A SONG OF COURAGE:
CHAPLAIN (COLONEL) M. L. HANEY
AND THE CONGRESSIONAL MEDAL OF HONOR

JOHN W. BRINSFIELD

"... one hundred muskets were fired at my person."
Chaplain Haney
Atlanta, Georgia
July 22, 1864

Chaplain Milton L. Haney surveyed his regiment's position uneasily. Posted two and a half miles northeast of Atlanta along the Georgia Railroad, the soldiers of the 55th Illinois Volunteer Infantry Regiment, U.S. Army, soaked their shirts with sweat as they dug their shovels into the red Georgia clay. Under a scorching July sun the men built firing steps into the bases of trenches they had occupied that morning. The officers said the infantry must always "improve their positions," a fancy West Point term for piling up tons of dirt. Yet if the rebels attacked, it would be without warning. A ton of dirt would save lives; and in the balance, sweat was cheap.

Some of the men called this part of Georgia "God's country" because only God would live here, God and a skinny chicken to keep him company. In reality there were 48,000 Confederate soldiers out there somewhere keeping God company as well. It was the job of the infantry to prepare their positions in case the rebels charged, screaming from the woods.

Chaplain Haney took his turn at the shovel, encouraging the men by singing hymns that he knew by heart from his tiny Methodist hymn book. At thirty-nine years of age Haney was fifteen years older than most of the men. He was the most popular officer in the regiment. He had served in the Army initially as a captain of infantry even though he was an ordained Methodist minister. In 1862 the regiment elected him as their chaplain. Haney remained "fully satisfied" with that position even after he was elected Colonel of the 55th Illinois in November 1863 for his heroism at Vicksburg and Chattanooga.1 In June 1864 he turned the command of the regiment over to his Lieutenant-Colonel, Jacob M. Augustine,

1M. L. Haney, The Story of My Life (Normal, Illinois: Published by the Author, 1904), 197.
though the men insisted he keep his honorary rank of Colonel, which reflected their esteem and affection for him. Haney was content to be a full-time chaplain whatever his rank.

As part of Colonel James S. Martin's Brigade, Brigadier General Morgan L. Smith's Division of the Federal XV Corps, the 55th Illinois Volunteers, occupied key ground in Major General William T. Sherman's plan to cut the major railroads leading into Atlanta. Sherman had amassed more than 106,000 Federal troops in three armies, more than General George Meade had commanded at Gettysburg, to put Atlanta and Confederate General John B. Hood's 48,700 rebels in a vise.2

Sherman positioned the Army of the Cumberland, commanded by Major General George H. Thomas, and the Army of the Ohio, commanded by Major General John M. Schofield, north of the city. Major General James B. McPherson's Army of the Tennessee, comprised of the XV, XVI, and XVII Corps, marched east to a line that was perpendicular to the Georgia Railroad. Atlanta, "The Gate City of the South" and the transportation hub for Confederate supplies, was thus threatened on the north and east by Sherman's forces.

The Best Defense of the City

Many of the 10,000 citizens of Atlanta had already left the city before Sherman arrived. The foundry, railroad depot, and warehouses bustled with activity as the Confederates brought in seventy boxcars of ammunition for distribution and improved their ten-mile circumference of breastworks, redoubts, cannon emplacements and rifle pits which constituted Atlanta's inner defense line.3

Confederate General John B. Hood, however, was not interested in passive defense. Such strategy had not worked at Vicksburg in July 1863, nor did Hood think that it would work at Atlanta in July 1864. President Jefferson Davis expected Hood to drive the Yankee invaders out of Georgia, and that meant aggressive action.

To accomplish this gargantuan task, Hood had three corps of about 12,000 infantry each, commanded by Lieutenant General William Hardee, Lieutenant General A. P. Stewart, and Major General Benjamin F. Cheatham. The cavalry of 10,000 troops, divided into three divisions, was commanded by Lieutenant General Joseph Wheeler.

