

## Reminiscences of Capt. Lawson Harrill

COMMANDER, CO. I, 56TH REGIMENT, N. C. T., 1862-65

### CHAPTER TWO

#### Ordered to Goldsboro

August 8, 1862, the 56th was ordered to Goldsboro. The next three months were spent marching and counter-marching between Goldsboro, Warsaw, Magnolia, Wilmington, the seacoast, Tarboro, etc. We took one trip in the rain on flat cars. Smoke from rich pine wood used in the engine blew full upon us. When we reached camp soap and water were scarce, we had no change of clothing. The figure, size, or roll call revealed a man's identity. East of Tarboro, on November 4th, Vance, our recently elected governor, visited us. He was wearing a high silk hat and was greeted with "Come out of that hat! We know who you are in there because we see your feet sticking out." Vance enjoyed the joke as much as the men.

November 5, expected attack from General Foster—had skirmishing. November 6, had pursued enemy to Hamilton, N. C. Next day we had several inches of snow. I was unwilling for the half dozen barefooted men to march through it, and with difficulty secured a wagon for them. On November 15, we crossed Roanoke River at Hill's Ferry, near Palmyra. We marched through Bertie county to Murfreesboro. We were escorted through the town by Col. Wheeler, (Author of North Carolina History) and his cavalry. November 19, crossed the Nottaway River, marched to Franklin, Va., and six miles beyond. We were without food. I failed to secure any supplies from the commissary but was invited to sup with my Colonel, which I declined to do. We remained at Franklin, Va., for several weeks.

#### Attack Gunboat

December 8. A detachment from my company under Lieutenant Sweezy, who never saw anything too big for him to fight, attacked a small gunboat in Blackwater River and forced it to withdraw. My men being on a bluff had the advantage.

January 17, 1863. Returned to Goldsboro, N. C., and were ordered to the front on picket duty at Magnolia. January 20th went to Kenansville. Here the brigade of General M. W. Ransom was formed by placing the 24th, 25th, 35th, 49th and 56th Regiments under his command. February 22. Ordered to Wilmington, thence to Old Topsail Sound (Feb. 24) where we drilled until March 23, when we started to Kinston, arriving April 1. April 17 we crossed Neuse River and by the 19th reached Wise's Fork, where we lay in line of battle. At this time the Federals were occupying Newbern.

#### Ordered to Gum Swamp

April 24th, Companies I, E and G, all under my command, were ordered to Gum Swamp, ten miles east of Kinston. On the 28th we were attacked by four Regiments, at least 1,600 men, while my force was 165. We held our position on the east side of the swamp for about two hours, then crossed to the west side and fought until darkness closed the battle. We lost one officer, Lieutenant Lutterloh, and three men killed. Enemy's loss, ten killed and eighteen wounded. Next morning Adjutant E. J. Hale wrote an account of the skirmish and published it in the Fayetteville Observer. He says "Capt. Harrill, Company I, commanded during the first of the fight and until the arrival of Colonel Faison. He is certainly one of the coolest men I ever saw, and award him all praise for the admirable handling of his little force while in command. . . . Our officers and men behaved most admirably, not one leaving his post or straggling in any way. . . . The force of the enemy in our front consisted of six regiments of infantry and a squadron of cavalry." (For another account see North Carolina Regiments, Vol. III, Page 323.)

We remained near Wise's Fork until May 21, when my company was again on picket duty, one mile south of the railroad at a crossing of Gum Swamp. During the night the enemy passed in rear of my position and attacked our regiment where the first battle of Gum Swamp was fought. After the battle I withdrew my company, crossed the enemy's trail through the swamp, and after hours of wandering joined our Regiment at Wise's Fork. About half of the Regiment was captured. Company I did not lose a single man.

#### Forced March to Richmond

At this time the enemy was threatening Richmond from both sides of

the James River. To meet emergencies our brigade was moved rapidly from place to place. May 28, to Petersburg; 29, Richmond; June 2 Petersburg; June 13, Drewry's bluff; 17, Petersburg; 21, Halfway House. June 26, we had a night march to Seven Pines to meet a column of the enemy coming from White House. June 2, we met a large force of Federals, partly new recruits, near Bottom's Bridge, and had the longest running fight that I saw during the war. We advanced eight or ten miles rapidly, often at double quick, but the enemy outran us to the shelter of their gunboat on York River.

July 11 we were at Petersburg; 28 at Weldon, N. C.; August 1, Garysburg, N. C.; August 12, Halifax; 13th, Hamilton; 16th ordered back to Garysburg.

About the last of August '63, my company with others, was ordered to Wilkes County, N. C., to break up the gang of deserters and lawless characters, whose refuge was in the mountains. We arrested a large number and sent them to the army. These men were from several states.

