

**“EVERY MAN GOES TO FIGHTING ON HIS OWN HOOK”:
Open Order Fighting in the Civil War
As Experienced by South Carolinians of the Confederacy**

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The history of the common soldier of the Civil War is a small but growing field. Interest in the everyday experiences of the individual during this conflict is reflected in the many previously unpublished letters, diaries, and memoirs that are finding their way into print each year. Unit histories that place the stories of groups of men in relation to the larger events around them complement these individual histories. Such histories may concern themselves with a hundred men or a hundred thousand. Finally, general histories of the soldiers provide an overview, stressing the commonalities between men in different theatres of the war and on opposing sides.

These works have done much to enhance the body of knowledge concerning soldiers' lives. They portray details of food, shelter, clothing, and equipment, as well as personal responses to political, military, and civilian events. Only a handful, however, are concerned with the defining point of a soldier's career - the experience of combat. The majority of treatises on the nature of the battlefield deal with large scale tactics of assault and defense, such as the best formation to use in a charge or the most effective methods of defense. This type of study is concerned with large formations of men, not the individual experience. Individual studies that have been done on the experience of

combat concern themselves with the psychological responses to battle and the cultural values which shaped them.¹

In addition, soldier studies are heavily biased in favor of Northern accounts in the Civil War. This is in part due to the wider availability of personal accounts of members of the Union army. Union soldiers are generally understood to have been more literate than their adversaries; furthermore, Northern society did not experience the social disruptions and destruction of property endured by the invaded Confederacy. Many documents of the soldiers in gray did not survive the ravages of war.

There has not been a study that exclusively discusses the physical nature of combat for the individual soldier and his physical response to being placed in an environment of shot and shell. The instinctive response to being placed in such a position of danger would be to seek the protection of any available shelter. Military training and discipline of the period were designed to overcome this natural response, but could not recreate the shock and confusion of actual combat.

This study will demonstrate that soldiers of the Civil War responded to the circumstances of combat by taking advantage of any available shelter. The mass formations emphasized in the drill manuals of the day were employed to maneuver troops onto and off the battlefield, but were abandoned upon entering a firefight in favor of skirmish tactics, which stressed taking advantage of cover. This response was not merely the result of individual reaction to a hostile environment; officers often ordered their men

¹ Joseph Allen Frank and George A. Reeves provide an excellent historiographical analysis of the study of the common soldier of the Civil War in their introduction to "Seeing the Elephant:" Raw Recruits at the Battle of Shiloh, *Contributions in Military Studies*, no. 88 (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), 2-4. See also James McPherson, For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 183-186; and J. Tracy Power, Lee's Miserables: Life in the Army of Northern Virginia from the Wilderness to Appomattox (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina press, 1998), 291-292.

to ground. Furthermore, this study will attempt to link this course of action with the experiences of small-unit actions, which were more common than large scale battles. Finally, the study will show that the practice of soldiers seeking cover was present from the very beginning of the war. The use of extensive fieldworks and the organization and use of skirmisher and sharpshooter units has been well documented during the campaigns of 1864 and 1865. This essay will demonstrate that advanced skirmish tactics and the practice of going to ground were part of the soldier's experience throughout the war.

To illustrate its claims, this study will concentrate on the experiences and observations of Confederate soldiers from the state of South Carolina. The path towards civil war began in that state and the first shots were fired in Charleston harbor. If soldiers from the state most eager for conflict took advantage of battlefield protection early in the war, then it may be argued that such a response was common for all soldiers. South Carolina had a long military tradition at the time the Civil War began, one that stretched back to its colonial experience. The tactics used by its soldiers may reflect this heritage.

The drill manuals used by the Union and Confederate armies had changed very little from the days of the Revolutionary War. In the eighteenth century, soldiers were armed with the smoothbore musket, an inaccurate weapon with a range of approximately one hundred yards. Due to the limitations of the weapon, military tactics were founded on the idea of getting large bodies of men close to an enemy. The combination of close range and mass concentrated fire made up for the musket's shortcomings.² Tight

² Some recent studies are suggesting that muskets were more accurate than commonly believed, and that the limitations lay in soldiers' marksmanship – or lack of. See Lawrence Babits, [A Devil of a Whipping: The Battle of Cowpens](#) (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998): 13. Babits is discussing The Revolutionary war, but the musket did not change greatly until the introduction of the rifled musket.

formations of soldiers not only increased the effectiveness of their weapons, but solved problems of maneuverability. Officers were better able to control and direct compact bodies of men.³

The introduction of the rifle forced some adaptation in tactics. Rifles were far more accurate than muskets and had three or four times the range. This combination offset the need for close order formations. Rifles, however, were delicate weapons that could not be mass produced, and were not as durable as muskets. They were also much slower to load and fire. One company per regiment was armed with rifles, and these men functioned as skirmishers.⁴ They advanced in a dispersed line in front of the main body to develop an enemy's position and pin him in place. In defense, they harassed and disrupted advancing forces before retreating to the main body. While performing these duties, skirmishers were expected to take every advantage of cover to make up for their small numbers.⁵

