Annals of the War (Feb. 7, 1885)

Chapters of Unwritten History

ONE OF THE WOUNDED

How It Feels to be Among the Dead and Dying on a Battlefield

A CASE OF REMARKABLE VITALITY

From the Bloody Ditch at Groveton to a Clean Cot by the Potomac

By J. S. Slater*

A little before 5 o'clock in the afternoon of August 30, 1862, at Groveton, Va., I was wounded. The missile, a large sized Minie ball, struck me in the throat, close alongside the "Adam's apple" (about five inches below the left ear), passed between the windpipe (which it grazed) and the jugular and carotid veins and made its exit at the back, a little lower down, between the spinous processes of the fifth and sixth cervical vertebrae, which it fractured.

The blow benumbed me, as a matter of course, and the blood gushed in hurried jets, responsive to the throbbing of my heart, as I fell, covering my face, getting into my eyes and mouth as I gasped for breath; but yet, wonderful as it may seem, I never lost consciousness. On the contrary, my mind appeared more keenly active, although for a moment the sense of sight failed altogether and sounds were confused as if I were in the midst of a hurricane.

A CURIOUS SENSATION.

A comrade helped me to a sitting posture, and while I was endeavoring to repair damages by stopping the leak in my anatomy with a small ball of lint and handkerchief I chanced to have, the fighting was going on fiercely all about and over me and men were falling by dozens. But I did not mind that so much. I was in no pain. I regarded the bullets that flew by and sang their deadly music only with a languid interest. It was a curious sensation; the lying there so helpless in the very vortex of death without realizing the danger of the situation. To think of it now, after more than twenty years have passed, causes me to shudder.

AN OVERPOWERING THOUGHT

It was not until I saw our boys driven and going back that my mental faculties took fairly hold of realities. Then, in the twinkling of an eye, came the thoughts "I must die here, with no familiar face to cheer, no voice to comfort, no kindly hands to care for my dead body when I have done using it." It was terrible. Never before had I, nor have I ever since, felt the awful anguish of that moment, nor do I ever expect to again, not even in the final grapple with the great destroyer. Death was then bending over me; I was gazing into his fearful features: his chilling breath was stealing its way to my heart but the mental agony did not long continue.

A SPEEDY CHANGE

It was speedily succeeded by the most exquisite physical suffering, aggravated by another wound caused by a piece of shell that struck my left hip as I lay upon the earth. The benumbed sensation produced by the bullet as it forced its course through the bundled network of nerves and muscles of neck and spine gave way to the most excruciating pains, which manifested themselves most cruelly throughout my left side, no part of which, above the waist, was sensible to the outward touch. It seemed as if millions of red-hot needles were being thrust into my flesh, or as if each nerve and muscle were being reeled off my bones by some massive enginery of irresistible power.

WHERE THE BALL PASSED OUT

At the base of my skull, too, a hand's breath above the place where the ball had made its exit, there was a curious sensation, which can only be described by saying that it felt as though someone were endeavoring to bore into my brain, upward, with a gigantic anger. Yet, at first, this feeling were not so very painful; it was simply annoying and uncomfortable. It was, perhaps, two hours after I fell that thirst began to torment me, but I had no water. The last drop from my canteen had been given to a dying comrade.

In the edge of the evening a guard of Confederates was formed about the field and I was borne back about a hundred yards or so beyond the railroad cut, on the edge of which our line of battle had stood and there, until the afternoon of September 3, four days and nights, I lay in the midst of some 1,800 dead and wounded men. Until about

2 o'clock P.M. of the 2d of September not a drop of water touched my lips except as the rain fell, and then each drop which touched my parched and swollen tongue, which protruded from my mouth, felt like molten lead.

I had eaten my last food prior to the battle---three small army crackers---on the morning of August 30, so that even in my weak condition hunger as well as thirst came to increase my sufferings.

DEATH OF A COMRADE.

