

How They Received Their "First Baptism of Fire" in the War of
of the 60's as told by One of Them

The letter printed below, written by Col. John C. Sellers, of Sellers, S. C., and addressed to Capt. Ben B. Williams, whose Confederate Soldier's Memoirs have been appearing in the Sunday News, contains much of interest regarding the service rendered the Confederacy by the Citadel Cadets. Col. Seller's letter follows:

Capt. Ben S, Williams, Brunson, S. C. -- My Dear Sir: I have greatly enjoyed reading your memoirs as published in the Sunday News, and especially have I enjoyed the one in the issue of January 11, in which you relate your impressions of the Citadel cadets as they received their first baptism of fire at Tullifinny, as I happened to be one of the dandy-fine boys who did "stand square up to/rack" when we struck "the Yanks". In the main your accounts of the fights at Tullifinny is correct, and is quite complimentary to the two companies which composed the cadet battalion, under the command of Major J. B. White, but in a few instances you are in error, which is not at all surprising, as it has been forty-nine year since those fights, and human memory is a most treacherous thing.

Aided by a pretty tenacious memory and a rereading of Major White's report, as found in Thomas's "History of the South Carolina Military Academy," on pages 205-6-7-8, I find that Capt. (afterwards Governor) Hugh S. Thompson commanded Company A and Capt. J.P. Thomas, with Lieuts. A.J. Norris and R.O. Sams, commanded Company B, and not Lieut. Huger," as you suppose; in fact, there was no Lieut Huger in either company, but C. Huger was a private in Company B. December 6 the train carrying the hospital battalion was stopped just beyond Tullifinny trestle, and against the fighting about three miles off, in the direction of Gregory's Point the noise of the rifle firing could be plainly heard, and we were marched at a double-quick in the direction of the battle, and soon the whistle of the minie balls could be heard, but none of us were

hit, and when we arrived at the scene of the fight the Yankees had retired. We then fell back to Tullifinny trestle and slept on our arms at the trestle that night.

I well recollect an incident of that night that furnished considerable amusement to all the cadets, except one. Just before day a train came thundering over the trestle and Cadet B.A. Miller, of Company B, waking up suddenly and not knowing what was the matter plunged into Tullifinny Creek and got thoroughly soaked. It was a very cold night and there was a heavy frost on the ground next morning. The next day, which was December 7, we were, with the 47th Georgia, marched in the direction of the enemy in order to ascertain his exact position and determine the propriety of attacking him in his intrenched position, about three miles east of the railroad towards the coast. The entire line of skirmishers soon became engaged with those of the enemy, and steadily drove them back on their intrenchments. This skirmish lasted about three hours, Company B relieving Company A, (it's ammunition having been exhausted) and the entire battalion was thus engaged in the skirmish. When the ammunition of Company A became exhausted they retired in good order, and Company B was rushed in to take their places during a brisk fire from the enemy, and many of us had forgotten whether we were No. 1 or No. 2, and there was considerable confusion along the line.

Capt. Thomas, with his sword drawn, rushed in front of us and gave the command, "Halt!" "Fall in," according to eight, just as on the parade ground at the Citadel; when in line the command was given, "Front!" "Dress to the right," "Count off from the right," and then every one double-quickened to his position on the skirmish line and leisurely retired. While all this was going on the bullets, grape and cannister were whistling all around us, and it has always been a wonder to me that we were not all killed.

We then fell back to the railroad and slept that night under our arms in an old broom sedge field by the side of the railroad. I remember I slept very soundly that night in that grass, with my gun by my side, and no covering except "the clouded canopy of the heavens," and next morning there was a heavy white frost all over that old field. The next day, which was the 8th, we were engaged in throwing

up temporary breastworks on the east side and parallel with the railroad.

The casualties in this skirmish were as follows: Lieut Amory Coffin, severely wounded in the head; Cadet J. B. Patterson, mortally wounded, afterwards died; Cadets Joseph W. Barnwell and E. C. McCarty, severely wounded; Cadets S. F. Hollingsworth, A. J. Green, A. R. Heyward and W. A. Pringle, slightly wounded.