About the time of the Mexican War, but not in time to be widely used in that conflict, another weapon appeared. The rifled musket combined the durability and faster rate of fire of the musket with much of the accuracy and range of the rifle. It was also

³ For an analysis of the development of American military tactics and drill manuals up to the Civil War, see Grady McWhiney and Perry D. Jamieson, Attack and Die: Civil War Military Tactics and the Southern Heritage (University, Ala.: The University of Alabama Press, 1982), 31-36; Paddy Griffith, Battle Tactics of the Civil War (London: Yale University Press, 1989; reprint The Crowood Press, 1987), 98-100; and Mark A. Weitz, "Drill, Training, and the Combat Performance of the Civil War Soldier: Dispelling the Myth of the Poor Soldier, Great Fighter," The Journal of Military History 62 (1998): 270-276.

⁴ The basic unit of United States army organization was the regiment, which consisted of ten companies. Each company had strength of forty to one hundred men.

⁵ Grady McWhiney and Perry D. Jamieson, Attack and Die, 31-36; Paddy Griffith, 98-100.

able to be mass produced. This innovation placed the advantages of the rifle in the hand of every individual soldier.⁶

New drill manuals accounted for this new technology by placing a greater emphasis on skirmish tactics. Every company was now trained to function as skirmishers, promoting the ideas of loose order tactics and freedom of movement. Heavy or light bodies of skirmishers could be used as needed. An emphasis was placed on the concept of “comrades in battle,” groups of four men that would fight and maneuver together on the skirmish line.⁷

However, while each company was now expected to be able to function as skirmishers, the drill books still placed a premium on close order formations for movement and on the firing line. Skirmishers had been used during the Mexican War, but officers did not like what they perceived as a loss in firepower and in command control.⁸ The increased range and accuracy of the rifled musket was addressed by stressing speed in deployment. Soldiers were to deploy at the “double-quick,” which was a jog. This concept was not combined with a requisite program of physical conditioning. Soldiers jogging about a battlefield with full packs and their equipment quickly tired, making the idea of the double-quick a moot point. The idea was taken from the tactics used by the elite French chasseur and Zouave units, but the French complemented their drill routines with a program of physical fitness and athleticism.⁹

⁶ Smoothbore muskets were issued to many units at the outset of the war, but were replaced with rifled muskets as soon as possible.

⁷ McWhiney and Jamieson, Attack and Die, 51-52; Griffith, Battle Tactics, 101-102.

⁸ McWhiney and Jamieson, Attack and Die, 33.

⁹ McWhiney and Jamieson, Attack and Die, 31-36; Griffith, Battle Tactics, 100-102.

Officers during the Mexican War disliked using skirmish formations due to the resulting loss of command control. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the influence of officers was limited to the effective range of their voice and vision. Close bodies of men were much easier to keep under observation and control. Organized bodies of men were easier to maneuver about the obstacles of the battlefield, while maintaining command control. In a tight formation men were conscious of the presence of their comrades. This contributed to a sense of security in numbers and reduced the likelihood of acts of cowardice, since no man would wish to desert his post within sight of his comrades.¹⁰

The preferences of officers and the strictures of drill manuals broke down when faced with the pressures of the battlefield. Many battles were fought in thick woods or underbrush that made the use of close order tactics impossible. Wooded or other rough terrain rapidly disrupted marching columns or ordered battle lines, breaking them up into what were in effect skirmish lines. Even open farmland or clearings contained fences, ditches, and other obstacles that broke up ordered formations. Added to these factors were the smoke and noise of battle, which impaired visibility and hearing. Amid such confusion, officers rapidly lost the tight control of their men that they enjoyed on the parade ground. Removed from the direct control of their officers, the individual soldier's instinct for survival and self-protection took over. Ordered lines of battle disintegrated as soldiers flinched from enemy fire, attempted to dodge bullets, and sought protection from available shelter. In this process, battle lines unconsciously became skirmish lines as

¹⁰ Griffith, Battle Tactics, 106, 110; Frank and Reeves, "Seeing the Elephant," 90; Earl J. Hess, The Union Soldier in Battle: Enduring the Ordeal of Combat (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997), 46-47, 84, 113-114.

men went to ground under enemy fire.¹¹ The common command to “fire at will” also encouraged individual action.¹²

When fighting in woods or thick brush, the protection of a tree or log was readily available. But even open fields provided shelter in the form of fences, stone walls, standing corn, or simply hollows in the earth. Simply going prone was another method of minimizing one’s exposure to fire; by piling his knapsack, blanket, and other equipment in front of him a soldier could create a fortification that would at least offer the illusion of protection.¹³ Even when under the direct fire of the enemy, “almost any piece of ground could quickly be converted into a stronghold.”¹⁴

Although men engaged in this style of fighting may have appeared to have lost all sense of organization, such was not the case. Unit integrity was maintained even as soldiers fought on in individual fashion. Soldiers fighting alone or in clusters nevertheless maintained contact with each other.¹⁵ Berry Benson of the First South Carolina Infantry provides an excellent description of this practice:

...I want to try to tell something of how the fighting really goes on. I supposed a battle was carried on in the order and style of a first-class drill, knees all bent at the same angle and at the same moment, guns leveled on a line that was as even as a floor, and every trigger pulled at one moment making a single report.

