

The Battle of Bentonville ^[1]

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In April 1861, Arthur Ford joined the Confederate army's Palmetto Brigade from South Carolina, even though he was not yet eighteen years old. Because he was not of military age, he worked in the post office. When he turned 18, he was sent to the battlefield and saw active duty for the remainder of the war. In 1905, Ford and his wife, Marion Johnstone Ford, wrote a memoir of their experiences during the war.

In the excerpt below, Ford describes the march to Bentonville and the battle there on March 19, 1865, including details on the desperate state of the Confederate army by the end of the war.

[A]bout 3 o'clock on the morning of the 19th[of March, 1865] we were aroused and hurried on toward Bentonville, where we arrived a little before three in the afternoon, having made the 20 miles in rather less than 12 hours.

It was on the march this day that an amusing incident occurred. I had not owned a pair of socks since I left James Island a month before, and my shoes were in such tattered condition that I could keep uppers and soles together only by tying them with several leather strings, but most of my toes stuck out very conspicuously ^[2]. I had read of the importance that great generals attached to the good condition of infantry ^[3] soldiers' feet, and hence the aphorism ^[4], "A marching man is no stronger than his feet," and I determined to keep mine in good condition if possible. I knew that frequent bathing prevented blistering; therefore, every night before going to sleep, and often on the march during the day I would bathe my feet, so that they were never blistered, and I kept well up with my company in marching. On this day as we crossed a little stream, according to my custom I stepped aside, and pulling off my shoes soaked my feet in the running water. General Hardee and his staff rode by at the moment. He checked his horse and called sternly to me, "You there, sir! What are you doing straggling ^[5] from your command? I suppose you are one of those men who behaved so badly at Averysboro." (A few men had been guilty of misconduct there.) I sprang to my feet, and saluting him said, "Excuse me, General, but you are speaking to the wrong man, sir. I have never misbehaved, and never straggled. I am only bathing my feet to prevent them from blistering. There is my company right ahead there, sir, and I always keep up with it." My injured tone and evident sincerity struck the old man, and he saluted me with the words, "I beg your pardon, sir," and rode on. He was a courtly and knightly soldier, and a great favorite with the men.

We reached Bentonville at about 3 o'clock p. m., only a short time after the battle had begun, and as we marched hurriedly along the road in the direction of the firing we passed a number of wounded men coming to the rear; and then several operating tables on both sides of the road, some with wounded men stretched on them with the surgeons at work, and all of them with several bloody amputated ^[6] legs and arms thrown alongside on the grass. The sight was temporarily depressing, as it foreshadowed what we had to expect. But we hurried on, and our division halted for a few moments on the ground from which the Federals had just been repulsed ^[7], and there were quite a number of their dead and wounded lying about. One of the Federal wounded, a lieutenant, begged us for some water, and I stepped from the line and gave him a drink from my canteen. Others begged me likewise, and in a few moments my canteen was empty. I knew that this might result seriously to me, in case I should need the water badly for myself, but I could not refuse a wounded man's appeal even if he was my enemy; and one of our men, a thrifty fellow, who always managed to have things, produced a little flask of whiskey, and gave a good drink to a Federal who had his leg badly crushed. The blue-coat raised his eyes to Heaven with, "Thank God, Johnnie; it may come around that I may be able to do you a kindness, and I'll never forget this drink of liquor." We were not allowed to remain long relieving the suffering, but soon were called to "attention," and received orders to create it, by an attack upon the enemy from our extreme right. At this moment Maj. A. Burnett Rhett, of the artillery ^[8], rode along the line and called out that news had been received that France had recognized the Confederacy and would send warships to open our ports immediately. The men cheered, few of us realizing that the end was so near. We were blinded by our patriotism. There was Lee with his 30,000 men that moment surrounded by Grant with his 150,000. Here was Johnston with his 14,000 trying to keep at bay Sherman with his 70,000, with the knowledge that Schofield was only two days off with 40,000 more. And this was about all there was to the Confederacy; and they talked of recognition! Oh, the pity of it!