The night of the 30th it rained quite hard and chilled the badly wounded to the marrow. On that night, also Sergeant Jerrolds, of Company E, of my regiment, died. He was wounded in the abdomen and hand by a shell and it chanced that I had been laid down close by him. He could not rest, complained of the position of his head, and, as we were alongside of each other on the sloping ground, I managed to "spoon up" near enough to slip my right and only useful arm beneath his neck, forming a pillow. ""God bless you, that feels better," he murmured, and those were the last words he ever uttered. During the darkness I felt him shudder and heard him give two or three short, quick gasps. ""Sergeant, are you cold?" I inquired. There came no response, and, supposing he might be sleeping, I said nothing more. In the morning I found him dead.

- ## A PILLORIED ARM

I attempted to withdraw my arm from under him, but failed. It was not until the afternoon of September 2 that anyone came to lift away his body, then very much swollen, the flesh discolored, and after being relieved from its burden it was some time before the arm recovered from the deadening effects of the weight that had for so long rested upon it disappeared.

The day and night of the 31st of August were passed in about the manner that the preceding day and night had been. I was much weaker, in greater misery, owing to my constrained position, and during the day time had been greatly pestered with flies, such as lust after flesh. My clothing, which had been partially dried by the sun, was saturated again at evening by another shower. Meanwhile the sullen thunder of the guns, the occasional volleys and scattering fire of musketry, with the groanings of the wounded, had been almost continuously ringing in my ears, together with now and

then the despairing death cry as some poor anguished soul yielded up his life to Him who gave it.

THREATS OF DELIRIUM

September 1 and the night of that day (a very rainy night, too) I seemed to have reached the crisis of my fate. I had grown somewhat used to the pains, continually felt, but the want of sleep added a new horror for me to contemplate. Maggots began to burrow into my wounds and I was wholly helpless and unable to prevent their desecrating touch. Besides, mentally, I was approaching delirium. My ears were harassed by musical sounds of purling streams I could not look upon; my eyes were feasted upon delicious springs of water---clear, shaded pools, wherein fair nature's drapery of moss and brakes and feathery ferns were pictured, but beyond my reach; my palate was tantalized by visions of tables spread with richest viands set just beyond my grasp. Language is inadequate to describe even faintly the sufferings of those far-off, awful days.

The morning of 2d of September my thoughts were turned homeward. Step by step memory led me back over life's track to my [illegible] previously remembered, seen and known earliest childhood, and there my mind dwelt at intervals for hours. But not so much upon the scenes and associations of my later youth as I them. Blessed visions of childhood's early dawn rose up before me; dear loved, smiling faces of my early boyhood's friends thronged into view; a tender mother came to soothe all pain. I was her boy again, sitting upon her knee, then---a twinge of pain---a feeling as if the fingers of death were groping for my heart and I was returned to the realities that enveloped me.

MENTAL PHENOMENA

Hour after hour, like the second hand of a watch, my mind kept darting from one thought to another, but with so much regularity that the sameness soon grew monotonous and tiresome. The circle of ideas traveled over was always about the same at the start and gradually narrowed down, like the vessel's course in a maelstrom, to the central abyss, which then for me was home. I realized the precarious condition of my mental faculties, but yet, though striving hard to do so,

could not control them. I believe I could have died then feeling comparatively little of mental anguish; the physical pains of dissolution had been already borne.

But it was not to be. In the afternoon assistance came. The corpse was lifted from my arm, water was brought in the crown of an old slouch hat to quench the fever burning in my veins. Hope grasped me firmly with her good right hand. I resolved, God willing, to do my share towards living.

It was difficult, at first impossible, for me to drink; but drop by drop the liquid blessing trickled down my throat; slowly I felt its refreshing influence within, throughout my system, and upon the wounds which were bathed with it. You who have suffered deeply in mind and body endeavor to think, if you can, how great was my relief.

AN ATTEMPT TO WALK

On the 3d of September a Confederate officer came and told us that those able to get to Centreville could do so and be paroled. I resolved to make the attempt. At my request I was helped to my feet but the moment those who had hold of me let go, I fell to the earth like an empty sack. They were about to leave me, one remarking that I could never again walk a dozen steps, but at my earnest entreaty they gave me another trial. To meet it I summoned all my strength and resolution. Where I was, if I remained, death seemed inevitable. Thirty miles or so away were all the comforts necessary to minister to a sorely wounded body and wearied brain. I might die on the way but then I would be nearer friends. Thus I reasoned and started.