¹¹ Griffith, Battle Tactics, 58, 112, 113; Frank and Reeves, “Seeing the Elephant,” 88; Hess, The Union Soldier in Battle, 47-48; McWhiney and Jamieson, Attack and Die, 81-98; Andrew Houghton, Training, Tactics and Leadership in the Confederate Army of Tennessee: Seeds of Failure (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2000), 69.

¹² Griffith, Battle Tactics, 112.

¹³ Griffith, Battle Tactics, 119; John Tobey, “Prone Fighting: ‘The Reason that there is not More Killed in Battle,’” The Columbia Examiner 3, no. 1, n.d.; reprint Rock County Volunteer: The Newsletter of the 33rd Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry, 18, no. 2 (2002): 4-7.

¹⁴ Griffith, Battle Tactics, 119.

¹⁵ Hess, The Union Soldier in Battle, 116-117.

For a battlefield is not a drillroom, nor is battle an occasion for drill, and only the merest semblance of order is maintained. I say *semblance* of order, for there *is* an undercurrent of order in tried troops that surpasses that of the drillroom. It is that order that springs from the confidence comrades have in one another – from the knowledge that these messmates of yours, whether they stand or lie upon the ground, close together or scattered apart, in front of you three paces or in rear of you six, in the open or behind a tree or a rock – the confidence that these though they do not “touch elbows to the right,” are nevertheless keeping dressed upon the colors in some rough fashion, and that the line will not move forward and leave them there, nor will they move back and leave the line.

A battle is entered mostly in as good order and with as close a drill front as the nature of the ground will permit, but at the first “pop! pop!” of the rifles there comes a sudden loosening of the ranks, a freeing of selves from the impediment of contact, and every man goes to fighting on his own hook; firing as, and when he likes, and reloading as fast as he fires. He takes shelter wherever he can find it, so he does not get too far away from his company, and his officers will call his attention to this should he move too far. He may stand up, he may kneel down, he may lie down, it is all right – though mostly the men keep standing except when silent under fire, then they lie down.¹⁶

Note that Benson also refers to the usefulness of drill maneuvers in moving about the battlefield except as hindered by terrain and when in actual combat.

Another important point in Benson’s account is that officers were able to exert some influence on men fighting in skirmish fashion. This was not an anarchic form of fighting, despite the pre-war prejudices against it. In fact officers frequently took the initiative of ordering their men to seek shelter.

Many times this was done to shelter the men from the effects of incoming artillery fire. Lieutenant Samuel Lowry of the Seventeenth South Carolina Infantry mentioned that during the battle of Malvern Hill, Virginia in July of 1862 his unit was ordered to lie down behind a hill to take shelter from an artillery barrage. As the enemy’s cannons corrected their fire to adjust to this movement, Lowry’s unit was shifted to another area

¹⁶ Susan Williams Benson, ed., Berry Benson’s Civil War Book: Memoirs of a Confederate Scout and Sharpshooter (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 22-23.

behind the hill. This process was repeated several times during the course of the battle.¹⁷

A few weeks later on August 21, near Rappahannock Station, the Seventeenth was again ordered to lie down behind a hill as protection against artillery fire. This order was also issued at Second Manassas on August 29.¹⁸

Colonel James Drayton Nance of the Third South Carolina Infantry ordered his men to lie down under artillery fire during the fighting near Richmond in 1862, and again at the battle of Antietam.¹⁹ At the battle of Chickamauga General James Kershaw halted his men “under a heavy fire of artillery from the heights, sheltering the men as much as possible.”²⁰

Soldiers were ordered to take cover from rifle and musketry fire as well. At Chancellorsville in May 1863, John Coxe recalled, “When our line got well under the Federal fire, we were halted and told simply to hold our ground, protect ourselves as much as possible behind trees and by lying down, but to keep up a steady fire.” Orders to lie down were given later in the battle when Coxe and his comrades were sent to halt the advancing Federal Sixth Corps.²¹ D. Dickert remembered that his unit was ordered to take position behind the stone wall at Marye’s Heights at the battle of Fredericksburg,

¹⁷ Samuel Catawba Lowry, diary, Samuel Catawba Lowry Papers, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, S.C., 13-14.

¹⁸ DeWitt Boyd Stone, Jr., Wandering to Glory: Confederate Veterans Remember Evans’ Brigade (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2002), 43, 51; Lowry, diary, 16.

¹⁹ James Drayton Nance, letter, 21 June 1862, and “Official Report on the Battle of Sharpsburg,” 22 Sept. 1862, James Drayton Nance Papers, South Caroliniana Library.

