MEMORIES OF THE BATTLE OF SHILOH, TN

150TH Anniversary, Mar 28 – Apr 2, 2012

A Private Soldier’s First Event

WED Mar 28

There are eleven men of Company “B” (4th Texas Infantry) shoehorned into a rented van. We leave Camp Mabry in Austin at 2:30p. We are really packed in there, elbow-to-elbow and hip-to-hip, but with amusement I realize that all of the weeks spent drilling has accustomed us to physical proximity and nobody seems to really care about the close quarters. It is a long highway ride done largely at night and there is little worth noting except that a) it is nearly impossible to sleep against a moving van window sitting up, and b) I would not particularly recommend the Cracker Barrel restaurant. Memphis, TN is a big letdown. My anticipated experience of “Elvis’ Hometown” turns out to be a visit to a gas station in the middle of the night populated with a hooker, a weird crazy guy showing off the contents of his shopping bag, and various thugs. We get lots of stares from every passing car. Definitely in the wrong neighborhood. We arrive in Shiloh around 4am and find the parking lot. Several of us sleep in the grass but I snag a van seat for 2.5 or 3 hrs “sleep.” We get up at dawn.
THUR Mar 29

We find the static camp area and change into our uniforms. We pack our knapsacks for the planned march to the overnight camp. Apparently the march is the only thing scheduled for the day. We pile into the van and head into neighboring Corinth to visit the museum and memorial there. We enjoy an amazing breakfast at a roadside diner on the way that has a photo of Elvis on the wall next to a signed picture of Jerry “the King” Lawler and Barry Manilow. Now I have been to Mississippi. We head back to Shiloh and re-park the van and then visit the sutler’s camp for a little while. Shortly after, we form up the Red River Battalion in full gear.

We start marching. I have no idea where we are going or how long the march will last. This is no big deal as we have all been drilling for weeks and I feel capable of whatever is called for. We hear a couple of musket shots but write it off as practice fire. We keep marching, headed for some woods, then are ordered to halt and rest. The “practice fire” is more frequent, but no-one seems to take much note of it. It seems like it is coming from 2 different places, though. I remark, “That sounds like returned fire.” My heart starts beating more rapidly. We get into the woods, down a trail, approach a clearing. I can’t see anything but now I can definitely hear a firefight. I am positive it is not practice fire now. Some companies ahead of us are thrown forward and I can hear shouting. I look to Joey, who has never been in a battle (neither have I or several others), and his eyes are as big as saucers. This isn’t supposed to happen. We are just supposed to be going to camp. Just a little walk in the woods is all. The sounds of battle are quite loud now and obviously involve many men. Captain Hunt tells us to load --- load! I am still in denial --- this isn’t planned. The Captain tells us we might not be needed for this, but to just be ready anyway. Then they order us to move forward. It is quite scary. It is a thickly wooded area with footpaths we are on, and visibility is limited as the paths dip and rise and curve around. The Captain tells us to drop our packs and leave them by the road. We move forward a bit and halt. The Major is coordinating some kind of action. I look up the path and just at the bend, near the rise, I see a cluster of blue coated men. “They are RIGHT THERE” I exclaim. “I can SEE THEM.”
We are ordered to volley fire by rank ---front rank kneels. This is the first time I have fired my musket in a fight. I am shaking and the powder is going all over the ground instead of into the muzzle. The Yankee column is hemmed in and they retreat and start moving back. We are ordered forward after them. Someone yells for a bayonet charge and a few of us advance at a clip up the trail after the column. None of us are loaded but the Captain says “They don’t know that! CHARGE!” Vitalik doesn’t know that charge means “fast jog” and he barrels up the hill straight into the retreating Yankees. Myself and Damon and possibly Mike do so also. We are actually in hand-to-hand combat! A Yank has his rifle in a port arms position and can’t level it at us because we are too close. He shouts “I have a loaded rifle!” and I reply “You should have used it!” and we clash rifles together clack clack clack! The look of stunned surprise in his eyes is intoxicating. Someone takes a couple of prisoners from this action. We are ordered back into columns and keep moving up. The rest of the action is a blur. I just remember a lot of volley firing through fallen trees, and thick clouds of smoke and yelling, and then suddenly it seems to be over. We take water and our stunned eyes all seem to be asking, “Did that really just happen?” Later we go back to retrieve our packs and a Reb picket stops us. He’s really mouthy and eventually we all just turn our backs on him and leave. Gil says, “There’s a bunch of Yankees RIGHT THERE and you’re f***ing with us? C’mon.”

