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**THE GALLANT & MERITORIOUS CONDUCT OF
COL. OLIVER L. SHEPHERD**

**By
T. M. Jacobs**

“It is impossible to comparison all of an officer’s history and services, but mine has been unceremoniously active and serviceable to the book.”

Colonel Oliver Lathrop Shepherd wrote these words to General George Cullum in February 1879. Cullum was conducting the daunting task of locating and collecting all records of cadets who graduated from West Point Academy for a Biographical Register of the Military Academy. At first Shepherd was reluctant of outlining his years of service. He wrote, “How myself to give a narrative of my service in the Army, seems somewhat presumptuous and savoring egotism.” He did finally agree to outline his career and wrote to Cullum several times in order to summarize his 30 year career as a soldier in the United States Army.

In early 1836 he applied to West Point Academy perhaps hoping for a life of adventure and travel often promised to a recruit. Upon learning of his conditional appointment, he wrote to Lewis Cass, Secretary of War, “I accept with a feeling of the most grateful acknowledgement.” Shepherd received full enlistment with the academy on July 1, 1836 and embarked on what would be a military career including active duty during the Seminole Florida War, the War with Mexico, and the Civil War.

Graduating from the academy in 1840, his classmates included such decorated

Generals as William T. Sherman, Stewart Van Vliet, and George W. Getty. He was commissioned as a Brevet Second Lieutenant of the 4th Infantry in the Army where he proved to be a disciplined soldier and showed leadership qualities.

He also learned the true life of a soldier; while serving on the front lines in the War with Mexico in which he received three promotions for “Gallant and Meritorious Conduct” during the battles of Contreras, Churubusco, and Chapultepec.

In 1861 when the Civil War broke out, Shepherd was in garrison at Fort Hamilton, New York, in command of the 3rd Infantry Battalion in the Defenses of Washington, DC. He was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel of the 18th Infantry and took part in the Siege of Corinth, Mississippi earning him another promotion for Gallant and Meritorious Service. He went onto to serve in Major-General Don Carlos Buell’s movement through Alabama and Tennessee and also Major-General William S. Rosecrans’ Tennessee Campaign (Army of the Cumberland). In late December 1862, he was commanding a brigade of regulars at the Battle of Stones River where he earned his fifth promotion for Gallant and Meritorious Service.

He later reflected and wrote of his experience at the Battle of Stones River in a letter to R.W. Johnson dated May 8, 1888:

Four days before the 31st December 1862 when the battle began lasting four days, I became its commander, joining with two Battalions.

The Brigade were ordered to move at break of day Dec 31, 1862. General [William S.] Rosecran’s order for the battle was read at the break of day with good efforts.

The Brigade were ordered in column to the right of the Nashville Pike fronting the

enemy till about 9, o'clock when from the noise of battle on our right, we were moved west into the thick cedars - cutting our way - which in the cedars I saw Genl [Alexander M.] McCook on foot - his forces being smashed and rendered useless by defeat - that he escaped death or capture is somewhat miraculous. The Brigade was advanced again. . .and the troops under Major King - the 15th and Major Sherman of the 16th rejoined the command. At noon day or about that time this command was ordered to the front near a house which was being shelled, but suddenly we were ordered to the right flank to screen [Charles] Cruft's brigade reported as out of ammunition which I believe was the case as they retired in tolerable order. When the brigade was brought parallel to the advancing line of the enemy, it was wheeled into line advanced in quick time into the Cedars thirty yards where the enemy was discovered within 60 yards - they having a gray uniform were with difficulty distinguished from the Cedar trees. The brigade withstood further advance for twenty to thirty - minutes - crossing nearly half of the command, seeing Major King retire, being overwhelmed by the enemy - the left having surrendered also and but few men left standing owing to the great numbers fallen, I ordered the battalions to retreat on the RailRoad Embankment. . . while the brigade was advancing into the Cedars, Genl [George H.] Thomas being near our line [ordered] a quicker advance. I rode to him a few steps saying that to advance faster would tend to disorder the ranks, &c, stating at the same time that it was no place for him to be so near and under the enemy's fire.

The retreat was effected in tolerable order and while clambering over a cluster of rocks, my horse fell and I was reported killed. On rising I saw Genl [William S.] Rosecran trying to [order] the retreat of my men when I rode up to him saying that I had ordered the men onto the R. Road embankment. The general being a large man and

splendidly mounted I suggested to him that he was expressing himself too much - on assembling on the R. Road embankment - a natural epaulement, same was on one side and same on the other. While in this position the brave Capt. Dennison had his knee so wounded as to cause amputation and subsequent death from gangrene.

It is proper here to mention that a large number of Volunteers were the men of the Brigade who behaved well - Towards Sun set they were [pleased] to find their own companies, &c.

This R. Road embankment was under a raking fire from the enemy's battery, doing maneuvers but little damage. One shell bursting about 25 yards to the rear killing instantly a man on horseback and another on foot. Another shell imbedded itself under the end of a cross tie to the road before exploding, when it did it left a hole somewhat like a huge iron pot. No one was hurt. All men in readiness to fire when required. An amusing incident occurred at this time, a large pile of knapsacks behind which several men were crowding for shelter was undermined by a shell. The explosion threw the knapsacks into the air from 20 to 30 feet.

First as the Brigade retreated from the Cedars the enemy attempted to follow up their success across the open space which was about a half mile, perhaps less, but was repulsed by an Batteries, several in numbers. They remained in this position for the day. After night fall Liet Kinnsey with a party went under a Flag to gather the wounded but going too near the Cedars, was taken prisoner with a Sergt and retained nearly all night by General Stewart I believe, when he was released. Our wounded were carried out of the Cedars by the Confederates so as to be gathered in by us. One man said, his name not recollected, that as he was carried on the back of an officer he saw on the shoulder

straps, two bars, showing him to be of the rank of captain. He expressed himself that he did this on account of the wounded man being a Regular.

