

The following is a copy of an extremely interesting and characteristic letter received from Capt. Sims after I had reached him through the kind assistance and suggestions contained in letters to me from Gen. James Longstreet and Senator Wade Hampton:

(Copy.)

CHARLESTON, S. C., May 22, 1886.

MR. J. L. SMITH:

DEAR SIR:—Your letter of May 1st, enquiring as to detail of carrying the flag of truce at Appomattox, has remained unanswered longer than I intended from pressure of business, sickness in my family and general reluctance to write on this subject and disinclination to write at all on any matter or subject.

The flag was a new and clean white crash towel, one of a lot for which I had paid \$20 or \$40 apiece in Richmond a few days before we left there. I rode alone up a lane (I believe there was only a fence on my right intact), passing by the pickets or sharpshooters of Gary's (Confederate) Cavalry Brigade stationed along the fence, enclosing the lane on my right as I passed. A wood was in front of me occupied by Federals, unmounted cavalry, I think. I did not exhibit the flag until near your line, consequently was fired upon until I got to or very near your people. I went at a full gallop. I met a party of soldiers, and among them or near them, two or three officers. One was Lieut.-Col. Whitaker, now in Washington, and the other a major. I said to them: "Where is your commanding officer, General Sheridan? I have a message for him." They replied: "He is not near here, but General Custer is, and you had better see him." "Can you take me to him?" "Yes." They mounted and we rode up the road that I came but a short distance, when we struck Custer's division of cavalry, passing at full gallop along a road crossing our road and going to my left. We galloped down this road to the head of the column, where we met General Custer. He asked: "Who are you, and what do you wish?" I replied: "I am of General Longstreet's staff, but am the bearer of a message from General Gordon to General Sheridan, asking for a suspension of hostilities until General Lee can be heard from, who has gone down the road to meet General Grant to have a conference." General Custer replied: "We will listen to no terms but that of unconditional surrender. We are behind your army now and it is at our mercy." I replied: "You will allow me to carry this message back?" He said: "Yes." "Do you wish to send an officer with me?" Hesitating a little, he said: "Yes," and directed the two officers who came with me, Lieutenant-Colonel Whitaker and the major, whose name I don't know, to go with me. We rode back to Gordon in almost a straight line. Somewhere on the route a Major Brown, of General Gordon's (Conf.) staff, joined me, I think after I had left Custer.

On our way back to Gordon two incidents occurred. Colonel Whitaker asked me if I would give him the towel to preserve that I had used as a flag. I re-

There was at first a disposition not to be convinced that the situation was what it purported to be. Men cautioned each

plied: "I will see you in hell first; it is sufficiently humiliating to have had to carry it and exhibit it, and I shall not let you preserve it as a monument of our defeat." I was naturally irritated and provoked at our prospective defeat, and Colonel Whitaker at once apologized, saying he appreciated my feelings and did not intend to offend. Passing some artillery crossing a small stream, he asked me to stop this artillery, saying: "If we are to have a suspension of hostilities, everything should remain *status quo*." I replied: "In the first place, I have no authority to stop this artillery; and, secondly, if I had, I should not do so, because General Custer distinctly stated that we were to have no suspension of hostilities until an unconditional surrender was asked for. I presume this means continuing the fight. I am sure General Longstreet will construe it so."

When I reached General Gordon he asked me to go in another direction, almost opposite to the one I had been, and take the flag to stop the firing. I replied that I could not so go, as I must go to General Longstreet; besides some of his (Gordon's) staff were now with him. He directed Major Brown to go. Major Brown came to me and asked me to loan him the towel. I took him off to a private place and told him I would let him have the towel on condition that he would not let the Federal officer get possession of it and that I would call in the afternoon for it. He took the towel, and in going into your lines (so he reported to me that afternoon) Colonel Whitaker asked for the towel to display to keep his own people from firing on him, and, as soon as he got into the lines, he mixed up with the others and disappeared with the towel.

I learned a few years ago that Mrs. General Custer has the towel. When I reached General Longstreet, after leaving General Gordon, I found General Custer and he talking together at a short distance from the position occupied by the staff. Custer said he would proceed to attack at once and Longstreet replied: "As soon as you please," but he did not attack. Just after I left Custer he came in sight of our lines. He halted his troops and, taking a handkerchief from his orderly, displayed it as a flag and rode into our lines. He was surrounded by some of our people and was being handled a little roughly when an old classmate of his recognized him and rescued him.

Upon frequent applications from General Gordon to General Longstreet for reinforcements, he (Longstreet) sent me to say to General Gordon that General Lee had rode down the road to meet General Grant and that if he thought proper he could send a message to General Sheridan, who was in command in his front, asking him for a suspension of hostilities until General Lee could be heard from. I found General Gordon without a staff officer near him, and he begged me to take the flag, which I did. Major Brown, of his staff, joined me somewhere on the route, I think as I was returning from General Custer.

Pardon the hurried manner in which this is written. Let me hear from you again. What part were you in this surrender?

(Signed)

R. M. SIMS, late Captain C. S. A.

This Towel was the first Flag of Truce sent in by the Confederate forces on the day
General Lee surrendered.

2315 M St N.W.
Washington

Dec 21 1882

My dear Mrs. Custer,

Your very kind favor of Oct. 16th was duly received and not answered earlier. Knowing you were busy seeing the Old Country and could hardly have time to read a line from me. I was so glad to get the address of Captain Simms.

I gave the flag of truce to Gen. Custer (first taking a small piece for myself) because I felt he who led our charge was
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the proper person to have the relic. It came into my possession at the truce. Gordon & Longstreet requested me to stay the Federal infantry line of battle that was closing in on them from the South west at short range.

I consented to go direct out to that line with Simms same message and truce (the old towel) if Simms would accompany me. He consented and we ran the risk of being shot with so small a truce to stop so large a line of battle in action.

The towel was in my possession
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of course at the close of the excitement Simms was gone. We were ordered away at an early hour after. And in the matter of relics I thought I had the best one from the field. It had been used to meet and stop our cavalry Corps of 10,000 men and light artillery with Gen. Custer at the head. I was by his side as his ranking staff officer. He said quickly Whitaker go with this officer & say to Gen Lee that the charge
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can not be stopped except on our an announcement of an unconditional surrender as I am not sole in command on the field.

I shall reach Simms soon and attempt to convince him that the truce is a legitimate trophy in our hands and I should be proud to be its possessor again.

I am now trying to obtain a pension for Mrs. Gen. Kilpatrick.

I had Bailly's statuette of Gen Custer on exhibition in the Capitol Rotunda at the late Garfield fair where it was much liked.

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We have recently organized a Grand Army Post here composed solely of sons of Union soldiers and the name George A. Custer Post No. 1 has been selected. Reno is trying to return to the return to the Army he so often disgraced. He applies at the Senate and shall never succeed.

Excuse my lazy scribble and believe me as ever yours sincerely

E. W. Whitaker