



The Cape Fear Civil War Round Table

Hold On

By Noah Raper

In the early summer of 1864, Union General Ulysses S. Grant's forces pushed steadily through northern Virginia and eventually pinned down Confederate General Robert E. Lee's army in a line of trenches stretching from north of the capital, Richmond, to south of Petersburg, Virginia. Petersburg was a modest gathering of rail lines that represented Richmond's last supply line to the rest of the Confederacy. Lee himself had said that if it came to a siege of the Confederate capital the result of the war would be simply a matter of time. His outnumbered, outsupplied, and battle-weary men fought on through the fall and subsequent winter, clinging desperately to a cause that many felt and some knew was lost. Starved and racked by disease and desertion, the army managed to stay together, and hoped without hope that victory could still, somehow, be salvaged.

Rifle fire from the Rebel pickets rang out sporadically in the gathering dusk like logs popping on a hard-burning campfire. Sighting figures in dark Union blue and heavy overcoats scuttling through the openings in their clay-red trenches and advancing closer, the forward outposts discharged their final desperate rounds and sprinted back to the relative safety of the Rebel lines. Shouts of "Raid! Raid!" rent the air, as men in dirty gray seized their muskets, checking to see that the percussion caps had not become dislodged, and prepared to hurl back the raiding party. They knew that the Federals only wanted to capture a few prisoners and to give those among the Confederates who wanted to desert a good chance of accomplishing it. Any attack, though, no matter how small, now posed a danger to the well-spread Confederate defenses at Petersburg.

Sergeant William Wright was glad for this chance to kill a few Yankees. He was growing tired of the harassing he and his comrades in gray were forced to endure nearly continuously. Every day artillery rounds from the Union lines crashed into the solid wood and dirt earthworks on his part of the line, sending great plumes of red earth high into the air. Picked sharpshooters, dead shots at five hundred yards, sent their rounds zinging over no-man's land at anything that moved, making it dangerous to expose any body part over the earthen walls or even to stand up straight. William and his brother Joseph spent their days at the front hunkered down in the mud, waiting for something, anything to happen. This was such a time.

The two brothers, along with the remaining twelve men of their company, sprang to their senses upon hearing the shouts and the sudden increase in the intensity of firing. Making their way to their favorite firing positions along the crooked, curving, irregular line, they searched for targets. It was not long before shadowy shapes flitted in front of them, and Lieutenant Smith shouted, "Company E! Fire at will!"

William took careful aim at a small knot of Federals struggling to get through the felled trees with sharpened branches and the other entanglements in front of the lines. Lining up the sights of his British-made Enfield rifle-musket, he breathed slowly and squeezed off a round. He immediately reloaded and looked for the effect of his shot. He spotted a blue form there on the ground, writhing and shrieking in pain. Satisfied with his aim, William commenced firing and reloading mechanically, pouring rounds into the advancing Union troops, who were now firing in return. The strange shriek of lead balls cut the air, every bullet sounding like the scream of Death himself. The entire Confederate line in this sector was alert and ablaze with gunfire now, and the Federals began to waver. A small counterattack farther down on the left from William convinced the Federals that they had had enough, and they went sprinting back to their own lines, carrying as many wounded with them as possible. About a dozen dark forms were left sprawled in the mud.

The riflemen of Company E stepped down from their small platforms and lounged in the dark red mud, glad to have repulsed the Yankee attack so easily. Casualties in the thin Confederate lines had been light, with only one man wounded in Company E, the short conscript named Hill, down with a flesh wound in the forearm. Lt. Smith sent him to the rear to look for a doctor and get patched up and told him to report back as soon as he had the surgeon's approval. Putting one man on watch and telling William to keep an eye on the company, the Lieutenant headed off to find the Colonel and get any orders he might have.

"Not too bad, eh Will?" asked James Spencer, a tall skinny fellow with a knack for foraging who had been with the company from the beginning. "One hit and a whole crop of Yanks with rations they won't be needin'."

"Take Lamb," William answered, smiling at the prospect of a good meal and a full stomach for the first time in weeks. "Mind you don't get shot."

Spencer and Lamb slid easily over the muddy breastworks and jogged forward toward the still, blue forms, keeping as low as possible and moving in short bursts over the broken ground. Meanwhile, the rest of the company set to work cleaning their muskets, swabbing out the black powder residue and picking out the cone to ensure a clean ignition on every shot. They had learned long before that a clean musket was the private's best friend in combat.

In no time at all, Spencer jumped back into the trench with his precious cargo of Federal rations in tow, one full, black haversack for each of them, but William was surprised to see that he was alone.

"Lamb?" he asked, weary of what he might hear, having heard it far too many times and knowing that the sharpshooters across the way never rested.

"Damn traitor. When I stopped at them Yanks, he just kept right on a-goin' to the Yank lines. I suspect he's gone and deserted."

Joseph immediately jumped up, an angry look on his face.

"I knew that no-good piece of trash wouldn't last," he shouted. "He started to have that sneaky look, and I caught him lookin' over at their lines one night like he's

lookin' for a spot to come in. I warned 'im not to try nothin' but now he's up and gone. Leavin' us here after all we been through. It ain't right.

