

LOOKING BACK AT OUR CIVIL WAR

Amid horrors of 1864, R.I. soldier perseveres

Through the battles, death, mud and misery of 1864, Elisha Hunt Rhodes, a Civil War soldier from the village of Pawtuxet, Cranston, was sustained by his indomitably positive spirit, a deep religious faith and a firm commitment to the Union cause.



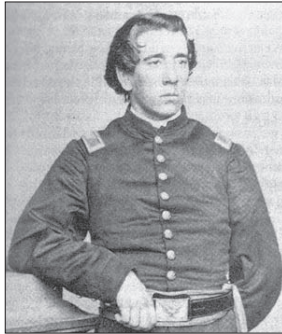
FRED ZILIAN

Rhodes entered military service for the Union in July 1861 as a private and left it four years later as a colonel, serving most of his time with the 2nd Rhode Island Volunteer Regiment (Infantry).

He began 1864 with the rank of first lieutenant in the position of regimental adjutant. On June 7, he assumed command of the regiment and on June 26 achieved the rank of captain.

The miseries of warfare during his fourth year of the war continued. There was the stifling heat in summer and the frigid cold in winter. In early July he states that the temperature reached 124 degrees and "the men are suffering severely." On Dec. 12 near Petersburg, Va., he writes: "It was so cold that riding was an impossibility, and as the snow turned to rain the men's clothes became stiff with ice." "We had no tents ..." "We hovered over our fires half frozen until daylight ..."

Death at times surrounded him. In the Battle of the Wilderness in



Elisha Hunt Rhodes of Cranston, a Union soldier during the Civil War, maintained a positive outlook despite hardship and close encounters with death.

early May, Rhodes states: "The line surged backwards and forwards, now advancing and now retreating until darkness put an end to the carnage. Many men were lying upon the ground dead or wounded ..." The following day, he states: "Our Brigade charged in to the swamp six times, and each time were driven out. Darkness again put an end to the fighting, and we lay down amid the dead and wounded. During the night the brush caught fire, and many of the wounded burned to death."

At the Battle of Cold Harbor in June, he writes: "Constant roar of

Artillery and bursting of shells. Even as I write I saw one poor fellow shot down as he left his shelter." In September after the Battle of Winchester, he indicates: "Our first duty was to bring in such of the wounded as were not found last night. The Taylor house and the Virginia House, the two principal hotels are used as hospitals and are full of wounded, while the churches as well as private houses are put to the same use."

Rhodes himself was shot several times but miraculously escaped death. On May 6, he was struck in the right forefinger, which "only hurt me a little." On May 12, he was hit in his right breast, tearing his coat, and bruising his right arm. It turned out to be just a surface wound.

On the lighter side, Rhodes writes about some of the simple pleasures he enjoyed, including animals. In September he writes: "My mare Katie is a beauty, and I enjoy the rides both on duty and for pleasure which I take every day." He writes also of a new pet for his unit. "I selected one lamb from our flock, and we are to make a pet of it. We have named him 'Dick' and he is already a great favorite." Unfortunately, in December the officers, short of cash, "sacrificed our sentiment and sold poor Dick to a butcher for \$5.00 ..."

On July 4, he invited his officers to a dinner to celebrate the holiday. The bill of fare: stewed oysters (canned), roast turkey (canned), bread

pudding, tapioca pudding, apple pie (made in camp), lemonade, cigars.

Rhodes witnessed black military units in action this year, which changed his view of their fitness for combat. In June near Petersburg, he writes: "I have not been much in favor of colored soldiers, but yesterday's work convinced me that they will fight. So Hurrah for the colored troops!"

Having been at war for more than three years, it is remarkable how Rhodes was able to maintain his positive spirit. At Cold Harbor in June, he writes: "Every few minutes a shell comes screaming over, and then we run to our holes. It is amusing as well as dangerous. We are covered with dirt, but still I am happy." Near Petersburg in July, he states: "The Army presents a rather motley appearance now ... Still I am happy and probably the best contented man in the Army of the Potomac."

In December, he states: "Two nights without sleep has a tendency to make me sleepy. Winter campaigning is cold work, but it is all for the Union, and I will not complain. I thank God that I have such good health and can stand it."

His abiding faith in God and the Union cause clearly sustained him throughout this year. He regularly attended Protestant services on the Sabbath in many towns in the South, often noting the rebellious nature of the sermons.

He was determined to see the war through to its end, hoping for

a Union victory. After campaigning in the Shenandoah Valley under Gen. Philip Sheridan in October, he writes: "... I am tired of the bloodshed. But God has been good to me, and I hope I shall live to see the end as I saw the beginning of the Rebellion." A few months later he writes: "I was sorry to leave the Shenandoah, for we have had a fine campaign, but duty is duty, and I do not complain. If it will end the war I am satisfied to go to any point they choose to send me."

His final entry of 1864 comes in winter camp near Petersburg: "Goodbye old 1864. Your departure is not regretted, as it brings us so much nearer the end of the war. May God grant us success in the year about to open."

(Note: This essay is based on Rhodes' diary, published as "All for the Union," Robert Hunt Rhodes, ed.)

A retired Army officer, Fred Zilian teaches history, ethics and political science at Portsmouth Abbey School and Salve Regina University and is a member of the Rhode Island Civil War Sesquicentennial Commemoration Commission Advisory Council. He is writing an occasional series of columns highlighting various aspects of the Civil War and their impact on Newport County and Rhode Island for The Daily News. Send him email at zilianf@aol.com or check out his blog at www.zilianblog.com and his Abe Lincoln website at www.honestaberi.com.