



COL. GEORGE N. GRAY'S EXPERIENCE

Ironton Register, Thursday, December 23, 1886

We interviewed Col. Geo. N. Gray, the other day, upon his experiences in the army, and after circling the Colonel with a good many interrogatories, managed to get a very interesting and romantic "Narrow Escape" from the recesses of his memory. He remarked in substance, as follows:

"In 1862, I was a Lieutenant in the Signal Corps, and attached to the Mississippi Gunboat Flotilla, which was under command of Commodore Davis. Just after the fall of Memphis, in June of that year, we were ordered to White river, and up that, to look for Gen. Curtis's command, which seemed lost somewhere in Arkansas or Missouri. There were five or six gunboats in the fleet, and we arrived at White river, June 16th, and steamed up that stream. We soon approached a little town of St. Charles, where there was a high bluff back from the left bank of the river on which was a fort and several heavy siege guns. We had the 46th Indiana regiment was landed on the left bank; about two miles below the town and just below where a little bayou put out.

"Well, the next morning, the 17th, one of the gunboats, steamed up the river to open fire on the fortifications. But before the boat started, I was sent with two men to shore to creep along between the river and the fort, and through the canebrake, to a high piece of ground beyond the fort, so I could take observations from there, for from that point I would be able to look right down into the enemy's works, see their force and count their guns. The intelligence I was to gain there, I was to signal to my associate officer on the gunboat, who was to communicate to Col. Fitch, and let him know the situation, so he could attack if desirable. My progress along the bank was to be protected by the gunboat, which was to draw all the enemy's attention and gunpowder. It was about three miles from where I started to the knoll I was after. We began our journey through the thicket and canebrake. Soon the gunboat coming slowly up the river opened out, and the guns in the fort replied, and under the hissing shells and solid shot of both sides, we three men crept along. It was pretty uncomfortable, I tell you, but seemed worse than it really was. Well, myself and two men had got up the river bank about two miles from where we started, and were a little in advance of the gunboat, when a shot from the fort blew up the gunboat-- the shot had struck a steam pipe; several men were scalded to death; some

jumped overboard and swam ashore to be butchered; and the boat drifted helpless toward the side the rebels were.

"The enemy then came out of the fort and rushed to the river bank, firing at men in the water and on the boat. There were about 1100 infantry in the fort, and, of course, they shot and killed all they could. Out of the 200 on that gunboat, I think we lost in shot, drowned and scalded about 150.

"Now, the blowing up of the gunboat made my situation especially perilous. Here we were two miles from our forces, and the Rebs all around us, and looking for us. Soon, about thirty came scooping through the canebrake looking for us, and finally discovered us. About a dozen rushed at us with guns aimed, ready to shoot, but I cried: 'There is no use of that; we surrender,' and they took us in. Anticipating capture, I had hid our signal flags and tore off all insignia of the signal service, thinking perhaps the Rebs might torture us into sending false signals to our forces. Well, we were taken around the upper end of the fort, to a place back of the works. I saw, as I passed by, the artillery and the number of men and took a careful observation.

"About that time, another gunboat had steamed up in front of the fort and engaged it. The infantry had hurried from the riverbank back behind the fortifications. There was all excitement. The cannonade was tremendous. We were left in charge of two infantrymen; and one of them straggled away from us in the confusion and hurly-burly of the fight. A field of corn skirted the bluff back of the fortifications, and but a few steps from us. I asked our guard if we might not get a roasting ear, and he assented. As we went to the corn, I said quietly to my comrades. 'We'll run when we get there.' Of course, the guard's attention was divided between watching us and the shells from the gunboats, and that gave us a better opportunity; so as soon as we got well into the corn, we took to our heels. The guard fired at us, and several joined in pursuit. Gracious, but we did run! Pretty soon we came to a bayou, an arm of White river that stretched around the bluff that the Rebs were on. It was about 50 feet wide. There was nothing to do but plunge right in, and in we went. It was a terrible moment to me, for I couldn't swim; and what if the waters were over my head! In I went, deeper and deeper, till the water was to my shoulders, and the next few steps might take me still deeper. I could hear my pursuers prowling through the cornfield, not far back. The bottom of the bayou was swampy and I seemed to sink deeper every step. I stretched my neck and turned my face upward and kept on. The anxiety of that moment was horrible, but I thought it was better to be drowned than be shot. I had seen our own soldiers shot as they came from the gunboat, struggling through the waters, and I was sure that would be my fate if I turned back. Another step or two and I found the bottom solid and the waters less deep. On I pushed and soon emerged from that perilous journey. My two comrades were swimmers and got over before, and just as I landed and got into the woods, the Reb guards were approaching the bayou, but we were beyond their reach. We took our course down the bayou, in the direction of Col. Fitch's regiment, and in a short time arrived there. We were sorrowful looking objects, soaked and muddy from head to foot.

"Col. Fitch looked at us in amazement, and was more amazed when we told our story. 'Do you suppose I can take the works from the rear?' he asked. I told him I thought he could. He then put his command in marching trim, and I led the way up the bayou to our wading place, where the regiment crossed. The second gunboat had passed up the river beyond the fort, and another boat started to engage the enemy, while Col. Fitch with his regiment attacked from the rear. The infantry completely surprised the rebel forces and captured the whole business. I expect they killed and wounded about 250 of the enemy, took all the guns and many prisoners. There are two or three other very interesting incidents connected with this matter.

"There was a signal officer beside myself connected with that expedition, Lieut. Wood. At first, he was assigned to that land duty, and I was to stay on the gunboat; but as he was not well, we changed places-- I went ashore, and he stayed on the gunboat. When the boat blew up, he jumped overboard and swam to the opposite shore. If I had been there I would have drowned, for I couldn't swim a lick.

"When we three retreated from the Rebs, and happened to strike the bayou at the only place possible to wade, we found there a rebel picket who had been shot right in two, only a moment before, by solid shot from the gunboats. He was horribly mangled. He was, doubtless, there to watch that narrow place in the bayou, and if it hadn't been for that timely solid shot, he would have made it serious for us.

"Col. Fry, formerly of the Navy, commanded the rebel guns, and he was among our prisoners. Capt. Flory, Capt. Sill and myself were talking together, when Fry slipped by and made a dash for some adjacent timber. We called him to halt, but he kept on and I sent a ball from my revolver after him, but it missed; and then Fry, still retreating, threw out a sign of free masonry, which we all observed, but Capt. Sill, saying 'that wont do here,' fired his revolver and hit Fry, bringing him to the ground with a hole through his lungs; but he got over it. I speak of this, because he was the man who commanded the filibustering Virginias in an attack on Cuba, a few years after, and who died under the walls of Havana, the same expedition in which the son of our townsman, Mr. DeGrei, was shot.

"One other thing, and it bore on our minds all the time; we had knowledge that the Rebs there had declared they would give no quarter. It was understood that Gen. Hindman had sent that word to Col. Fitch. Then the fact that they shot all who escaped from the boat, made our experience deeply distressing. That was the thing that impelled us to 'light out' at the first slim chance.

"Well, I guess I've told you all you care about knowing. I may say that the expedition was quite successful, and Gen. Curtis and his army got out of their box, without our help, even if our efforts were full of narrow escapes."