

# Shiloh

## The Blue Gray Alliance 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Event

By Phil McBride

I returned home 24 hours ago from the BGA Shiloh event, where I participated as adjutant of the Red River Battalion in King's Division. Our division fought as Confederates on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, and galvanized as Federals on Sunday. My pard and I were on site reenacting from noon Thursday until 3 PM on Sunday, taking part in five engagements over four consecutive days.

The BGA leadership was successful in that all four battles were different and all followed the historical flow of the actual battle of Shiloh. The main battlefield was huge, making it easy to keep respectable and historically accurate distances between the opposing artillery batteries and infantry lines.

Contrasting the battle ground at Shiloh to that of the 150<sup>th</sup> Manassas mega-event last summer in Virginia, the field at Shiloh was simply gigantic. That likely made the battles less spectator friendly, but made them much more realistic and reenactor friendly.

The first big fight on Friday morning was the Fallen Timbers tactical, and it really should have been last as it was in real life, and the Rebs should have been an all-cavalry force. But the opportunity to do the kick-off battle on the actual ground was a big deal; especially, right before that ground is turned over to the National Park Service and will become unavailable for future reenactment battles. It also helped that we did the battle in the rain, and the smoke of the muskets and cannons draped the whole field in a heavy white fog of war. It was a soggy, but great opening act to the weekend.

The Saturday morning battle was a long drawn-out engagement covering a lot of ground, and was done for us, since there weren't any spectators. The planning required cooperation from all elements of both forces, what with the distances involved and the "capturing" of Federal camps, and it worked.

The Saturday afternoon battle was awesome. It started not with an artillery duel or cavalry skirmish, but with a Confederate infantry attack that surged forward several times, but was finally beaten back. Then came the artillery barrages, then another successful Rebel infantry attack that carried through the Federal lines into the woods before the battle halted.

Sunday afternoon was the big Union counterattack of the second day, with Buell's reinforcements. It was a straight-forward fight, with an initial artillery duel before the massive Federal advance across the wide field. As an added extra the huge Iowa campaigner regiment came in on the flank of the Rebs towards the end. This time the Confederates were pushed back into the woods where the battle finally wound down.

Knowing this article would need to be written quickly after the event to make the magazine's deadline for the May-June issue, I wrote some pre-events speculations, which are in italics below, with post-event reflections to those items added:

***Before:** The event is still two weeks away and I'm wondering what will make this one special. Will it be gorgeous spring weather? Large numbers of reenactors? Great planning? Or will some of the gremlins that have bedeviled prior BGA events curse this one? Thunderstorms, even tornadoes? Way too many Rebs and a paucity of Yanks? Scenario busting? Cars and trucks never removed from the camp areas? Ticks and chiggers?*

**After:** The weather was wonderful once the Friday rain passed through. But the Friday rain did indeed muck up the dirt roads all over the event site, which caused some regrettable logistical problems like stuck vehicles, empty water tanks and over-filled porta-toilets near the reenactors camps.

There was no problem of force-ratios at this event. There were enough Yanks in the spectator battles on both days to well represent the Rebs' overwhelming success on Saturday and the Federals' winning counterattack on Sunday. If there was any serious scenario busting during the battles, I haven't learned of it.

Cars and trucks remained in evidence all over the site. I mainly noticed the continuous parade of trucks hauling cannons around, but with over 110 cannons present, only a few of which were actually horse-drawn, that was inevitable.

There was an ample supply of ticks and chiggers to go around.

