

This memoir was written by John Shellenberger, a carpenter who enlisted with the 64th Ohio Infantry in the fall of 1861. The 64th saw tremendous fighting during the war, including Shiloh, Franklin, the siege of Corinth and the following campaigns: Middle Tennessee, Chickamauga, Atlanta, and Nashville. He returned to his wife and three children after the regiment was mustered out of service in December 1865.

From “The Battle of Franklin”, presented to the Minnesota Commandery of the Loyal Legion, Dec. 9th 1902.

...It was a pleasant, hazy, Indian summer day, and so warm that I was carrying my overcoat on my arm. When the line squatted down [to fire behind the entrenchments] I folded [my] coat into a compact bundle and placing it on the edge of the bank in rear of my company and sitting on it, with my feet in the shallow ditch, by craning my neck, could look over our low **parapet**. The battle was opened by a rebel cannon, which, unnoticed by us, had taken position on a wooded knoll off our left front over towards the river. The first shot from this cannon flew a little high directly over the angle where I was sitting. The second shot dropped short, and I was thinking with a good deal of discomfort that the third shot would get the exact range and would probably lift some of us out of that angle, but before it came our line had opened fire on the approaching rebel line and I became so much interested in that fire that I never knew whether there was any third shot from the cannon.

Our fire checked them in front for they halted and began to return it, but for a minute only, for, urged on by their officers they again came forward. Their advance was so rapid that my company had fired only five or six rounds to the man when the break came. The **salient** of our line was near the pike and there the opposing lines met in a hand-to-hand encounter in which clubbed **muskets** were used, but our line quickly gave way. I had been glancing uneasily along our line, watching for a break as a pretext for getting out of there, and was looking towards the pike when the break first started. It ran along the line so rapidly that it reminded me of a train of powder burning. I instantly sprang to my feet and looked to the front. They were coming on the run, emitting the shrill rebel charging yell, and so close that my first impulse was to throw myself flat on the ground and let them charge over us. But the rear was open and a sense of duty, as well as a thought of the horrors I had heard of rebel prisons, **constrained** me to take what I believed to be the very dangerous risk of trying to escape. I shouted to my company, “Fall back! Fall back!” and gave an example of how to do it by turning and running for the breastworks. As the men were rising to go the rebels fired, but so hastily and with such poor aim that their fire did not prove nearly so destructive as I had feared. Probably the most of their guns were empty, although I did not think so just then. The range was so close that it seemed bullets had never before hissed with such a **diabolical** venom, and every one that passed close by made a noise like it was big enough to tear your body in two if it should hit you. I had forgotten my overcoat, but had run only a **rod** or two when I thought of it and stopped and looked back with the **intention** of returning to get it, but the rebels then appeared to be as close to the coat as I was and very reluctantly, for it was a new one, I let them have it. After running a few rods farther I again looked back. They were then standing on the low **embankment** we had left, loading and firing at will, but just as I looked some of their officers waved their swords and sprang forward. The fire then **slackened** as they started in hot pursuit to get to the breastworks with us.

...The cry of some of our wounded who went down in that wild race, knowing they would have to lie there exposed to all the fire of our own line, had a pathetic note of despair in it, I had never heard before. A rebel account has stated that the next morning they found some of their dead with their thumbs chewed to a pulp. They had fallen with disabling wounds and the agony of their helpless exposure to the murderous fire from our breastworks, which swept the bare ground where they were lying, had been so great that they had stuck their thumbs in their mouths and bit on them to keep from bleating like calves. Many of the bodies thus exposed were hit so frequently that they were literally riddled with bullet holes....

...my attention was quickly so intently **riveted** on the nearest rebel to myself that in watching him I became **oblivious** to all the other surroundings for I thought I was looking at the man who would shoot me. He was coming directly towards me, on a dog trot, less than fifty yards away, and was in the act of withdrawing the **ramrod** from the barrel of his gun... then, much to my relief, [he] aimed and fired at a little squad of our men close on my right. He then started to trot forward again, at the same time reaching back with one hand to draw a fresh cartridge. By this time I had rested a little and looked back over my shoulder towards the breastwork. I then noticed that there was a ditch on the outside and the sight of this ditch brought renewed hope. With the **fervent** prayer, into which was poured all the intense longing for more life natural to my **vigorous** young manhood, “O, God, give me strength to reach that ditch,” I turned and staggered forward. I fell headlong into the ditch just as our line there opened fire. The roar of their guns was sweeter than music and I chuckled with satisfaction as I thought, “Now, rebs, your turn has come and you must take your medicine.” I lay as I fell panting for breath, until I had caught a little fresh wind and then began to crawl around to take a peep and see how the rebels were getting along. When my body was lengthwise of the ditch I happened to raise my head and was astounded by the sight of the rebels coming into the ditch between me and the pike, the nearest of them only a few yards away. They were so tired that they seemed scarcely able to put one foot before the other and many of them stopped at the ditch utterly unable to go a single step farther until they had rested.

