

LOOKING BACK AT OUR CIVIL WAR

Despite hardships, soldier remained 'for the Union'

The year 1863 was filled with mud, battles, hunger, comradeship and firmness in commitment to God and country for Elisha Hunt Rhodes, a Civil War soldier from the village of Pawtuxet, Cranston.



FRED ZILIAN

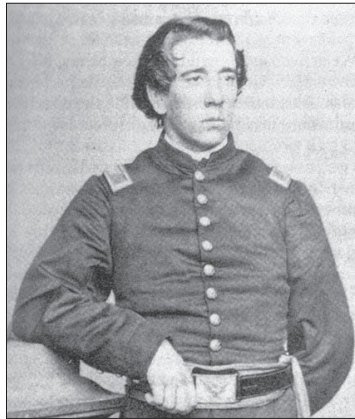
Rhodes entered military service for the Union in July 1861 as a private and left it four years later as a colonel.

In February 1863, the 2nd Rhode Island Volunteer Infantry Regiment received a new commander, Col. Horatio Rogers Jr., whom Rhodes and the other soldiers quickly grew to respect and admire. "Colonel Rogers is a splendid fellow, and we like him already," Rhodes wrote. "Instead of making a great show of authority, he was very mild in his manner and it has had a good effect."

Rhodes was delighted on March 21 to reach the age of 20. "I am a man today," he wrote. "I begin to feel that I am an old man if hard work makes one old." He was very happy to receive a birthday "present" of a 10-day leave to visit home.

During this year, 2nd Lt. Rhodes served as the commander of Company D for a short period of time, but mostly he led Company B. In April, he showed great character in not accepting promotion to captain, which Col. Rogers offered to him. He declined the offer "because I did not care to step over the heads of ten First Lieutenants who are my seniors."

His living conditions throughout most of the year remained



Elisha Hunt Rhodes of the 2nd Rhode Island Volunteer Infantry Regiment kept a diary detailing his experiences during the Civil War.

challenging; however, he continued to show great resilience, remaining reasonably healthy and upbeat. In poor weather, mud was a constant companion. Early in the year at Pratt's Landing, Va., he wrote: "So the gallant Second [R.I. Volunteers] is again shoveling Virginia." On Jan. 24 near Falmouth, Va., he stated, "Men, Horses, Artillery, pontoons, and wagons were stuck in the mud." The wagons began to turn over and "mules actually drowned in the mud and water." On Nov. 24 at Camp Sedgwick, he wrote, "It is raining, and we all live in mud, sleep in mud, and almost eat in mud."

Rhodes clearly had good rapport



Rhodes described his unit's new commander, Col. Horatio Rogers Jr., above, in 1863: 'Instead of making a great show of authority, he was very mild in his manner and it has had a good effect.'

with his men, as they often built him shelters and modest houses, so-called "shebangs." On Feb. 1, he indicated, "The men of Company D have built me a house." It is outfitted with a fireplace and table on the first floor, a partial second floor with bed, walls of timber and mud, and a roof made from pieces of tent. In August in camp at Warrenton, Va., he stated: "My Co. 'B' built me a fine house of stone and put on a canvas roof." On Oct. 7 his men again built him a house: "One of my men found me a desk, so I am living in style."

At several times during the year, he complained of lack of food. On a few such occasions, the unit was

lucky enough to find blackberries. The men had had nothing to eat for two days when they discovered the gems. "On halting last night we found high blackberries very plenty and everybody ate their fill. They were good, too, for we were nearly starved."

Remarkably, Rhodes was able throughout the year to keep his positive attitude. In April before a battle, he stated, "I am well and confident of successful [sic] tomorrow." After the battle, he wrote, "I am well and happy." At the beginning of July, he wrote: "I am tired — in fact I never was so tired in my life. But Hurrah! 'It is all for the Union.'" In mid-July, "I have not changed my clothes for five weeks, but still I am happy" Finally in October: "I am happy and feel well all the time."

During this year, the 2nd Rhode Island was involved in numerous skirmishes, battles and encounters with Confederate forces. In early May in fighting near Fredericksburg, Va., Rhodes wrote: "One iron bullet struck me upon my foot causing me to jump into the air, but only lamed me a little. I picked up the iron bullet and put it into my pocket and will send it home."

On several occasions he describes encounters with Southern troops with whom agreements were made not to fire. In February near Falmouth, Va., he describes such an agreement, allowing men to visit the river banks. "It seemed queer to see them only a few yards away in their gray clothes. One of their bands played every day, and we enjoyed the music with them." In April near Franklin's Crossing (Rappahannock River), Rhodes stated: "Gen. Thomas

J. Jackson (Stonewall) came down to the river bank today with a party of ladies and officers. We raised our hats to the party, and strange to say the ladies waved their handkerchiefs in reply."

The 2nd Rhode Island also saw limited action at Gettysburg. On the climactic third day, he wrote: "As we were only a few yards in rear of our lines we saw all the fight. ... But what a scene it was. Oh the dead and the dying on this bloody field."

Late in the year, a big change occurred: Rhodes was moved to the regimental staff and becomes the adjutant, allowing him to purchase two horses. "So good bye sore feet"

At year's end, Rhodes was wistful but remained committed to service. On Dec. 31 he closed: "The United States need the services of her sons. ... I am going, if God wills, to see the end of this wicked rebellion."

(For further reading, see Robert Hunt Rhodes, ed., "All for the Union.")

A retired Army officer, Fred Zilian teaches history and political science at Portsmouth Abbey School 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 web site at www.honestaberi.com.