The next morning, which was December 9, the enemy advanced in full force against our position on the railroad. Our position was on the left next to the 47th Georgia, on our right. Major White acted with great coolness and daring that day. He cantered his horse up and down our line admonishing us to remain concealed behind the breastworks and hold our fire until the command to fire was given. As soon as the enemy got through the swamp in our front and emerged into the old field, where they could be seen, Major White, at the head of the battalion, rose in his stirrups and gave the command, just as if on the parade ground, "Attention battalion, Ready, air, fire." At the command "attention battalion," each cadet sprang to his feet, and when the command "fire" was given our three hundred rifles belched forth as one gun. The effect was instantaneous. The enemy fell back in great confusion, leaving their dead and wounded on the field. We continued firing for awhile and when the command, "Cease firing" was given and the smoke lifted the enemy was nowhere to be seen.

I remember one poor fellow, an officer, was brought out on a litter through our lines, and appeared to be desperately wounded, and I think soon died. It was after this affair at the railroad that the Yankees planted a battery across the swamp in an old field and commenced shelling passing trains. We were moved into the woods on the west side of the railroad. When not on picket duty, we kept ourselves comfortable by building huge fires, where we cooked our scanty rations. It was while in these woods that W. D. Palmer was struck by solid shell in the left hand, tearing his hand into shreds. His hand was amputated just above the wrist, but he never left us, but stayed with the command till we were disbanded at Greenville. After the war he settled near St. Stephens and was successfully engaged in farming. He never married and died last year. He was as gallant a soldier as ever shouldered a gun.

I have no recollection of the North Carolina "reserves" you mention, and am pretty sure the reference is to a militia company from Marion County (then district,) commanded by Capt. W. J. Davis,. This company was composed of "elderly men" and 16 year old boys, and mustered in rank ad file about 154 men. They arrived after the fights in Tullifinny and camped in the old field on the right of the railroad, just beyond Tullifinny Creek, and near to the woods, where the cadet battalion was bivouacked. They arrived soon after the Yankee battery began shelling the passing trains and knew very little about military tactics and were encumbered with a lot of "pots, ovens, frying pans, bedding, etc," as you describe. The cadets were detailed every day to drill this disorganized mass of old men and boys, who had not even learned to change step, and when a shell from the Yankee battery would come screaming over the old field it was with difficulty that discipline could be maintained.

With a number of the 16 year-old boys I had gone to school in the old Marion district, and to some of them I was closely related, and I had known a number of the elderly men from my earliest recollection, and they were our most solid and respectable citizens. Five years after, I married the daughter of the fourth sergeant of this company, the late John Mace; and two uncles of my wife, the late Gewood and Elihu Berry, were privates in this same company. In looking over the rool of this militia from Marion I find that all the elderly men are long since dead and a majority of the 16 year-old boys have already "crossed the river," A few, now prominent citizens of Marion, Dillion and Florence counties still survive, among them the Hon. Jas. D. Montgomery, for years county treasurer of Marion County and member of the Constitutional Convention of 1895, and Ex-Sheriff Wm. A. Wall, of Marion; Wm. B. Allen, Neal McInnis and T.C. Sherwood, of Dillion County; R.J. Rogers, Mullins, and Isham E. Watson, of Florence County.

The Citadel cadets left Tullifinny on Christmas Day; 1864, and went direct to James Island, where they did picket duty, twenty-four hours on and twenty-four off, till the evacuation of Charleston, February 17, 1865. For a part of the time we were on James Island we had tents, and though the duty was hard and exacting, we greatly enjoyed life, living as we did in the open and drinking in the salt water breezes.

