

### *An Execution in Corinth.*

Death came to Corinth in many forms during the war. Disease was by far the greatest killer of men followed by the appalling numbers who died in battle or who later succumbed to their wounds. Fatal accidents were not uncommon and during summer months men were known to die from heatstroke. One of the strangest deaths of all was the execution of a Union soldier by his own comrades.

Alex J. Johnson enlisted in the 1<sup>st</sup> Alabama Cavalry (Union) on June 1<sup>st</sup>, 1863. Little is known about him; in fact we don't know a thing about his life before he joined the army. Civil War service records are often filled with fascinating information for genealogists tracing their roots. Hometown, hair color, height, age at enlistment, even the last time he was paid. But with Johnson there is next to nothing.

The 1<sup>st</sup> Alabama Cavalry was an intriguing regiment, a topic I will explore in detail in another article. The troopers of this unit were local boys from Alabama, Mississippi and Tennessee who remained faithful to the old Union and chose to fight for the north. As can be expected they were hardly popular with the patriotic Southerners who referred to them as loyalists, Tories or traitors.

Alex Johnson didn't spend too much time with his new unit. He joined up on Monday the 1<sup>st</sup> of June at Camp Glendale (modern day Glen), and by Friday the 19<sup>th</sup> he had enough. While he was on picket duty, guarding his camp and comrades, he deserted his post. Desertion was not that uncommon on either side during the war but it was against military law and offenders were punished if they were captured. Depending on the circumstances a man could be reduced in rank, sent to prison, given a dishonorable discharge or even face execution. Alex compounded his crime by joining up with a local band of Confederate guerillas and then was captured fighting for the enemy.

A court martial was convened and considered his case but it was a foregone conclusion. For desertion to the enemy there could be only one result: death by firing squad. On July 23<sup>rd</sup>, at the order of Gen. Greenville Dodge, the officers and men of the Corinth garrison gathered at the Parade Grounds on the east side of town to witness the execution.

It was an intensely hot morning and by 8 a.m. the men in the regiments which had assembled were sweating in their uniforms. The troops were arranged on three sides of a hollow square and at 8:30 the procession arrived. A brass band marched into the square playing a solemn dirge, followed by a wagon bearing Johnson sitting on his coffin. Behind them came the detail of eight men from the 1<sup>st</sup> Alabama who would serve as the firing squad. Seven of the weapons had been loaded with bullets but a single gun was given a blank round. When the weapons were handed out to the firing squad no one knew who had the blank, so each man could believe he had not fired one of the fatal bullets.

As the procession fully entered the square the wagon was stopped and four men carried the coffin while Johnson walked behind with the Chaplain of the 66<sup>th</sup> Indiana Infantry. When they reached the center of the clearing the Chaplain and Johnson took off their hats to pray and the condemned man slumped forward, his knees resting against the rough pine box. The firing squad and the officiating officers doffed their hats as well and a photographer from the local studio of Howard & Hall captured the image on a glass plate. Johnson's last request was to see the photograph but as it would take hours to develop the image, the request was denied.

At last Johnson was directed to sit on the edge of his coffin, a blindfold was tied over his eyes and the firing squad came to attention. At exactly four minutes past ten, "the Provost Marshall gave the command and the unhappy man was launched into eternity." The photographer took a second image of the still blindfolded body lying next to the coffin with his battered hat placed on top of it. The assembled troops were marched past to view the fate of any man caught taking up arms against his comrades. It was a lesson they did not need to see twice.

Private Charles Watson of the 52<sup>nd</sup> Illinois understood. “This is a branch of the military service I have not seen before and don’t want to see again; still I think it was perfectly right to shoot the man. He possessed a knowledge of the place here and its situation so he then deserted, joined the enemy and could have led them in here or at least have troubled us a great deal.”

Johnson was buried in an unmarked grave and his name does not appear on the list of Union soldiers buried in the Corinth National Cemetery. In accordance with his request, the two photographs were sent to his widow.