

VERY HOT FIRE

EXPERIENCED BY
ONE OF THE
EDITORS OF THE FIREMEN'S EDITION, IN JUNE, 1864

It was at Bethesda church, Virginia, on the second day of June, 1864. The Union and Confederate armies had again come together in the tug-of-war. A savage little fight was in progress by the skirmishers, when a Rebel battery galloped to the front, formed battery by pieces on its left piece in beautiful style, unlimbered and opened on the infantry quicker than it could be told. In our front, west of the church, there was a clearing, extending some distance into the woods forming a sort of pocket, or pass. This clearing may have been ten or fifteen acres in extent of triangular shape, and commanded by the woods on both flanks. It was about at the base of this triangle that the enemy came into battery; between us and the enemy was a stretch of low ground somewhat grown up with small brush, the road was graded up to some extent through this low ground. For this reason there was no eligible place for us to go in battery anywhere in this low ground. But it afforded the infantry some protection when the Rebel battery came into position. Battery B fourth U. S. Light Artillery was standing "at ease," just back of the church, being halted, in column of piece left in front, the captain (James Stewart) was lounging on his saddle near the right gun with some ten or fifteen of the battery men around him, and I should judge he was in one of his funny moods by the laughter of the boys. Suddenly General Griffin beckoned to Captain Stewart who left the crowd and rode over towards the General. But directing what the general wanted, he said as he wheeled his horse round, "this means us boys. Drives, mount! Cannoneers, mount! Attention!" A few words passed between the General and Captain which I did not hear being at that moment in the act of mounting the lumber chest. But afterwards I learned that the general asked Stewart, "Can you go in battery under fire?" "Yes sir, where shall I unlimber?" "Suit yourself about that but keep an eye to supports, I would like to see that battery silenced." "I will shut it up sir." Now the question as to unlimbering on this side or the other side of the low ground spoken of, was an important one; if we unlimbered on this side (that is the side nearest the church) we would have over half a mile range and would have to fire over the heads of the infantry in line. But if we crossed it we would have to go in battery a few hundred feet—feet mind you not yards—from the enemies' muzzles—right on our skirmish lines if not a little in front. Having his choice as before stated the old man chose the close quarters. Turning from General Griffin, Stewart whipped out his saber and spurred to the head of battery column, executing a "right mouset" as he did so. "Attention! forward march, Trot, Gall-p." And then as the huge wheels began to thunder behind him and the tramp of the powerful horses, the yells of the drivers, and the cracking of whips mingled with the swish, swish, of the enemies' canister he bent forward over his horses neck, and spurring him to a run roared out come on boys! follow me! Charge!!! Old Infantry veterans who were out along the road that day have described the appearance of Stewart's battery as it charged down the road. The old man was five or six yards in front leaning over his horses neck swinging his saber and shouting, come on, come on! Every driver lying forward on his horse whipping and yelling, every gunner and cannoneer hanging on for life to the guard rods of the limber chest and bouncing six inches high from the springless seats as the wheels flew over cuts, a long train of dust streaming behind and the very earth made to smoke and tremble under the fierce tramp of the flying wheels. Speed was everything here, because it was necessary to get there quick and get to work before the enemy could get many rounds into us; and, besides, as it was a very desperate enterprise, it was best to go in with all possible "Whoop and hurrah!" When we reached the ground favorable for going in battery, Stewart gave rapid orders to "Trot and walk, and then forward into battery" etc., then depending on the perfect discipline of his boys to execute orders without details, it was "action front, right section load, solid shot and case alternately. Number one, left section load common shell, cut fuse one second. (So they would burst at 1200 feet, just before reaching the enemies' batteries.) Old Hess (the left hand gun) give them double canister and fire by piece and sock it to 'em," all in a perfect torrent of roars. From that time on it was "Keep that muzzle down, steady there, that's right, keep her there," and similar directions. Meantime every one of the boys who survived was working for the great day. Did you ever hear the thump of a rammer on a shot or canister head when number one was "sending home" while you were getting ready to pick cartridges and look on the lanyards? And did you ever hear that sound mingle with the close thunder of the enemies'

