



The Cape Fear Civil War Round Table

Seeing The Elephant

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Do you want to know what it was like to be a soldier during the American Civil War? Do you want to experience the sights, sounds, and smells of life in camp and on the field? If you do, and have a penchant for 'roughing it', then reenacting might be for you. In May, I participated in my first full-scale battle reenactment, at the 140th anniversary of the Battle of Spotsylvania Courthouse. I was not quite sure what to expect, but was determined to be as authentic as possible and try to get a feel for what life might have actually been like for the common soldiers. Suffice it to say I was not disappointed. Tired, muddy, hungry, and sweaty, maybe, but not disappointed.

I arrived at the Belvedere Plantation in Spotsylvania County, Virginia early in the afternoon on Friday, May 7th. My time was spent setting up camp, catching up with friends and acquaintances, and getting my first taste of camp life, nineteenth-century style. Everything was going nicely. That is until about seven thirty, or so.

About that time, some of the event staff were hustling around the camp, spreading the word that there was a severe thunderstorm on the way, with damaging winds, hail, and possibly tornado's. Not really the kind of thing you want to hear when you're going to be spending the night under canvas in an open field! As we were scurrying around, trying to get tarps and gum blankets secured over all of our belongings (there was no room for all of our baggage and us in the little A-Frame tent), the wind started picking up, and it began to rain.

And it rained, and blew. And blew and rained. Tents were tattered and strewn all over camp. Our fly came down, and several times during the maelstrom, yours truly volunteered to go outside, and re-stake our little home to Mother Earth. The flap closures were torn so badly by the wind that the flaps couldn't be secured, leading to a rather damp interior of our little abode.

All said, we fared much better than most...at least our tent was still standing! It was, however, just as muddy inside our tent as out, making bedding down for the night not a very promising venture. It brought to mind a prayer that was amended by Union soldiers during the infamous 'mud march'...'now I lay me down to sleep, in mud that's many fathoms deep. If I'm not here when you awake, then hunt me up with an oyster rake!'

As my first night in camp was anything but comfortable, I kept in mind that soon enough, I would get a chance to smell powder, and get my first taste of Civil War 'combat', commonly referred to as 'seeing the elephant'. As with my camp experience, I got more than I bargained for on the field. It turned out that the Regimental Quartermaster was going to be otherwise occupied during the fight, so I volunteered to carry the Regiment's Colors for him. The Commanding General accepted my offer, and I traded my musket for a flagpole.

The stage was set for a grand battle...roughly 3,000 Union Troops and 3,200 Confederates were poised for action. I took my place General Donny Taylor, and watched the lines of blue-clad troops advancing in perfect line-of-battle, the evening sun glistening on their muskets. The Federal Artillery opened, and ours answered, starting a cannonade that lasted for nearly twenty-five of thirty minutes. Our pickets were driven in, and volley after volley was poured into the mass of blue to our front, but they kept on coming. They stopped about fifty yards in front of our lines, and delivered a volley without much effect, reloaded and marched forward once more. They gained the breastworks on our left flank after several minutes of furious fighting. The tide seemed to be in the foe's favor, and they held the works for some time, until the units that we held in reserve could mount a counter attack. Once that was accomplished, the Yanks were driven back, our artillery chasing them from the field with shot, shell and canister, all with telling results. Their artillery then made a half-hearted attempt to provide some relief, targeting our guns with counter-battery fire, but the field was ours for the rest of that night.

The next morning, I awoke to the chill of pre-dawn, and made some coffee. We were expecting the Yanks to renew their assault, and we were not long in waiting. Just as the sun was peeking over the horizon, we could make out their lines of battle, already within musket range of our pickets! Without much shooting, our pickets were driven back across our lines, and the Federal artillery once again opened on us. Most of their shells passed harmlessly overhead, but we remained hunkered down, just the same. Our gunners raked the line of Yanks with solid shot, and then canister once they got within range, but there was no turning them back this time...they were heading directly for our center, with far more troops than they had on the previous night's attack. I actually saw a Yank Colonel riding at the front of the column, pointing his sword directly at the flag I was holding! They meant to sever our line right down the middle, it seemed. They delivered several volleys, seemingly oblivious to our withering fire, and then charged.

As there was no breeze, by this time thick smoke had settled over the field, making it hard to breathe. Added to the already dim early morning light, it was hard to see exactly where you were. Muzzle flashes were everywhere, and it sounded as if the whole world was being rent asunder. Our line stood fast for a little while, but then broke and fell back pell-mell from the Mule Shoe Salient, leaving the 'dead and wounded' of both armies in their wake. There was a desperate sense of confusion prevalent, Yanks and Rebs being intermingled while locked in 'mortal' combat of a most serious and personal nature.

Amidst all this cacophony, out of the smoke, there came a squad of Yankees no more than ten yards directly to my front, furiously loading and firing. There were no friendlies between the General and myself and them! In a moment of brazen exuberance, I mocked them, and waved the proud banner I was holding to and fro high above my head. They ceased all activities, looking at us with mouths agape. Before they could regain their bearing, we ran off to the left of our line (losing the astounded Yanks in the smoke and din of battle) to organize a counter attack. I sprinted past a Yank that was lying on the ground, holding his leg, writhing in mock agony.

Two fellow tar heels that had joined us and were running beside me went down. I felt as if every Yank in our lines had me in his sights. I imagined that I could hear the Minie balls whistling by my head as I ran. A hospital steward or ambulance driver ran past me towards the rear, his previously white apron then being the sanguine hue of an artilleryman's sash.

General Taylor had succeeded in getting two battalions on line, and with renewed confidence we started back towards the fray. While we were off organizing a counter attack, the Yankees had added another two battalions to the melee, with staggering results. It was utter chaos when we returned, with the 'bodies' of friend and foe alike thick on the ground.

Our fresh troops slammed into the Yanks with an awe-inspiring Rebel Yell, instantly swinging the battle in our favor. Another battalion of Confederates had come from the right flank, and we had effectively caught the yanks in a pincer-like trap, both of their flanks taking heavy enfilading fire from our infantry, and their center being raked by our artillery at close range.

As we advanced back towards our original line, driving the Yankees before us like sheep, I once more passed the 'wounded' Yank that I had seen earlier. His moaning had then ceased, and he lay still, with a fixed stare. I noticed more about him than I had earlier. He was about forty years of age, with a full beard, and had a wedding ring on his finger. For a fleeting moment, through the din of musketry and roar of artillery, with the powder smoke stinging my eyes, seeing blue and gray clad soldiers firing, loading, and falling all around me, I was no longer living in the twenty-first century. I knew nothing of cell phones, e-mail, or automobiles. I began to understand and fully appreciate the staggering nature of the enormous conflict that we were portraying. About the hundreds of thousands of otherwise healthy Americans who laid down their lives for their respective cause. In that instant, I knew what it was like. For that solitary moment in time, I was a soldier during the American Civil War.