²⁰ James B. Kershaw, “Official Report of the Battle of Chickamauga,” Southern Historical Society Papers 13 (1885), reprint James I. Robertson, ed., (Wilmington, N.C.: Broadfoot Publishing Co., 1992), 390.

²¹ John Coxe, “In the Battle of Chancellorsville,” Confederate Veteran 30, no. 4 (1922), reprint (Wilmington, N.C.: Broadfoot Publishing Co., 1987-1988), 138, 140.

and that this was the first time they had the protection of breastworks in combat.²²

Colonel Nance commanded one of the units near the stone wall. He noted that his men had “laid down and opened fire upon the enemy,” but that they “were too much exposed.” He then ordered the men to “withdraw far enough to get shelter behind the crest of the hill without retiring too far to deliver an effective fire.”²³

At the battle of Antietam, a South Carolina unit was posted behind a rock fence for protection, but later ordered to attack a wood to their front. To attack was “suicidal, especially when we were ordered to march through open ground and attack the enemy, sheltered behind trees and rocks.” In this instance, it was the enemy that had gone to ground. The attack failed.²⁴

South Carolina units in other sectors of the battle were also deployed behind walls and fences for protection.²⁵ James Coker, Sixth South Carolina, stated that “our men went boldly forward, down the hill, through an orchard, to a good stone fence, where they were halted, and began firing.”²⁶

²² D. Augustus Dickert, History of Kershaw’s Brigade, (n.p., n.d., reprint Dayton, Ohio: Morningside Bookshop, 1973), 185.

²³ James Drayton Nance, “Official report of the Battle of Fredericksburg,” 24 Dec. 1862, James Drayton Nance Papers, South Caroliniana Library.

²⁴ Dickert, History of Kershaw’s Brigade, 174.

²⁵ J.F.J. Caldwell, The History of a Brigade of South Carolinians, Known First as “Gregg’s,” and Subsequently as “McGowan’s Brigade,” (Philadelphia: King & Baird, 1866, reprint Marietta, Ga.: Continental Book Co., 1951), 45.

²⁶ James Lide Coker, History of Company G, Ninth S.C. Regiment, Infantry, C.S. Army and of Company E., Sixth S.C. Regiment, Infantry, C.S. Army (n.p., 1885?, reprint Greenwood, S.C.: The Attic Press, Inc., 1979), 111.

At the battle of Gaines' Mill, July 1862, the First South Carolina Infantry was ordered to lie down under heavy musket fire.²⁷ A member of the Hampton Legion observed soldiers of the Texas Brigade being ordered to "lie down and load."²⁸

The act of taking shelter these accounts describe was both an instinctual response to the circumstances of combat and behavior taken under direct orders from a superior. Fighting in skirmish fashion on the field of battle was also a learned response. Few engagements in the Civil War involved large scale battles between armies composed of thousands of men. Most were much smaller affairs which received little or no coverage or mention outside of officers' reports and the Official Records. In fact, battles have been categorized by the United States War Department as "actions," "affairs," "skirmishes," "engagements," etc., according to the number of men engaged.²⁹ In "battles" involving small numbers of men, it is probable that small unit, or skirmish, tactics were also utilized. The experience of fighting in open order in countless unnamed skirmishes would certainly have affected conduct of troops in larger battles.

Thomas H. Kirton of the First South Carolina Infantry stated "the skirmishes I was in are too numerous to mention."³⁰ George Draft made a distinction between "engagements" and "regular engagements" in his reminiscences.³¹ And the diary of

²⁷ Benson, Memoirs, 10.

²⁸ Alifaire Gaston Walden, ed., Confederate War Diary of John Thomas Gaston (Columbia, S.C.: Vogue Press, 1960), 6.

²⁹ Peter Svenson, Battlefield: Farming a Civil War Battleground (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 22.

³⁰ Thomas H. Kirton, "Thomas H. Kirton," Recollections & Reminiscences, 1861-1865 through World War I, vol. 1 (South Carolina Division, United daughters of the Confederacy, 1990), 481.

³¹ George Draft, "Reminiscences of a Veteran – Number 27," Recollections and Reminiscences, vol. 3, 306.

James Boulware mentions instances of small unnamed actions throughout 1862 and 1863.³²

Skirmishing was most frequent when the opposing armies were operating in close proximity to each other for extended periods of time, such as in siege operations. The city of Richmond was under constant threat from the Union troops that occupied the Peninsula between the James and York Rivers from the spring of 1862 until the end of the war. Contact between the two forces was common during the Peninsular Campaign of 1862, and throughout the war. South Carolinians posted there took part in numerous skirmishes.³³ Nearby Petersburg was also vulnerable; Henry Conner noted a skirmish with a raiding party in September of 1863.³⁴

South Carolinians took part in similar activities in the western theatre. They participated in the skirmishing that took place before the capture of Munfordsville, Kentucky in the fall of 1862,³⁵ and around Jackson, Mississippi in July of 1863.³⁶ During operations around Chattanooga and Knoxville in late 1863, small but sharp firefights were a daily occurrence.³⁷

³² James Richmond Boulware, war diary, James Richmond Boulware Papers, South Caroliniana Library, see entries for 24 July 1862, 8 August 1862, 10 November 1862, 17 March 1863, 19 April 1863.

