

James W. Porterfield Magazine Article

[photo: Pvt. James W. Porterfield Co. E, 37th Georgia Infantry Army of Tennessee, CSA]

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Common Soldier

James W. Porterfield, a farmer who lived near Danielsville in Madison County, Georgia, enlisted in Co. B, 9th Battalion, Georgia Volunteer Infantry on March 4, 1862. This company was raised in Clarke and Madison counties, and was later transferred to Co. E, 37th Regiment, Georgia Infantry, in the Army of Tennessee.

James was born in 1823, which would have made him at least 38 years old when he joined the army. He was married to Mary Ann Dudley and fathered ten children, including three born during the course of the war. One of these children was my great grandmother, Matilda Nancy Porterfield.

The 37th Georgia was originally formed during the winter of 1861-1862. Not long after being mustered into Confederate service, the War Department discovered irregularities in the regiment's organization. It appears that the unit was temporarily discontinued and the members assigned to various other Georgia organizations. Early in 1863 the regiment was reorganized by the consolidation of two Georgia infantry battalions, the 3rd and the 9th, along with a handful of men who had served in the original 37th regiment. From July 1, 1863 until April 10, 1864 the regiment was in Bate's Brigade, and after that Tyler's Brigade, until it was consolidated with the 4th Georgia Sharpshooters and the 54th Georgia on April 1, 1865.

Company E was known as "Captain Gholston's Company" after its commanding officer, Dabney L. Gholston. Gholston was the first captain of the unit, from May 1862 until he was killed at the Battle of Jonesboro, Georgia on August 31, 1864.

While no letters exist from James to his family, a diary kept by a fellow member of Company E of the 37th, I.V. Moore of Carlton chronicles the actions of the unit from May 1862 until the survivors returned home after surrendering near High Point, North Carolina, with the rest of Joe Johnston's army.

Moore was a sergeant in the company and his diary gives a day by day account of the activities of the unit. The 37th participated in more than 35 engagements. The list of battles reads like a history of the Army of Tennessee: Stones River, Chickamauga, Chattanooga, Missionary Ridge, the Atlanta Campaign, Spring Hill, Franklin, Nashville, Bentonville, and finally the surrender in North Carolina. A few excerpts from Moore's diary tell of the common soldier's experiences:

Some time the last of May, 1862 Jesse Porter relapsed with the measles and died. He went one morning and got his feet wet and relapsed. I bought his casket and shroud, and sent him home.

December 31, 1862: This was the day of the great battle of Murfreesboro [Stones River]. We killed, wounded, and imprisoned about 16,000 men, so it is said. Our loss was 5,000.

March 18-28, 1863: Sam Power and myself made and baked apple pies (rights and lefts) and sold them to the soldiers at \$1.00 apiece. Some of the soldiers were simply too lazy to cook for themselves.

September 19, 1863: This is the day of the great Battle of Chickamauga. Our brigade went into the battle about 3 o'clock. Killed and wounded in our regiment about 140, 3 in Company E. Myself wounded in the right side. The ball struck my cap box, and did not go through.

November 25, 1863: We cam to the top of Missionary Ridge and had a big fight. We vacated the ridge. M. David was killed. The enemy shot our own cannon at us.

December 25, 1863: Christmas Day I sent \$70 home by Captain D.L. Gholston.

August 6, 1864: Our division was in a considerable fight today, killing, wounding and taking many prisoners. Our loss was light.

August 31, 1864: Today there was considerable fighting. A great many were killed and wounded. Captain Gholston was killed.

November 30, 1864: We marched to Franklin, where a great battle was fought, it commenced at five in the evening and lasted all night. The Yankees gave up and left. It was a bad time, our loss 423 killed.

December 1, 1864: We buried the dead today. We buried the Yankees in their own ditches.

December 16, 1864: Heavy fighting today [at Nashville], and we retreated to Franklin. This is the roughest time we have had.

February 9-17, 1865: Came home, left home, and went back to camp.

April 27, 1865: Surrendered and stacked arms in the public square in High Point, North Carolina. Johnston back in command before surrender.

(The company roll showed 63 privates, four corporals, and five sergeants remaining in the unit.)

May 15, 1865: We reached home at 3 o'clock.

While it is not possible to know for certain if James participated in all these campaigns, it is highly likely that he saw action in most of them. War records show that he was sent

to the hospital at Chattanooga in January 1863, and was back with his company in Atlanta in August, when he was issued clothing. On January 10, 1865, James was admitted to the hospital in West Point, Mississippi after the army returned from the disastrous Tennessee Campaign of 1864. There is no record of his discharge.

A family story tells of James' return home. His wife Mary and the children were in the yard washing clothes when they saw an unkempt and dirty man approaching. Alarmed, Mary sent the children into the house. The man called out "Mary, it's James. Get me some clothes so we can burn these. I'm eat up with lice."

Another family story is that James was never the same after the war. He was reported to be "kind of wild." he died in 1874 at the age of 51. When Mary died in 1918, her family would not permit her to be buried with James, so there must have been some discord. James is buried in a plot surrounded by several unmarked graves, while Mary is buried in the cemetery at a nearby church.

Perhaps James' health and happiness, as well as his marriage, were casualties of war.

Submitted by Tommy Hooks of Newman, GA.