On lifting me up they steadied my form until I “”got my head,”” so to speak. (I was quite dizzy at first, and then, hope’s taper dimly burning, I started to follow it to death or Washington. I was desperately weak and staggered when I walked, like a drunken man. With my right hand I was obliged to support my head, and the paralyzing effects of the bullet and piece of shell upon my left side retarded locomotion, so that it required great caution to keep from falling, and when [illegible] down I knew I could not get up without assistance. Before leaving the other prisoners I saw a number of comrades from my own regiment who were unable to travel and bade them goodbye, some forever, others to meet again.

DEAD COMRADES

In crossing the battlefield I passed over the ground where we had fought. There lay our dead, many of them stripped of all clothing, festering in the hot, sultry sun. Benjamin, Galpin, Kiehle (sic?), Reese (sic?), and Stewart, all of my own company, were there as they had fallen, close up to the ditch, their faces upturned to the sky a ghastly sight. Their bodies were swollen to more than twice their natural size, their features disfigured and discolored, their eyes open and glassy. They were nearly four days dead and unburied.

I could follow the line our troops had held in that vicinity (the First Division, Fifth Corps) by the wrecks of human forms that marked its furthermost advance. My parting glance was indelibly photographed upon the memory. It rises up before me as I write.

A SIGHT OF THE SURGEONS

From the [illegible] we had vainly attempted to take I made my way to the farmhouse of the Widow Dogan, where, beneath the shade of the fruit and other trees surrounding it, the surgeons were at work at their bloody but merciful trade. It was only a trifle over a mile distant, but it took me all of an hour to traverse the intervening space. Several times I was on the point of giving out; the exertion of walking caused the wound in my neck to bleed afresh. I grew faint, a slight nausea set in, but the prospects of relief cheered me and I persevered [ill.] succeeded. By this time the wound in my neck had become by rapid increase one festering mass of maggots, some of which, ever and anon, went rolling down inside my clothing, which I had loosened, their cold, bloodless, squirming bodies producing no agreeable feeling as they came in contact with the bare skin.

I went up to one of our surgeons and asked him to dress my wounds. He repulsed me rudely with an oath, which struck me harder and hurt me more than did the bullet that came so near taking my life. His assistant, however, a more humane man, gave me about two yards of bandage, which I succeeded in twisting about my neck in a manner to somewhat staunch the flow of blood, keep off the flies and act as a supporter.

A BIT OF FOOD

Then Dr. R. K. Gregory, a pleasant-faced, kind-hearted Confederate surgeon (I know his name, for I met and recognized him several years after the war was over) gave me a teaspoon of brandy and two oyster crackers. I was ravenous for food, but the hardest undertaking of my life thus far was my attempt to swallow those two diminutive morsels. My throat was dry and fearfully swollen, the muscles of the neck and jaw were stiff and inflamed. It was only by moistening the crumbs thoroughly that I finally succeeded in placing them where they would do me the most good.

I would like tom say here that absence of food and water while I lay on the field was not through any fault, so far as I could see, of those having the prisoners in charge. The Confederates were generally kind, but they had nothing for themselves to eat, and the guard was not large enough to wait upon all of us who needed water at once. Some of us had to wait---others were unintentionally overlooked. I was one of the latter.

A PATHETIC INCIDENT

About 2 P.M. I left Dogan's for Centreville, but before detailing the events of that weary journey I must tarry long enough to relate an incident that occurred on an amputating table improvised from a door at the place where the surgeons were. During my brief stay there I saw a young, stalwart soldier---of what regiment I know not---laid on the table preparatory to the amputation of his right arm, the elbow of which had been fearfully crushed by a piece of shell. He was a fine-looking fellow, light-brown hair, blue eyes, full, rounded cheeks---just such a son as parents have a right to be proud of and look fondly on, with a square chin and lips that denoted a strength of will and fortitude beyond the common.

