

Newspaper Account of the battle of Murfreesboro

Lt. Charles Martin view of battlefield

Soldier's Poignant Letters a New View of Battle of Murfreesboro

By Louise Davis

[image, with a caption-Staff drawing by Bob Turner--After Battle of Murfreesboro, Lt. Martin and fellow Confederates "did what has not been done since the commencement of the war!"—"Captured a Gun Boat with the Cavalry." After riding through five days and nights of snow and sleet and icy underbrush, they captured numerous Federal boats on the Cumberland, laden with supplies for Union soldiers stationed in Nashville.]

OUT OF A shoebox of letters from a young Confederate soldier from Georgia comes a never before published account of the Battle of Murfreesboro—part of a brave odyssey of hope.

For the slender youth, Lt. Charles Martin, cavalryman under Gen. Joseph Wheeler, poured out the high spirits and confidence, the pain and horror of war in 55 letters he wrote to his teenage sister, Dalton Martin, back in their home town of Newman, Ga.

Charlie's letters to his sister had been kept in a shoebox by her daughter in California until 1973 when another relative, Lawson Beville Jones of Tampa, Fla., visited her in Los Angeles. Dalton's daughter gave the letters to Jones, and he in turn gave them to his daughter, Mrs. Lloyd Carver of Nashville.

In those carefully written letters—some of them on pale blue stationery bought at high price wherever he could manage—the slender script of a well educated, sensitive youth tells the story of unflinching patriotism and uncomplaining endurance.

Member of Company A, First Regiment, Georgia Volunteers, Lt. Martin must have volunteered almost the day the war began, for less than a month later, on May 11, 1861, he was writing from his second post: the Warrington Navy Yard, site of today's U.S. Naval Air Training Command, near Pensacola, Fla.

Basking in the "pleasant breeze" off the Gulf of Mexico, Martin wrote that the Navy Yard "is the most beautiful place I have ever seen. So many pretty flower gardens and yards, beautiful residences, smooth brick pavements and streets, beautiful groves, etc."

"None of us knows when the fight will commence," he wrote. "It may be in two weeks or it may be six months...That we will gain the victory and take the fort I have no doubt, but it may cost the life of many a brave and true man..."

“When we open fire on them it may take 10 or 15 days to destroy the fort enough to storm it. Won’t it be a grand and glorious sight, thus to think of two or three hundred cannons firing at one time, all the time, day and night, for 10 or 15 days? It will shake the earth for many a mile around.”

But by Dec. 12, 1861, Martin was writing from a camp near Winchester, Va., after a march of 180 miles.

“The whole distance we walked except 25 miles which we rode on the RR,” Martin wrote. “The country through which we passed is a very pretty country, the people mostly kind and generous and the whole country far different from North West Virginia...Today it is cold and windy and very unpleasant. We are camped two miles from Winchester, a very pretty city nearly as large as Atlanta, with a large number of beautiful women.”

Martin explained that the lady refugees were mostly from Washington City, Wheeling, Alexandria and Baltimore and had barely escaped from “the clutches of the Yankee.” He mentioned a wound that might leave him without full use of one arm, but he said, “Otherwise my health is very good and I weigh 155 pounds, ten pounds more than I ever weighed before.”

It was toward the end of 1862 that he neared the Battle of Murfreesboro, but he had no idea of that when he wrote his sister about a journey that was to begin on Dec. 21, “in pursuit of some deserters.”

“We followed them to Huntsville, Ala., where we arrived on Christmas Day, and put up at the Huntsville Hotel awaiting further orders from Murfreesboro (where his commanding officers were).” he wrote.

“We spent the 25th, 26th and part of the 27th in fine style, enjoying ourselves highly...on the evening of the 27th having received a telegraph dispatch from Col. Morgan to return, that the great battle of the West would be fought in a few days, we left Huntsville and on the night of the 30th stayed 35 miles from Murfreesboro.

“On the morning of the 31st we heard the distant rumbling of artillery and knew the battle had commenced. Putting spurs to our horses, we reached the scene of action (35 miles distant) by one o’clock.

‘When we arrived, our brigade (Wheeler’s) were then preparing to attack a portion of the enemy’s left wing. We pitched in and the thundering roar of artillery and rattle of musketry crowned everything until night put an end of the dreadful and awful carnage.

“All was silent for the balance of that night. Some of the piteous moans of the wounded and dieing [sic]. (There were 9,000 casualties on both sides.) We had driven the enemy back two miles and lay on the bloody field till morning.

“When Genls Wheeler, Morton, Buford and Pegram’s brigade of Cavalry, all under the Command of Gen. Wheeler, commenced operations in the rear of the enemy, between Murfreesboro and Nashville, for four days and nights without any intermission did our Cavalry operate in the rear of the enemy, burning wagons heavily laden with Yankey [sic] supplies, capturing prisoners and Negro Contrabands, and harassing the enemy in a great many ways.”

