

The 11th Ohio Battery: A Story of Rebirth

There were about 46,000 men involved in the Battle of Corinth which means there are 46,000 fascinating stories to tell. There are even more if you count all the tales from people like me who weren't there. No, despite all the gray in my beard, and my co-workers comments, I was not a participant. One of my favorites is about a unit that took a beating at Iuka but got their own back at Corinth. It's the story of the 11th Ohio Battery of Light Artillery.

On September 19, 1862, six guns of the unit were placed on a commanding ridge southwest of town and the fighting they experienced is impossible to describe; I won't even try. Out of 54 men serving the cannons 48 were killed or wounded, and of the 80 horses only 3 survived. The damage they inflicted on the attacking Confederates could be measured by the carnage found in the ravine in front of them.

At one point the cannons were overrun by the charging Southerners but a Union counterattack took them back. Not to be denied, the Confederates surged forward and took the guns a second time. Captain Cyrus Sears and his men refused to leave their guns and defended them with their rammers and their fists. Despite their heroic efforts, the cannons were captured. Unable to haul their prizes away, the Confederates "spiked" the guns by breaking off metal spikes in the vents. Why did they do that? With the vent blocked the primer couldn't be inserted so the cannon was harmless. For his part in the gallant defense, the wounded Captain Sears was later awarded the Medal of Honor.

The location of this hallowed ground is easy to find. Head out to Iuka on Hwy 72 and turn north onto Hwy 25. Take an immediate left into the parking lot of the Sunset Lodge and you have arrived. It was on this piece of high ground and on the slopes below where so many men poured out their life's blood into the soil of Mississippi. Despite all the concrete and asphalt, it really is a sacred place.

After the battle the 11th Ohio Battery was a wreck, but not for long. The senior officer still on his feet was Lt. Henry Neil and he was given the impossible job of returning the unit to fighting trim. Under

normal circumstances a member of the battery would have returned to Ohio to recruit new men but there was no time for this. General Rosecrans allowed Neil to accept volunteers from the infantry regiments and in no time his roster was filled to normal. Putting the cannons back into fighting condition was not as easy.

A machinist was needed to remove the spikes from the vents but that was the simple part. The carriages and wheels had been splintered by hundreds of bullets and carpenters went to work replacing spokes and hubs. Leather workers got busy with all of the harnesses while other men inventoried the remaining gear and drew replacements from the quartermasters. There was a slew of equipment needed before the guns could once again thunder; sponge rammers, thumb stalls, trail spikes, lanyards, trace chains, water buckets, and oat bags. Hundreds of items. For every cannon which was put back in order two limbers and a caisson had to be repaired as well. What are those? A limber was a two wheeled cart with an ammunition chest which the cannon was hooked to when it was being towed and a caisson was another two wheeled cart, this one with two ammunition chests.

While his gear was being replaced and restored, Neil began the task of training his new men how to fire the cannons. Even with all of the equipment in top condition they couldn't fire a shot if the men didn't know what they were doing. The survivors of the Iuka fight taught the rookies and the lessons were repeated over and over again until each man knew his job and everyone else's as well. By the evening of October 1, the decimated battery was once again ready for action. It had taken Lt. Neil just 12 days to accomplish the impossible.

The Confederates were once again on the march and the 11th Ohio Battery was needed in Corinth. Without waiting for an infantry escort the unit set out on their own, disregarding the threat of enemy patrols and bands of roving guerillas. The battery was not called into action the first day of battle but on the 4th of October the unit was placed on the extreme right of the Union line guarding what was then

called the Pittsburg Landing Road. They were on a bit of high ground supported by a brigade of infantry and ready to face the foe. They didn't have to wait long.

At about 10 a.m. the Confederates came out of the woods to their north. Opposite the Ohioans were men from Texas, Arkansas, Mississippi and Louisiana. They were Colonel Bruce Colbert's Second Brigade, the very men who had captured the guns of the 11th Ohio at Iuka. The Rebel yell sounded through the woods as the Southerners charged forward.

Neil later wrote, "As the mass approached I recognized them and called to the men: 'Boys, these are the same troops that fought us at Iuka; are you going to let them touch the guns to-day?' The yell of rage that went up was more ominous than a rebel yell ever tried to be." Neil acted like a man possessed. He rode his horse out into the open and waved his sword over his head screaming at the Confederates, "Come on! Come On! If you think you can play Iuka over again!"

Three charges were made against the Union right but the line held firm. In other parts of the battlefield the Confederates had some success but not in front of the 11th Ohio Battery. "The men worked like tigers," recalled Neil. "Each time they came so close that we resorted to double charges of canister and never a rebel reached the muzzles of our guns." At Iuka the 11th Ohio kept their honor but lost their guns. At Corinth they kept them both.

Where did the 11th Ohio Battery make their stand and defend the Union right and their precious cannons? Go out to the old Corinth High School on 5th Street, not too far from the old "Warrior Stadium." There was a time when other warriors fought on those grounds; warriors in blue and gray.