

Captain V. P. Sisson
Tells Vividly of

CLOSE CALLS

In Which Near 1,000
Men Participated

It was at Manassas, July 21, 1861. The "call" was not personal to the writer alone, and this brief narrative must not assume that phase.

It was a "close call" in which a full regiment of near a thousand men participated. That regiment was the memorable Eighth Georgia, organized at Richmond, in May, 1861, disciplined and commanded by that chivalrous son of Georgia, Francis S. Bartow, of Savannah, who reached the capital of the Confederacy in command of the Oglethorpe Light Infantry of his city.

The writer left Atlanta as high private in the Atlanta Grays, Captain Thomas L. Cooper, on May 5, 1861. Other companies from the state went forward to Richmond at the same time, and an early formation of the regiment was accomplished, drilled and equipped for the arena of war.

It was an intrepid band, composed exclusively of Georgians. The regimental staff consisted of Colonel Bartow, Lieutenant Colonel Montgomery Gardner, Major Thomas L. Cooper and Lieutenant John Branch, adjutant. In the staff also was that distinguished and scholarly gentleman, Dr. H. V. M. Miller, the surgeon, familiar in ante-bellum Georgia politics as the "Demosthenes of the Mountains." The commissary was Major Charles H. Smith, known to literary fame as "Bill Arp." The quartermaster was Lieutenant Ed Wilcox, of Macon. Gardner was in West Point, had been in the Mexican war, and was the thorough drill master and disciplinarian the regiment had need of. In this he had the ready assistance of the colonel, whose enthusiasm and ambition had no bounds. He had a personal pride in developing a regiment perfect in all things. The material was there assembled, and Colonel Bartow's lofty character exercised a marked influence among company commanders and privates. Among the latter were men the peers of their ranking officers, men of high birth, education and refinement, bearing muskets and in cheerful submission to rigid military discipline.

Of the company officers it is impossible here to speak. It was a fine body of Georgia's chivalry, many of whom as captains of local companies, like Bartow at Savannah, had given evidence of ability of a high order. If memory fails me in the long lists, I cannot forget Lucius M. Lamar, Magruder, Dawson, the Coopers, Tom Lewis, Seab Love, Towars, Fouché, Hall, Smith, Charley Lewis, Dunlap, Scott and John C. Reed, now of the Atlanta bar and member of our present city council, George C. Norton, of Louisville, the Harpers and Dwinell.

A brief stay in camp at Richmond, and the regiment was sent forward, first to Harper's Ferry. The soldier prefers active service to the monotony of camp life.

Here it is in place to record my then impressions of Colonel Bartow, our Richard of the Lion Heart—sans peur et sans reproche—and his regiment as he rode at its head. He seemed an ideal knight, and the pages of crusade history can furnish nothing grander in conception of purpose or desire of achievement, as its beautiful banner first floated to the winds and its bristled guns flashed in the sunlight. Here was the pomp and pageantry of war, with the glistening blades of a Saladin. A thousand men in the bloom of youth, enthused with the righteousness of their cause, and an invincible determination to defend it. Thus panoplied, they were fit champions for any cause or any age.

Alas, for the frailty of human hopes, when fate decrees otherwise! And how ambition treads the spider's stair! The regiment reached Winchester from Harper's Ferry, where General Joseph E. Johnston was confronting a Federal force menacing the valley of Virginia. Our stay at this point was without incident. It was severe drilling under a merciless July sun with light picket duty on the turnpike leading to Martinsburg. But the plot was thickening.

In the forenoon of July 18, an order came to be in readiness in two hours for a forced march to reinforce General Beauregard, at Manassas, and in that brief period of time the command of General Johnston was in motion. We waded the Shenandoah river, and by midnight had reached the summit of the

Blue Ridge, where for an hour or two rest was had in the village of Paris. Resuming the march, railway transportation at Piedmont awaited us, and in box and stock cars we landed at Manassas, much exhausted from wading a river, climbing over a rugged mountain, loss of sleep and in sore want of food. This was but a foretaste of what awaited the regiment on the following day. It proved a stimulant to courage, and created a dogged pertinacity to meet whatever issue the future might hold. And they did to a man!

It was now night at Manassas on July 20, the eve of an eventful day in the history of the Eighth Georgia. At daylight on Sunday morning, the 21st, the regiment was hurriedly ordered into line and sent forward to the left flank of General Beauregard's line of battle where the enemy had made a heavy flank movement and attack. This was an exhaustive forced march of several hours under a pitiless July sun impeded by artillery and cavalry en route.

