Southern Soldier Stories

By

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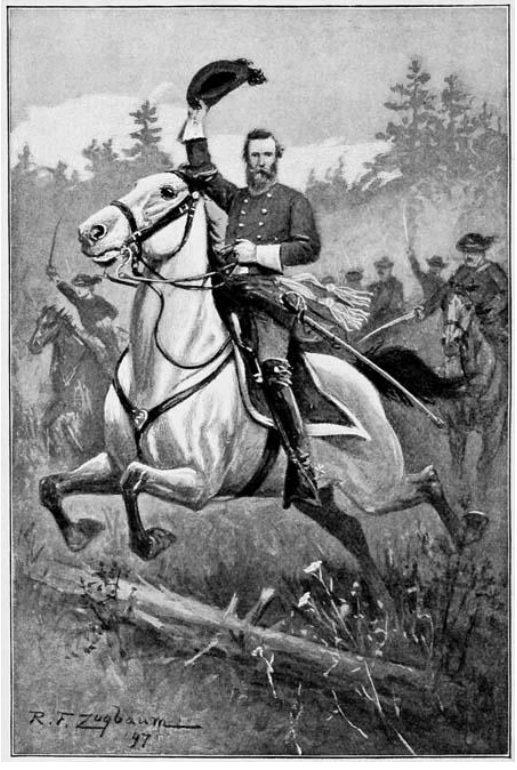
SOUTHERN SOLDIER STORIES



J. E. B. STUART—THE CAVALIER.

TO "JOE"

I DEDICATE THIS BOOK TO THE "JOE" SO OFTEN
MENTIONED IN THESE STORIES
HE WAS MY LOVED COMRADE IN ARMS, AND A
SHARER IN ALL MY WAR EXPERIENCES
HE IS NOW

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OF RICHMOND, VIRGINIA

PREFACE

THE use of the first personal pronoun singular in any of these stories does not of necessity mean that the author had anything to do with the events chronicled.

“I tell the story as ’twas told to me.”

SOUTHERN SOLDIER STORIES

HOW BATTLES ARE FOUGHT

A PREFATORY EXPLANATION FOR THE BENEFIT OF THOSE WHO KNOW NOTHING ABOUT THE MATTER

WHEN squads or scouting parties meet each other, they either fight in an irregular fashion or they run away.

With a systematic battle it is different.

Before a systematic battle, one army selects some place at which to resist the advance of the other.

The advancing army usually cannot leave the other aside and go on by another route to the capital city which it wants to reach, because, if it did, the army left aside would quickly destroy what is called the advancing army's "communications."

To destroy these communications would be to cut off supplies of food, ammunition, and everything else necessary to an army.

The army which takes the defensive selects some point that can be most easily defended,—some point where a river or a creek, or a line of hills, or something else, serves to give it the advantage in a fight.

The enemy must either attack that army there, and drive it out of its position, or it must "flank" it out, if it is itself to go forward.

To "flank" an army out of position is not merely to pass it by, which, as explained above, might be dangerous, but to seize upon some point or some road, the possession of which will compel that army to retire.

Thus, when General Lee could not be driven out of his works at Fredericksburg by direct attack, General Hooker marched his army up the river, and by crossing there placed himself nearer Richmond than General Lee was. This compelled General Lee to abandon his position at Fredericksburg, and to meet General Hooker in the open field; otherwise there would have been nothing to prevent General Hooker from going to Richmond, with a part of his greatly superior force, leaving the rest of it to check any operations Lee might have undertaken against his communications.

It is in some such fashion as this that every battle is brought about. One side is ever trying to get somewhere, and the other side is ever trying to prevent it from doing so. Incidentally, each army is trying to destroy the other.

When one army has planted itself in a position of its choice, and the other advances to attack it, this is what happens:—

The army that is standing still throws out lines of pickets in front to watch for the enemy's advance and report it.

The enemy, as he advances, also throws out a cloud of skirmishers to "feel" of the position and avoid traps and ambushes.

A line of battle often extends over several miles in length, covering all available ground for attack or defence.

Before the advancing general can determine against what part of his adversary's line to hurl his heaviest battalions, he must study the conditions along that line; namely, by means of his skirmishers.

In the same way the general who is awaiting attack tries to discover through his skirmishers what his enemy's plan of battle is, and at what points he most needs to concentrate his own men.

While awaiting this information he posts his men—cavalry, artillery, and infantry—wherever he thinks they will be most useful, having reference all the time to their rapid movement during the battle from one part of the line to another, as occasion may demand.

He also holds a considerable part of his army "in reserve." That is to say, he stations it at points a little in rear of the line of battle, from which he can order all or any part of it to any point where strength may be needed.

In a great battle, involving large bodies of troops, each corps or division commander must do in a smaller way what the

general-in-chief does on a larger scale. Each has charge of the battle on a certain part of the line. Each must take care of things within his own jurisdiction, and be ready at a moment's notice to respond to the demand of the commanding general for troops with which to help out elsewhere.

These are the generalities. Let us now come to the battle itself.

When the skirmishers of the advancing army meet the skirmishers of the resisting army, there is apt to be some pretty hot fighting for a time, and sometimes the artillery is considerably involved in it. But this is not the real thing; it is a mere preliminary to the actual battle.

The army that is standing on the defensive holds its lines in position—every battery placed where it will do the most good, and every infantryman lying down and taking the utmost advantage of every tree stump, log, or inequality of the ground, to protect himself as much as possible.

The men on horseback are either in front with the skirmishers, minutely observing the strength and movements of the enemy, or, having finished that work, are thrown out at the two ends of the lines, called "flanks," to watch there for possible movements of the enemy that might be otherwise unobserved. They are within call of any part of the line where need of them may arise.