In the evening of July 21, General Hood sent Hardee's Corps, comprised of four divisions, on a night march from their Atlanta entrenchments around Major General McPherson's left flank while Cheatham's

---

Corps of three divisions prepared for a frontal assault. The coordinated attack was to begin at daylight on July 22 with Hardee striking McPherson's left rear while Cheatham struck his center. Wheeler's cavalry would attack the Federal rear from Decatur in the east along the Georgia Railroad. Two-thirds of Hood's army, 30,000 Confederates, would be matched against 31,000 Federals, most within their breastworks. Hood hoped that his surprise attack would be successful before McPherson could be reinforced by Schofield's 13,000 troops ten miles away.

As the Confederate soldiers moved into their march positions, General Hood reportedly ordered whiskey barrels to be opened so that the boys might fill their canteens.4 This was to be their last battle. They would “drive the Yanks out of the country,” and celebrate as they had at Chickamauga

the previous September when many of the same Confederate troops had driven Major General William S. Rosencrans' 64,000 Union "blue-bellies" out of the state.

At dawn on July 22 General Hood took his position near Cheatham's Corps to listen for the opening guns of his flanking attack. Five hours crept by without word from Hardee. The four Confederate divisions marching east around McPherson had become lost in the dark and then bogged down in a swamp. Major General W. H. T. Walker, the lead Division Commander, threatened to shoot the guides and then insisted on proceeding along a route the guides warned him not to take. As General Walker rode his horse up a slight hill, he put his field glasses to his eyes to see what lay ahead. A Union picket fired from the woods to his front, and General Walker pitched from his horse, mortally wounded. Major General Hugh Mercer, succeeding the dead General Walker, formed two divisions on line and ordered a charge into McPherson's left flank.

**The Flames of Hell Turned Loose**

At General Sherman's headquarters in the Howard House, approximately three miles from the attack, Major General James B. McPherson was discussing with General Sherman his artillery emplacements intended for the shelling of Atlanta. Shortly after noon they heard cannon fire from the southeast. Sherman recalled McPherson's reaction:

I asked him what it meant. We took my pocket compass and by noting the direction of the sound, we became satisfied that the firing was too far to our own left rear to be explained by known facts, and he hastily called for his horse.

McPherson galloped past the Georgia Railroad toward his left flank, dispatching his staff officers, one after the other, to order the reserve brigades of the XV Corps to reinforce his flank. When McPherson reached the wooded rear of the XVII Corps, he ran into a Confederate skirmish line. The skirmishers directed him to surrender. He tried to turn his horse to escape, but they shot him out of the saddle. Within the first hour of the battle, a Confederate division commander and a Union army commander were dead.

As the Federal troops of the XVII Corps on the left swung around to meet the attack from Walker's (Mercer's) Confederates, Major General Patrick Cleburne ordered his Confederate division to attack the Federals in their right rear. For two hours the Union soldiers fought front and rear against the attackers, surviving six charges against their earthworks, three from each direction. Private Sam R. Watkins of Company H, 1st Tennessee Infantry Regiment, charged the Union lines and recalled a vivid scene:

---

We advanced to the attack on Cleburne's immediate left. Cleburne himself was leading us in person, so that we would not fire upon his men, who were then inside the Yankee line. I heard him say, "Follow me, boys."

We rushed forward up the steep hillsides, the seething fires of ten thousand muskets and small arms, and forty pieces of cannon hurled right into our very faces, searing and burning our clothes, and hands, and faces... and piling the ground with our dead and wounded almost in heaps. It seemed that the hot flames of hell were turned loose in all their fury.7

Cleburne's men gave one long, loud cheer and, bayonet to bayonet, sword to sword, drove the Yankees from their first line. Watkins saw twenty battle flags fall on the field while cannon balls ripped open soldiers and shot-gutted horses rolled on the bodies of the dead. Blood gathered in pools, and in some instances made streams which coursed down the slippery clay hill.

Two miles north of McPherson's flank, at the Georgia Railroad, Chaplain Haney listened intently to the thunder of the artillery on his left. He noted that "the musketry was simply terrific," but there was nothing to do but listen until new orders were issued.8 For four hours, from noon until four o'clock, the battle raged. Units from the XVI Corps hurried by the men of the 55th Illinois to reinforce the crumbling Union flank, while an ambulance bearing General McPherson's body wound slowly up the road to Sherman's headquarters.

