so effective in scouring the whole country and gathering in all that it afforded, as the smaller bands of adventurous spirits, who took to it because they liked it. It was a life full of hard work and danger, but also full of adventure, and it soon became apparent that in every regiment were men possessing a peculiar fitness for it, and either by general consent or by appointment they were permitted to do about all the foraging.

To show the superiority of these sometimes self-appointed "bummers" over a regular detail, permit me to mention a personal experience. About the second day out from Atlanta, I was detailed with my whole company for foraging duty. Striking off at nearly a right angle from the main road, we were fortunate enough to soon find a good-sized flock of fat sheep. We caught, killed and dressed the whole flock, and returned to the road, where we loaded them into the commissary's wagons, all within two or three hours, and thought we had done well. But in the light of subsequent achievements our recollections of this exploit were tinged with mortification and melancholy. A trained band of "bum-

mers" wouldn't have thought of returning to the regiment till near nightfall, and by that time probably every mother's son of them would have been metamorphosed into mounted infantry. Neither would they have "toted" sheep to the main road and taken the chance of getting their produce hauled to market. After securing the sheep, they would probably have hunted up the owner of them (or perhaps I should say the *late* owner) and have served a requisition on him for a wagon or two. If he had no farm wagon, a family coach, gig, or buggy would do. All sorts and conditions of vehicles were pressed into the service, but usually for one day only, as they were generally abandoned after they had brought their loads safely into camp. No doubt most of them found their way back into the hands of their owners. But it was not so easy to find the horses and mules. Yet, as the possession of wagons was considered by "the boys" as good circumstantial evidence of the existence of horses somewhere in the neighborhood, a little patient investigation seldom failed to reveal their whereabouts. If horses or mules could not be found, oxen or cows

would be yoked up and made to do duty for Uncle Sam. I may say here that we left Atlanta with five thousand cattle on the hoof, and reached Savannah with ten thousand, and it wasn't a very good country for cattle either.

But to return to our muttons. After securing their transportation, these "professors of foraging" would have loaded up the wagons with these "lost sheep," and with anything else which the kind and generous planter seemed willing to contribute to the Union cause. Among these welcome contributions could be found chickens, turkeys, ducks, geese, salt and fresh pork, hams, flour, meal, sweet potatoes, and sorghum or molasses. Loading these into the conveyances so cheerfully furnished by the aforesaid kind and generous planter, and borrowing from him his grandfather's dress coat or any other antiquated and outlandish article of dress, the "bummer," arrayed in the fashions of fifty years ago, would perch himself on top of his load and majestically drive into camp, saluted by the jests and jeers of the whole army, but yet welcomed by his comrades with warm hearts and hungry stomachs. What, I

ask, was the mere capture of a flock of sheep compared with such perfection of skinning? To tell the truth, as I looked back upon my exploit, the more I thought of it, the more sheepish I felt. A spirit of rollicking fun seemed to have taken possession of the whole army. With rare exceptions, nothing was, I think, willfully destroyed, but anything that would contribute to the general frolic was quickly seized upon. For this purpose odd and old-fashioned articles of dress were in great demand; but as a rule, private property, except such as the necessities of the army demanded, was by most of the troops respected. There were, of course, some men of no principle in every corps, or perhaps in every regiment, who would not have hesitated to appropriate any articles of value that came within their reach, but such men were few, and they were restrained by the better sentiment that prevailed among the majority.