We arrive at the overnight camp area. It is on a hill by a large pond which is encircled by trees. To one side are thick woods. On the other side of the pond are smaller camps but I don’t know whose they are. We throw down our ponchos and blankets on the damp thick grass. The lack of sleep from the night before is catching up with me especially after all the excitement. It turns out that no-one knew about the battle that just occurred --- it was a complete surprise. So that sets the tone for the event. Anything can happen.
The sun sets and the hill is dotted with campfires. Periodically a musket shot rings out far away, somewhere on the other side of the pond. It will be followed by a small group of more shots. Far away a flash of light in the night and then the delayed sound of cannon fire shatters the silence and echoes throughout this small valley. It is loud as thunder. It goes on for some time. We think the Yanks are probing the Artillery camp and the pickets are firing on them, followed by the larger guns. It’s incredibly loud but I am so tired that I get used to it. I am assigned picket duty at 10 o’clock and am led into the woods to stand guard behind a small cluster of trees. It’s quite dark and I am exhausted. I can’t really see much of anything and I am not used to the small lenses in my new 1864-dated glasses. There is a half moon so the light it throws isn’t exactly bright, but I am too tired to really get scared or paranoid. Everyone thinks the Yanks are tied up in the battle with artillery and won’t bother infiltrating infantry through the woods to our camp and I tend to agree so I am not worried at all. There’s some sort of ruckus out in the woods but it sounds like some animal. It creeps around and snaps small twigs but never really gets too close. When Bob finally comes to relieve me I say “Halt! Who goes there” but it comes out as a weak choking gasp and I have to clear my throat to say it again. I get back to my “bed” and try to sleep but the artillery starts up again. Eventually I get some half sleep. It will have to do because we are up before dawn, again.

FRI Mar 30

In the early daylight it starts to rain. We are marching yet again, to who-knows-where yet again. It is getting quite muddy and you have to watch your step. We pause for a while and there is discussion of how exactly to “take hits” and be casualties. Finally the Captain says that during the fight he will call out months of the year and if we are born that month, we fall in battle. We accumulate on the side of a large field and this cluster of men indicates the size of the coming battle. It is impressive. Skirmishers are sent out in advance of us to the top of a gentle rise.
We array ourselves in a huge line of battle below the hill and advance upwards to a field. We approach a thin tree line on the other side. From across the field during our advance we can see scattered Yankee skirmishers rise from the tall grass and rush back to the tree line like flushed rabbits. Scattered blue coats can be seen moving in the trees too. We get to a road in front of the tree line and drop our packs again. The sun has begun to come out and our wet clothes feel damp and muggy. We cross the road and line up parallel to the tree line and you can hear the collective gasp as we catch first sight of the enemy --- several formed battalions of Yanks in the field beyond. They are ready and waiting. We are ordered to fire through the tree line and the Yanks return fire.

Choking smoke fills the air and I can’t tell if visibility is decreased from this, the steam of heating grass, or the mingling of both. Our company and a couple others funnel through a break in the trees and quickly reform in a line of battle and begin firing, then advancing. This is the first face-to-face fight I have been in and again my hands shake so much that I spill my cartridge powder everywhere, all over my hands, my pants, my shoes. It runs like black ink down my wet skin. Again, mayhem, the fog of war, the sequence of events is vague again. The air is so thick with smoke that we can’t see the enemy at all but we keep firing. We are advancing once more and the smoke clears in a slight breeze and then we are met with a volley from the Yank lines and the Captain falls forward with a thud onto his front and is still. I don’t remember explicitly but I think there was a pause in the ranks out of sheer confused shock. The first thing I think of is “who is going to call out the months now.” Gil (Sgt) steps forward and gets everyone squared away and we are moving again and firing again and then Gil is gone too. Bob
(Corporal) takes command with authority and we are firing and moving again but the numbers are dwindling. Other men fall and we step around their bodies.