It was only the strongest among them who were still capable of the exertion of climbing over the breastwork, and if they men behind that work had stood fast not one of those tired rebels would ever had crossed that parapet alive. Transfixed with amazement I watched them until the thought flashed into my mind that in an instant some of their comrades would come in on top of me and I would be pinned down with a bayonet. The thought of a bayonet thrust was so terrifying that it spurred me into a last effort, and ... I sprang on top of the breastwork. Crouching there an instant with both hands resting on the head log, I gave one startled look over my shoulder. The impression received was that if I fell backward they would catch me on their **bayonets**. Then followed a brief period of **oblivion** for which I cannot account. With returning consciousness I found myself lying in the ditch on the inside of the breastwork, trampled under the feet of the men, and with no knowledge whatever of how I got there. It is possible that I was taken for a rebel when I sprang up so suddenly on top of the breastwork and that I was knocked there by a blow from one of our own men. I was lying across the body of a wounded man who had been hit by a bullet which, entering at his cheek, had passed out the back of his head. He was unconscious, but still breathing and the breast of my coat was smeared with the blood from his wound. The press was so great that I could not get on my feet, but in a desperate effort to avoid being trampled to death managed in some way to crawl out between the legs of the men to the bank of the ditch, where I lay utterly helpless with burning lungs still panting for breath...

... when I had rested enough to be able to sit up I found at my feet a can of coffee standing on the smouldering embers of a small camp fire, and beside it a tin plate filled with hard tack and fried bacon. Some soldier had just got ready to eat his supper when he was hastily called into line by the opening of the battle in front. I first took a delicious drink out of the coffee can and then helped myself to a liberal portion of the hard tack and bacon, and while sitting there eating and drinking incidentally watched the progress of the fighting. By the time I had finished I was so fully rested and refreshed that thereafter I was able to shout encouragement to the men fighting in my vicinity as loud as any other company commander. Along that part of the line only the breastwork separated the combatants. On our side we had five or six ranks deep composed of the original line, the reserves and Conrad's men, all mixed up together without any regard to their separate organizations. The front rank did nothing but fire. The empty guns were passed back to those in rear who reloaded them. The rear rank was kneeling with guns at a ready. If a rebel raised his head above the breastwork, down it would instantly go with one or more bullets through it fired by these rear rank men. In this close fighting the advantage was all on our side for our front rank men, standing up close against the perpendicular face of the breastwork on our side, could poke the muzzle of a gun over the head log and by elevating the breech could send a plunging shot among the rebels who filled the outside ditch and expose for an instant only the hand and a part of the arm that discharged the gun. But on account of the **convex** face of the work on their side the rebels could not reach us with their fire without exposing themselves above the breastwork. They kept up the vain struggle until long after dark, but finally elevated their hats on the ends of their muskets above the breastwork, as a signal to us, and called over that if we would stop shooting they would surrender. When our firing then ceased many of them came over and surrendered, but many more took advantage of the darkness and of the confusion created by their comrades in getting over the breastwork to slip back to their own lines. Soon after the firing had ceased the 64th Ohio reformed its broken ranks a few steps in rear of the breastwork and just east of the cotton gin...

Soon after the regiment had reformed one of the drafted men of my company was brought in from the ditch outside mortally wounded. No doubt he had reached the ditch in too exhausted a condition to climb over the breastwork and had lain out among the rebels where he had been repeatedly hit by our own fire. The pain of his wounds had made him crazy, for he would not talk, but kept crawling about on all fours moaning in agony. There were a few men missing from the company of whom their comrades could give no account and moved by the fate of the drafted man, I had crossed the breastwork to search outside if perchance I might find one or more of the missing ones lying there wounded and bring them aid. I went to a gun of the 6th Ohio battery, posted a short distance east of the cotton gin, to get over, and as I stepped up into the **embrasure** the sight that met my eyes was most horrible even in the dim starlight. The mangled bodies of the dead rebels were piled up as high as the mouth of the embrasure, and the gunners said that repeatedly when the **lanyard** was pulled the embrasure was filled with men, crowding forward to get in, who were literally blown from the mouth of the cannon. Only one rebel got past the muzzle of that gun and one of the gunners snatched up a pick leaning against the breastwork and killed him with that. Captain Baldwin of this battery has stated that as he stood by one of his guns, watching the effect of its fire, he could hear the smashing of the bones when the missiles tore their way through the dense ranks of the approaching rebels.

While I was cautiously making my way around one side of that heap of mangled humanity a wounded man lying at the bottom, with head and shoulders protruding, begged of me for the love of Christ to pull the dead bodies off him. The ditch was piled **promiscuously** with the dead and badly wounded and heads, arms and legs were sticking out in almost every conceivable manner. The ground near the ditch was so thickly covered with bodies that I had to pick my steps carefully to avoid treading on some of them. The air was filled with the moans of the wounded and the pleadings of some of those who saw me for water and for help were heartrending....