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Wartime Reminiscences: The Story of William R. Tanner's Civil War Service

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Abstract

Veteran war stories are some of the most fascinating windows into the past that students of history can experience. With World War II veteran numbers quickly diminishing and the risk of these accounts of history being lost, the importance of collecting and passing on veteran stories to future generations is vital. Such was the case with those who fought in the Civil War. As the twentieth century approached, droves of veterans began disappearing from the pages of history. The need for those veteran stories from America's bloodiest war to be recorded and published became not only important to the veterans themselves but also to students like myself who have a genuine interest in studying how the Civil War was remembered by its soldiers. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial, Veterans

Disciplines

History | Oral History | Social History | United States History

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Wartime Reminiscences: The Story of William R. Tanner's Civil War Service

March 26, 2014

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Veteran war stories are some of the most fascinating windows into the past that students of history can experience. With World War II veteran numbers quickly diminishing and the risk of these accounts of history being lost, the importance of collecting and passing on veteran stories to future generations is vital. Such was the case with those who fought in the Civil War. As the twentieth century approached, droves of veterans began disappearing from the pages of history. The need for those veteran stories from America's bloodiest war to be recorded and published became not only important to the veterans themselves but also to students like myself who have a genuine interest in studying how the Civil War was remembered by its soldiers.

Tucked away in a seldom visited corner of Musselman Library's Special Collections Archive is William R. Tanner's story. Tanner was a Civil War veteran who chose to document and publish his experience with Company C of the 13th South Carolina Regiment. Mustered in at Spartanburg, South Carolina in 1861, Tanner served the length of the war with his company, seeing action in a number of large engagements over the course of the war. His memory of his service was published in a pamphlet in 1931, a mere four years before his death in 1935. He dedicated his writing in memory of his comrades, who "gave their lives in service to their people."

The bulk of the pamphlet describes where his company traveled and fought throughout the war. Tanner recounts two specific situations in which he proved himself to be not only a good soldier, but a good person. Both occurred during the Second Battle of Manassas, the first being when Captain A.K. Smith was killed on the front lines. Tanner and another soldier he mentioned, Mark Sexton, volunteered to retrieve the captain's body before it was taken away by Union troops. He wrote of how they both endured heavy fire trying to reach the body, forcing them both to belly crawl and drag the dead captain back, where Tanner himself dug a shallow grave and buried Smith.

The next particular situation Tanner wrote of during the Battle of Second Manassas was when he heard a “wounded Yankee” begging for a drink of water one night after the fighting had subsided. Upon giving the soldier his canteen, the Confederate and the Yankee continued on to exchange names and form a genuine bond between each other as they talked throughout the night. Twenty five years later, Tanner wrote, he found the Yankee’s obituary in the New York Sun newspaper, along with a will for \$10 to thank him for sparing him water at Second Manassas. Tanner expressed how joyful he was to read in the paper that the soldier he helped remembered him years after the war. However, by the time he was writing his pamphlet, he had forgotten the soldier’s name, bringing him much sadness.



The remainder of the pamphlet described the final years of the war and the different places his regiment traveled. One of the last places Tanner wrote about was Gettysburg, where he wrote of the fighting in the town. While Tanner never explicitly stated that he participated in Pickett’s Charge, one can infer from his description of advancing through a field amidst “grape shot and canister,” with the “enemy lying behind a stone wall” that he made the treacherous march from Seminary Ridge towards the Union position.

The final sentence of the pamphlet was Tanner reminiscing about the Rebel Yell, so fierce when given that it “drove the enemy across the Potomac.” He wrote that he would “gladly give ten dollars” to hear the Rebel Yell again, if given by a Picture Show. Tanner’s decision to record and publish his experience sixty-six years after the war ended really illustrates how large of an impact his service during the war had on the rest of his life, and how he would never forget those four transformative years he served in the 13th South Carolina infantry.

Sources:

Tanner, W.R.. *Reminiscences of the War Between the States*. 1931.

Image:

“Gettysburg, battlefield of, Scene of Pickett’s charge, 974.” Library of Congress, Department of Prints & Photographs Online. Digital ID: ppmsca 32848. Reproduction Number: LC-DIG-ppmsca-32848.