

Letters from the Front, and Other Writings by Beverly Becker

In the first year of the Civil War, 3,700 volunteers marched 1,200 miles from San Antonio, Texas, to Glorieta, New Mexico, hoping to capture the Southwestern territory for the Confederacy. In their poignant letters home and in the touching entries of their journals, the soldiers recorded the hardships of the trip.

September 5, 1861

My dear Carrie

We are now stationed about 8 miles from San Antonio where we will probably remain 4 or 8 weeks. We have been mustered into the Confederate Army for the indefinite period of the war. When we will get back I can't tell. Not I fear soon enough to eat the Christmas Turkey. (I) never sing "Do ney Miss Me at Home." . . . That song now would force my heart into my throat and choke me. For no man ever lived as happily at home as I do. . . . I fear you will miss me too much and attach too much importance to my absence...Kiss the Boy and give my love to all the children. Remember me to all.

Your, John

Shortly before he wrote the letter¹ above, 28-year-old John Shropshire had left his family's cotton plantation in Columbus, Texas, to fight under Brigadier General Henry Hopkins Sibley in the Confederate Army of New Mexico. Sibley wanted to capture New Mexico for the Confederacy, and after that task was accomplished, he planned to conquer much of the rest of the American Southwest.

Shropshire's letters - and the journals and remembrances of other veterans of the Texas-based force - offer an immediate, personal impression of what it was like to march with 3,700 men over 1,200 miles from San Antonio, Texas, to Glorieta, New Mexico, in the middle of the winter of 1861-1862.

Following their recruitment into the Confederate army, the new soldiers armed with their own guns and riding their own horses or mules bivouacked in San Antonio for several months in the late summer and early fall, marching and training before heading for New Mexico.

Shropshire, a lawyer who was born in Kentucky, was raised by an aunt after his parents died. He grew to be a tall, handsome man with thick, dark hair and pale blue eyes. He settled in Texas after completing his legal education, following his two older brothers first to La Grange, then to Columbus. Two years before the outbreak of the Civil War, Shropshire had married Carolyn Tait of Wilcox County, Alabama, and the bride's father had given the couple 40 families of slaves as a wedding present. The young couple also had a baby son, Charles.

Like other Confederate officers, Shropshire brought with him one of his slaves as a kind of aide-de-camp. This man's name was Bob, and in his letters Shropshire's observations offer insights into the attitudes of 130 years ago.

November 14, 1861

Bob is a great Negro, a perfect scamp yet I am attached to him, I can't tell why. He professes a great interest in me and mine and I believe he does as well as his nature will allow When we bought our wagons he asked me if I was going to have a Mexican to drive us. It never occurring to him that he was a suitable person to perform the feat The candle has burned out. I am writing by moonlight. The moon shines very bright in this country.

By December, the scarcity of supplies and the harshness of the northern march were taking a toll on the men.

December 6, 1861

Our horses are growing thin. Tell the doctor that I wish now I had taken his advice and bought a mule Soldiering is a great business. We are dirty and hungry all the time. The men all complain of not having anything to eat There is a prospect that we will have to throw away our tents.

Like the other Confederate volunteers, Shropshire provided his own horses and guns for the campaign.

December 12, 1861

Our horses are failing very rapidly. Our cavalry will be converted to infantry before we return, I expect. I would write a long letter if I had time. I start in the morning to the Rio Grande about 125 miles, in separate companies. My company starts first. I will be commander all by myself. The route is dangerous. The Indians have been stealing mules from some of the commands ahead. Remember me to all. Kiss my boy and take good care of him.

By Christmas, the Confederates were approaching the Texas-New Mexico border.

December 26, 1861, Fort Quitman

We arrived at this place last night our mules and oxen broke down, having been out 36 hours without water Christmas Day 1861 will be remembered a long time by this Regiment. . . . I thought of you many times and hoped that you were enjoying a good time. The eggnog and good things you had to eat, I sincerely hope you had the good appetite to enjoy...

Cavalry on the march have a hard time at best, but especially do they suffer when they march through a wilderness where a scarcity of everything essential to comfort prevails. I candidly confess I never would have come this way had I imagined the country was so mean [if I had the Yankees at my disposal, I would give them this country and force them to live in it. From the present prospects, I fear it will be a long time before I see you again. I fear I will be tempted to desert yet, or do something else desperate...Goodbye. Kiss my boy...

A month later, Sibley's Brigade had yet to encounter any Union soldiers.

January 26, 1862

...If the enemy should retreat and we have to follow them in winter to Ft. Union, we will be worn out and our transportation entirely exhausted before we can

overtake them. Then we will have to fight them in a fort - almost impossible... The enemy, like the Boa Constrictor, is turning his clammy coils around us and only awaits the completion of his coils which is nearly at hand to crush us at once I am no soldier and am longing for a release. My home with my wife and little one are more to me than all the flags and pomp and circumstance of the military...In this one wearisome march my (mind) has been idle and allowed to roam at will. Many are the fancy castles I have built you and I and our little one...