As the surgeons cut off the blue blouse from his shoulders and got ready their instruments, he watched them with a wistful expression, and when it was proposed to administer an anesthetic he said: ""Must it really come off?"" A nod in the affirmative and he continued: ""No, doctor, I don't wish that stuff. I've been through this (motioning toward his wound); ""I can stand the rest."" And he did.

AN ODD FAREWELL

I watched the operation, which was speedily over, and saw the moisture gather in his eyes and upon his forehead, but heard no sound save a faint groan when the marrow was reached. The stump having been bandaged he was offered a taste of

brandy preparatory to be lifted down, but he put the glass aside and spoke: “”Doctor, let me see that hand of mine.” One of the surgeons took it from the ghastly heap of shattered limbs where it had been thrown and placed it where he could reach it. He grasped it---the poor, mangled cast-off portion of himself---in his left hand, and gazed at it for a moment or two with a deep, tender look in his eyes, such a look as we see in the eyes of those who are bidding farewell forever to forms most dearly beloved.

“”Good-bye, my good right hand,” he murmured in a voice low and tremulous, “”good-bye. You have been a good friend and faithful helper. I had hoped to take you home with me. ‘Tis all right---good-bye.” Then he placed it---his free gift to the nation---to his lips, kissed it and saw it no more.

I have always been sorry since that I did not learn who he was, but at that time my chief concern was for myself. Except for the peculiarly affecting circumstances of the case I should have probably forgotten the hero altogether.

PAROLED.

It took me four hours to reach Centreville, owing to my pitiful condition. I met there a friend in Colonel, afterwards General, Thomas S. Flournoy, of the Sixth Virginia Cavalry, in charge of paroling prisoners. Several hundreds of unfortunates, who had gotten ahead of me, were in line, when the Colonel espied me, took me from the rear to headquarters and in fifteen minutes, with a copy of my parole in my pocket, I was on my way to Alexandria.

A FAINT AND A FALL

It was well on towards midnight, I should judge, when I came near Fairfax Court House, and knowing of a path that would cut off some distance I concluded to take it instead of the pike. I had gotten about half way to where I would again strike the road when a sudden faintness came over me, and, as I was walking alongside of a steep bank on my right, I thought I would lean up against it and take a brief rest. I did so, but the instant I got out of the perpendicular dropped all in a heap in a sort of ditch that ran along the edge of the path. I tried to get up, but could not do so. I wallowed around in the darkness like a wounded animal. My wound began to bleed afresh and I thought the daylight would find me dead.

A FRIEND IN NEED

I had lain there probably an hour when I heard footsteps approaching. The comer proved to be Billy Glasgow, of my own regiment, whose left shoulder blade had been shattered by a bullet. I lost no time in attracting his attention. He worked with his one good arm for fully ten minutes before he got me balanced on my feet, and then we traveled together, he setting his pace to mine and occasionally steadying me over rough ground.

The next morning, September 4, about daybreak, we met between Fairfax and Annandale our ambulances going to the battle-field with surgical and medical supplies and provisions under a flag of truce. We borrowed a loaf of bread apiece, but my tongue and throat were so inflamed and swollen that I made little headway at eating; besides, I had all the time to steady my head in some manner, else, on account of my injured neck, it would be dropping over and causing the most excruciating pain.

NEAR ALEXANDRIA

After we left Annandale my comrade stopped to rest, but I continued, reaching Alexandria about 12 M. of the day. From Cloud's Mills to the city limits, on both sides of the way, sat people with food for the wounded coming in, and such a display! Hog and hominy, bacon and greens, baked beans, ""boiled dinners," cakes, pies, fruits, chickens, roasted, fried any way one liked, it was a perfect paradise for a hungry man, and yet I could not eat. But it was difficult to refuse to make the attempt. The banquet was furnished without cost by Union-loving people and a declination to partake seemed to cause real regret to the volunteer host or hostess.

I remember that one old colored aunty pressed me so hard that I took a bit of nice corn dodger and ""greens," with vinegar, which went first rate (the little I succeeded in swallowing), and she thanked me as though I had done her a favor.

