

THE FLASH LIGHT INVENTOR

Now that the signal corps with our Army and Navy have been brought prominently before the public by their service, it will be of interest to know that North Carolina furnished to the signal service of the Confederacy an officer who had a more varied experience, held a position of greater responsibility, and by his invention rendered greater service to this branch of the Confederate Army than, perhaps, any other member of the same.

At the earnest solicitation of his friends, Mr. J.B. Smith of Rosedale Farm has consented to let the following sketch of his Confederate record, prepared for the N.C.C.V. Historical Association, be published. It will also be of interest to mention the fact that the body of the signal corps of which Mr. Smith was an officer was composed of the pick of Confederate youths, many of whom have distinguished themselves in the civil walks of life. Among them can be mentioned Sidney Lanier, the greatest of Southern poets, J. Hoge Tyler, the present Governor of Virginia, and Dr. George T. Goetchins, Moderator of the Presbyterian Assembly at Charlotte last year.

THE SKETCH

Lieutenant John Baptist Smith of the Confederate Signal Corps, the subject of this sketch, enlisted as a private in the Milton Blues on the 15th day of April, 1861, at the age of 17 years. He was identified with that company (Co. C. 13th regiment, N.C.V.) until

February, 1862, when, by order of the Secretary of War, he was detached and subsequently transferred to the battalion of signal corps commanded by Maj. Jas. F. Milligan, and was made 1st sergeant of the 2nd company in that battalion, and placed in charge of the signal station on the south side of James River, opposite Newport News.

His first important service was rendered during the naval engagement at the mouth of James River in which the Confederate "ironclad" Virginia (Merrimac) destroyed the Federal frigates Cumberland and Congress. When Norfolk was evacuated Sergeant Smith and his signal corps were ordered to Petersburg and placed in charge of the signal station on the Appomattox to watch the movement of the Federal fleet and forces. This exposed position was held by him in spite of repeated efforts to capture the signalmen and break up the station. Efficient service was also rendered during the seven days fight around Richmond and the retreat of McLelland's army to Harrison's Landing.

Soon after this series of engagements Sergeant Smith was sent by order of the Secretary of War to assist in organizing the signal service in the department of the Cape Fear, and was placed in charge of the most important station in this department- that of Fort Fisher, under Col. Wm. Lamb. Here he served with many testimonials of approbation from his commanding officer until the spring of 1863, when he invented the method of signaling by flash lights (white and red). This system, though since improved by the use of electric lights, formed the basis of the system that is now used in all navies of the world.

The system was first submitted by Sergeant Smith, with the approval of Col. Lamb, to General Whiting, who requested Commodore Lynch, commanding the naval forces in this department of the Cape Fear, to test the system. This officer ordered a special board

of naval officers presided over by Capt. Wilkinson of the steamship R. E. Lee to investigate and report upon the value of the invention. This board, after subjecting it to a rigid test, unanimously approved it and recommended its adoption in the Confederate Navy and all blockade runners.

As a special compliment for this invention the Secretary of War issued an order assigning Sergeant Smith for special duty with General Whiting at Wilmington, who very kindly gave him choice of vessels upon which to serve as signal officer. He at once requested and was granted permission to serve on the Ad-Vance, because she belonged to his beloved State, under Capt. Thos. Crossan. He was identified with the thrilling history of this most famous blockade runner until February, 1864, when he was promoted to a lieutenancy in the signal corps and ordered to report for duty at Petersburg. He was at once placed in command of the signal station on Lower James River, and established his headquarters at Hardy's Bluff, the lowest outpost of the Confederate Army.

Here he witnessed the entry of Butler's fleet into the mouth of James River and transmitted minute reports of the number of gunboats and transports in the fleet to the Confederate authorities at Petersburg until the signal communication was broken up by the destruction of the station by the Federals. Lieutenant Smith then withdrew his company of signal men to Surrey Court House and in a few days received orders to fall back to Petersburg where he arrived in time to take part in defending that city from the Federal assaults until the arrival of Gen. Lee's army.

Lieutenant Smith and his company of brave signal men fought in the trenches as infantry for 48 hours without rations and held the angle assaulted as the center of attack by that distinguished general, Hancock, of the Federal army.

As a compliment for this service, Lieutenant Smith was given command of the signal lines from General Beauregard's headquarters and a few days later was ordered to report in person to General Lee and was placed in command of the signal lines running from his headquarters to the different points around Petersburg (perhaps the highest compliment bestowed in the C. S. army upon so youthful an officer). This position was held by him until the campaign of 1864 closed. He was ordered to report to Commodore Pegram at Drewry's Bluff and take command of the signal lines connecting Drewry's Bluff with all the forts and batteries on James River, also with the fleet of ironclads in that river.

During the winter Lieutenant Smith was actively employed in bringing the signal service on James River up to a high state of efficiency, serving with Commodore Pegram until that officer was relieved by Admiral Semmes. Then, with this distinguished officer, until the opening of the campaign of 1865, when he was recalled to Petersburg and given his old command again, which was actively engaged day and night, previous to and during the evacuation of that city.

It is a historical fact that Lieutenant Smith's signal men were the last organized body of the Confederate Army to leave that city. They crossed the railroad bridge at the foot of Dan's Hill, while it was on fire, after the Pocahontas and Campbell bridges had been destroyed. On the retreat from Petersburg, Lieutenant Smith's company was rear guard of General Lee's army until it was joined by the troops from Drewry's Bluff. Then Lieutenant Smith was ordered by General Lee to take charge of a body of prisoners with his company. Notwithstanding the confusion and repeated attempts to release these prisoners, they were safely guarded during the retreat until Appamattox Courthouse was

reached. Here they were marched out into the Federal lines and Lieutenant Smith and his men were publicly thanked by the released prisoners for the kind treatment they had received at their hands.

Lieutenant Smith then procured paroles for his men direct from General Gibbons, General Grant's provost marshal, and then set out for his home in Caswell County, N.C. He arrived there on the 15th day of April, 1865, exactly four years from the day of his enlistment in the Confederate Army.