³³ Richard Lewis, Camp Life of a Confederate Boy, of Bratton's Brigade, Longstreet's Corps, CSA (Charleston: The News and Courier Book Presses, 1883, reprint Garthersburg, Md.: The Butternut Press) 29, 46-47, 49, 52; T.T. Burch, "War Record of T.T. Burch," Recollections and Reminiscences, vol. 3, 502.

³⁴ Henry Calvin Conner, letter 1 Sept. 1863, Recollections and Reminiscences, vol. 2, 96. See also letter for 18 May 1863 in same volume for operations around Richmond.

³⁵ William H. Chandler, ed., Letters of Thomas Moses Britton, 1862-1863 (Hemingway, S.C.; Three Rivers Historical Society, 1983), 20.

³⁶ Fitz William McMaster, account book and diary 8 June-30 Sept. 1863, Fitz William McMaster Papers, South Caroliniana Library, entries for 13-14 July.

³⁷ Henry Conner, letter 26 Sept. 1863, letter 20 Nov. 1863, Recollections and Reminiscences, vol. 2, 98, 104; E.R. Gunter, "Reminiscences of a Veteran – Number 22," Recollections and Reminiscences, vol. 3, 304.

Small actions were also common during the increased activity before and after larger battles, as opposing forces marched and countermarched in their attempts to maneuver into positions of advantage. At the beginning of the Chancellorsville campaign, the Twelfth South Carolina Infantry was covering a ford at Hamilton's Crossing, and "here a skirmish battle raged all day."³⁸ The Fifteenth South Carolina Infantry also fought a day-long skirmish as it took part in demonstrations that distracted the Northern army and prevented it from discovering Stonewall Jackson's flanking march.³⁹

Gerald Linderman has concluded that the instinct to seek cover was consciously resisted by the men in the ranks. Victorian concepts of bravery required that men fight in the open without flinching from enemy fire. Courage was proven by standing up and fighting "man fashion." Only the cowardly attempted to dodge shells and bullets. Cowardly men were punished by meeting a painful death on the battlefield, while courageous acts provided a divine protection from harm. This ideology was particularly strong in the early years of the war. Gradually, the experience of combat wore away such idealism and veteran soldiers had no qualms in going to ground. Fresh recruits, however, entered the war still adhering to ideals of civilian society.⁴⁰

At what point did soldiers realize that Victorian ideology had no basis in the reality of combat? Or did these ideas ever have a strong influence upon a soldier's

³⁸ J. Boyles, Reminiscences of the Civil War, by Lt. J.R. Boyles, of Co. C, 12th S.C.V., Gregg's Brigade afterward McGowan's (Columbia, S.C.: The Bryan Printing Co., 1890), 35.

³⁹ Wesley Nichols, Autobiography and Civil War Recollections of Wesley Nichols, Leesville, S.C. (Leesville, S.C.: Twin County News Print, n.d.), 4.

⁴⁰ Gerald F. Linderman, Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War (New York: The Free Press, 1987), 21, 61, 70, 138-139, 142.

behavior in combat? The answers to these questions may be found in the experiences of South Carolinians.

The battle of Gettysburg enjoys premier status in popular memory of the Civil War. This reputation was first cultivated shortly after the war, when it was recognized as the turning point of the war and because of its associations with Abraham Lincoln and the Gettysburg address. It became the embodiment of the Civil War experience for the Victorian Age and for subsequent generations.

Yet soldiers in that battle departed from the Victorian ideals of combat. General Kershaw reported that during the fighting on July 2, "I fell back to the Third regiment, then hotly engaged on the crest of the stony hill...among the rocks and tree, within a few feet of each other, a desperate conflict ensued."⁴¹ Major R.C. Maffett, who was in command of the Third South Carolina in Kershaw's brigade, provides additional detail in his report, which states "...the regiment moved...to the cover of a piece of woods...Sheltering ourselves behind some rocks and trees..."⁴² A private in the ranks, whose unit was being held in reserve but was subjected to enemy fire, sated that as they men lay down "we all threw up little Gibaltars for ourselves."⁴³

A few months earlier, at the battle of Chancellorsville, Union troops were observed to fight from the protection of the trees of the densely wooded field. "They deliberately loaded their pieces behind the trees, stepped out, picked their men, fired, and

⁴¹ James B. Kershaw, "Official Reports of the Battle of Gettysburg: Report of General Kershaw," Southern Historical Society Papers 4, no. 3 (1877), 182.

⁴² R.C. Maffett, "Official Reports of the Battle of Gettysburg: Report of the Operations of the Third South Carolina Regiment," Southern Historical Society Papers 13 (1885), 208.