It must not be supposed that foraging was always exempt from danger. In fact, it was seldom so. "Sherman's bummer," strange as it may seem, was a fighting "bummer." In small parties they would

make their way, by side roads, by paths, or across the fields, far in advance, or on either flank of the main body. In fact, they soon became the actual skirmish line of the army, hovering around it on every side like a cloud, hiding it from the observation of the enemy, and fighting many a lively skirmish in its behalf, as well as providing most of its food. As the "bummers," after the first few days out from Atlanta, were always mounted, their usual course of procedure when raiding a plantation was to picket the approaches in all directions, and if disturbed by the Home Guard or Wheeler's cavalry, they did not hesitate to show fight if strong enough. If not, they fell back toward the main body, fighting as they went, until, as was usually the case, they met other parties of foragers, and then, if sufficiently reinforced, they turned and became the pursuers. In this way many a sharp skirmish was fought and won without the presence of a single commissioned officer. Sometimes, however, the "bummer" would be surprised and taken prisoner, or pay for his rashness with his life. My first lieutenant and half a dozen of my men were thus captured on the march

from Savannah north, and compelled to spend a few months in southern prisons ; and served them right, too, for they went just where I had cautioned them not to go, and where it was morally certain they would be "gobbled." Foraging is, of necessity, destructive and wasteful, and no doubt much hardship resulted to the inhabitants of Georgia from our visit, yet the damages done by our troops were not so great, according to the statements of their own newspapers, as those inflicted by Wheeler's cavalry.

About a week after leaving Atlanta we entered Milledgeville without resistance. Here we found copies of southern papers of recent date, and, to judge from their contents, Sherman and his army were certainly doomed to destruction. But with these confident predictions of our discomfiture, they also printed the most frantic appeals to the people, signed by Generals, Senators and others, to rise for the defense of their homes and property. Some of these pathetic calls for help are given in "Sherman's Memoirs," from which I copy them :

" RICHMOND, NOV. 18, 1864.

" TO THE PEOPLE OF GEORGIA :

" You have now the best opportunity ever yet presented to

destroy the enemy. Put everything at the disposal of our Generals; remove all provisions from the path of the invader, and put all obstructions in his path. Every citizen with his gun, and every negro with his spade and axe, can do the work of a soldier. You can destroy the enemy by retarding his march. Georgians be firm. Act promptly and fear not.

“B. H. HILL, *Senator.*”

“I most cordially approve the above.

“JAMES A. SEDDON,

“*Secretary of War.*”

“CORINTH, MISS., Nov. 18, 1864.

“TO THE PEOPLE OF GEORGIA:

“Arise for the defense of your native soil! Rally around your patriotic Governor and gallant soldiers! Obstruct and destroy all the roads in Sherman’s front, flank, and rear, and his army will soon starve in your midst. Be confident. Be resolute. Trust in an overruling Providence, and success will soon crown your efforts. I hasten to join you in the defense of your homes and firesides.

“G. T. BEAUREGARD.”

“RICHMOND, Nov. 19, 1864.

“TO THE PEOPLE OF GEORGIA:

“We have had a special conference with President Davis and the Secretary of War, and are able to assure you that they have done and are still doing all that can be done to meet the emergency that presses upon you. Let every man fly to arms! Remove your negroes, horses, cattle and provisions from Sherman’s army, and burn what you cannot carry. Burn all bridges, and block up the

roads in his route. Assail the invader in front, flank, and rear, by night and by day. Let him have no rest.

“JULIAN HARTRIDGE,	MARK BLAUFORD,
J. H. REYNOLDS,	GENERAL N. LESTER,
JOHN I. SHOEMAKER,	JOSEPH M. SMITH,
	“ <i>Members of Congress.</i> ”

These impotent prayers for aid clearly demonstrated the weakness of our opponents, and served but to excite the ridicule of all our men.

The legislature of Georgia, which had been in session at Milledgeville, had, on our approach, hastily adjourned and fled. The town was also largely deserted by its residents, although the inhabitants of other places through which we passed mostly remained at home. Taking possession of the State House, some of our officers organized a mock Senate and House of Representatives, and after much discussion passed an act repealing the ordinance of secession. Whether the Governor signed it or not we never heard, but it was approved by the logic of events.