***Before:** Regardless of the pre-event unknowns, I'm seeing a level of anticipation that's just not common in this part of the country. We were excited about Wilson's Creek last summer because 3,000 reenactors were there. As of today over 6,000 have paid their registrations for Shiloh. My own unit, The Alamo Rifles, has never fielded more than 18 men at a national event, and we have 34 men registered for Shiloh. Fifty artillery pieces are a sight to behold and to hear. At Shiloh 117 full-sized cannons are registered. Then there is the Federal "paddlewheel regiment" that is planning to ferry over 500 Union reenactors up river through the night and land them at Pittsburg Landing, to then march five miles to the Saturday battle. Another group of reenactors are riding a chartered train to Memphis, and yet another group is marching and horse riding from Corinth to Shiloh. And not to forget the town of Purdy, Tennessee, where hundreds of period dressed and encamped civilians will add a third body of reenactors to put the military forces in a real-world context, instead of a blue/gray "bubble."*

**After:** This time the Alamo Rifles missed being decimated by pre-event "canister" as 31 of the 34 registered men showed up. I trust that was the same for most units, as it looked to me like the 6,000+ registered reenactors were all there. I've heard that 50+ artillery pieces were on the Southern side of the great Saturday artillery duel that was Phase 2 of the spectator battle. If the Union side of the field held a like number of artillery pieces, there were indeed over 100 full-sized cannons at the event. Our

infantry division was in the opening attack on Saturday afternoon and after our 3 or 4 determined advances were finally repulsed with huge casualties, we withdrew behind the long line of Reb cannons and hunkered down “in support” to watch and listen to the earth-shaking show of all those cannons firing several times each. It was impressive.

I don't know how the train ride came out, but I've read internet forum messages that the 15<sup>th</sup> Iowa, the “paddlewheel” campaigner regiment came through in fine fashion. I watched them march past our division on Sunday as we waited for the artillery duel to end so we could attack the Secesh. The Iowa regiment was very large and the uniformity of the troops, including their upturned Hardee hats and tan blankets over their shoulders, was beyond what we normally see. Those fellows looked right. I've read they marched over 6 miles to the battle from Pittsburg Landing on Saturday morning after being ferried up river. We marched past their regimental camp of over 20 huge round Sibley tents and a dozen or more common tents. I noticed the brick ovens and wondered about them. I've since read that each company had a baking detail. Privates were put to work kneading bread dough and assisting the head baker in making their own bread loaves to eat Saturday night and Sunday. Talk about a ration issue.

I personally was very grateful for the presence of almost 500 campaigners from around the country who were willing to take part in the Shiloh mainstream mega-event, effectively blending the two worlds of reenacting for one great weekend. The hobby needs more of that sort of cooperation. The leadership of the 15<sup>th</sup> Iowa did an incredible amount of pre-event work planning and coordinating their activities, and sweating the details of the logistics involved in leasing and “de-modernizing” a paddle wheel river boat, making and issuing period-correct rations, getting proper tents for 500 soldiers, and the extras like making the brick bread ovens.

As to the civilian town of Purdy, our battalion camp was in the woods across a field from Purdy. I did not wander through the town as there were ample pre-event warnings for military personnel to enter at risk of arrest, but I think most of us snuck into the town saloon and poker hall sometime during the event. I'm told the Purdy mayor more than once drove out all soldiers from the establishment.

***Before:*** Now I'm thinking about all the preparatory work of getting things like parking lots, signs and site maps, porta-toilets, water trailers, firewood and hay, camp site clearing, and road construction done. Or other pre-event work of land procurement, coordination with county and state officials, and insuring efficient registration check-in procedures. Then during the event someone has to manage traffic control, the crowds of spectators, see to trash removal, water refills, porta-toilet clean-outs and toilet paper resupply, sutler row management, special programs for the paying public, EMS service, and tractors to pull out stuck vehicles should the storms hit.

**After:** The Blue Gray Alliance took on a monster to get their Shiloh event in place. Yes, there were logistical problems, probably mostly due to the rain and the terrific turn-out of reenactors. I personally never ran out of water, and or had to use a filthy porta-toilet, but I understand many others did. I confess that I did have to rely on my own “necessary paper” the last day. There was a noticeable absence of trash cans around the site and trash sacks did pile up in make-shift garbage dumps around many campsites and porta-toilets, including a very unsightly mountain of trash near the food vendors.