As we stood in line ready to advance my next comrade ^[9] remarked, "Well, boys, one out of every three of us will drop to-day. I wonder who it will be?" This had been about our proportion in our two previous infantry engagements, and it was not far short of the same here, for out of the twenty-one men the company carried into the fight five were left on the field. At the word the line advanced through a very thick black jack-oak woods full of briars ^[10], and then double-quickened. We ran right over the Federal picket line and captured or shot every one of the pickets ^[11]. One picket was in the act of eating his dinner, and as we ran upon him he dropped his tin bucket, which, strange to say, had rice and peas boiled together. Our lieutenant grabbed it up, and carried it, with the spoon still in the porridge, in his left hand in the charge. We went through the bushes yelling and at a run until we struck a wire rail fence on the edge of an old field. I sprang up on the fence to get over, but when on top could see no enemy, and so called out to the men, a number of whom were likewise immediately on the fence. Just at this moment the officers called to us to come back, as a mistake had been made. Our division had not gone far enough to our right. The line was again formed in the thick bushes, and we went about two hundred yards or so farther to the right, and during this movement the lieutenant ate the captured porridge, and gave me the empty tin bucket and spoon. I attached the bucket to my waist belt, and kept it for about a month, when in an amusing encounter with Gen. Sam Cooper, of which I will tell farther on, it got crushed. The spoon I have kept to the present time.

Our line was soon again halted just on the inside edge of the dense woods, and concealed ^[12] by the brush, and I could see on the other side of the field, about 300 yards distant, twelve pieces of artillery glistening in the sun, and behind them a dense mass of blue infantry evidently expecting our attack, and ready for us.

As we stood there for a few minutes and saw the work cut out for us, one of our men, one of the few who had been of age in 1860, said in plaintive ^[13] tone, "If the Lord will only see me safe through this job, I'll register an oath never to vote for secession ^[14] again as long as I live."

At the word "forward" our brigade ^[15] left the cover of the woods at the double-quick, and the men reopened with their yells.

As all veterans of the great war know, in a charge the Confederates did not preserve their alignment, as the Federals did. They usually went at a run, every man more or less for himself. There was also an inexplicable ^[16] difference between the battle cries of the Federal and Confederate soldiers. In the assaults of the Federals the cries were regular, like "Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!" simply cheers, lacking stirring life. But the Confederate cries were yells of an intensely nervous description; every man for himself yelling "Yai, Yai, Yi, Yai, Yi!" They were simply fierce shrieks made from each man's throat individually, and which cannot be described, and cannot be reproduced except under the excitement of an assault in actual battle. I do not know any reason for this marked difference unless it was in the more pronounced individuality of the average Confederate soldier.

As soon as our line charged out into the open field the Federal artillery opened on us with grape shot, and the infantry with their rifles. My eyes were in a moment filled with sand dashed up by the grape which struck around. I wiped them with my hand, and keeping them closed as much as I could, kept on at a run until I suddenly realized that I was practically alone. When I looked back I saw that the brigade, after getting about half way across the field, had stopped and was in confusion. In a moment it broke and went back in a clear panic. It is needless to say I followed. Our line was reformed in the woods, and I am glad to say of my own company, and I think Captain Matthews's, they both rallied at the word to a man. Every man was in place except those who had fallen. This was more than could be said for some of the other commands of the brigade, some of whose men never rallied, but went straight on home from the field, and were never heard of again.