In that letter about the Battle of Murfreesboro, written on Jan. 20, 1863 at Franklin, Martin said he shared the shock of most of the Confederate soldiers when Bragg let a decisive victory slip through his fingers.

“After Gen. Bragg retreated (much to our astonishment), we were ordered to bring up the rear and protect the wagons, etc., which we did successfully, repulsing the enemy whenever they attacked us.

“After we had sent the Yankees back to Murfreesboro, Gen. Wheeler with our brigade consisting of the 1st and 3rd Ala. Regts, the 8th Confederate, two Tenn. battalions and our Regt., with two pieces of Artillery, started on our expedition to the Cumberland River, and captured boats that were on the way to Nashville with government supplies.”

Nashville had fallen into the hands of the enemy in February 1862, and had become a storehouse for Union equipment and food. To cut off that supply would strangle Yankee operations in many directions, and Martin described in vivid terms the desperate race to block supplies sent to Nashville by river.

“After four days and nights of fast travel through rain and mud, Snow and hills, bitter, bitter Cold, swimming swollen creeks, riding through underbrush covered with snow and ice, after four days of laughing and crying, talking and singing, hollering and whispering, riding over beautiful valleys and rough and barren mountains and wilderness, Suffering from hunger and too much to eat, we arrived at the banks of the Cumberland 40 miles below Nashville, and did what has not been done since the commencement of the war:

“Captured a Gun Boat with the Cavalry. We rode down the banks of the Cumberland for five days and captured one Gun Boat with five heavy pieces of cannon on board. River boats very heavily laden with sugar, coffee, molasses, rice, candles, soap, crackers, brandy, whiskey and salt, quantities of other supplies, also 500 prisoners.

“After taking of everything that we could carry in our saddle bag, we burnt the boat with everything on board. There were also about 15 Negroes (runaways) on board each boat, which we sent back to camp.

“Went little further down the river and burnt half-million dollars more of Yankee supplies. The only way the Yankey [sic] army at Nashville received or could receive its supplies from the North is by the Louisville and Nashville R.R., and the Cumberland River. John H. Morgan has destroyed the L. and N., and Gen. Wheeler has rendered the navigation

of the river not only unsafe but unprofitable. So the Yankeys [sic] are in a pretty bad condition in the way of supplies.

“Gen. Wheeler left part of the brigade to guard the river and came with the ballance [sic] of the Command to this place, Franklin, a very pretty and wealthy village 18 miles from Nashville. The troops are all quartered in homes. I am staying at the hotel.

“We will remain here three or four days more until we are rested and get our horses shod, and wait for reinforcements from Camps, when we will proceed on some other expedition under our gallant and daring little leader, Brig. Gen. Jos. C. Wheeler, one of the bravest, coolest, most daring and successful Cavalry Commanders in the Confederate Army, John H. Morgan not excepted.”

Martin often advised his young sister about her schooling or her shopping, or extravagance or beaux. He sent messages to her to be delivered to friends and relatives at home, and teased some of them, like patriotic Miss Fannie Calhoun, about how General Wheeler would meet even her requirements for a brave husband.

“You can tell Miss Fannie Calhoun the first time you see her that as Gen. John H. Morgan is married and as she is desirous to marry a man of brave and daring spirit, I will give her my commander, Gen. Wheeler,” Martin wrote his sister in the letter from Franklin.

“Tell her he is a graduate of West Point, young (35 years old), handsome, five feet, ten inches tall, high dark hair, blue eyes, quick spoken, weighs 150 pounds, quick perception, good common sense with the acquired good disposition, Georgian by birth, an Alabamian by adoption, and one of the bravest, coolest and at the same time most daring little rascals in the army.

“He is by appointment Chief of the Cavalry of Bragg’s Army and will undoubtedly be soon promoted to Maj. Gen. of Cavalry. Tell Fannie that in consideration of the great interest I feel in her and for the friendship I bear her, that I will give her my Commander, Gen. Wheeler.”

Martin told his sister there was not a Confederate Post Office “in 30 miles of here (Franklin),” but she could mail any letters to him to Tullahoma.

Less than two weeks later, on Feb. 1. 1863, Martin was writing his sister triumphantly on a page cut out of “one of the Books captured on one of the boats which we took while on the Cumberland river below Nashville.” He was writing from Fosterville “on the Shelbyville and Murfreesboro Turnpike, 12 miles from the former place.”

He told her that the Battle of Murfreesboro was too much to write in one letter. It would have to wait for a visit home to tell the whole horrid tale.

“To describe the Battle of Murfreesboro would be a Herculean task and would take hours,” he wrote. “It was an awful, grand and sublime sight, 100,000 men arrayed against each other in deadly combat, 200 muskets firing almost incessantly [sic], over 10,000 horsemen rearing, plunging and charging upon one another, necessarily presents a sight which to give a description would take a long time,” he wrote.