While the skirmishers are doing their work, the heaviest strain of war falls on the nerves of the men in line of battle.

They have nothing to do but wait.

They wait with the certain knowledge that in a few minutes the advancing army will throw men forward, and thus convert its skirmish line into a line of attack; while on their own side they know that their skirmish line, after making all of discovery that temporary resistance can accomplish, will fall back, and that then the crucial conflict will begin.

Then comes the uproar of battle,—the dust, the blood, the advance, the retreat, the shock of arms, the murderous volleys of the infantry, the thunder storm of artillery; in short, the final desperate conflict of determined men for the mastery, all of them directed by cool-headed commanders, sitting on their horses at points of vantage for observation, and directing a reinforcement here, a withdrawal of men there, the hurrying of artillery to one point, an onset of cavalry at another, and at a critical moment an up-and-at-them charge with the bayonets. That usually ends matters one way or the other at the point involved. For only two or three times in any war do men with fixed bayonets on one side actually meet in physical shock men armed with fixed bayonets on the other.

Wherever there is advantage on either side, the general commanding that side throws troops forward in as heavy masses as possible to make the most of it. If one line or the other be broken, every conceivable effort is made to convert the breach into victory. And if victory comes, the cavalry thunder forward in pursuit and in an endeavor to convert the enemy's defeat into rout.

This is only a general description. I hope that no old soldier on either side will read it. It is not intended for such as they. It is written *virginibus puerisque*, and for other people who don't

know anything about the subject. It is printed here in the hope that it may enable such persons a little better to understand these stories of strenuous conflict.

JOE

JOE was very much in earnest at Pocotaligo, South Carolina, where a great little battle was fought on the 22d of October, 1862.

That is to say, Joe was not quite seventeen years old, was an enthusiastic soldier, and was as hot headed as a boy well can be.

We had two batteries and a few companies of mounted riflemen—three hundred and fifty-one men all told—to oppose the advance of five thousand. We had only the nature of the country, the impassability of the marshes, and the long high causeways to enable us to make any resistance at all.

Before the battle of Pocotaligo proper began, we went two miles below to Yemassee and there made a stand of half an hour.

Our battery, numbering fifty-four men, received the brunt of the attack.

Joe had command of a gun.

His men fell like weeds before a scythe. Presently he found himself with only three men left with whom to work a gun.

The other battery was that of Captain Elliot of South Carolina; and Captain Elliot had just been designated Chief of Artillery.

Elliot's battery was really not in action at all. Joe seeing Captain Elliot, and being himself full of the enthusiasm which insists upon getting things done, appealed to the Chief of Artillery for the loan of some cannoneers with whom to work his gun more effectively. Captain Elliot declined. Thereupon Joe broke into a volley of vituperation, calling the captain and his battery cowards, and by other pet names not here to be reported.

I, being Joe's immediate chief, as well as his elder brother, commanded him to silence and ordered him back to his gun. There he stood for fifteen minutes astride a dead man and pulling the lanyard himself. At the end of that time we were ordered to retire to Pocotaligo.

Joe was flushed, powder grimed, and very angry; so angry that even I came in for a part of his displeasure. When I asked him, in order that I might make report for the section, how many shots he had fired, he blazed out at me: "How do I know? I've been killing Yankees, not counting shots."

"How many rounds have you left in your limber-chest, Joe?" I asked.

He turned up the lid of the chest, and replied: "Five."

"And the chest had fifty, hadn't it, when you went into action?"

"Of course."

"Then you fired forty-five, didn't you?"

"Oh, I suppose so, I don't know! Confound these technicalities, anyhow! I'm *fighting*, not counting! Do your own arithmetic!"

It wasn't a very subordinate speech for a sergeant to make to the commander of his section, but Joe was my brother, and I loved him.

At Pocotaligo he fought his gun with superb devotion and effect. But he remained mad all over and clear through till two o'clock that night. At that hour I was able to persuade him that he had been indiscreet in his remarks to the Chief of Artillery.

"Maybe I was," he said, grasping my hand; "but you're not to worry, old fellow; I'll stand the consequences, and you're the best that ever was."

Nevertheless I did worry, knowing that such an offence was punishable without limit in the discretion of a court-martial. It was scarcely sunrise the next morning when I appeared at Captain Elliot's headquarters. I had ridden for half an hour, I suppose, my mind all the time recalling a certain military execution I had seen; but this morning I imagined Joe in the rôle of victim. I had not slept, of course, and my nerves were all on edge.

I entered headquarters with a degree of trepidation which I had never felt before.

Captain Elliot was performing his ablutions as well as he could, with a big gourd for basin. He nodded and spoke with his head in the towel.

"Good fight, wasn't it? We have a lot of those fellows to bury this morning. Pretty good bag for three hundred and fifty-one of us, and it was mainly your battery's cannister that did it."

I changed feet and said, “Y—e—s.”

I thought to myself that that was about the way *I* should take to “let a man down easy” in a hard case.

The captain carefully removed the soap from his ears, then turning to me said: “That’s a *fighter*, that brother of yours.”

“Yes,” I replied; “but, captain, he is very young, very enthusiastic, and very hot-tempered; I hope—I hope you’ll overlook—his—er—intemperateness and—”

“THUNDER, MAN, DO YOU SUPPOSE I’VE GOT ANY GRUDGE AGAINST A FELLOW THAT FIGHTS LIKE THAT?” ROARED THE GALLANT CAPTAIN.

As I rode back through the woods, it seemed to me about the brightest October morning that I had ever seen, even in that superb Carolina climate.