The paying spectators were lined up along the dirt road during the battles and the fighting was a long ways away with all the artillery crews and cannons between the spectators and the infantry who were out in the field. It must have been hard for the paying public to see the far away infantry engagements. For all that, Shiloh being my fourth Blue Gray Alliance event in four years, I think the BGA deserves credit for doing each event better than the ones before.

***Before:** I also know the period tailors have been busy making new uniforms. Dan Wambaugh of Wambaugh and White wrote me that they had a heavy load of orders for Union sack coats, especially for the campaigners in the "paddlewheel" regiment who want accurate reproductions to meet the unit's authenticity standards.*

**After:** Just in our company, five men showed up wearing new Confederate frock coats and two men bought high quality trousers from sutlers at Shiloh. If such procurement of new uniforms was common among the 6,000 reenactors, the event was a big boost to the suppliers of our hobby's uniforms and equipment.

### **General Reflections on the Event**

What I liked best about Shiloh, and the two most recent previous BGA events, is the extension of the weekend to include Thursday and Friday campaign and tactical engagements. At Shiloh we formed up in heavy marching order at 3:30 on Thursday afternoon having set up our static camp, then we marched as a "light" division of Rebs across the road to the actual ground where Nathan Bedford Forest covered the Rebs' retreat after the historical battle. We skirmished in the woods on Thursday, bivouacked overnight without shelters in a huge meadow, and then engaged the Federals in a steady rain on Friday morning. By the time we returned to our static camps around midday Friday, we were soggy veterans with sore shoulders from wearing knapsacks and bedrolls for hours. We had eaten out of our haversacks for nearly 24 hours and were just then at the starting time of the traditional event. Three times the BGA has done similar preludes to the main show. I whole-heartedly applaud that effort and hope they continue the pattern during the rest of their 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary series of reenactments.

There were two battles on Saturday, with a sometime-after-dawn battle to simulate the Confederates first great push. For our division that was the least fun engagement as we were the last Rebs to be engaged, and the Yanks opposite us had already been fighting a long time and had little energy or cartridges left to expend fending off our attack. We were their dessert and they had already eaten a big breakfast and were full. But we did overrun their camp, with the support of the only cavalry I saw engaged the whole weekend. I know there were lots of cavalry at Shiloh, but some quirk of planning kept their fights at places I wasn't.

King's Division had the use of three supply wagons, one per brigade, which followed our battalions into the field and were always nearby. Because of those horse drawn wagons, we were able to refill canteens and were able to unload wooden ammunition boxes full of arsenal packs to replenish the troops with cartridges while the battle was hot around us. The battles were all long fights and without the wagons, both the water refills and the ammunition resupply would have been very difficult.

Perhaps the best compliment I can give to the BGA is to replay a short incident I saw firsthand and up close on the field on Saturday afternoon. Our infantry division was marching out into the big field to start the battle. As battalion adjutant I was at the right end of the battalion, and our battalion was the right-most battalion in our division. We had lots of open space to our right. I looked over that way to see a little band of six or eight young horseless cavalymen walking in a single file to establish a skirmish line to our right. As I watched them, a staff officer from our division rode up and politely, but very firmly, informed their leader that they could not just deploy on the field wherever they wanted. He then led them off the field after quieting their protest by telling them they could go right over to General Way, the Confederate overall commander (and co-leader of the BGA) and present their case to him. I didn't see them again. Maybe they were allowed on the field somewhere else, maybe not. But they were not allowed to "bust" the scenario even in their tiny fashion. Our hobby needs lots more of this sort of self-policing.

I was told of one incredible piece of camp equipment that a pard swears he saw being used. Get ready for this. Perhaps you should sit down. He saw another reenactor using a powered leaf blower to clear the area around his tent. Honest. The absurdity of that still leaves me speechless. I can accept old guys and fat guys trying to be young soldiers. Heck, I am one. I can handle coolers and cots in camp. I've brought them. But the leaf blower just goes beyond all sense of what the hobby is about. No wonder some folks laugh at our claim to serious historical interpretation of Civil War soldiers. I hope the user of the leaf blower reads this, is deeply embarrassed, and swears on his mama's grave to never bring it to another reenactment.