#### After Deserters in North Carolina

My company was in Wilkes, Ashe, Alleghany and Randolph counties until January 1, 1864, when the Regiment was assembled at Goldsboro, where we drilled until ordered to Kinston, about the 28th, 29 and 31st we advanced toward Newbern. February 1st, we moved at 2 a. m. and captured an outpost on Bachelor's Creek, my company on skirmish line took several prisoners. One man, hidden in the grass, threw up his hands as we came near. James Nelson was in the act of shooting him when I struck down the gun with my sword. We made a rush for the railroad bridge, hoping to cut off the enemy, but failed, then closed in around Newbern and spent the day in sight of their fortifications, then were sent back to Kinston.

February 7th, sent to Weldon by train; 26th to Franklin, Va.; March 9, to Suffolk, where we captured a number of prisoners and returned to Franklin; 12th, by train to Weldon. We then camped at Garysburg for drilling, also muster, and inspection for January and February, by Colonel Faison. Here I had my first experience in drilling a regiment. We left Tarboro April 14, and the next day the march to Plymouth began. The 49th Regiment being absent on special duty, the 8th Regiment was placed in Ransom's Brigade until its return.

#### Battle of Plymouth

We reached the vicinity of Plymouth on Sunday, April 17. Brigadier General R. F. Hoke, commanded this expedition. Under him were his own brigade, Colonel Lewis, commanding, Kempers Virginia Brigade; General M. W. Ransom's Brigade; Deering's Cavalry, Branch's and other artillery.

The engagement began Sunday evening, the enemy opening fire with artillery. My company was deployed as skirmishers on the Washington Road and drove the Yankee skirmishers within their breastworks.

April 18. The position of my command was changed to the south front of the enemy's fortifications. About 5 p. m. a staff officer rode up to our Commander with General Ransom's compliments, and said, "Send me Capt. Harrill's Company." We were sent forward to engage the enemy's pickets and drove them in. The Yankee artillery opened fire, and we sheltered behind stumps and logs, as best we could, to avoid the heavy fire of grape shot hurled at us. We lay down and all the artillery on both sides opened fire, the shot and shell passing over us. The artillery duel is described in North Carolina History, Vol. V, page 179, as follows: "The action commenced about sunset. The night being perfectly clear with a full moon, every object was visible. The sight was magnificent. The screaming, hissing shells, meeting and passing each other like blazing comets with their burning fuses and would burst with frightful noise, scattering their fragments as thick as hail."

April 19. Our position was changed several times. At dark we marched to east of Plymouth. About midnight we reached Conaby Creek where the bridge had been destroyed by the enemy. We crossed the creek on a pontoon bridge and took position in an open field in front of strong fortifications.

#### Advance on Plymouth

April 20th. We advanced on the

town at day break. My company was ordered to keep close to the river, as sharpshooters, without regard to the movements of the regiment.

We crossed a swamp through water hip-deep, advanced through yards and gardens, to the crossing of Jefferson Street, where we came into range of heavy infantry fire. T. R. Campbell, Samuel Green, J. P. Philbeck, H. W. Price, R. H. Wall and Housen Harrill were wounded. The latter still carries a minnie-ball in his leg as a souvenir. William Daves, Co. I, color guard (with the regiment) was instantly killed.

Advancing, we reached Battery Worth, fired into the open rear door, whereupon the occupants surrendered. Taking the prisoners with us we turned to the left. About seventy-five yards in that direction brought us to the rear of the right wing of the enemy's fortifications, full of Federal soldiers, who promptly surrendered. We marched our prisoners, (Double our own number) into the western end of Water Street and required them to sit or lie down. Thus we had opened the way for Lewis' men to enter the town from the west side without firing a shot.

#### Part Taken By Harrill's Men

The quotations given below bear upon this engagement and the part taken by my men. North Carolina Regiments, Volume 5, page 188: "Company I of the 6th Regiment, under Captain Harrill, was sent in advance of the Regiment with orders to keep along the river was thus the first company to enter the town, and about sunrise captured 20 artilleryists who were serving the 200 pound gun intended for the Albemarle, which was proceeding up the river with our line and secured Captain

Cook from further opposition of any moment."

North Carolina Regiments, Vol. III, page 340, 342, 343: "Company I pressed straightforward sweeping everything before them between Water Street and the river bank . . . ."