Our line was again moved forward to the position from which we had first driven the Federal pickets, and our company was sent to the edge of the woods from which we had made the last charge, and deployed as pickets, two men at each post. It was now about dark, and, while the Federal infantry had ceased firing, the wretched pieces of artillery never let up on us and kept throwing grape shot, and occasional shells into the woods where they knew we were, making a terrible racket through the tree-tops, tearing off branches, etc. At about eight o'clock that night our lieutenant came running along the line calling for "Ford." As soon as he came to my post he told me that he had brought another man to take my place and that I was relieved, and at 12 o'clock must go directly to the rear and get some [rations](#) ^[17] that were expected, and cook them for the company. I begged to be let off, but it was no go. He said he knew I could cook, and must go. So I laid down where I was, with instructions to my comrade to awake me at 12 o'clock, and in an instant was sound asleep, oblivious to the shells, etc., that the enemy kept meanly crashing through the trees and brush, and worse still to the groans and cries of the wounded that still lay in the field in front where they had fallen. After dark the occasional screams of some wounded horses lying in our rear were particularly distressing. Early in the afternoon Halsey's [battery](#) ^[18] of flying artillery, attached to Hampton's [cavalry](#) ^[19], had held a gap in the line, until the arrival of our division, and in advancing I saw probably a dozen horses lying dead or wounded where the battery had been. To this day I recall the [piteous](#) ^[20] expressions of two or three of these wounded horses, as they raised their heads in their suffering and looked at us as we passed between them. They were perfectly quiet, but it was only after dark that in their loneliness they uttered any sounds.

About midnight our picket line was withdrawn and the whole division moved off in Egyptian darkness somewhere, I never did know exactly where, or really care either, for at that moment I was suffering from fever which afterwards developed into a serious illness. At daylight in a cold rain we halted somewhere in the woods on the edge of another field, and threw up [breastworks](#) ^[21], as we were threatened with an attack, which, however, was not made. On the afternoon of the 21st we were hurriedly ordered to [hasten](#) ^[22] across to the extreme left of Johnston's army to support the troops there who were severely pressed by the Federals. I was now so sick that I was ordered to the rear, but begged off, and a comrade offered to carry my gun for me, so I kept up. When we reached the place our line was formed with our company on the extreme left resting on the edge of Mill Creek. I was really so ill that I could not stand in line for any length of time, and requested permission of my lieutenant to lie down in ranks, so as to be in place when the assault came. He ordered me to the rear, but I succeeded in begging off again, and lay down in line. I was asleep instantly. The next thing I knew I was being dragged by the feet, and heard some one say, "What are you going to do with that dead man?" "Going to throw him in the creek," was the reply. I opened my eyes and said, "I am not dead, but only sick. What is the matter? Where are our men?" Looking around I saw that it was early dawn, and the place was deserted except by two of our cavalry [videttes](#) ^[23], one of whom said, "If you have life enough left you had better skedaddle, for the Yanks will be here in five minutes. We are the last of the cavalry." I picked myself up, and got across Mill Creek bridge just as the Federal troops began to appear.

Source Citation:

Ford, Arthur Peronneau and Marion Johnstone. *Life in the Confederate Army: Being Personal Experiences of a Private Soldier in the Confederate Army... And Some Experiences and Sketches of Southern Life*. New York: The Neale Publishing Company, 1905.

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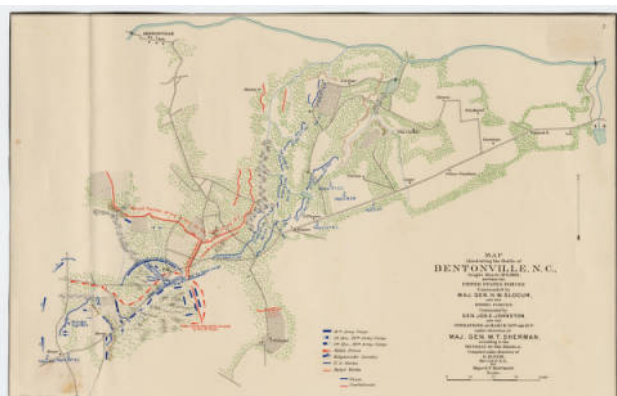
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Maps of the Battle of Bentonville, includes details on both Federal and Confederate commanding officers of each brigade. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Artifacts:



[39]

Color-coded map illustrating the Battle of Bentonville, created circa 1890, from UNC Libraries.

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