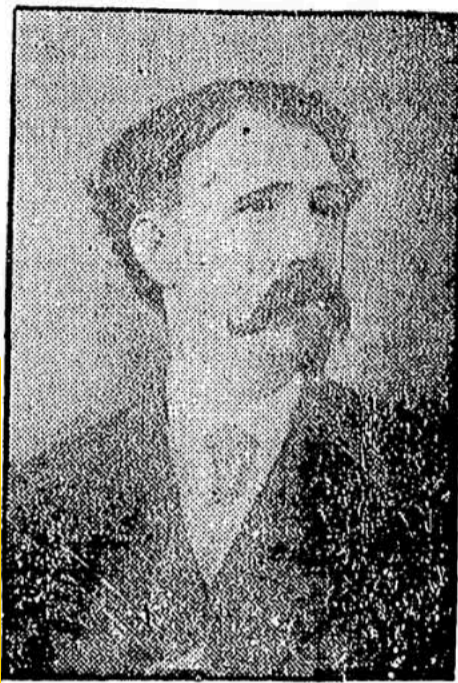
By 10 a. m. the scene of action had been reached, and the combat was on. Beauregard's elaborate line of earthworks had been flanked.

Here the mastery of war had to come to issue on the field, and no advantage to any, save that the enemy had precipitated an emergency requiring military skill and quick action to meet.

To this General Johnston and Beauregard proved equal, as history will show. But The Journal asks for a recital of the "close call," and my preface has lengthened out to weariness. Our talented litterateur, "Uncle Remus," congratulated himself on one occasion whilst reading a piece to a friend, that the listener did not go to sleep!

And here comes the close call: Hampton's Legion and other troops were engaged.

The first sight the Eighth had of the enemy was Rickett's battery of six 10-pound pieces on a promontory, about a half a mile distant. So soon as the regiment entered an open field and got in line for action, that battery had a very fine target, and was quick to get the range. It was in a nicely cultivated cornfield, the growth being about waist high,



CAPT. V. P. SISSON.
Taken May 1, 1887.

to our immediate front, and not a shot had we fired. Colonel Bartow, having been promoted, was not in command of the regiment. He was not far distant, however, getting orders from General Johnston, whose other forces were moving up rapidly. A crisis was at hand. The rattle of musketry grew nearer, and Rickett's gunners had an easy going affair in plowing up with solid shot and shell our cornfield. The soldier's pride of character keeps his courage intact so long as he has a fighting chance, but the suspense is trying to the best nerve when he cannot strike back as he receives. In any event, however, he will do and dare in the face of the enemy as is known only to those who have been there.

Colonel Gardner was no novice on such occasions, and he stood as a statue in

orders. At length the order came, and the "close call" followed in its wake. "Yonder battery, forward, double-quick, march," and Colonel Gardner sprang forward, flourishing an old cavalry saber he had used in the Mexican war. It was a half-mile on open ground to reach that battery, save a stunted pine thicket in its immediate front, from behind which its guns were in full play as we advanced.

Our quick movement and not having time to lower their guns for a correct range, much of the destructive fire of shot and shell failed of its deadly mission. Our loss in this half-mile was not serious. Rickett's battery, as we learned later, was known as the "pride of the army," and its work on that dire occasion was indeed beautiful, if one can desecr anything in resemblance to aesthetics under such circumstances!

And yet closer comes the "close call." We thought it sufficiently near at hand in that cornfield under the fire of well directed, guns, awaiting slaughter like sheep in the shambles.

But that was a picnic! We entered the pine thicket in very good order; emerging from which into the open the regiment found itself some fifty yards distant from the battery, its position being a little elevated, and every gun in full chorus. Nothing remained but a last desperate sortie for those guns, and to silence them. Perhaps to turn them on the enemy. Up to that critical moment, the regiment had not suffered seriously, beyond the killing of a few men, and wounding not more than a dozen, so far as memory serves me.

It was thought we had the bird in hand, but it is the unexpected that happens, and certainly, it confronted us then and there with startling suddenness. As we began to pick off the gunners and end the havoc, there arose as if by magic from the ground, a full regiment of United States regulars in support of the battery, and we received a terrific volley along the entire line of our regiment. The aim was a trifle too high, but its effect was deadly enough. The blow was staggering and much confusion ensued. The regiment of the battery, and was unseen by us

Among the first to fall was Colonel Gardner and Adjutant Branch, with several company officers, and a third of the men wounded or killed. It was difficult to retrieve the regimental alignment and continue the contest, but there were no orders to fall back, the colors still floated defiantly in the hands of the color bearer, Charley Daniel, and there was no surrender, demand for one, or advance of the enemy. Human endurance finally reached the limit, and the Eighth Georgia retired to the base of the hill under a withering fire of shrapnel, where the remnant was reformed as reinforcements came up. The pine thicket was a scene of ruin, stripped of its foliage, and presented a grim spectacle of war's devastation.