MANSION HOUSE HOSPITAL

Reaching the city limits I met a brigade surgeon, who, after inquiring when and where I was wounded, rode on. Presently he came galloping back, dismounted and accompanied me to town, supporting me with an arm. He took me to the Mansion House Hospital, introducing me to the surgeon in charge with: ""This boy has walked

from Bull Run with his head half shot off; do what you can for him," and left me. The first question asked: "Do you wish something to eat?" I of course answered in the affirmative.

THE FIRST TREATMENT

They gave me a cup of bean soup (army strength), bread and coffee and sent me to the surgery, where one of the attendants, after looking at the wound in my neck, insisted in putting on a compress of plasters to draw the ragged edges of the opening together. I objected, urging that the wound should be cleansed and properly dressed, if at all, but he prevailed, squeezing the sensitive flesh together regardless of the handkerchief and lint within or of the agony he caused me.

Then I was directed to the wharf and placed upon a boat that was to take a cargo of wounded to Washington and there offered more coffee and bread, but my sufferings were so great that I declined. Meantime the compresses had caused such acute pain that I pulled them loose and the pus and blood flowed profusely, saturating the upper portion of my person with corruption.

ON A TRANSPORT

The night of the 4th the vessel remained at Alexandria, and the space being crowded I lay in the stern sheets of the small boat on deck with my neck resting upon the gunwale for a pillow to deaden the pain. I had not slept a moment since the night of the 29th of August and then for not more than an hour, and during the long hours of darkness I listened to the groanings and moanings of those about me while my mind darted from one thought or memory to another unceasingly, as it had done on the field of battle.

I think that night I experienced the first real symptoms of homesickness subsequent to enlistment. To be so near home, only a couple of hundred miles away, with a loving mother waiting for a son whom she never expected to see (for my name had been published in the list of the killed, though I was not then aware of the fact)---it was terrible beyond the power of language to describe.

Next day, the 5th, at high noon, I reached Georgetown College Hospital, just opened, and was taken into Ward 6.

IN HOSPITAL AT LAST

I sat down upon the cot assigned to me with a sense of relief. I had won the goal for which I had striven, reached a place where even death, should it come, would be robbed of some of its terrors and was glad. I had not been there long before an old darkey with a bucket of warm water, soap, and a sponge came along.

"Boss, you'se lookin' mighty like's if you ought'n be wash,"said he, with a good-natured grin. I agreed. Then he cut from me my vermin-infested, blood and dirt encrusted clothing, sending it, all save blouse and cap, which I kept, away, and, naked as I was born, washed me from head to heel.

MADE COMFORTABLE

Talk of your moments of luxury. As the liquid water and castile soap were softly sponged over my person I forgot pain, fear, everything but the exquisite sensations developed as the feverish skin grew cool and clean under his skillful manipulations. And when he robed me in one of those wonderful hospital shirts, made to fit any size or stature, and assisted me to lie down between fresh white sheets upon a straw mattress, heaven opened before me and I was almost willing to die. Some may think this extravagant language, but I felt as I now write. The thirst, the hunger, the hard bed of the battle-field, the walk of many weary miles and my cruel wounds had produced a condition of mind and body to which even the slightest relief proved grateful. To be thus tenderly cared for was ecstatic.

A GOOD SAMARITAN

Though I regretted leaving the good Samaritan who cared for me so faithfully and tenderly, yet it was a glad day when he accompanied me to the depot and saw me off for a brief season at home. He was one of God's noblemen, with sympathies tender as a woman's; a firm, steady hand and a strong, faithful heart. I pay this tribute to his worth and goodness, not only for what he did in my behalf, but because of his kindness and unremitting care of all who were under his charge. Wherever he is may he dwell in the veritable presence of all that makes life pleasant.

Philadelphia, Pa.

- This article was written by Mr. Slater at the request of the editor, since it deals not only with a remarkable episode, but tells of a phase of soldiering rarely touched upon in published narratives.

From *The Philadelphia Weekly Times*, Volume VIII, No. 51 (February 7, 1885), available on microfilm at the Philadelphia Free Library, main branch.