⁴³ Benson, Memoirs, 47. The quote is from Benson's brother Blackwood Benson. Barry Benson had been wounded earlier and did not participate in the battle of Gettysburg.

returned to their trees to reload.”⁴⁴ When a Confederate unit advancing in line of battle to discover the enemy’s position came under fire “...each got under the cover of a tree or something and for a time the only firing was when a man from either side would show his head.”⁴⁵

The majority of Confederate soldiers engaged at the battle of Fredericksburg in December 1862 enjoyed the advantage of being posted behind the shelter of fences or woods. But some men did find themselves in an exposed position under intense enemy fire. J.W. Brunson of the Pee Dee Light Artillery disdained a comrade’s suggestion that he take shelter behind a nearby tree. “‘No,’ I replied, ‘one place is as good as another, and if I’ve got to go, I’d rather go by my gun.’ Then I lifted up the wooden lid of the cartridge box as a slight protection to my head, and leaning on my elbow, stood.” When a shell crashed to close for comfort, Brunson decided that discretion was the better part of valor and joined his friend behind the tree.⁴⁶

Troops were observed to fight from behind cover during the battle of Antietam in September 1862, another well known engagement fought in relatively open fields. Berry Benson recounted that the Federal soldiers were “in a crouching disorderly line” into which “we poured volley after volley...Besides those lying in the ravine, part of the enemy’s line had taken refuge behind a stone fence or ridge of rocks which did not appear to protect them fully, for...they were continually breaking from it and fleeing.”⁴⁷

Frank Mixson, who was in the same unit as Benson, recalled an instance when both the

⁴⁴ Caldwell, History of a Brigade of South Carolinians, 80.

⁴⁵ Boyles, Reminiscences, 36.

⁴⁶ J.W. Brunson, “Fredericksburg,” Recollections and Reminiscences, vol. 5, 182.

⁴⁷ Benson, Memoirs, 27-28.

Confederate and Union troops engaged in a race for the shelter of a stone fence in the middle of the field. The Southern soldiers won the race.⁴⁸ Additional evidence that men were trying to shield themselves comes from a letter of J.C. Ramage. Ramage does not detail the nature of the fighting, but describes the wounds received by members of his company. All suffered head, torso, and arm wounds, which would be the parts of the body exposed by men crouching behind fences, rocks, or bushes.⁴⁹

Gregg's South Carolina Brigade was heavily engaged at Second Manassas in August of 1862. This unit was the target of wave after wave of Federal attacks. The men had the protection of a railroad embankment, and "standing, kneeling, lying, we fought."⁵⁰ Attacking Union troops were also observed to conceal themselves as much as possible. "The enemy would advance, deliver their fire, and then conceal themselves until they could load again."⁵¹ A third account states: "From the dense growth which shielded the enemy from our view, they poured in upon us a deadly fire. Our men had seldom better direction for their aim than the bushes from which the fire came."⁵²

Skirmishing and small engagements were common, but there had been few large scale pitched battles by spring and early summer of 1862. In Virginia, there had not been a significant engagement since First Manassas in July 1861. When Northern forces attempted to capture the Confederate capital of Richmond by driving up the Peninsula

⁴⁸ Frank M. Mixson, Reminiscences of a Private (Columbia, S.C.: The State Co., 1910), 31.

⁴⁹ J.C. Ramage, "Letter of J.C. Ramage to Wife, September 18, 1862," Recollections and Reminiscences, vol. 9, 262-264.

⁵⁰ Caldwell, History of a Brigade of South Carolinians, 36.

⁵¹ Coker, History of Company G, Ninth S.C., 98.

⁵² Edward McCrady, Jr., "Gregg's Brigade of South Carolinians in the Second Battle of Manassas," Southern Historical Society Papers 13 (1885), 24.

between the James and York Rivers, the veterans of First Manassas had been joined by many new recruits with little battle experience.

Even at this early stage of the war, troops were taking advantage of available cover and going to ground during combat. While under artillery fire in the Peninsula on June 26, 1862, J.R. Boyles noted “we had to lay low and hug the ground.”⁵³ At the battle of Seven Pines, the Fourth South Carolina was advancing through a thicket towards a strong enemy position: “Our numbers being so small we made a flank movement to our left, making for a thick piece of woods that was but a short distance away, as we thought we would be sheltered from the storm of ball and shell which played havoc in our ranks.” Unfortunately for the men of the Fourth, the woods concealed another body of Federal troops. They regiment suffered heavy losses while caught in the open under a crossfire, but “...we did what shooting we could while laying on the ground amongst our dead and wounded comrades.”⁵⁴

The experience of James Coker was a veritable litany of examples of men going to ground. At the battle of Williamsburg, Coker observed a North Carolina regiment advancing. “Coming to the rail fence...they fell to the ground and availed themselves of the slight cover to return the enemy’s fire.”⁵⁵ At Seven Pines, a fellow soldier was “loading and firing where the regiment was lying down in line of battle...when he rolled on his back to ‘tear’ and ‘ram cartridge,’ a cruel bullet crashed into his forehead.”⁵⁶ Later

⁵³ Boyles, Reminiscences, 20.