We fire, we advance. My turn to fall comes when I reach back for a cartridge and my box is empty. I spill limp to the ground and lay in the wet grass. The sun is baking hot now and everything is shimmering from the glare on wet things. I clutch fistfuls of thick grass and soil and squeeze them and I note the steam rising from my own flesh. The line of battle is formed behind me and I clutch my hat to my exposed ear to blot out the explosions of their rifles. They march beyond me after a while and continue pressing the Yanks back. Lying in the grass near me is Mike and we lean up on an elbow and smile and catch our breath together. I think this is where a cavalryman lost control of his horse and was thrown, the horse then loose and running wild. That got all of us dead men suddenly feeling more healthy and up on our feet in a hurry. The animal is secured finally and Mike and I put our arms over each other’s shoulders and begin limping back to the trees as ‘walking wounded’ in order to retrieve our packs.
Shortly the rest of the battalion snakes around the far side of the field, the battle resolved. We fall back in and start the long march back to the static camp from the day before.

Someone’s pack has burst open and all their personal belongings are strewn through the muddy road and get marched upon. We are too tired to navigate around the stuff and just continue straight ahead. (Later in the weekend I meet “Skip” and he complains endlessly about how his drawers have muddy boot prints all over them.)

We finally arrive back at the camp and I am stunned to find out that it is only about 10:30am. We set up crude shelters and hang up some wet jackets or socks but it is too humid now to do much good.

After everything is set up, Scott arrives with some “foraged” fried chicken in a big white sack and with delight we realize he brought along some foraged biscuits too. We make another visit to sutler’s row where I buy a spare set of dry socks and a new (dry) shirt. We all laugh about how the rain is the sutler’s friend as they make a killing selling socks and ponchos that would otherwise sit idle on clear dry days.
We wander back to camp. Everywhere you go it smells like a circus from all the horses, their droppings, the hay, and the mud. Mud everywhere. You just walk through it, you are already dirty.

When the sun goes down we build a fire because there is no other light unless you want to light a candle which will just blow out if you even look at it funny.

It takes a long time but I finally dry out my haversack over the fire but it smells like smoke for the rest of the event. When I finally lay down to sleep I find that my blanket is still damp but I am too exhausted to care, especially considering there is nothing much that can be done about it anyway.

SAT Mar 31

It is supposed to be “a long day” with 2 battles scheduled. Word comes that we need to form up the battalion for a roll call, with our rifles and all our gear. We start breakfast but it is slow going and eventually we leave 3 guys on cooking detail and wander over to the muster. The Captain says we don’t need our ammo or rifles, just to show up, for it will be a simple head count. When we get there at the edge of camp, we are the only company not fully outfitted, as well as being under strength. We fold some new guys into our ranks including “Skip,” a chatty old character who always has something to say, and often more than once. I must hear the story about his exploded knapsack five times, always delivered in the third person as if he were relating a tale of someone else. While getting the new guys situated, I can hear more “practice fire” over to the far left edge of camp, beyond some trees. Not a good sign. I feel naked without my weapon. The fire gets more frequent and loud and it becomes clear something is happening. Smoke is drifting into a clearing on our left flank when suddenly what seems like several companies of yanks come into plain view and form a line of battle down the road to our left. Captain Hunt tells us to go get our gear (and the rest of the guys) and we run through the woods back to camp. “Drop everything and get your stuff, they think we are being overrun!” I shout. Again my hands shake so much that I cannot get my belt fastened. We fall back into line and the “right face – march” is called and we hoof it out of there with the Yanks on our tails it seems. Around a bend in the road is the rest of the Division and we form up and start marching further, eventually arriving at a staging area astride a large open field. A preacher comes out in the back of a drawn wagon and gives a big long
speech that I don’t think anybody can hear. I can pick out the stray word ... “God,” “battle,” “the South,” others. Every time I hear “God,” “The Lord,” “a prayer,” or anything even remotely religious, I take off my hat. Then I note that the soldiers in the front ranks never do this, and it dawns on me that they must be able to hear what he is actually saying. Shortly, I finally realize he isn’t a preacher at all; he is the Mayor of Shiloh. My hat goes back where it belongs.

