

## THE CHAPLAINS

By John F. Hall

For more than 40 years, my family has lived in a very old antebellum house located in the middle of a farm. From documents and letters preserved in a metal box, I learned about John J. Dyer Jr., the man that built the house around 1860. This was just before the start of the American Civil War. A dear friend, Tom Vinson, owns the metal box and he let me read all the contents in that box. One letter caught my attention, it was written by Dyer's son, William. The boy ran away from home at the age of 16 and joined the Confederate Army. He wrote the letter after he was wounded at the Battle of Shiloh. He was one of the 23,300 casualties, wounded and killed, in that bloody battle.

Many years ago, my wife, Paula and I took our grandchildren, Andrea, Heather and John-John to Dollywood in Eastern Tennessee. We decided to have our picture made dressed up as a Confederate family. In looking at that picture today, I wondered about the life the soldiers at that time endured. Doing a little research, it was rather distressing to learn about the health care these soldiers received.



(Pictured: Standing, John F. Hall & Paula Hall. Front: L to R: Heather Hall, Andrea Hall & John-John Hall).

The deadliest thing that faced the Civil War soldier was disease. For every soldier who died in battle, two died of disease. In particular, intestinal complaints such as dysentery and diarrhea claimed many lives. In fact, dysentery and diarrhea claimed more soldiers than did battle wounds. The Civil War soldier also faced outbreaks of measles, small pox, malaria and pneumonia. Troops from rural areas were crowded together for the first time with large numbers of other individuals and got diseases they had no immunity to. Neglect of camp hygiene and ignorance of how diseases are spread was the root cause of many deaths. Exposure turned many a cold into pneumonia which was the third leading killer disease of the war.

During the 1860s, doctors were generally ignorant of the causes of disease. Generally, Civil War doctors underwent two years of medical school. Harvard Medical School did not even own a stethoscope or a microscope until after the war. Most Civil War surgeons had never treated a gunshot wound and many never performed surgery. Medical knowledge of the 1860s had not yet encompassed the use sterile dressings, antiseptic surgery, and the recognition of the importance of sanitation and hygiene.

The average life expectancy for men in the 1860s was around 45 years of age. Medicines, especially for Confederate soldiers, in most situations, was almost nonexistent. Three quarters of all surgical procedures during the Civil War were amputations. Musket balls were responsible for many of the dead and a large part of the wounded. The Minie ball

was made of soft lead and weighed more than one ounce and was more than one-half inch in diameter. When it hit bone, the bone was shattered for several inches. That is why amputation was necessary to save the life of the soldier. Unfortunately, doctors with dirty hands unknowingly infected wounds with gangrene-causing bacteria while trying to treat the injured soldier.

As I look around my old house, I realize that Confederate families in the 1860s had none of the conveniences that we take for granted today. They had no electricity or indoor plumbing. Things such as radio, television, cell phones, computers and air conditioners had not been invented. About all the devices that they had for entertainment was limited to a piano, or a guitar or a fiddle. Cars had not been invented. The main sources of transportation were limited to horses, river boats and steam trains. Even the airplane was not invented until 38 years after the Civil War.

Living on a farm during the Civil War was not easy. Manual labor from sun up to sun down was necessary to survive. They had to raise their own food. Water came from hand dug wells or captured from rain, off the roof into a cistern. Clearing a field to grow crops was not easy. First they had to cut down a tree, then remove the stump, and dig up the tree roots. Diesel and gas tractors had not been invented. Life was hard and difficult at best.

Just living in those days was a challenge. Kentucky was spared the destruction that Major General William Tecumseh Sherman inflicted on the state of Georgia. Few people realized that on November 9, 1861, during the first year of the American Civil War, General Sherman was paralyzed by depression and was relieved of his command in Kentucky at his own request. He was nursed back to health by his wife, Ellen. Then General Ulysses S. Grant brought General Sherman down to the front lines at Pittsburg Landing, Tennessee and put him in charge of a Division of Union soldiers. Sherman ignored intelligence reports and underestimated the size of the Confederate units. He was able to prevent a rout of his men only by considerable personal bravery and tactical skills.

The second day of the Battle of Shiloh, the Confederate Army began to withdraw not only from Kentucky but also from most of Western Tennessee. General Grant won the battle, but he was heavily criticized for the losses of so many Union soldiers. He was considering resigning, but General Sherman convinced him to stay in the war.

I thought about the letter that William Dyer wrote to his dad after the Battle of Shiloh (also known as the Battle of Pittsburg Landing). The letter had no stamp on it. The following words were written on the front of the envelope, "Delivered by courtesy of a friend." While we may wonder about the friend that hand—delivered the letter to John J. Dyer Jr. There were other friends on the battle field that never made it into the history books. History professor Dr. James Robertson of Virginia Tech, wrote the following, "Among the most overlooked of all Civil War soldiers was one vital to every regiment. That fewer than half the regiments had such a person made their presence all the more important. They were the men that guarded and guided the spiritual well-being of the soldiers. They were the army chaplains.

In the beginning of the Civil War, neither side knew exactly what to do with chaplains. While they received officer status, chaplains had no prescribed uniform and usually had to cover their own expenses, including forage for their horses. One minister upon entering the army was discouraged to learn that a chaplain had no appointment or recognized place on a march, in a bivouac, or in line of battle. He was a supernumerary, a kind of fifth wheel to a coach, being in place nowhere and out of place everywhere. Many officers openly opposed the presence of chaplains. Religion, they asserted, made men more fearful of death, it preached against popular sins, and it was a challenge to the blind obedience on which an army depends. The shortage of army chaplains existed in the beginning and grew worse as the war continued. There were not enough clergy to meet the demands in military service and maintain church organization at home. ”

Whatever the denomination, chaplains performed a host of duties. They held church services and prayer meetings as often as possible. They baptized and buried, confronted the wounded, visited the sick, distributed Bibles and religious tracts, wrote letters for and read letters to the illiterates in their care, gave words of encouragement to the homesick. At least 50 chaplains died in the Battle of Shiloh. Another 100 succumbed to disease or fell wounded. Those who were left continued to preach the faith.

Civil War chaplains deserve far more attention than has been paid them. In quiet and unobtrusive ways they strengthen men to face the greatest challenge of life, mainly, death. Paula and I were married by an Army Chaplain at South Chapel on Fort Campbell in 1965. When I was in the Kentucky Army National Guard in 1979, I had a company commander that was trying to ruin my career. I went to the battalion chaplain for help and he intervened. In 2001, when I was the Inspector General in the 85th Division, I worked closely with the Division Chaplain on troop issues.

I wondered what it would have been like to be a chaplain at the Battle of Shiloh. If I was there and I came across a wounded teenage soldier who was homesick, scared and in pain, I would try to avoid the incoming cannon fire and the musket mini balls coming from every direction. I would move to the wounded soldier and gently hold his head in my arms. There is a prayer that I would share with the soldier.

That prayer is something most of us know well: The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me besides the still waters; He restores my soul. He leads me in right paths For His Name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; Your rod and Your staff — - they comfort me. You prepare a table for me in the presence of my enemies, You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life. And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long. Psalm 23:1-6.

Army chaplains at the Battle of Shiloh slept on the same hard grounds as the soldiers to whom they administered. They ate the same food, endured the same hardships, and confronted the same life and death issues. They visited hospitals, comforted the sick and

dying, following the army into battle. They offered counsel and religious instruction. And did what ever was necessary for the spiritual well being of the soldiers under their care. Army Chaplains need no epitaph. It was written for them centuries earlier: "Blessed are the peace markers; for they shall be called children of God." Matthew 5:9

John F. Hall

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