By February, the Texans had been on the move for five months. In spite of the cold weather, the scarcity of food and fuel, and the loss of animals, they were anxious to find Union troops and to begin to win New Mexico for the Confederacy. They were eager to secure the supplies and arms stored in the Federal forts to replenish their nearly empty supply wagons.

Among the youngest members of the Texas regiments was 17 year old Private Ebenezer² Hanna of the Third Regiment, Company C. The farm boy from Victoria, Texas, had been asked by his company to be its scribe and record the campaign. In early February 1862, he wrote of the soldiers' excitement as the Confederates finally approached Union troops at Fort Craig near Valverde. The first major clash of the Civil War in the Southwest was near.

February 13, 1862

...Great excitement about the Yankees. Expecting to have a big fight when we get (to Ft. Craig)...we're badly prepared for fighting... have but little ammunition...Facing north wind with sleet and snow falling so hard as to almost pelt the skin off our faces...

A few days later, he entered this terse description of the battle.

February 21

We marched five miles. The Yankees met us at the river five miles above Fort Craig. Commenced firing about 10 o'clock in the morning...We charged them and routed them, taken their artillery, and routed and run them. The battle

ceased at sunset...Federals loss unknown, only I know I seen plenty of them laying on the field.

Despite Hanna's concern about their lack of arms, the Confederates scored a major victory at Valverde and captured six pieces of artillery. On the day following his first experience in battle, Hanna wrote:

We lay in camps. I think the most melancholy scene I ever witnessed was on the Valley of the Rio Grande where the Texas Boys thrashed out the Yankees on the 21st day of February 1862...

In the days following the Battle of Valverde, the Confederates seized much-needed supplies. The ranks were reinforced with clothing and blankets, food and armaments.

The route north was now open for the Confederate advance.

Again, Abe Hanna:

February 26

...I had my horse killed in the battle of Valverde and I am now afoot...I now feel the pleasure of soldiering in New Mexico more plainly than I have ever done before, notwithstanding the severity of the climate and the hardships of a march of a thousand miles over mountains such as is seen in no other country...without wood or water and but little grass and being in the dead of winter and worse than all the horrors that is witnessed on the battlefield. But I never had any conception of the hardship to be witnessed on such a trip until I had some experience on the matter.

In the first few days of March, Hanna describes the events of the preceding days, including a prolonged detour caused by bad roads on March 5.

...I was more exhausted from this day's travel than any I had before experienced. We lay in camps on the 6th which was very agreeable as we were considerably worn out with our journey on foot. Here we got some flour and some mutton and sheep meats, we now feel considerably

(rejuvenated)...Although it is now the 6th of March and in our native Southern climate I have no doubt the weather has shed its gloomy coat of winter and everything green and growing, yet here in this dreary region spring has not yet made its appearance.

The Confederate campaign lingered through the cold winter months. When the troops found small villages or camps with wood or feed available, they rested for a few days - giving both men and animals a chance to recover strength and gain shelter from the weather. The sparse New Mexico landscape afforded few comforts. Animals had perished, men had died from battle wounds and sickness, and everyone was hungry. Much to their disappointment, there were few sources of supplies on the sparsely populated upper Rio Grande, and the local population did not support the Confederate cause. Hanna writes:

March 13

We moved one mile to a (New) Mexican town where we got a little protection...which was some better than being out in the woods as we were compelled to throw away our tents on account of not having teams sufficient to bring them. On the night of the 13th snow again fell. The 14th was a warm day and the snow melted away considerably, which we was glad to see for our quarters were not very comfortable.

By the end of March, the decisive battles with the Union forces were near at hand. On March 26, advance units of the two armies fought at the narrow entrance to Apache Canyon, about 25 miles from Santa Fe. Federal troops won the day by charging the Confederate ranks, led by Major Charles L. Pyron, and forcing a retreat. It was the first Union victory in New Mexico. Company C had camped about 12 miles away near Galisteo. From Hanna:

Late in the evening an express came in to inform us that Major Pyron with 300 men had engaged a party of Yankees on the road from Santiffee to Fort Union at about 12 miles from us...The third regiment had just arrived a few hours before and we packed our baggage and the teams were ready, and by sunset we was in motion. The road that we had to travel was very rough as we

neared the mountains; consequently the wagons was sent (on) another road which was some farther with a detail of men to guard them. The night was very cold so we traveled freely. On reaching the canyon through which the road run we came to a very steep mountain and the horses which drew the artillery was wearied. They was not able to draw the artillery to the top of the mountain, so they were compelled to be taken up by hand, and to accomplish this, long ropes were fastened to them and we went to work and after an hour or two's work, we succeeded in getting them to the top...We soon reached a ranch not far from where the enemy was. It was now about 3 o'clock in the morning.