The division gets itself in order and the artillery begins preparatory fire in front of us. Battalions begin to advance across the field. I think we are the third one to set out. The number of men on the field is staggering. Eventually we manage to flank the Yankees and push them backwards. We press and press on, when we come face to face with their artillery line, and I am sure we will be fired upon, but we are not. We press on towards the cannons, whooping the “Rebel Yell” in a loud din as the Yanks fall backwards. We move forward over their fallen bodies and I can see the Yank camp ahead with blue coats mingled among the white tents.
We sweep them from their camp and into the woods behind it and a narrow path leading away. At this point things fall apart. Formed in a line of battle, we face the enemy. Each side fires into each other for what seems like many minutes but no reaction is seen. No casualties on either side, and I can see a lot of confused faces. Over to the right is the Reb Cavalry all mounted up but they seem to be waiting for orders. Instead of an intense life and death struggle I suddenly feel like I am onstage waiting for a cue. For a moment, no-one does anything, then finally the Cavalry rides in and fires its pistols at the Yanks and someone calls them glory hounds and then the Yanks fall back a final time and it all kind of fizzles out in a big anticlimax and we march back to camp to see what can be done about that food.

Again it is surprisingly early in the day. I seem to recall having scrambled eggs that were a vivid orange in color. Sometime later and it is time to form up yet again for what will be the biggest engagement of the entire campaign, the “Hornet’s Nest” fight. It is a very long march to the battlefield and I am already tired when we get there. We are all lined up on a muddy narrow road and for the first time I see members of the public milling about. This will be a spectator battle. The road we are staged on is right next to a Yankee camp and when we are allowed to rest, a bunch of guys go into their abandoned camp and make themselves at home. I seriously doubt anyone stole or damaged anything but I am also fairly certain that any food or coffee left unsecured mysteriously vanished. Someone flips their camp sign around and writes in bold black letters ARMY OF TEXAS on it. Then it is time to take to the field.

