

## *Confederate Surgeon Dr. George Phillips*

There were plenty of tough jobs in the army during the Civil War. The life of a foot soldier, whether Union or Confederate, was no easy duty. Cavalrymen had to care for their four legged partners as well as themselves and artillerymen were often called on to lift dangerously heavy loads. And being a teamster wasn't a joy either. Those were the leather lunged "mule skimmers" who drove the mules hitched to the wagons. Their colorful language was a testimony to the difficulties of that particular task.

No, I think the most difficult job was being a surgeon in a field hospital. My hat's off to those men who worked out in the elements to save the men as they were brought straight from the fight. Rain, sun, blistering heat or freezing temps, they operated under the worst of conditions and often within musket or artillery range of the battle.

One of those stalwart men was the young Dr. George C. Phillips, Assistant Surgeon of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Mississippi Infantry. George was a handsome lad of 26 when he joined Company G, "The Black Hawk Rifles," in Carroll County in September of 1861. (Yep, the same Carroll County Bobbie Gentry sang about in "Ode to Billy Joe.")

All of five and a half feet tall with blue eyes and blonde hair, he was a native Alabamian living and practicing medicine in Mississippi. He signed on as a private but he was quickly promoted when it was learned there was an M.D. in the ranks.

Phillips was technically the "assistant surgeon" of the regiment, but Surgeon W. Mosley had died of brain inflammation in April of '62 leaving Surgeon Jonathan Meares in the top post. Meares got sick after only a month and from that point on George was in charge.

In 1902, while he was attending a reunion of his old regiment, he was asked to relate, in writing, his recollections of the great Battle of Corinth. He tactfully declined, stating his duties were in the hospital, not on the front lines and he would leave it to his comrades who carried the muskets to tell that story.

He did tell of his own observations from the rear.

“My field hospital was on a small creek immediately behind our brigade line of battle, where there was shade and water.” The site was probably beyond Cane Creek, about three miles from downtown off the Wenasoga Road.

Dr. Phillips got together with the other regimental surgeons in his brigade and they set to work preparing for the flood of wounded soldiers they knew would be coming. They improvised operating tables out of boards and a door taken from a nearby farm house. Water was boiled and kept hot while buckets of cold water were placed close at hand. Rolled bandages and instruments were set out and soon they were ready. In the distance they could hear the booming cannon and the crash of muskets.

“By the time our crude preparations were finished, the wounded commenced coming in, those who could walk, on foot, others in ambulance, some in wagons, as we had but few ambulances.”

The 22<sup>nd</sup> Mississippi Infantry was in the brigade commanded by Brigadier General John S. Bowen, perhaps the most gifted and toughest brigade commander in the Southern army. He was a fighter and the results were grievously wounded and broken men.

“Now came hard work for the surgeons,” explained Phillips, “first in the ligating arteries that were bleeding, cutting out bullets that could be felt, laying aside, often a hurried examination, those requiring a capital operation until the rush was over, splinting and bandaging broken limbs that might be saved.”

The grisly work went on through the afternoon and continued into the night by candlelight. Eventually all of the men had been treated in some fashion and they were made as comfortable as possible, many lying on the bare ground with only a single blanket to cover them. Luckily it was a warm evening, a welcome result of the brutally hot day that had preceded it.

At dawn the contest was renewed and the wounded again began to arrive at the field hospital. Fortunately for the overworked doctors the brigade was only lightly engaged on the second day of fighting and the number of casualties was far less than the day before.

In the afternoon the wounded were loaded on wagons and joined the retreat of Van Dorn’s army in the direction of Chewalla. Arrival at that sleepy little village meant

more work for the medical types who had to change dressings and attend to men whose treatment had been postponed during the march.

“I prepared to remove a man’s arm at the shoulder joint who ought to have been operated on the evening before but we did not have the time. It was a dark night and the wind blowing, I had two sperm candles held by two men with their hats shielding the flame from the wind in spite of which, first one and then the other would be blown out. The case was so urgent however, that I determined to operate, even under these difficulties. As the amputation was to be at the shoulder joint, no compression of the blood vessels could be maintained. So I with the understanding that Dr. McMillen, a large strong man, was to grab the lower flap, as soon as cut, with thumbs across it compressing the bleeding artery.”

“The bone was shattered by a piece of shell so that I was forced to sweep the knife around to disarticulate the head, Mc’s thumb was in the way ‘hold on’ he says, ‘you are cutting my thumb,’ ‘I can’t stop,’ says I, ‘but damn it Phillips it hurts, you are cutting right into my thumb,’ says he, ‘Hold hard Mc says I, this man’s life is in your hand and you must not turn loose.’ Mc did hold, and the man’s life was saved, but Mc had a sore thumb for some time.”

The wagon train of wounded men set out again long before dawn and arrived at Davis Bridge on the Hatchie River just in time to nearly be cut off and captured. A Union column out of Bolivar, Tennessee was in position to block Van Dorn’s retreat and the Confederate army was forced to find another place to cross the river.

As the wagons set out again Phillips saw a sight that wrenched his heart. “Here I witnessed one of the saddest scenes that I saw during the war, an old blind grandmother, her daughter and four little grandchildren, lived in a house around which the heaviest of the fighting was going on. They had fled and gotten into the road filled with our troops, the daughter leading her blind mother and one of the little children, the other three holding her by the dress, and all crying.”

There were several days of trials and challenges for Phillips before the wagons finally reached the safety of Holly Springs.

George stayed with the army to the bitter end, surrendering with the remnants of the Army of Tennessee in North Carolina. He returned to his medical practice and in his old age moved to Akron, Ohio to live with his daughter. He passed away in 1927 and was returned to Mississippi for his final rest. His obituary read in part, “Dr. Phillips was a veteran of the Civil War, serving as a surgeon in the

Confederate army, and there never was a more ardent supporter of their cause than the brave soldier who filled his post for the whole four years of suffering and strife.”

Doctor George C. Phillips is buried in Odd Fellows Cemetery, Lexington, Mississippi.