⁵⁴ J.W. Reid, History of the Fourth Regiment of S.C. Volunteers, from the Commencement of the War Until Lee’s Surrender, (Greenville, S.C.: Shannon & Co., n.d.; reprint Dayton, Ohio: Morningside Bookshop, 1975), 90-91.

⁵⁵ Coker, History of Company G, Ninth S.C., 55.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 67.

at Gaines' Mill, "after taking (the enemy's) bullets for a while, General Anderson, who had been lying down with us on the crest...ordered a charge."⁵⁷ A mix of defiant courage and practicality occurred at Frasier's Farm, where "exposed to the terrible and murderous fire of the enemy, our boys would stand up, take deliberate aim, and fire, exposing themselves unnecessarily...At the command to charge, our companies rose up..." During this charge, Coker's comrades captured a battery. There the men "took refuge behind the artillery and dead horses, and poured a well directed fire into the line of infantry..."⁵⁸

The practice of fighting skirmish style was also present at this time during the fighting around Charleston. In a small engagement on James Island "the Southerners lay down on the ground, hiding behind palmettos and it was in this manner that they fought."⁵⁹

Thus far, the practice of going to ground has been demonstrated as early as the spring of 1862. Was this behavior manifested even earlier? Are examples to be found in the battle of First Manassas, the first major engagement of the war? Indeed they are. Richard Lewis of the Fourth South Carolina noted that "our company was lying behind the plank and rail fence in front of the Henry House at one time in the fight."⁶⁰ The Hampton Legion infantry was also engaged near the Henry House. They had been driven back from an earlier position, rallied under the cover of a wood, and then returned to the

⁵⁷ Ibid, 74.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 83.

⁵⁹ Mrs. T.W. Bookhart, "Reminiscences of John Cribb," Recollections and Reminiscences, vol. 8, 47-48.

⁶⁰ Lewis, Camp Life, 13.

fighting at the house. “Our men however did splendidly, taking advantage of the cover they fired with deadly effect. Here Colonel Hampton wished to make a charge but luckily the men were too much scattered, and were doing excellent work in another way.”⁶¹

Another member of the Hampton Legion described a skirmish at the Henry House on July 21, but this is probably the actual battle of First Manassas on July 19. The defeated Union army fled to Washington after the battle, leaving the area firmly in Confederate control for several weeks. It is unlikely that another skirmish could have happened shortly after the battle. The account reads:

Forming a line of battle, single file we marched to the fence, lay down, and began firing. The “Yanks” fired according to regulations, by platoons. We could hear their orders distinctly – “Ready, Aim, Fire!” – in time to lie as closely to the ground as possible. Following that volley of bullets, most of which struck the fence, we would arise and shoot at will, each of us usually picking a man.⁶²

This evidence referring to skirmish style fighting and the practice of going to ground is even more compelling when one considers the sources. The Hampton Legion was organized and partially equipped by Wade Hampton, a wealthy South Carolina plantation owner known as the wealthiest man in America. Many men from the upper crust of South Carolina society - including members of elite, exclusive antebellum militia companies - vied for the honor of serving with this wealthy and cultured man.⁶³ If any

⁶¹ James Lowndes, letter 26 July 1861, James Lowndes Papers, South Caroliniana Library.

⁶² T.C. Albergotti, “Reminiscences of T.C. Albergotti, Company A, Hampton Legion,” Recollections and Reminiscences, vol. 10, 57.

⁶³ Ron Field, The Hampton Legion, Part 1: Regimental History and Part 2: Company Histories (Lower Swell, Gloucestershire: Design Folio, 1994, 1995). See Regimental History, 4, 39, 52; Company Histories 1-2, 11-14, 19, 22-24, 27-28. James Lowndes and T.C. Albergotti, cited above, were members of the Legion’s elite Washington Light Infantry of Charleston. Members of this unit included the flower of

unit subscribed to the Victorian principles of shunning protection and fighting “man-fashion,” it would have been this one. The fact that this unit, whose members were conscious of being part of a long and distinguished South Carolina military tradition, went to ground without a second thought speaks volumes about the style of fighting that was actually carried out in the Civil War.

On a related note, soldiers during the Civil War have been said to have especially shunned the use of fieldworks at the beginning of the conflict. The men would entrench only under direct orders, and considered such physical labor only fit for slaves. But consider this description from Calloway Henderson of the Seventh South Carolina of a scene a few days prior to the battle at First Manassas:

We formed line of battle and were informed by General Beauregard that that was the end of falling back and to get ready to fight. The line was on the south side of the creek, close up to the water. We became very industrious at this time. Every man wanted to dig a trench or ditch...⁶⁴

An extensive study of the use of fieldworks is not the focus of this work, but the evidence does highlight a pattern of behavior that is directly related to the subject of going to ground.