"The part assigned Harrill's men under their fearless leader had been effectually accomplished. Through water hip deep they crossed the canal and swamp and keeping near the river, passing around houses and bursting through garden and yard fences, they reached the rear of Battery Worth, containing the 200 pounder specially provided to anticipate the coming of our iron clad "Albemarle." One volley was sufficient. The white flag was run up and the battery with some twenty artillery men surrendered to him. Taking the prisoners with them from this battery on the river they immediately charged to their left and thus struck in the flank and rear the right section of the enemy's line of battle occupying the breastworks here on Water street facing up the river. His demand to surrender was promptly complied with and while Harrill here gathered in his prisoners largely outnumbering his own rank and file, Lewis' men, who had held the attention of the enemy in their front, came in at a double quick over the cause-way leading through the swamp on the west of Plymouth, passed Harrill's position and joined Graham's detachment."

General Wessels, commander of the United States forces, says: "At daybreak the following day, 20th of April, while my right front was seriously threatened, the enemy advanced rapidly against my left, assaulting and carrying the line in that

quarter, penetrating the town along the river and capturing Battery Worth."

(To be continued)

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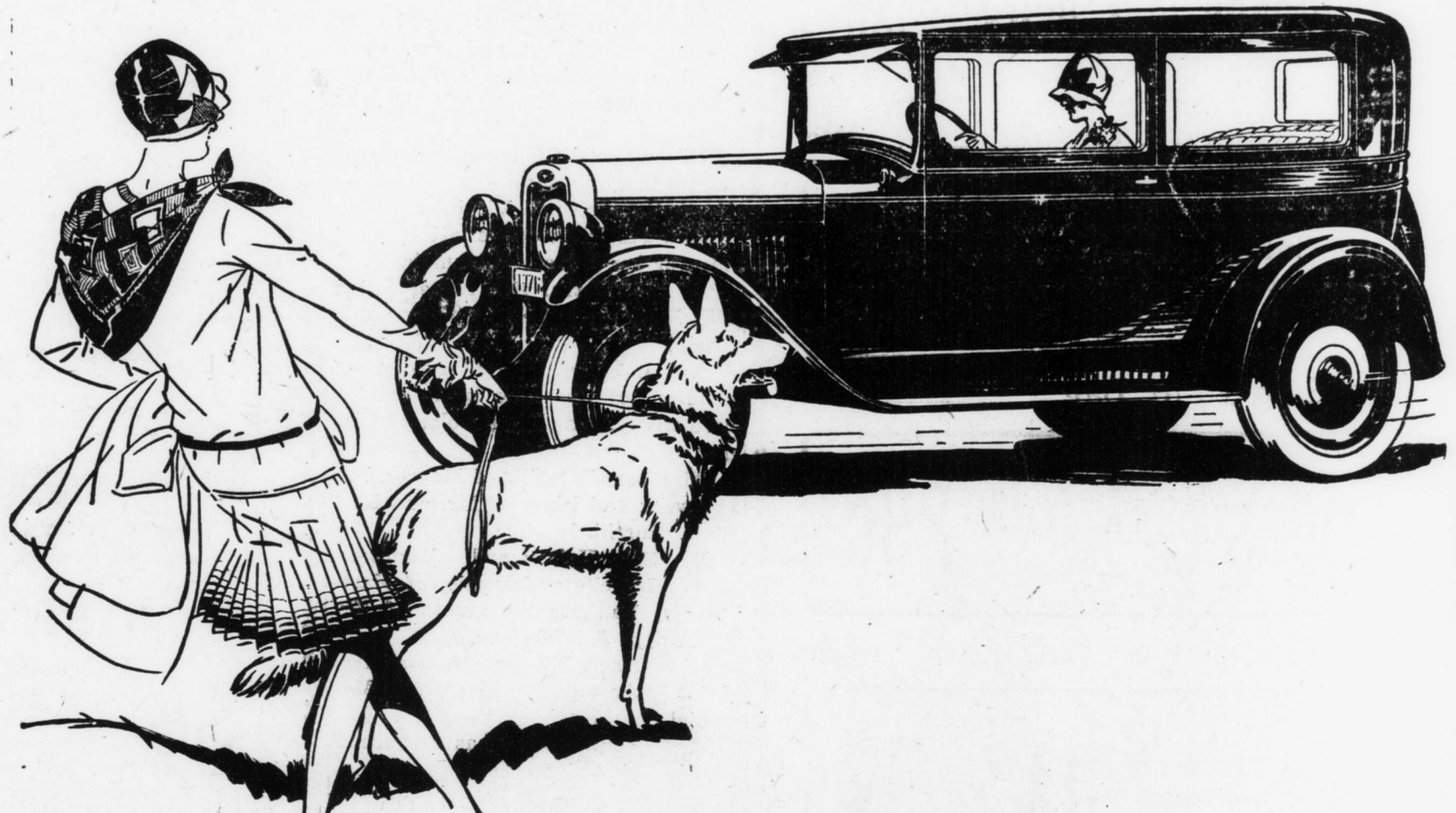
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