We are marched between 2 sets of bleachers to get onto the field and the cheers start to rise. The crowd goes apeshit when they see us coming and cheer and yell and clap like we are the Dallas Cowboys. “Go get ‘em boys!” they yell. It is very energizing to be the “home team.” We get everyone lined up and the amount of men on the field is staggering. Then the artillery opens up and thunder rains down the line from end to end and I can feel the shockwaves in my sternum and teeth. This goes on for some time and the crowd goes insane like they were at a monster truck jam, listening to a formless loud racket. It is a clear and warm day compared to the misty morning and the previous rainy day. It is very humid and the field is a vivid thick green sea.
We are supposed to make “4 assaults and retreats” and then take the Hornet’s Nest, a thick wilderness area on the other side of this vast field, into which the enemy will retreat and make a stand before being shoved into the damn Tennessee River. Seems like a lot of action to me. Finally we start our advance. It is really quite hot and the jean wool uniforms, long underwear, and 2 pair of socks don’t help things. Out on the field it is majestic to see the divisions and battalions and the flying colors and the thousands of men. It stirs the soul to see the lines, and hear the shouted commands, and to fire as one. But then the enemy lines advance and their fire is heavy and the smoke is thick and all is bedlam suddenly. There is confusion in the ranks and a lot of head-turning and then I hear the Captain say, “Fall back!” Nobody knows what the order means. There is chaos in the air, noise and gun smoke, and the Captain blurts out “Run!!!! Run back to the line!!!” Holy shit, never heard that before, and a lot of us just break ranks and haul ass back the way we came. It is mayhem and some officers from other companies are waving their swords at us and telling us to halt but we power past them in a panic. Then I hear the Captain say “No! Stop! Rally yourselves boys! Confederates don’t run! Back into line, back into line!” and we scurry back to where we were initially. It is really quite hot. Then we are ordered to about face and return back to the starting point, back in front of the bleachers and behind the artillery. It seems to take forever to get there and when I sit down I find I can’t really move very much. Everything is moving too slowly. Bob is handing out an ammo resupply and I can barely take it from him, much less put it in my cartridge box. I look over at him and tell him I don’t feel so good. He says are you OK? And I just kind’a shrug. I tell him I can’t think straight and when I try to stand up I feel like I am gon’na fall over. He says “OK” in a tone I don’t like and starts to stand up and I beg him not to call a medic just to let me catch my breath. He gets someone to come over and then Shane is there pouring water down the back of my collar and a couple folks are fanning me with their hats. Then of all people “Skip” comes over and pours cold water from his canteen on my wrists and tells me to keep my hands outstretched, with palms up. “Feels good, don’t it brother” he says and suddenly I think he might not be such a bad guy after all. Thanks, Skip! Then the weirdest thing happens, a cool breeze starts to blow and everyone breathes an audible sigh of relief.
genuinely feels amazing. Light clouds move in at that exact moment and shield me from the sun. It feels like it is me specifically that is being shielded. I can’t help but think of the Confederate motto “Deo Vindice,” “with a protecting God.” It’s truly magical. I can feel my breath even out and I don’t feel hot anymore. I actually start to feel a lot better. Bob asks how I am and I say exactly that, “A lot better.” He says my color is better too. I did not know I had bad color before but OK. Everyone around me looks relieved. Gil asks how I am and I say “Great! Let’s go get those Yanks!” And soon enough, we do just that. Back onto the field.

![Image of Confederate soldiers in a battle scene](image)

We make it all the way across the field and up to the trees and the Yanks have fallen back. In front of us is a wet marsh filled with mud and standing water and I can hear groans when others see it and I yell, “Power thru! Just go straight through it!” and we do just that, straight through the ankle-deep mud and sick-smelling water and up to a big obstruction, a fallen tree surrounded by thick shrubs and vines and God knows what. The Captain orders us to cross that obstruction, and men mount it and fall and some get on top and jump the rest of the way and a couple get stuck in the vines and are left behind. Now we are in a clearing and the Yanks throw volleys at us and my cartridges are running low so I go down in the grass and catch my breath with Bob.
It is an amazing sight to see the lines of battle come back together after such disorganized action. Everyone gathers ahead of us on a firing line into the woods. This is the Hornet’s Nest. They fire volley after volley into that wilderness. It goes on forever. Then they start to move into the trees. I thought the fight was going to end in this field but if it’s going to get into the woods I want to see it so I get to my feet and do my ‘walking wounded’ bit and hobble back to my company clutching my thigh. Inside the trees it is pandemonium and there are still, blue bodies laying everywhere and a few of our guys too. It’s just noise and smoke. You can barely see a thing and forget about a decent battle line but the Captain still keeps shouting to get back in line so at least we try. It seems like there isn’t anybody left in the company at all and frequently I get on line with guys I have never seen.

It is a real mess but eventually the Yanks give out and call the retreat and beat it in the other direction. Finally we stop firing and gather our forces up in a clearing. Now it is time to head back to the static camp and this feels like the longest march of my life. I can’t seem to catch my breath at all and it is
difficult to stay in formation. At any second I feel like I might take my last step. No position is comfortable for carrying the rifle. Soon, I am at trail arms, which is just one hand and I feel I might never get the other hand onto that rifle again, I am so tired. The idea of falling out and becoming a straggler becomes more and more likely. I stop looking ahead because all I see is long stretches of road or open fields I know we have to cross and its never good news. I concentrate only on the feet of the man in front of me. I just slog onwards. One step at a time. I don’t think about anything except that next step. It becomes almost impossible to continue. Finally I realize that I must stop. I open my mouth to say I am stepping out and I intend to drop to the ground and rest. But when I look up I can’t believe it but I see the edge of the woods where our camp is, only 20 yards away.