Before concluding this paper, the limitations of the sources must be acknowledged. Despite the many sources available of personal experiences and reminiscences of the Civil War, it is difficult to pinpoint with total accuracy a pattern of behavior. Many soldiers were vague in their descriptions of actions they were in, often saying little more than the equivalent of “I was there.” In letters home to friends and

Charleston society. For company roster, see Janet B. Hewitt, ed., Confederate State Roster: South Carolina Unit Roster, vol. 2 (Wilmington, N.C.: Broadfoot Publishing Co., 1998), 533-534.

⁶⁴ Calloway K. Henderson, “Reminiscences,” Recollections and Reminiscences, vol. 3, 152.

family, the men frequently made no mention at all of their combat experiences. Some were simply homesick, wishing only to hear of events back home. Others used their correspondence as a means of escape from their surroundings.⁶⁵

No attempt has been made in this study to assemble any statistics of the percentage of men who detailed their battle experiences versus those who left a vague description or none at all. Nor has there been an effort to amass a set of numerical data on the number of men who mentioned the practice of going to ground versus those who did not. The variety of types of sources consulted – diaries, letters, journals, post-war recollections – poses difficulties in constructing an accurate sample. And no single type of source was numerous enough to provide statistically significant data. A statistical analysis incorporating all of these variables may provide a quantitative basis to judge how common the practice of going to ground was.

Furthermore, it must be acknowledged that a degree of interpretation is involved in constructing exactly what a soldier meant by a turn of phrase. For example, when men wrote that their companies “rose up” and charged, this could either mean that they were fighting prone before their attack or that they merely sprang forward. “Rising up” could refer as much to a mental state as to a physical one. This study has sought to present the experiences of the men involved in their own words. The reader may judge whether the wording of the accounts justify the interpretation that has been drawn.

Simply put, that conclusion is that soldiers during the Civil War commonly fought in loose lines of battle which more closely resembled skirmish lines. They took advantage of any available cover to shield themselves from the bullets and shells of the

⁶⁵ For a discussion of examining Civil War correspondence, see McPherson, For Cause and Comrades, vii-xi. Also Power, Lee's Miserables, 289.

enemy, going prone if no other cover was available. This, too, was a characteristic of skirmish lines. Such action was partially due to the confusion inherent in battle, which worked to disrupt ordered formations. It was not only an individual response to the battle environment; it was often initiated by the orders of superior officers. Furthermore, soldiers had more experience in fighting in skirmish formation in small unit actions, an experience which influenced their conduct in larger engagements. Finally, the practice of going to ground was not the result of gradually accumulated experience with the realities of war. It was present from the very beginning of the war.

The experiences of South Carolinians in the Confederate armies have been used to make a case for a broader pattern of behavior common to all participants in the war. Future scholarship on the experiences of soldiers from individual states on both sides could confirm the veracity of this argument.

The Civil War is often presented as the first “modern war.” This reputation rests largely upon the first use of technological tools that would be commonly employed in future conflicts, with some improvement. The field telegraph allowed rapid communication from the front. Railroads shuttled men and supplies across theatres of operation, and were central elements of strategic planning. Revolutionary weapons such as the early form of the machine-gun and the armor-plated battleship appeared.

Revolutionary tactics and strategies also emerged during the Civil War. “Total war” – the targeting and destruction of civilian resources as a military objective – was carried out on a scale never before seen. The combination of speed and mobility with concentrated firepower by Northern cavalry foreshadowed the blitzkrieg. Trench warfare evolved from the use of modern weapons and the perfection of field fortification

construction techniques.⁶⁶ The widespread use of open-order tactics and the appearance of specially trained skirmish units such as the Confederate sharpshooter battalions are traditionally placed within this context of trench warfare. Future drill manuals incorporated this tactical innovation, and this method of combat was eventually adopted and improved upon in the future by armies at war around the globe, particularly after World War I.

The appearance of open-order tactics from the very beginning of the Civil War pushes back that interpretation and stresses an organic process initiated by the lower ranks. Enlisted men took the lead, and their instinctual reactions to the battlefield environment were adapted by their officers to battle conditions and objectives. Furthermore, a tactical style from below in opposition from established procedure instituted from above may account for the absence of strategically significant victories early in the war and therefore have been a factor in the length and cost of the conflict.⁶⁷ The apparent lack of any cultural restrictions against this style of fighting calls for future study of American military heritage, particularly militia training. At the time of the Civil War, the tradition of the natural ability of the volunteer American soldier with origins in the experience of the American Revolution still acted against the raising of a large professional army. This underscores the possible influence of militia training. A closer study of the training of volunteer militia companies before the Civil War may illuminate the roots of open-order tactics and may point to their origins in earlier conflicts.

⁶⁶ Edward Hagerman, The American Civil War and the Origins of Modern Warfare: Ideas, Organization, and Field Command (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), xi-xviii.

⁶⁷ Griffith claims that Civil War battles were indecisive and costly because combat quickly degenerated into series of firefights. The plans of officers disappeared as tight, orderly formations broke down in the heat of battle and as soldiers acted increasingly on their own initiative and in their own interests of self-protection by assuming loose, open formations. Battle Tactics, 137-138.

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