One of my jobs as a battalion adjutant was to complete an ammunition expenditure report after each battle. Obviously, in the real war that would have been a very important report if the regiment wanted to be kept supplied with ammunition for the next battle. In our reenacting hobby such reports are rarely done, and it was fun to see the company officers and NCO's sorting out just how many cartridges their troops actually did expend in the battle just completed. I think we were all surprised when the tallies came in to learn that even a four-company battalion of around 100 riflemen can easily use 4,000 rounds in a long battle. It's simple math – 40 rounds per man x 100 shooters = 4,000 cartridges used – but we don't generally think about the sum total. To take it a step further, if one pound of black powder fills 100 paper cartridges, then a battalion of 100 shooters uses about 40 cans of black powder in a single battle. Since a can of black powder costs at least \$13, those 40 cans equate to \$520 in powder expended. If there were 3,000 infantry reenactors (a low estimate, I think) firing 40 rounds apiece in each of the three large engagements at the Shiloh reenactment (not even counting the half-size battle at Fallen Timbers on Friday morning), that's \$15,600 worth of black powder used up at each one, or a sum total of \$46,800 in black powder expended by the infantry at the event. I'm afraid to speculate how much black powder the 100+ artillery pieces expended, but I wouldn't be surprised if their sum total was more than the infantry. All in all, I think it is a safe estimate to say that over \$100,000 worth of black powder was "shot" during the Shiloh reenactment.

I felt lucky to be a part of King's Division which fought on both sides of the field at Shiloh. During the first three battles we were aggressive Rebs who took it to the Yanks, and on Saturday afternoon we won the field. On Sunday the entire division galvanized to add weight to Grant's counterattack that won the real

battle. Doing blue and gray allowed us to see both armies' long battle lines of infantry and to pass by and through the huge numbers of cannons. While it's very true that no single person can experience all there is to see and do at a large reenactment, I know that I saw and did more than usual by virtue of our galvanizing. The hobby needs "happy" galvanizers at almost every event to keep the force ratios realistic, and I was glad to do my little part, and proud of King's Division for galvanizing *en masse* to make the event work.

King's Division also was "blessed" by a real Tennessee state politician standing in the back of a water wagon and exhorting us to go forth and carry the honor of the Confederacy onto the field of battle. He also read to us General Johnson's actual general order to the Southern army before they went into the real battle at Shiloh.

Our battalion leadership had done some homework and created casualty cards for each man to use during the Saturday afternoon battle. On each card was the name of a real Confederate with a note of the man's fate at Shiloh. That made "taking hits" real easy to figure out. If your card said your historical soldier had been wounded or killed, you went down when you felt the time was right. It worked and was popular with the men.

Our company lieutenant also conducted a mail call with a letter from home to each man. The two letters written by one wife informing two good friends that the wrong one was the father of her new baby boy created quite a stir around our campfire, as the two friends almost came to blows trying to sort out how to deal with this revelation.

Finally, our company quartermaster made himself a popular man by providing each soldier in our company with a small package of "necessary papers," wrapped and labeled per the 1857 originals. When the modern paper disappeared from the modern sinks, the little period issue instantly became a valuable asset.

My only wrap-up to this story of the BGA Shiloh event is stress how glad I am that I went. Sure, some things could have gone smoother, but the men and women with whom I've talked since the event all share the sentiment that the BGA Shiloh reenactment did right by our hobby. Shiloh was the big event in the west in 1862. Now that it is behind us, for me it's on to the eastern theater to take part in two more 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary events put together by Chris Anders: *Lee Takes Command* in June, and *Maryland, My Maryland* in September.