That Saturday night is a bad night. I am utterly spent. I can barely move. Days of sleep deprivation, irregular food, insect bites, wet clothes and extreme physical challenges have taken my spirit from me. I tell several that I don’t plan to join the fight the next day. All I want to do is collapse on my wet blanket and pass out. I think to myself that I don’t want to do Civil War reenacting. That it is nothing but cold and wet and tired and bugs and sunstroke. It takes forever to drive to an event, crammed in a van with a bunch of dudes. The uniform gets filthy and smells like a cat pissed on it. It won’t dry out. When it does it just gets wet again. You have to sleep on the cold ground. It’s too hot in the day and too cold at night and my feet swell from all the marching and salty foods eaten to prevent dehydration. I am basically at my low ebb, and miserable. Storm clouds roll in and lightning flashes with the promise of a further drenching and this just makes my resolve even stronger. But then Scott and Mike say that dinner is ready, and it is a thick stew and the best cornbread I have ever had in my life and it was made on a shovel and an old pot lid in a real campfire. We spend time mending our clothes (lots of popped buttons) and I seem to be one of the very few who brought a sewing kit and I am definitely the best at sewing in the unit. Suddenly I am needed. And full. Soon after dinner, when it becomes obvious the lightning will only be a light show and no rain will hit us, I collapse in the crude shelter. As exhausted as I am, I still can’t sleep. Then I open my eyes and it is the dead of night. Shane is asleep next to me and blurts out, “Oh, God,” stops breathing for a few seconds, but then resumes. Glad that worked itself out.
SUN Apr 1

I get up at dawn and I realize I am full of energy and good cheer and ready to go again. Today we galvanize: a procedure where you change uniforms to portray the other side. This time I have been informed that it is a political concession to the Division commander that the Red River Battalion galvanize for this event’s depiction of Buell’s army reinforcing Grant’s. I don’t really want to do it; I don’t think anyone really does. Lots of talk about “turning and running at the first shot” or “the whole company going down in the first barrage.” But it is a nice day, the coffee is good, and I think everyone is looking forward to going out with a bang and then going home to soft beds and warm showers. It is also a very leisurely morning. The battle does not start until 1pm and we all sit around camp and goof off playing cards and eating the rest of our rations. No need to pace ourselves anymore, it is almost over, so now we can portray the “well-supplied Union Army” and pig out. I win 2 hands of poker in a row and suddenly everyone loses interest.

Shane and I head to the saloon but they are all out of lemonade so we buy giant pickles instead. There are several ladies in fancy dresses who seem to want to say “Hello soldier” a lot and “Hi, how are you” as they bat their eyes. As we leave there is an approaching commotion and a bunch of folks from the “civilian camp” besiege the tavern with signs reading “shame!” and cries for temperance. A lady pulls a baby around in a small red wooden wagon as she howls at the saloon keeper for selling alcohol on the
Sabbath. Two of the flirty women are led from the saloon in irons but they later “break free” and return. Tauntingly the soldiers inside the “drinking establishment” start belting out hymns from their tables which the crowd in turn pretends to be offended and enraged about. It is a delight. It is like watching amateur improve dinner theatre. Everyone is obviously having a good time but that baby looks a little red to me.

At formation, a truck hauls a trailer by and everyone realizes it is the refreshment crew for the port-o-johns. The entire division seems to cheer at once and the driver laughs and drives by waving like a returning hero.

The march to the battlefield seems to take forever. I think they’ve run us the long way around and I am beat by the time we get there.