Hanna's account of this night march to the mouth of Apache Canyon is from his last journal entry. His final words recount the burial of the dead from the Battle of Apache Canyon:

...And twas during the day of the 27th that we had the trial of burying the first one of the members of Company C. The enemy did not make their appearance during the day.

On March 28, the two armies fought the Battle of Glorieta. Compared to Civil War battles in the East, it was a small fight. The Union had 850 soldiers on the field; the Confederates numbered 1,200. The troops fought fiercely for six or seven hours in the narrow canyon. At the end, the Texans held the field of battle, so both sides thought the Confederates had won. They didn't know then that a band of 400 Union soldiers guided by Colonel Manuel Chaves, a New Mexican familiar with the mountainous terrain, had circled around the battle and encountered the Confederates' large supply train. The Union troops burned nearly 80 supply wagons and slaughtered hundreds of horses and mules.

With no supplies and no hope of reinforcements, the Confederates were forced to retreat from New Mexico. Sibley's plan to extend the Confederate boundaries to the Pacific was vanquished.

The observations of John T. Poe, recorded in REMINISCENCES OF THE BOYS IN GRAY 1861 - 1865, COMPILED BY MISS MAMIE

YEARLY (1986 Morningside) many years later, summed up the Texans' six-month campaign:

The object of Sibley's Expedition to New Mexico was to capture millions of dollars worth of military stores for the use of the Confederate Army. This was a fine strategic move, but we were not prepared. We had no clothing, blankets, and no place to draw from. Had no artillery and were only armed with shot guns. We captured the Valverde battery of six pieces, and we had them with us when we fought our last battle. We never lost a gun.

John Shropshire was killed on the battlefield. His comrade James Carson described Shropshire's death 58 years later in a letter to the United Daughters of the Confederacy, Shropshire-Upton Chapter.

...Major Shropshire ordered me to take my company and drive the enemy out, which was the last order he ever gave...Shropshire and I were leading the charge, and he was shot in the head and killed instantly when we was...about 10 steps of the enemy. After the battle, I, with others of my comrades got the body and took (it) down in the valley and buried it. He was the best friend I ever had. He was one of God's noblemen and his spirit so holy it would not stain the purest (brook) that sparkles among the bowers of bliss. I feel that I can see him now, peeping through the... curtains of Heaven, awaiting and watching the coming of his chivalrous knights.

Shropshire, too tall for the coffins intended for officers, was buried on the field of battle rather than in Santa Fe with other officers.

Abe Hanna, possibly the youngest soldier at the battle, was also killed. His friend Alfred Peticolas recorded Hanna's death:

...Abe Hanna was shot down on the left in 30 yards of the enemy. Jake Henson, who was on the same side, coming along and seeing Abe down, went to him, gave him water, and began to pick the stones from under him. While in a kneeling position over his wounded friend, Henson was shot and killed... Abe Hanna died about an hour in the night very easily. He was shot in the loins and

bled inwardly. He said he felt no pain save that his limbs were numb and dead from his hips down... Thus ended the battle of Glorieta Valley...

The next day both armies gathered their dead. The Union soldiers buried their comrades in Santa Fe. The Confederates buried 31 men close to where they had fallen. Confederate Private Brinkley Tyler (REMINISCENCES OF THE BOYS IN GRAY 1861 - 1865) tells:

...And soon we went about gathering up our dead and putting them away, which we did the best we could. We dug a big hole large enough for them, and laid them two deep, and spread one layer of blankets over them, and filled in on them with dirt. It was bad. But the best we could do.

One hundred and twenty-five years after the day the slain Confederates were put in the cold New Mexico earth, a Glorieta man discovered their graves while digging a foundation for his house.

Forensic analysis of the bones and on-site evidence from the excavation made it possible for the Museum of New Mexico's Office of Archaeological Studies to positively identify three sets of remains including Shropshire and Hanna.³

Shropshire wore two rings, including a delicate, silver one - perhaps a keepsake from his wife - on his left hand.

Hanna, the scribe for Company C, was buried with a leather pouch containing a clerk's pencil and pen nib.

At the request of the Society of Shropshires, John Shropshire's remains were re-buried in 1990 alongside the graves of his parents in Kentucky.

ENDNOTES

1. The Shropshire letters and the Hanna journal texts in this article are from transcriptions of original manuscripts and have been edited for ease in reading. Information in parentheses was added by the editor. Shropshire's letters and the Carson letter courtesy of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, Shropshire Upton Chapter, Columbus, Texas. Hanna's journal is from the Holbrook Collection of the Texas State Library, Austin. Peticolas's journal is from *REBELS ON THE RIO GRANDE: THE CIVIL WAR JOURNAL OF A.B. PETICOLAS*, Alberts, Don E., University of New Mexico Press, 1984.
2. Hanna's first name was spelled several ways in official records and other writings.
3. See Cheryle Mitchell's story, "THE SECOND BATTLE OF GLORIETA."