

**“How Men Feel in Battle”** BY S.H.M. BYERS

I was twenty-two. I longed for the excitement of battle, the adventure of war; and so I enlisted... It was noon now, of the 19<sup>th</sup> of September, 1862. Possibly the fiercest battle of the Civil War was about to begin — a battle in which our small brigade of three half-regiments was to lose six hundred and eight killed and wounded... It was appalling.

That was war... We wanted real war... Not a soldier in the Fifth Iowa was more anxious to participate in a red-hot battle than myself. I was among those who had volunteered... for hope of tremendous adventure. My chance had come. We marched from our camps at Jacinto as light-footed and as light-hearted that September morning as if we were going to a wedding. The sky was blue, the birds sang, the autumn leaves were red and beautiful. We seemed perfectly happy with anticipation of being killed. It seems astounding now.

The fact is, no one thought himself in severe danger. Some of us would be killed, we knew, of course, but each thought it would be the “other fellow.” I might of course get wounded — I almost hoped for this little honor, — but it was the “other fellow” who would certainly get killed. We sang jovial [happy] songs as we marched along; one, a song of my own composing. That gorgeous forenoon, hurrying through the woods for twenty miles, towards the enemy, we saw the poetry of war. Sundown saw five of my messmates and forty-two of my regiment dead in a ditch by the battlefield. Another one hundred and seventy-five were wounded. And we had all been so happy in the morning!...

Someone cried out to us to “rise and fire.” I was burning up with excitement, too excited to be scared... I could see the enemy perfectly... I raised my musket and blazed away at nobody in particular... That was my first shot in an open, stand-up battle. We went on firing, biting our cartridges and loading with iron ramrods as fast as we could. I was constantly afraid that the enemy would be on me before I could get that fool gun loaded. The destiny of the country was in my hands at that moment; only I wasn’t thinking of the country, or anything else except that miserable old ramrod and that line of fellows a hundred yards in front. I must have swallowed whole spoonfuls of gunpowder in my haste biting the cartridges. I had thirst beyond description... Every gun was loaded to the muzzle, and as the Confederates approached, a horrible whirlwind of bullets, grapeshot, and canister poured into their faces. They never halted... Hundreds of them crossed the ditch... In a moment, new Federal [Union] lines rose up behind the fort... The Confederates fled back among their dead... Standing there, looking at the horrible scene, and in the midst of the awful thunder of battle, I felt as if the world were coming to an end. It seemed the destruction of humanity, not a battle. If the ground had opened and swallowed us all up, it wouldn’t have seemed strange. At that moment I was thinking neither of victory nor defeat. It was the tremendous spectacle, the awful noise, that overwhelmed me...

That night in the moonlight I stood on guard on the battlefield... I was only thinking of the words of General Rosecrans, as he rode down the lines at Luka, crying out, “Glorious Fifth Iowa.” I, too, in the moonlight on the battle-field was saying, “Glorious Fifth Iowa.” It was my regiment. How a soldier loves glory! I forgot my dead comrades and classmates in my pride in the regiment.

Forty years have passed... I had volunteered that something might happen. I wanted more adventure, and more and more; and it was all coming, but I did not know it... The suspense of standing in that line was something awful... I had, as a boy, often wondered how men feel in war-times. After four years of war, adventure, and prison, I found it out... I had longed for adventure. The memory of the past is now enough.

\* *Harper's Magazine*. By *Making of America Project*. Published by *Harper's Magazine Co.*, 1906.