We enter the field from the same way as the day previous, between 2 sets of bleachers, but this time there is no rising cheer to greet us. Company “B” leads the column in song, “Battle Cry of Freedom” and “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” but in truth it’s really only Captain Hunt handling the lyrics, and our voices only gain confidence for a familiar line or two of the chorus, the rest of it being sort of mutters and humming. Soon, we are lined up on the same field we fought the Hornet’s Nest battle on, only this time we are to traverse it lengthwise. The distance is daunting. I literally cannot see the other end of this field. Sitting in the shade for a half hour and drinking lots of water, that distance does not seem to grow any shorter.
Finally we jump off. The artillery has softened the enemy up a bit and we are then on the move. These blue wool uniforms are much warmer than our jean cloth coats. The sun is beastly. But the overwhelming spectacle of this reinforced blue army is dazzling. The wind seems to want to display the colors in only their most flattering angle and again the clouds gather to shield us. With each left step we chant “Buell ... Buell ... Buell.” All these voices raised in unison are kind of creepy and intimidating and we make such a racket that orders cannot really be heard over the din.

Our numbers swell the field and we flank the Rebs as well as occupy their front. We are going to just sweep in and crush them. Buell! Buell! Buell! We are on the far side of that epic field in what seems like no time at all but then again it probably took about an hour to cross. Time seems to fall apart in these things. You don’t worry about how long something is going to take; instead you are purely in the moment. (I was stunned to learn that the Hornet’s Nest fight the day before lasted over four hours.) Perhaps this day’s fight takes as long. I don’t know. The Rebs turn and retreat into the forest and we
sweep past their artillery line and carry the fight to them. We fill the trees with our smoke and our shouting and soon all that is left is their raised hands or fallen bodies. Wearing that blue uniform makes it a hard victory to really be happy about. Still, on a personal level, with heaving chest and wet brow and finally a chance to stop yelling, after 4 or more days of this stuff, it is still a well-earned moment.

Col Yokubaitis gives an emotional farewell speech from horseback and his cracking voice leaves many wet eyes in the crowd, but I think a lot of guys pretend that it is actually sweat rolling down their face, at least that’s what I do.

And then it is just time to go. So we do.

A trip to the Shiloh National Battlefield Park, envisioned I think as a 20-minute quickie “look and see” instead turns into a tour of nearly 3 hours and the sun is actually setting by the time we leave. It remains, however, on reflection a highlight of the trip. To stand on the original battlefields of which we had recreated the struggle only hours before holds a peculiar solemnity that I don’t think is expected.

Myself and a couple others pick up some soil and pebbles from the actual Hornet’s Nest as souvenirs which I later find out is a Federal Offense, so now I feel like a Bad Man with a pocketful of Crime Rocks.

The trip home lasts exactly as long as a big muscle relaxant and some prescription pain meds from Shane. Never has a pile of dirty clothes wedged against a vibrating truck window felt so welcoming. 6 a.m. breakfast at the Waffle House is a fuzzy drug-addled dream in a town I can’t remember and by 10 a.m. we are home again, and it seems like some kind of foreign planet. I put on my 20th century eyeglasses and it’s like I’m in a kind of crazy future time where they have invented peripheral vision.

A week spent in the woods of the 19th century can really help you appreciate little things, although I am not sure that is the point of reenacting the Civil War. Is it an escape from real life concerns? Is it an
educational pursuit? Is it a connection to ancestry, or is it a masquerade? Is it the adventure that draws the participants, or is it the struggle that proves them men, and strengthens them? Or is it the comfort of your friends' company, and the joy of travel? I think sometimes that it is all of these things for me, but at different moments, different aspects of it take dominance.

After this first event experience, I find I walk with my back a little straighter, my head held higher. There is knowledge and experience inside of me now that others don’t seem to understand (despite my nagging efforts to inform them of it anyway; I usually only stop when their eyes visibly glaze). Soon it becomes evident that the only folks interested in the experience are the ones who shared it with me, and I find myself yearning for that next event, to be with those folks who get it. Civil War and I are a good match it seems. I’ve always thought of myself as solely a 20th Century reenactor. But now, the pulse quickens at the thought of this different new era. It is a vast and unknown territory to begin exploring, and I am blessed with the acceptance, the encouragement, and the generosity of knowledge that all my Pards, old and new, have shown me. The next event cannot get here fast enough.