Corporal Slater is purposefully vague about his regiment in "Wounded," not to hide anything in particular but to focus his reader on the very personal and at the same time universal experience of being wounded in battle. He had already covered the controversy regarding Fitz John Porter's conduct at Manassas (see additional readings below) in 1880 and again in 1884.

However, Slater could not have known how George McClellan subverted Pope's efforts at Manassas by withholding the 10,000 veteran infantrymen of William B. Franklin's corps, sending them into camp within earshot of the August 29 battle.[1] McClellan and many of his generals wanted Pope to fail, Porter among them. Had Slater had access to, for example, The Reminiscences of Carl Schurz, printed in 1907, or to Gen. Porter's Papers in the Library of Congress, he may have revised his findings. Perhaps not, as he seems inclined as much as Porter to lay blame upon Pope.

John S. Slater was an eighteen-year-old color guard corporal at the time of his wounding. There are interesting details about this incident which Slater covers in his previous PWT articles.

Slater was wounded 15 minutes into the engagement. He had advanced to within 10 feet from the Confederate lines in the railroad cut. He claims he would still be able to recognize the man he believes shot him: "a big, bushy whiskered man with long neck, thin face, and whose large upper teeth projected, so that they showed through his long, straggly sandy moustache…" He watched the flags of his regiment go down and back up "two or three times" in the fighting which literally took place over top of him. Along came Tom Harvey, also of Company E, who took the time to help Slater get over on his knees "so I could crawl back out of the direct and crossfire that swept the position where I lay." He crawled to a rock another 10 feet down the slope where he felt more protected. There he took his pulse and looked at himself in a hand

[1] McPherson, Antietam, p.83

mirror. At this point, the mortally wounded Captain Savage of Company F falls near Slater and he gives the captain the water from his canteen. The officer dies 20 minutes later. At this point Longstreet's artillery opens up from heights above the Union left flank. Shellfire shrapnel again wounds Slater.

As the Union troops retreat, Stonewall Jackson's men advance: "I had fallen into a half-drowsy state when I heard footsteps near, and next a rough voice saying, "Bayonet the Yankee son of a bitch!" Slater peeped at the Reb and then closed his eyes "not desiring to be a witness to my own execution." In the nick of time comes a Confederate lieutenant who strikes his own man with his sword and hurries him away from the helpless Slater.

To avoid more artillery fire, Slater crawls towards the edge of the railroad cut but only succeeds in falling to the bottom where he sees "the great Confederate chieftain," Stonewall Jackson himself, ride to within a few feet of him. At this point, Slater is taken by his "overpowering thought" and the narrative of "Wounded" continues.

Two days later, the Union stops Jackson's exhausted men attempting yet another flanking march at Chantilly, in a driving rainstorm, where Division commanders Phil Kearney and I.I. Stevens would die ending that part of the Army of Northern Virginia's advance. The same rain was cooling and quenching the thirst of Corporal Slater as he slipped in and out of delirium.

Additional Reading:

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Slater, J.S., Corporal, 13th New York Volunteer Infantry, "The Fifth Corps at Manassas," *Philadelphia Weekly Times* 8, no. 30 (September 13, 1884) and *PWT* 8, no.32 (September 27, 1884) collected in The New Annals of the Civil War, edited by Peter Cozzens & Robert I. Girardi, (Stackpole Books, Mechanicsburg, PA) 2004

Pierce, Robert, "A narrative of the experiences of Robert Pierce while a soldier in the Civil War," http://www.carlisle.army.mil/usamhi/index.htm or http://cpcug.org/user/jlacombe/rpierce.html (Pierce was in Company G, wounded at

the same time as Slater at Manassas and had remarkably similar travails in getting to a hospital)

Mandeville, James, History of the Thirteenth Regiment, N.G., S.N.Y. Originally published 1894, New York, NY---now a rare edition according to www.mosocco.com/newyork.html

McPherson, James M., Antietam, The Battle That Changed the Course of the Civil War, (Oxford University Press, 2002) McPherson puts Manassas and McClellan and military power politics in context to Antietam.