guns as the "skitter and kerching" of his canister splintered your gun carriages or plowed the ground about your feet, to say nothing of its whizz and whirr in the air about your ears, or the occasional savage "plunk" of one that happens to find a poor comrade's bosom in its fierce track? If you have, it is not necessary to describe the scene while we were getting in that first charge. If you have not, why, the description would be wasted. If ever there was a forlorn hope of Artillery men in battle, it was the old battery while that first load was being "sent home." But beyond hard breathing through set teeth, lips compressed, nostrils dilated and eyes hard-tempered in the heat of battle, you could see no change in the expression of the boys. Almost without exception the men who took the battery into action were veterans of from eighteen to twenty battles, and they could handle twelve pounder Napoleons like horse pistols! Of course the personnel of the battery had been winnowed in battle, or tried in the test of hungry marches and muddy bivouacs until every man that survived and stood by was as tough as the brass guns that they served, or with the frightful fatigues, sufferings and privations of that wilderness and Spotsylvania campaign, which Stewart had shared with us. Shoulder to shoulder we had been drawn so near to the old man that he had become our commander and our comrade. Every one of us would have followed him into an open grave if he had called us to "come on." The Rebel battery opened furiously on us as we came along the road, firing both case and canister, but their practice was not good, and they did not hit either man or horse until we halted and began to unlimber. As we began to unlimber we could see our infantry poking their heads up out of the grass and weeds to look at us with loud yells and cheers, and their skirmishers lying down in the field on our flanks, kept up a crackling fire at the enemy's battery, as the enemy's infantry in the edge of the woods also did on us. Under such circumstances we unlimbered, loaded, then the concert began; and you bet that from that moment the music was by the full band. We had thirteen or fourteen men hit altogether in this affair of whom ten or eleven went down in the single minute that it took us to unlimber and get in the first load. After that our Confederate friends had something to engage their attention besides their own practice. The two batteries were not more than 1200 feet apart, both in the open, without the slightest cover. In these times of peace it would be useless to attempt a description of what it means to jump a battery into position within point-blank canister range of another battery already firing, and that too, on a broad road running through an open field, without a particle of cover for at least half a mile. The Rebel battery was gallantly served, and they got one regular blizzard into us. The day being hot and sultry, with no air stirring, the smoke hung right in front of us. So that after the second or third round we could not see the enemy at all, but could hear his canister rattling around our guns and wheels like big hail stones, or whizzing past our heads, or whirling through the grass and small bushes. But we had the exact direction by the well-defined tracks of the wheels in the first recoil, so there was no difficulty in pointing, and all we had to do was to "keep her muzzle down." In three minutes we could feel the enemy's fire slacken, in seven or eight minutes more he ceased entirely, and then, as the smoke lifted we saw his deserted guns standing silent in the field. Ordinarily Stewart was more precise and calm in the most desperate fighting than at any time, but on this occasion as we gave a cheer he joined in with us. At this moment one of the men in the right section, shook his fist at the enemy and shouted, "All down, set 'em up again— you!" this raised a laugh and another cheer. But nevertheless it was a very hot fire.

Experience as a Fireman.

I am not known by the cognomen of "Bud," nor do I answer to the name of "Slylock." Neither do I as a general thing promenade First street with my pantaloons chucked in my boots, nor do I carry a couple of pistols in each pocket. But, by way of a new excitement, I lately found the Fire Department, and connected my fortune with H & L. Co. No. 1. I bought myself a uniform, treated the company, took up my quarters in the bank house, where I slept in a bed occupied in the day time by an overgrown brindle poodle. First night went to bed with my boots on, ready for an alarm. At last it came. Seized the rope with the rest of the boys, started on the run, tugged and toiled and swore, till we got the machine in 26th avenue south, 4 1/2 miles from home. Found the alarm to be caused by a camp fire getting loose and climbing a spruce tree. The conflagration was about to extinguish itself. Had to drag her back; most tired to death. It wasn't funny at all. Turned in quarter hour; new alarm,

fire in an alley, got apparatus jambed on corner, fight with some one who tried to work a chain pump, victorious, got our machine out and carried off the right fore wheel of a wheel-barrow on tongue, reached the fire; big "greaser" standing on the pump, elected himself as chief boss and auctioneer, knocked him into a bee-hive, took water, got it on the fire, worked till my arms ached, let go to rest. First assistant hit me over the head with a fire bucket, and told me to go ahead.