Our march until we neared the sea was hardly interrupted by the force opposed to us. Kilpatrick and the “bummers” were almost constantly skir-

mishing, but as Sherman pushed out in advance first one column and then another, the "rebs," fearing capture, seldom waited to engage our infantry. Near the village of Sandersville, however, we had a little skirmish with a portion of Wheeler's cavalry. Our regiment, the Thirteenth New Jersey, had the advance, and I was ordered with my company (the largest in the regiment) to deploy as skirmishers on the left of the road and drive out Wheeler's men, who had dismounted, and sheltering themselves behind stumps and rocks were keeping up a dropping fire at long range. My men were so full of ardor and confidence in themselves that, hardly waiting to fire a single shot, they started on a keen run for the sheltered rebels and drove them pell-mell out of the field and back to their horses, which they mounted in hot haste. The movement was so quickly executed, and my men were so widely deployed, that fortunately not one of them was killed or wounded. It was rather a novel sight, to see a skirmish line make a charge.

The next day I received orders to report with my company at corps headquarters, where I was detailed

as assistant provost marshal of the corps, and my company as provost and headquarters guard. This position I was fortunate enough to retain until the close of the war, despite the efforts of my regimental commander to secure my return. A pleasanter position, both for men and officers, could hardly be imagined. It brought me into close personal contact with general and staff officers at army, corps and division headquarters, and introduced me to many pleasant acquaintances. My men were on almost constant duty, but as their knapsacks were carried in the headquarters wagons, they were content. They had a constantly increasing number of rebel prisoners to watch day and night, besides pitching and striking tents, doing guard duty, etc. We usually made camp by three o'clock each day, giving us a good opportunity for visiting, reading, writing, card playing and, "tell it not in Gath," cock fighting. The South seemed filled with game cocks, and each regiment, and for that matter each brigade, division and corps headquarters, had its special champion. The birds fought only with the weapons nature had provided them, and seemed to enjoy it as much as the spectators.

Very early in the march, the negroes began to join our columns, and their numbers swelled at every town and plantation. Their intense longing for freedom had become more than a passion; it seemed like an uncontrollable frenzy. Of all ages, and both sexes, some in health, but many bent with age or feeble with disease, they struggled on, burning to be free. A few were in wagons of various descriptions, some on mules or broken-down horses, but most of them were on foot. How they managed to subsist is a great mystery. Their privations must have been very great, yet, patient and uncomplaining, they plodded on, one great hope, the hope of their race for two centuries, animating their hearts and lending strength to their weary limbs. So vast an army of refugees seriously embarrassed the movement of the columns, and every effort was made by our commanding officers to prevent their joining us, but without avail. General Cox, in "The March to the Sea," one of the "Scribner series," says: "Losing patience at the failure of all orders and exhortations to these poor people to stay at home, General Davis (commanding the Fourteenth Corps) ordered

the pontoon bridge at Ebenezer Creek to be taken up before the refugees who were following that corps had crossed, so as to leave them on the further bank of the unfordable stream, and thus disembarass the marching troops. It would be unjust to that officer to believe that the order would have been given if the effect had been foreseen. The poor refugees had their hearts so set on liberation, and the fear of falling into the hands of the Confederate cavalry was so great, that, with wild wailings and cries, the great crowd rushed, like a stampeded drove of cattle into the water, those who could not swim as well as those who could, and many were drowned in spite of the earnest efforts of the soldiers to help them. As soon as the character of the unthinking rush and panic was seen, all was done that could be done to save them from the water; but the loss of life was still great enough to prove that there were many ignorant, simple souls to whom it was literally preferable to die freemen rather than live slaves."