At this juncture General Bartow brought up reinforcements and was wild at the unhappy fate of a regiment he loved as his own. It was in this act that he lost his own grand life. I make no effort to describe the death agony of our late colonel. He died with armor on and colors in hand.

It was now high noon, the sun burning down with tropical ferocity, and no man had tasted water since daylight. The dead lay upon the field, and the wounded had but indifferent care.

After the death of Bartow the Eighth and Seventh regiments were placed in General Bee's command. The enemy advanced in vast numbers on other parts of the battlefield, and the carnage had no abatement. The next great loss was that of General Eec, who fell with a mortal wound.

General Kirby-Smith reached us with his brigade, but was severely wounded as soon as his troops got into action, and his services lost to the Confederates.

Until about 4 p. m. the battle raged with great severity with the issue doubtful, when the enemy was seen to waver. The battery which the Eighth with such dire results sought to capture single-handed was now silenced, its commander wounded and a prisoner.

The field of Manassas was won, and the "on to Richmond" abandoned to a later period.

I am competent to speak of the one regiment only. Others had their close calls. In fact, it was an uncomfortably close transaction to all concerned on both sides.

After the third of a century memory becomes treacherous and perfection is not claimed for this brief sketch. The career of the Eighth ended at Appomattox, its ranks diminished to scarce one good company. Probably 75 per cent of those who received their baptism of blood at Manassas have solved the great mystery.

From Yorktown and all through Virginia to Gettysburg and back, wherever a battle was fought, some member of that regiment reposes in an unknown grave. He followed wherever the immortal Lee led.

Let us hope that grand old Nature in her munificence at each returning spring-time will decorate the turf over them with the beautiful wild flowers and the choristers in leafy branches overhead trill their choicest notes!

It should not be forgotten that the Confederate was not such soldier as comprise the regular army of a country. He was of a higher strain, and the purity of that strain finds no degeneracy in his issue. He claims lineage from:

"The knightliest of the knightly race,
That, since the days of old,
Have kept the lamp of chivalry
Alight in hearts of gold;
The kindest of the kindly band
That, rarely hating ease,
Yet rode with Spottswood round the land,
And Raleigh 'round the seas."

Those who survive that regiment, and in weary steps pass to and fro amid the busy scenes of life, hold, as the French would express it, an *embarrasment de richesse*, resembling the sunlight and the shadow. Memories of picturesque scenes of joyous comradeship in the bivouac one day, and of death and burial the next. And it is:
"Oh for the touch of a vanished hand—
The sound of a voice now stilled."

V. P. SISSON.

Atlanta, February 1, 1901.



THE 8TH GEORGIA REGIMENT ASSAULTING RICKETT'S BATTERY AT MANASSAS, JULY 21, 1861.

that we loaded guns and fixed bayonets. Colonel Gardner with his field glass surveyed the situation calmly for a moment, and ordered the regiment to "lie down," which I remember to have done with great promptness and much satisfaction. Perhaps never before had I embraced mother earth so affectionately, as my weary head was softly laid in a freshly plowed furrow, and I pulled a stalk of succulent corn to slake my thirst. The regimental staff had dismounted and sent horses to the rear. The federal infantry had not advanced

front of the regiment and calmly awaited General Bartow, attended by an aid, dashed up, and in a moment "attention" rang out in clear tones amid the wild din and confusion. The Washington artillery of New Orleans, dashed by like the torrent of Niagara, and the clanking sabers of Stewart's cavalry gave inspiration to the boys of the Eighth, ready to do their duty, and eager for release from their perilous position. The dogs of war were to be unleashed. "Men, this regiment is ordered to cap-

had lain flat on the ground in the rear until the blue flame belched forth as from one gun. As the volley was answered there was no infantry in sight. They had flattened upon the earth to reload, and in an instant another volley greeted us shattering our ranks and causing still further disorder. The contest was unequal, and our charge for the guns was halted. Had the infantry aim been a little lower, our destruction would have been complete. For the old time United States regular had a dead aim.