Babies in the loft, horrible situation, gallant fireman made a rush up the ladder, battered his way through the smoke and cobwebs, reappears with a child in his teeth, and his pockets full of teaspoons.

Old gentleman from the country much excited on gin, wanted to help, uncertain how to do so; he rushed into a fifth story bed room, threw the mirror out of the window, tried to throw the bedstead after it, seized the slop pail, boot-jack, comb and brush, carried them down stairs, and put them in a place of safety, four blocks away on the dock; came back on the run, shouting all the time, took up the door mat, wrapped the mouse trap and an empty beer bottle in it, and transported them into the nearest barn by heroic exertion. He succeeded in carrying the kitchen stove and furniture piece by piece unimpaired into the middle of a five acre lot on the outskirts of town. He was an enterprising worker and at last he knocked the piano to pieces with an axe, in order to save the lock and keys, and filling his pockets with cup and other table furniture, he was seen to make his final exit from the back door with a rolling pin tucked behind his ear, mouth full of doughnuts, and a table leg under each arm, his head surrounded by a cage, and a stew kettle.

The house was saved uninjured, but the contents were somewhat damaged by water. Got the truck back home as the whistle blew for breakfast, and went to bed with the dog before mentioned.

During the next day there was a fire in the Dutch settlement. Ran up stairs and carried down in my arms two half grown children, thereby saving their valuable lives, and giving them to their mother. She in a passionate burst kissed me, thanked me, and said that one had the small pox and the other the Michigan lumber itch.

Another fire in a fuse factory on 1st street; went on the roof, explosion, came to in somebody's cellar, one leg in a soap barrel and the other in a keg of butter, my hair full of Nestucca honey and stale eggs; discovered I had been blown over a sawmill, and had three sections of smoke stack hanging on my demolished fireman's shirt.

Fire in a big clothing store, next day chief sported a silk velvet hat, several of the men exhibited new twelve-dollar Oregon City, all wool suits; I didn't get a new shirt, lost my new over coat and got somewhat damaged myself by bailing water from the slough, four blocks from the fire with a dishrag canvas bucket. Fire out, order came assemble utensils of war and turn her around, start for home, corner Fourth Avenue east, and Third Avenue west on Stillwell avenue and Front street. Hook & Ladder Co. No. 1, Tillamookers; Steamer 73 Dutch; Chemical engine No. 103, Irish; and the hand force pumps on a pumper, Yankees; and our own company came in contact. Machine got jambed, return swearing by the strength of company, got all mixed up on a "right wheel by fours." Fight one of 73's men, hit foreman No. 1 with a spanner who retaliated with a fire axe. Dutch and Yankees joined in, extemporaneous and impartial distribution of prairie gravel, cement and paving stones.

Men of the companies went in. Resolved to go myself. Went in, went out again, as fast as I could with a bloody nose, black eye, and minus my set of store teeth, (I think they were in my stomach) my red shirt in carpet rags, my right ear in a sling, and my knuckles skinned as if they had passed through the hands of a Tillamook bonus man. Got on a dry goods box and watched the fun. No. 1 whipped every thing, 73's best man was doubled up like a jack-knife by a thump in the place where Jonah of old was, ten of No. 100 were ly-around with their eyes in mourning, while two-thirds of the rest were taken home on ladders. Four policemen saw the row at the start, but pulled their hats down over their eyes, covered up their stars, slinked into the alley.

I got home, patched myself up with sticking plaster, resigned my commission, made a will, and left the company. Saw enough service. Don't regret my experience, had lots of fun, but grieve for my lost teeth and the companionship of the lost brindle poodle.

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