Initially there was some confusion among the Federal officers. Martin's brigade, of which the 55th Illinois was a part, was ordered to pull out of the line and march to Decatur, four miles away, where General Wheeler was attacking the Federal wagon trains. Major General John A. Logan, succeeding McPherson, countermanded that order late in the afternoon and sent Martin's brigade back to its earlier position on the left of the railroad.9

The Center Line Breaks

As the first Confederate attack bogged down on the Union left at about four o'clock, Hood finally committed his second corps under General Cheatham to attack the center of the Federal line. Leading the attack down the Georgia Railroad was Manigault's Brigade of five South Carolina and Alabama regiments on the left and Stovall's Brigade of six Georgia regiments on the right. In front of Stovall's Brigade were two Federal units, the 57th Ohio Infantry Regiment and Chaplain Haney's 55th Illinois, whose soldiers had put down their shovels to take up their rifles and bayonets.

---

Chaplain Haney recalled that as the order came for battle, he could not see far into the woods to his front. Suddenly three lines of rebel soldiers, six men deep—the 1st, 40th, 41st, 42nd, 43rd, and 52nd Georgia regiments of Stovall's Brigade,—advanced at quick time. Haney saw a musket lying on the ground. He normally did not carry arms, but the Confederates would not exempt chaplains in the attack. Haney decided, in self-defense, that his marksmanship should supplement his prayers. He picked up the weapon and stepped into the trenches with Lieutenant Eichelberger's company of the 55th:

For the first time in the war we were behind breastworks and the men had an idea that no force could drive them. When the enemy came in sight a terrible fire of musketry scattered them at once and they were forced to disappear.

The Confederate attack had not failed so quickly, however, for Stovall's men had merely shifted around the Illinois regiment's right flank, where the 57th Ohio was trying to hold the railroad cut against them. Chaplain Haney saw the shift in the Confederate advance but did not realize that the 57th Ohio could not maintain its position:

When the enemy disappeared an order came to fire at "right oblique", so we kept up an incessant fire. While one man stepped up on the step and fired his mate stepped down into the ditch and loaded. When loading my gun I faced northward and to my surprise the 57th Ohio was retreating. . . . I thought when that comes down to the right of my regiment it will stop; but lo, when they were gone our right behind it gave way, and I began to command them to stand.

Soon Chaplain Haney, Lieutenant Eichelberger, and one soldier were all that remained in the breastworks to the left of the railroad. Stovall's Brigade overran the remaining trenches of the 55th Illinois and the 57th Ohio without difficulty and poured a murderous fire into the retreating Federals. Chaplain Haney wrote that Eichelberger "roared like a wild man" before he "broke into tears and wept like a child" as they withdrew through Confederate fire as thick as hail.

One Confederate brigade, Manigault's, drove through the XV Corps line on the right of the railroad and seized Captain Francis DeGress's battery of artillery at the Troup Hurt House, a Federal signal station. Withdrawing Union troops began shooting the horses to keep the Confederates from pulling the cannon further behind their lines. The horses screamed and plunged in their traces as .58 caliber minnie balls slammed into their shoulders and necks. The fire of 2,000 muskets from both sides cut down

---

12Ibid.
13Ibid., 203.
men, horses, and brush as would a scythe until the wounded and dead carpeted the ground for a hundred yards in every direction.

