

GRISWOLDVILLE: DO WE TELL THE TRUTH?

By John Wayne Dobson

"Old, gray haired, weakly looking men and little boys, not over fifteen years old, lay dead or writhing in pain ... They knew nothing at all about fighting and I think their officers knew as little..."

That is probably one of the most familiar quotes you will ever find regarding the November 22, 1864 Battle of Griswoldville, Georgia. Almost anyone who has read much about that battle recognizes those words - we almost know them by heart. But, are they entirely true? You could have found that same array of "old men and young boys", to some extent, in both armies of the late War period. The famous quoted words by Lt. Charles Wills came from an eyewitness, but still a Union soldier expressing a personal opinion - a snapshot in the fading light of a moment, if you will. Yet, few other words have come to so exemplify the battle more than the image that Wills' words convey of Southern men who were less than able-bodied, and not as experienced as veteran front line troops; which is just not the whole story... With each repetition of the words that Charles Wills left, I feel as though I am making an excuse for men who do not need me to validate anything they did, or who, as the song says, "need no pardon for anything they've done." It is almost as if we are trying to excuse the loss of that battle by saying, in essence, that the South did not send their best to the field that day but the North did. I readily agree that the Northern soldiers our ancestors challenged that day were nothing less than the best the Union Army had to offer. Those who led them said there never was a better brigade - hardy, battle-hardened Midwestern men of the 15th Corps, mostly veterans who had served from Shiloh through the Atlanta campaign - some companies armed with repeating rifles, defending the high ground. If that was not a dreadful foe, what was? But OUR Confederates ancestors took them on anyway... Too often we have had to settle for letting those who won the War write their version of OUR history. Enough is enough!

In the early stages of the Battle of Griswoldville, the two-gun Union Battery of the 1st Michigan Battery, H, was effectively silenced by Ruel Anderson's Confederate guns. The Georgia Militia at Griswoldville had been eager to charge these Union artillery pieces but Anderson's Napoleons made it unnecessary. Clearly, the Georgia Militia men were not cowards. Occasionally, you will read (on the Internet, so it MUST be true!) about the Confederates charging uphill facing the fearsome Union artillery fire of grapeshot canister. Forlornly daring as that sounds, there is little, if any, truth to it. The two, comparatively (3" Ordnance Rifles) small Union artillery pieces, were observed by overall Confederate Commander Pleasant Philips, to be "firing weakly" even as the battle started and were silenced, early on, (as we said) by Southern guns; thus Yankee artillery was not really a factor at all..... We must always be careful not to settle for myths when facts are available. Speaking of the four Confederate cannons, we often hear that they were submerged in the swamp to evade capture. I can see no reason for this move, unless all artillery horses were dead and the guns could not be removed - then, it is entirely reasonable. Maybe this tale is true, but where did it come from? I have combed the Official Records and any vestige of a Griswoldville source since 1995 - I have yet to find this incident even mentioned in print. If anyone out there knows where I can find it, please help me out!

Again, popular myth often creeps in the back door of history when it is commonly said that the Confederate lines went forward against overwhelming numbers (another Internet fallacy). Actually, there were about 4,300 Southern men and four pieces of artillery opposing some 1,500 Yankees, counting all infantry, artillery and cavalry. I will qualify that by saying that there was another, entire Federal infantry brigade only a mile behind the point of attack on Duncan's Ridge.

We have read, with good authority, that the Federals found a "14 year old boy with a broken arm and leg"- not dead, but wounded and later carried to the Union campfires for care. A Union soldier, (Theodore Upson /103rd Illinois), wrote that "next to him (the 14-year old boy), cold in death, lay his father, two brothers and an uncle; (that is 1 wounded boy and 4 dead relatives). No doubt they were not especially old nor very young men. Among the dead and wounded were black Confederate soldiers about who little is known.

I really tire of hearing how these Georgians were armed with only squirrel rifles, shotguns and smooth bore muskets - the men of the Athens battalion made the excellent Enfield-pattern rifles they carried - that was their trade. The 1,000 Militia-owned rifles that Hood threatened to confiscate from the Macon Arsenal were the Austrian Lorenz - about as good a muzzle-loader as anyone had at the time. We hear about the Spencer rifles of the Federal brigade. In truth only a few selected companies were armed in this manner - effective as they were, it is not like every Union soldier at Griswoldville had one.

I am a bit weary of hearing how the Southern commanding Officers had little battle experience - I am not sure how you would get much more experience than General C.D. Anderson gained during his pre Militia time with the 6th Georgia Infantry and still live. There are others, like Lt. Colonel Evans (State Line) who had first served in regular front line Confederate units then with Georgia's Militia and State Line. I do acknowledge that both the aged and the young stood in the Southern ranks that day - the middle-aged, too. The short, the tall the thin, the heavy, the good, the bad and the ugly... Generalizations are nearly always ridiculous. I simply refuse to concede that the Southern defeat was due to any ineptitude or cowardice of the men or the officers. I will not agree they attacked foolishly and I cannot find it in me to detract from their incredible bravery and heroism. Most of all, I will not cheapen their sacrifice by saying they died in vain, or possessed "more courage than discretion", nor will I ever be content with any Northern version of OUR history.

In closing, I ask you to examine the contents of the Georgia Militia units that fought at Griswoldville. The Militia Reserve was comprised of men between the ages of 16-17 and 50-60. It was called out and combined with the Militia Proper whose ages ranged from 18 to 45. These ages do not seem particularly young or old. Later, the consolidated (Reserve & Proper) Militia units were reassigned to occupy two miles of trenches on the eastern edge of Atlanta as part of John Bell Hood's Corps. Governor Brown had organized the Militia forces of the State into southern and northern sections by an east-west line drawn through Macon. Those Militia men north of the line had, of course, been sent to Atlanta on July 20th, 1864. Those who were south of Brown's line manned the trenches east of Macon, commanded by Howell Cobb.

This same Militia distinguished themselves beyond all reproach at Atlanta, at Jonesboro, Macon, Honey Hill and as much as anywhere on the frozen ground of Griswoldville! These gallant Southern soldiers received the public acknowledgement of their devotion to duty from Generals Johnston and Hood. At Griswoldville, they defended our beloved Georgia, and did all they could to take a stand against Sherman's March. As Adjutant General Henry C. Wayne said of these men, "they have done their duty and deserve the thanks of their County." God rest them, all.