

None Fought Harder: Moore's Brigade at Corinth

This week I want to talk about the Confederate brigade under the command of Gen. John C. Moore. First things first, somebody is bound to ask “what is a brigade?” Good question. During the Civil War the basic building block of an army was the infantry regiment. They were numbered and named for the state they were raised in, i.e. 20th Maine, 7th Virginia, etc. A brigade was formed by taking two or more regiments and putting them together under a single commander. Now you know what a brigade is and where the rank “brigadier” general comes from.

Brigadier General John Creed Moore was a native Tennessean and a West Point graduate from the class of 1849. He saw some action during the Seminole War and on the frontier but left the army to try his hand at civil engineering and teaching. He started the Civil War as a captain and was quickly promoted to colonel and then, for his performance at Shiloh, to general. His men liked him but I wouldn't say they loved him. One of them described him as, “A brave and gallant officer, but not a Christian, for he was red headed, red-bearded, red faced, and extremely high tempered.”

At the beginning of the Corinth campaign his infantry brigade consisted of the 42nd Alabama, 15th and 23rd Arkansas, 35th Mississippi and the 2nd Texas. It was a good sized brigade, one of the biggest in Van Dorn's army and boasted a total of 1,892 men. Less than half of them were veterans but that was about to change.

On the morning of October 3rd it was Moore's brigade that found the big gap in the Union lines, the key to breaking the enemy's first position along the old “Beauregard Line” of earthworks. The morning was already getting hot and they took a breather in a captured camp, feasting on the goodies and drinking as much water as they could find. After lunch they moved south and came across a strong line of Union soldiers near Battery F.

The Federal commander there, Gen. John McArthur, was as tough a fighter as the Union army had. He didn't wait for Moore to come to him but launched a counter-attack. It was some hard fighting but McArthur's men had been in the thick of it all day and couldn't take what Moore was dishing out; they fell back in retreat. Moore moved his men forward again and came across the Union brigade of Col. Marcellus M. Crocker. If McArthur was the toughest fighter in the army, Crocker was a close second. For 45 minutes his four Iowa regiments and Moore's men slugged it out behind Battery F. Crocker was holding his own when he was ordered to fall back and the exhausted Confederates were glad to see them go. Scores of Moore's men had been wounded or killed and the next day promised more fighting.

There was a delay in kicking off the attack the next morning but once it started it was worse than anything the Confederates had seen the day before. It was Moore's bad luck to be in the position to attack the Federal stronghold at Battery Robinett. Twice the brigade charged the fort and was driven back. The Federal artillery "cut roads" through their ranks. An officer from the 42nd Alabama said, "The men fell like grass. I saw men, running at full speed, stop suddenly and fall upon their faces, with their brains scattered all around." The third and final charge, led by Col. Rogers of the 2nd Texas, came close to succeeding but was driven back after the most desperate fighting. Rogers was left dead on the field.

The Confederate army was driven away from Corinth and Gen. Van Dorn chose the men of Moore's Brigade to lead the retreat. He expected the Federals to pursue his army and being in front of the column would be the safest place for Moore's battered command. The next morning, still at the head of the column, Moore was given orders to hustle his men forward for another fight. It seems a division of Union troops had marched down from Tennessee to help their brethren in Corinth and were now blocking Van Dorn's army from crossing the Hatchie River.

The brigade had numbered nearly 2,000 men only a few days before; now, double timing to Davis Bridge they were down to just 300. They crossed the river and got into a defensive position just in time to get hit by an overwhelming attack by the enemy. Two dozen were killed and hundreds were captured. Very few of Moore's men made it back across the bridge. The largest regiment after the fight was the 35th Mississippi, down to 40 men, who simply decided to walk home.

After the stragglers had returned and the numbers were tallied, it was found Moore had lost 53 killed, 230 wounded and 1,012 captured for a total of 1,295 casualties, an unbelievable loss of 68% of what they had started with. During the four years of the Civil War, no other Confederate brigade suffered a higher percentage of casualties in a single battle as did Moore's Brigade at Corinth.