My messmates on the island were John C. Tiedeman, an Ex-Alderman of the city, and now a prominent wholesale grocer of Charleston; Lewis Meng, of Union, and J.P. Allen, now holding a Government position in the Custom House at Charleston. Meng's father sent him down a negro man, who was a fine cook. Tiedeman's father, the venerable Otto Tiedeman, kept us supplied with groceries of all kinds, while Allen's father, who was a truck farmer near the city, furnished us with vegetables fresh from the fields, and these with the rations we drew, gave us "plenty and variety." My physical condition soon became such that I was only able to button the top button of my cadet uniform.

On the night of the evacuation I was on picket in the lower part of the island, in the direction of Stono River. That afternoon while on vidette duty I could plainly see the men on the picket line of the enemy and could see transports and gunboats moving around. The Yankees evidently believed that the island was being evacuated, as Sherman was then in our rear at Columbia. About 9 o'clock we were quietly taken off the picket line and marched to the long bridge over the Ashley in pursuit of the main body of the battalion, which had crossed the bridge much earlier. I am pretty sure our pickets were the last to leave the island by way of the long bridge. We caught up with our command early next morning. Marching on to St. Stephens after a few days' delay, we secured transportation to Cheraw, where we got in front of Sherman. At Cheraw our battalion acted as the rear guard of the army and crossed the bridge over the Pee-Dee into Marlboro County in rear of the Cavalry. The bridge was fired before the Yankees could cross, but they ran up a battery on the hill near St. David's Church and fired at us as long as we were within range. At the crossroads, about one and one-half miles from Cheraw, we were allowed to take the first rest we had had in hours. In a few moments, though bombshells were occasionally bursting around us, I was sound asleep. We were right at a road I had often travelled in my boyhood days, and when the bugle sounded "fall in," I looked longingly down the road towards my home, thirty miles away, and took up the weary tramp, tramp, tramp to Fayetteville, N.C.

This was the beginning of the great March rains of 1865, known in all this section as the "great Sherman freshets." The rains were incessant, streams greatly swollen and the roads in a terrible condition. Arriving at Fayetteville we crossed the Cape Fear River and proceeded to Raleigh by way of Smithfield. Before reaching Raleigh the battalion was, at the request of "Governor Magrath, ordered back to South Carolina. At Raleigh we got railroad transportation to Chester, S.C. by way of Greensboro and Charlotte, N.C. From Chester we marched across the country to Shelton, on Broad River, and then by rail to Spartanburg, where we took up quarters in Wofford College. It was while we were in Spartanburg that we first heard as a rumor, that Lee had surrendered. Late in April we marched to Greenville, S.C., where, on April 29, we were given a twenty days' furlough, and we all got home as best we could.

Besides those wounded at Tullifinny the following cadets died from disease: R. F. Nichols, John Culbreath, G. O. Buck, T. A. Johnson and R. Noble. T. A. Johnson died in the Wofford College building while we were camped there. From the first we received nothing for our services, either from the State or the Confederacy, except the rations we consumed.

After the war Major White removed to Marion, where he lived till his death a few years ago, full of years and honors. For many years he taught the Marion High School, and for several terms was country school superintendent. He also worked as a civil engineer, and was a most painstaking and accurate land surveyor. He owned a small farm near the town and was the pioneer in this section of the now great strawberry business. It was at Marion that his first wife died, childless. He afterwards married the daughter of the Rev. Hugh A. C. Walker, late of the South Carolina Conference and reared and educated four noble sons, now first-class men.. Some of his boys graduated at the Citadel. There never was a nobler man than Major White. Modest as a maiden, he was courageous as a lion; kind and gentle, yet he was a rigid disciplinarian; with a fine sense of humor, he was pure and chaste of speech. It was a delight to visit his home, for he was given to hospitality, and as a guest he was pleasant and entertaining. On the long march through slush and mud from Cheraw to Raleigh I have often seen him with as many

guns of the boys as he could hold on the withers of his horse, and often he would dismount and walk for miles in the mud while two and sometimes three, worn-out boys were astride the old bay horse. Peace to his ashes! One of the "Dandy-Jim boys" of 1864.

John C. Sellers

Sellers, S. C.