During the afternoon [Lieutenant] Col. [Julius Peter] Garesache the chief of staff, an excellent officer and man in every respect was reported as having his head shot off while riding with the Commanding General between the lines. It was said that it was questionable whether he was killed by the enemy's shot or by one of our men.

At the second time the Brigade entered the Cedars, a panic seized the Army and spread even to the left wing, as Batteries, Ambulances & men were crossing the River to the enemy's side, when [all] of a sudden [they] ceased & all recrossed the River. At this time if the enemy could have gotten possession of the R. Road, the defeat of our forces was ire trainable.

Near the break of day on the 1st [January] the Brigade was ordered to the rear, to take position near to the Commanding Genls. Th[at] was understood as the initiative to a general retreat. Be that as it may the Brigade halted at his command, and remained there till near noon when it was ordered to the rear, Stewarts creek, to having up supplies. He found the road covered with stragglers and when near to Stewarts Creek we were overtaken by an orderly on horseback. . .with an order to return in double quick time as the enemy were threatening to cut our rear at the small creek. The order of about face presented a beautiful sight. The Brigade & Battery swinging at double quick pace. The stragglers fleeing from the road panic stricken. On arriving at the creek, the threatened presence of the enemy was found to be a false rumor. We found the Genl surrounded by his staff, obsessing the movements of the enemy.

On the morning of the 2nd [January] the Brigade moved again to the front and on

a straight knoll where we throw up a breastwork for the defense of the men & for the Battery, at right angles to the R. Road. At night fall it was ordered somewhat to the rear [and] the Battery horses were given water for the first time.

On the morning of the 3rd day while in company with Genl's [George H.] Thomas & [William S.] Rosecran and their staff. . . the enemy made an advance cautiously into a corn field, in good order and when within a short distance of the Batteries under [John] Mendenhall, about 50 pieces opened fire breaking up their formation and slaughtering them in a horrible manner. The Infantry of the left wing under Genl [Thomas L.] Crittenden, following them up and as they recrossed the River with their dead.

This closed the ordeal of battle and we were prepared to advance into Murfreesboro on the 5th day. I was ordered to advance with the Brigade with some Cavalry, but on observing that a Colonel or General should not be such as I was only a Lt. Col. the order was surpassed.

After the battle Rosecran reported that, “the brigade of regulars under the command of Colonel Shepherd sustained the heaviest blows of this assault,” while General Thomas L. Crittenden reported that, “the regular brigade [was] commanded by Colonel Oliver L. Shepherd, under perfect discipline.”

As the Civil War came to a close, Shepherd took a couple leaves of absence, then in July 1870 wrote to Bvt. Major-General E.D. Townshend, “I have the honor respectfully to request that I may be placed on the Retired List, agreeably to the provisions of the court Law for (30) thirty-years of faithful service.” On Dec. 15, 1870, Col. Oliver L. Shepherd retired from the U.S. Army after 30 years of consecutive service;

25 years on the front lines, 13 major battles, and five promotions for Gallant and Meritorious Service. Being that soldiering was the only life he knew, Shepherd further wrote to Townshend, “for official record, that I shall [consider] it a duty to hold myself in readiness while life and health shall last, for recall to active service.”

Upon retirement, he collected money from his comrades of the 15th Infantry to erect a monument at Stones River. Over \$1,900 was raised, and Shepherd was appointed as depository. According to the *Army Navy Journal*, “It was not stipulated how he should invest the money, only that it was to draw interest at the usual rate. He used the money, believing that he could pay it over when he was called upon; but, unfortunately, when a peremptory demand was made for it last November [1877], he could not raise the amount, which, with interest, was then about \$3,500.” Shepherd immediately tried to sell some of his property in New York, but was unsuccessful and now faced a court-martial.

In April 1878, he was charged with, “Conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman.” In his defense Shepherd stated, “Permit me to say in the beginning that I do not have, nor have I ever had, any disposition to ‘refuse to turn over the fund’ when duly authorized by the trustees entrusting me with it. . . I purpose now to write to them . . . to ascertain a unanimous determination in respect to the fund, and to have it in readiness to turn over accordingly.”

He was found, “guilty of conduct to the prejudice of good order and military discipline,” and sentenced “to be confined within the limits of the post of Fort Adams, Newport, Rhode Island, for one year, and so long thereafter, if needs be, until the said Colonel O. L. Shepherd, U.S. Army, (retired), shall have paid such depository as the Department Commander shall designate.”

Shepherd moved his family from Newport to New York City and was later transferred to finish his confinement at Fort Columbus, Governor's Island, New York.

He was released in April 1879 and began correspondence with Gen. Cullum outlining his 30 years of service in the Army.

During 1890 to 1894, Shepherd lost his eldest daughter, wife, and mother. His pension was dropped and a once active and public serving man became a recluse.

Col. Oliver Lathrop Shepherd died on April 15, 1894, at the age of 79 at his residence in New York City. He is buried beside his wife and six children in Yonkers, NY at St. John's Cemetery. Shepherd did receive full military honors, but somehow eluded history books.

T. M. Jacobs is a freelance writer living in Fort Myers, Florida and the founder and former editor for *Patriots of the American Revolution* magazine. He is President of the Gulf Coast Writers Association and Newsletter Editor for the Southwest Florida Historical Society. Jacobs also is president/owner of Jacobs Writing Consultants, LLC. He can be reached through his website: www.jacobswc.com.