The rest of the company glanced at each other's faces and read them without a word. Lamb had been the last of three brothers who had enlisted together in 1861. One had gone down with a bloody bullet wound at Sharpsburg in Maryland, back in 1862, and the other had gone in a hospital in Richmond, sweating and dying with a fever. They all knew that his mother had written Lamb repeatedly over the last few months, imploring him to give himself over to the enemy rather than die. William remembered dark star-filled nights on the picket line with Lamb, hearing the young soldier struggling within himself to make the right decision. William himself didn't really know which way was right: remaining loyal to your comrades, or to your home and family.

Joseph was still visibly upset, and angrily cursing Lamb for all he was worth.

Just calm down, now, William told him. He's gone, and ain't nothin' for it. Be content with this here food and don't trouble yourself. To the others he remarked, And don't y'all think 'bout runnin' off, neither. I been to Point Lookout, and trust me, tain't no better and no warmer than here.

One of the men, Crawford, a small, quiet little man but one of the fiercest fighters in the regiment smiled shyly and spoke up. Yain't got nothin' to fear from us, William. We's here 'til the end regardless.

Joseph sat down, wiped his brown, grime-caked hands on his equally dirty wool pants, and set ferociously to work on the contents of one of the haversacks, the corner of which was stained a deep red. Reaching into the inner pocket, he came up with a piece of red and white salt pork about the size of a man's hand, some blue beef, and a small block of vegetables, dried and packed into the shape and consistency of a brick. There was also a knife, fork and battered plate, several dry hardtack crackers, and a bundle of white papers, wrapped in a copy of the *New York Herald*.

Don't go readin' them letters, Joe, William warned. You do, an' you'll wish that you hadn't. Best just read that newspaper and give them letters here.

Shrugging, Joseph did as William asked and munched contentedly on the Yankee food, reading the paper aloud for the benefit of those in the company who hadn't had the little bit of schooling that he had. Most of the men had come up with similar items in other haversacks, and one found a small ambrotype. After devouring his share of the captured food, savoring every last morsel, including a small tin of those good Yankee pickles, William collected all the personal goods and placed them carefully in one of the haversacks, making sure that nothing got wet.

Joseph, still reading, came across an article of particular interest.

Says here the Yanks got Fort Fisher. They captured Wilmington right soon after that. That's the last open port, weren't it? There were slight exclamations and sighs from the men. Fort Fisher was well known, being in the state that these boys came from, and rumored to be the largest and strongest fort in the world. Several men in the company had relatives

servicing in the fort's garrison and William and Joseph's own cousin had manned a cannon behind the fort's thirty-foot walls.

"Now what, Will? With Fisher gone, what are we going to do?"

"We'll do all we can, Joe," William said slowly. "We'll just dig in and hold on."

Above the brothers, an occasional shell crossed the evening sky with a red glare, casting dark shadows across the men's faces. Most landed well behind the lines, some in the town itself, and the men hardly even dodged anymore. They knew, like all soldiers, that if a shell was coming for you, it was coming for you, and that was that.

The lines were silent. The Yankees across the bloody strip of torn-up mud had come out again the next morning, this time more slowly and with white handkerchiefs in place of weapons. After similar handkerchiefs popped up on ramrods from the Confederate lines, men in dark blue with bright white stretchers ventured out from the trenches, walking easily over the ground that no man had dared walk on a few minutes before. They went back more carefully, encumbered as they were with darker, heavier burdens. Sgt. William Wright knew that they were performing one of the tiresome rituals of this siege, and he saw this as his opportunity.

Carefully laying down his musket, he took up the haversack from the night before and hopped over the breastworks. He singled out an officer among the burial detail and advanced slowly and deliberately toward the man. When within ten yards, Sgt. Wright paused. With the words, "Nothin's been touched, I seen to that," Sgt. Wright took a few steps nearer and, bending down, delicately laid the pouch on the ground. Straightening up, he assumed the position of Parade Rest, hands clasped in front, one foot half a step back at an angle. The officer anxiously studied the dirty Rebel's face a moment and, satisfied, reached for the parcel. Opening the flap, he examined the contents. He immediately glanced up at Sgt. William Wright, a mixture of emotions showing on his face. He brought his feet together to the position of Attention, briskly raised his arm, and delivered and held a crisp and formal salute. Sgt. Wright snapped up to Attention, returned the salute, and brought his hand quickly down to his side. Turning on his heel, he executed a precise about-face and marched back the way he had come. The Union officer dropped his arm slowly, turned, and faced his men. Seeing what their leader held in his hands, they let loose a manly cheer, that of soldiers honoring one of their own. The Confederate lines exploded with a cheer of their own, and with hats thrown in the air and shouts full of honor, Sgt. William Wright was welcomed back into his own familiar part of the line.

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The siege of Petersburg finally came to an end on April 2, 1865. Union troops broke through the Confederate defenses at several places during a general assault all along the lines ordered by General Grant. That night, the evacuation of Petersburg and Richmond began, effectively ending any Southern hopes of victory. The defenders had fought valiantly against great odds, but in the end it was not enough. Total casualties for the siege were 42,000 for the North and 28,000 for the South, making it one of the costliest campaigns of the war. -The Last Citadel, Noah Andre Trudeau

The author has been a Civil War reenactor for six years and has a great passion for anything historical, especially if it deals with the great struggle of 1861-1865.

