

SMITH ATKINS

CHICKAMAUGA.

USELESS, DISASTROUS
BATTLE

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**Chickamauga. Useless,
Disastrous Battle**

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*Talk by Smith D. Atkins. Opera
House, Mendota, Illinois, February
22, 1907, at invitation of
Woman's Relief Corps, G.A.R.*

When the Civil War came in this country forty-seven years ago, I was a young lawyer in Freeport, with not a particle of military schooling, and not the slightest inclination for military life. But when our good President, Abraham Lincoln, made his first call for three months' volunteers in April, 1861, I enlisted as a private soldier, and when mustered out at the end of three months, I again enlisted as a private soldier, resolved that I would serve in the army until the rebellion was crushed. Promotions came to me very rapidly. I always had a larger command than I believed myself capable of handling.

On August 16th, 1863, when the movement of the Army of the Cumberland began from Winchester and Dechard in middle Tennessee against the Army of the Confederacy under Bragg at Chattanooga, I was not, as a matter of course, informed of the plans of the campaign, for I held only the rank of a colonel of a single regiment, and a boy at that, attached to Wilder's Brigade of Mounted Infantry, armed with Spencer repeating rifles, the best arm for service in the field ever invented, better than any other arm in the world then or now, so simple in its mechanism that it never got out of order, and was always ready for instant service.

All the world knows now that the object of the campaign was the capture of Chattanooga. I am not an educated soldier; I am not capable of making any technical criticism of military campaigns; my opinions possess no military value; I know nothing of grand tactics, and very little of any kind of tactics; since the war I have made no critical study of that campaign. I am averse to such studies; when the war ended I tried to put behind me everything connected with the war, and devote my whole attention to the duties and pursuits of peace; I would not talk about, or read about the Civil War. I placed in my library many volumes of campaigns in which I was engaged, but I would not read them. By accident one day I took up a little volume, "Hood's Advance and Retreat" over ground with which I was familiar, and read it with intense interest, and I afterward read with interest many volumes concerning the war.

When the advance of the Army of the Cumberland began it was the desire of General Rosecrans, commanding the Army of the Cumberland, to confuse and mislead Bragg, commanding the Confederate Army. In that he was signally successful. Sending a portion of his army, cavalry, infantry and artillery, across the Cumberland mountains into the valley of the Tennessee north of Chattanooga to threaten that city from the north, he led his main army across the Tennessee at Bridgeport, Tennessee, and Caperton's Ferry, Alabama, and crossing the mountains into Lookout Valley, swung his army to the south and west of Chattanooga, rendering the occupation of that city untenable by Bragg with his line of supplies threatened in his rear. From my slight acquaintance with famous military campaigns I believe that the display of grand tactics by Rosecrans fairly rivals that of anything in history, and was as brilliant and successful as the famous campaign of John Churchill, the Duke of Marlborough, before the battle of Blenheim in 1704.

Instead of commenting on the campaign of the Army of the Cumberland against Chattanooga, which I freely grant that from a technical military point of view I am incapable of, I prefer to dwell upon the movements of my own regiment in that campaign.

In the afternoon of August 16th, 1863, my regiment, attached to Wilder's Brigade, moved out from Dechard, and climbed the Cumberland Mountains to University Place, and crossing into the Sequatchie Valley, climbed and crossed Walden's Ridge, reaching Poe's Tavern in the Tennessee Valley, twelve miles north of Chattanooga, on the 21st of August; on the 22nd, Wilder and his brigade went to a point north of Chattanooga to directly threaten that city, while my regiment went to Harrison's Landing, threatening to cross at that point fifteen miles north of Chattanooga. We found the enemy in earthworks on the edge of the river on the opposite bank, with quite a heavy fort on the hills back from the river, mounting three guns en barbette. Our Spencer rifles carried over the river easily, nearly a mile wide, and the Confederates were kept closely within their rifle pits by our sharpshooters.

For a bullet from a rifle to travel a mile takes a long time. Let me illustrate that. The Confederate officer of the day, with his sash across his shoulder, came riding down to the river from the Confederate fort, and was soon kneeling under a box elder tree on the bank of the river, and I said to my adjutant standing by me, "What is he doing?" but I had hardly asked the question, when a blue puff of smoke told me that he was shooting at us; Adjutant Lawyer stepped behind a tree, when the bullet from the Confederate rifle passed over my head, and through the side of the house by which I was standing, wounding one of my soldiers inside of the house, the first soldier in my regiment to be struck with rebel lead. If you see a man shooting a rifle at you a mile away, you will have abundant time to dodge before the bullet reaches you; if you can dodge behind a tree, as my Adjutant did, you will be safe; but if you are in the open you may as well stand still, for you are as liable to dodge in front of the bullet as away from it.

On the 24th of August I returned to Harrison's Landing with my regiment and two 10-pound rifled guns of Lilly's Indiana Battery, under a Lieutenant. He was a volunteer officer, but a studious one, and had mastered the science of artillery firing. I placed the two guns on the bluff on our side of the river, and ordered the Lieutenant to open fire at the Confederate fort, probably about two miles away, when I rode on to the bank of the river, opposite the Confederate fort, where I could plainly see the effect of the artillery firing. I waited an hour for the guns to open, but they didn't, and I rode back to see about it. He had cut down some trees to get a plain view of the Confederate fort, dug holes for the trails of the guns, and there they stood, pointing at the sky, and the Lieutenant stood there steadily eyeing the Confederate fort, with its three guns, en barbette, a brass gun in the center and a steel gun each side of it. I yelled at him to know why he didn't fire, and he replied, without taking his eyes from the fort, "I am waiting for some one to stand up on the parapet of the fort; I have an instrument here (a flat piece of brass full of holes of different sizes) by which I can tell the exact distance in yards if some one will stand up; with another instrument I know the elevation, just how much lower that fort is than where my guns stand." I replied, "Perhaps no soldier will ever stand up," and he answered, "Oh, yes, there will," and almost immediately said, "There. I have got it," and while he kneeled upon the ground to figure out the problem, and cut his shells, and load his guns, I dismounted and went down the bluff immediately in front of his guns until I found a place from which I could plainly see the Confederate fort, and, adjusting my field glass, hoped to see the effect of his shots; but I was enveloped in smoke when he fired, and could see nothing. But we learned the effect of his scientific firing a few days afterward when we captured a copy of the Daily Chattanooga Rebel, printed on wall paper, Henry Watterson, now the distinguished editor of the Louisville Courier-Journal, publisher, that said the Yankee artillery at Harrison's Landing at the first fire dismounted the brass gun in the Confederate fort, and killed four men. No one showed himself about that fort afterwards, and, although he continued firing, more to make a noise and worry Bragg at Chattanooga than anything else, the Confederates made no attempt to reply to our artillery. Those two shots by him, scientifically

fired, after he knew the elevation and distance, hit the mark and did the business. Roosevelt says, "It is the shots that hit that count;" that is true. One center hit is worth forty shot at random. That is why Dewey, in Manilla Bay, sunk the Spanish fleet. I spent several days, a few years ago, at Fortress Monroe, in Virginia, and all the forenoon of each day listened to the firing of heavy guns by the battleships of our navy at targets, when it cost five hundred dollars for every shot fired. The absolute accuracy of scientific firing is an astonishment. I have seen a man fire sixteen shots at a target one even mile away, and hit the bull's eye every shot, and he declared that he could hit it every time for a hundred shots. Our navy is made up of volunteers; it is expensive to educate them, but they make the best gunners in the world, and if we keep a navy at all, it is the greatest economy to keep it always in a state of the highest efficiency.

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