Writing a few weeks later from “a camp near Fosterville, Tenn.” on Feb. 11, 1863, Martin told his 16-year-old sister that he was shocked to hear of her engagement to “Sammy.”

“Now who in the world is Sammy?” he asked with brotherly concern. “Where did he come from, which way is he going, who does he belong to, etc.? Now I think I have the right to know all these things and shall expect a whole history of the affair in your next...”

“What in the world has got into our family, are they going to marry at once?...I believe an armistice will be declared this Spring...When this war commenced, I was a thin weakly boy. Now I am a Man and can stand anything that I have to stand.”

In July of that year he was put to the test at the decisive and gruesome Battle of Gettysburg. From Hagerstown, Md., on July 9, 1863, he wrote a letter that began: “Another great and bloody battle has been fought and thank God I am still alive and safe.

“The day after I wrote you from Chambersburg, Pa., about the first of the month, we took up the line of march in an easterly direction and continued until we met the enemy at Gettysburg. Then the most desperate and bloody battle of the war took place, commencing July the 1st and ending July 4th.

“The victory was ours, but it was a dear bought victory.”

In that battle, as in the Battle of Murfreesboro, Martin felt sure that the Confederates had won. In the case of Gettysburg, the bloodiest battle in the bloodiest war in American history, the final victory went to Federal forces.

“It is hard at times to estimate our loss, as the reports have not yet been made,” Martin wrote his sister from a “camp near Hagerstown, Md.” on July 9, 1863, only five days after the fighting ended. “but I can with safety say that our loss greatly surpassed any other battle of the war, in killed, wounded and prisoners. It will not fall short of 20 thousand and may reach as much as 25,000.”

Martin’s accuracy is attested by the fact that today historians estimate Confederate losses at 22,500.

He told of his own brush with death, when he “ran up to the color bearer and demanded the surrender of their colors.”

“They at once surrendered, both the color bearer and the color guards,” he said, but as he dashed “almost 40 steps” ahead of his men, one of the enemy who had already surrendered turned on him and “knocked me on the side of the head with his musket and laid me out like a bee. The blow stunned me and when I recovered my senses, three of them were dragging me off as a prisoner.”

Martin had visions of being thrown into one of the Yankee prisons, when suddenly some of his own men rushed forward, “raised the yell” and rescued Martin after killing his captor.

“The contest raged a few minutes longer when the Yanks fled in wild disorder and confusion,” Martin continued. “We pursued them until so tired down that we could not go any further. Our Legion captured two stands of color, and more prisoners than we had men engaged. Many a Yankee was shot dead with the muzzle of our guns within 12 inches of their bodies...”

Transferred to General James Longstreet’s army, Martin maintained his optimism, feeling “that Genl. Longstreet will do what is for the best.”

“I am being hopeful and look forward with joyful anticipation to the result of the Spring Campaign,” he wrote. “I am in my usual good spirits, and in the enjoyment of good health...Our Legion has offered to re-enlist.”

Martin’s last battle was the long siege at Petersburg, Va., where Grant and Lee had their armies locked in combat from June, 1864, to April, 1865, when the Union forces suffered 17,000 casualties and the Confederates 13,000. Martin was fatally wounded in September, 1864, and a soldier friend of his, J. J. Barnes, wrote Martin’s sister on Oct. 24, 1864, from “near Newmarket, Va.” to tell of Martin’s last hours.

Barnes had talked to two nurses who “waited on Charlie in his last moments” and they told of Martin’s brave outlook. He told them that he “gave his life in a good cause and would give ten such if he had them.”

A Mr. Jones and his family, ardent Methodists of the Front Royal, Va. area had “shown every attention in the power of man” to the wounded Martin, and “gave Charlie a very decent burial,” Barnes wrote. “He was buried in the church yard in a good coffin.”

Apparently another member of Martin’s family had died about the same time. Moreover, Barnes wrote, his own brother had been wounded and “left in the hands of the enemy...to suffer in prison.”

“I hope you will try and bear it with fortitude,” Barnes concluded his sad letter, “knowing they died in a good cause and are much better off today than those that are still battling with the cruel foe.”

And then he apologized for ending the letter abruptly.

“I will close as my hand is too cold to write,” he wrote shakily on the pale blue stationery, now yellowed with much reading.

[image—Staff drawing by Bob Turner—At Battle of Gettysburg, Martin said, “We had it hand to hand for some time...Sword crossed sword, and bayonet crossed bayonet. We were all mixed up together and thrusts were passed with terrible rapidity.” Martin had a narrow escape when a Union soldier he had captured turned on him and knocked Martin unconscious with a “blow on the head with his musket.” Fellow Confederates rushed forward to rescue Martin in furious fighting.]