As we approached the coast there was a decided change in the characteristics of the country. The

rich, rolling uplands of the interior were left behind and we descended into the low, flat, sandy country that borders, for perhaps a hundred miles, upon the sea. Here the rivers widen out, sometimes for miles, on either side of their channels, flowing through great forests of cypress trees, from whose limbs, long, pendent masses of the mournful southern moss sway gently in the breeze. Back from the rivers the country is largely filled with a magnificent growth of stately pines; their trunks free, for sixty or seventy feet, from all branches. Camping in these beautiful forests, on the thick carpet of pine needles, the air filled with the peculiar and delightful fragrance of the pine woods, had about it a charm and fascination which the dweller in ceiled houses never knew. But these pine woods, though beautiful, were not fertile, and rations, particularly of breadstuffs, began to fail and had to be eked out by rice, of which we found large quantities, but also found it, with our lack of appliances, very difficult to hull.

The various corps began to close in upon Savannah on the tenth of December, and by the twelfth

the city was completely invested. Savannah is situated on the right bank of the river of that name, and is surrounded on the land side by cypress and rice swamps. Parallel to the Savannah and distant from it some ten or twelve miles to the south and west flows the Great Ogeechee river. Coming down the peninsular formed by these two rivers we found our progress to the sea barred by Savannah on the left, and Fort McAllister, on the Ogeechee, on the right, while between them were impassable swamps. There were, however, several narrow causeways running out from Savannah in different directions, and one of these crossed the Ogeechee several miles above Fort McAllister, at King's Bridge. The bridge, a thousand feet long, had been destroyed, but the piles on which it rested were still standing, and on these a new bridge was soon laid, and at daybreak of the thirteenth, Hazen's Division of the Fifteenth Corps crossed to the right bank, and passing down the river stormed and carried Fort McAllister, opening up communication with our naval forces under Admiral Dahlgren, and enabling transports to come up to King's Bridge with supplies, of which we stood in great need.

I have previously spoken of the great number of refugees that followed us on our march. They could be counted almost by the tens of thousands, and the feeding of such a vast body of non-combatants was an impossibility. As soon, therefore, as communication with the fleet had been established, I was ordered to collect all those that had followed the left wing and march them, with about two hundred and fifty rebel prisoners, to Fort McAllister for transportation to Hilton Head. As our route from the north of the city to King's Bridge brought us within easy range and open view of the rebel lines, we had to make the first part of our march by night and in perfect stillness. The darkeys had the situation explained to them before starting, and although dreadfully frightened, and expecting every moment that the rebel batteries would open on them, they behaved very well. Among the prisoners were many officers, to one of whom, a bright, intelligent young man of about my own age, I became somewhat attracted. On the night in question, after passing the danger point, I called this officer to me, and dismounting walked arm in arm with him till we

halted near daybreak. Years afterwards I met this gentleman while crossing the North River on a Jersey City ferry-boat, and he immediately referred to the incident and asked for an explanation of my attentions that evening. I then learned for the first time that he was familiar with all the country around about Savannah, had hunted through the swamps and knew all their paths, and that his plans were all laid for a dash for liberty, which in the darkness and probable confusion he thought he could safely make. Probably his conclusion was a correct one, but luckily his plan miscarried, and I was saved the mortification of ever losing a prisoner.

I dare not impose further upon your patience by an attempt to describe the operations that resulted in the evacuation of Savannah. My paper was intended to portray only some of the incidents of the march through Georgia, and I will bring it to what I feel must be a welcome conclusion, by merely saying that on the night of December twentieth, General (then Colonel) H. A. Barnum, one of the most popular and efficient officers in the service, and one whom many of you must have met at army

reunions, was in command of the picket line, and about midnight crept out to reconnoiter. Hearing and seeing no one, he quietly pushed on until the sight of the rebel camp fires, with no one moving about them, convinced him that the enemy had fled. Returning to his own picket line he selected a few soldiers, and rapidly passing the outer rebel works pressed on to the main line, frowning with the heavy sixty-four pounders, but silent and deserted. From here he sent back for an additional force with which to enter the city, and at the same time dispatched a messenger with information of his discovery to corps headquarters, where we were all soon awakened to rejoice over the glad news of the capture of Savannah.