The Counterattack: Pay Back with Interest

From his headquarters at the Howard House overlooking the Federal XV Corps line, General Sherman personally directed some twenty cannon brought forward from Schofield's artillery units to fire over the heads of his troops into the left flank of the attacking Confederates. One of Sherman's staff officers saw a bullet glance past Sherman's cheek as he ordered his guns trained on the enemy. "Ha!" Sherman reportedly exclaimed, "A close shaving—we'll pay back that compliment. Fire!"14

As Sherman's artillery raked the Confederates from the left, General John Logan led Wood's Division, Lightburn's Division, and Mersy's Brigade of the XVI Corps to re-establish the Federal line to the right of the railroad where Manigault had broken through. Brigadier General Charles R. Woods, who commanded the first division, recalled that with this mass of troops moving against the rebels, "in less than fifteen minutes I had retaken DeGress's battery and driven the enemy from their rifle pits as far as the railroad."15

As Logan moved forward, Martin's Brigade began to rally on the left. Chaplain Haney recalled the counterattack:

Having gone through the brush perhaps thirty rods, a group of the scattered men began to gather around us and Eichelberger insisted that we return and retake the works. The men said they would not go unless I sanctioned it, and now our duty seemed plain. We fell into a thin line and the farther we went the faster, till suddenly coming into the clearing, we were face to face with a thousand rebels between us and our works, only about twenty steps away!16

Haney had not more than forty men in his "thin line," but they fought back fiercely. A few feet from Chaplain Haney, Lieutenant Eichelberger, the company commander, was shot through the head. Haney was the only officer left in his little group, yet he still refused to quit. Some of his men fell wounded or dying; a few were captured fighting with their fists when they ran out of ammunition. Haney later recalled:

As I turned after firing it was said by a cool-headed sergeant who was looking on, that one hundred muskets were fired at my person. It may have been less, but the brush was mowed to the left and right by rebel bullets and by a miracle my life was preserved. A voice went through me, assuring me that no rebel bullet should touch me.17

17Ibid., 204.
Suddenly, to Haney's rear, seven regiments of Martin's Brigade, re-formed and led in person by Haney's brigade commander, Colonel James S. Martin, emerged from the woods and slopes to meet the rebels in the trenches which they had occupied earlier that day. Chaplain Haney's thin line of heroes had bought time for Colonel Martin to rally his men.

The Confederates were now caught in an irresistible cross-fire between Martin's troops attacking four deep in front and Sherman's seething artillery, pounding into their left flank. There was no hope of receiving reinforcements, much less of holding the trenches. Smoke from thousands of rifles, muskets, and cannon covered the battlefield as the Confederates withdrew to Atlanta's inner defenses. Haney wrote that the rebels "did go out in haste before the sun went down and we were again in possession." As his second major attack failed, General Hood wrote cryptically, "A heavy enfilade fire forced Cheatham to abandon the works he had captured."

**Counting the Cost**

During the night of July 22, the Union burial parties found 2,482 Confederate dead in front of their trenches. The known Confederate casualties, dead, wounded, missing, and captured, totaled 5,237. General Hood had lost one-sixth of his best soldiers. His hopes for a great victory at Atlanta were gone with the wind of battle.

General Sherman reported the Union casualties at 3,521, killed, wounded, and missing. Sherman felt the loss of each of his soldiers, but McPherson's death in particular grieved him deeply. As the tears ran down into his dusty beard, Sherman's eyes turned almost black as he thought of the revenge his soldiers would wreak. The South would pay dearly for the death of his friend.

Chaplain Haney worked for eight hours that night and into the morning, ministering to the wounded and dying, both Confederate and Union. One soldier who had been shot through the stomach was dying but still conscious. He asked Chaplain Haney to tell him "some words" whereby he could be saved. Chaplain Haney shared the Gospel as he believed it, and then quietly sang an old revival hymn, a song of courage and victory for the dying man:

Grace's store is always free
Drooping souls to gladden
Jesus calls, come unto me
Weary, heavy laden

---

A Song of Courage

Though your sins like mountains rise
Rise and reach to heaven
Soon as you on Him rely
All shall be forgiven.

Streaming mercy, how it flows,
Now I know, I feel it,
Half has never yet been told
Yet I want to tell it.

Jesus' blood hath healed my wounds
O the wondrous story
I was lost, but now am found
Glory! Glory! Glory!21

The soldier had closed his eyes while Haney sang, but at the last verse he opened them and said simply, "Chaplain, I have found Him." Then his spirit went up to God, and his last battle was over.22

In the Battle of Atlanta the 55th Illinois lost so many officers and noncommissioned officers that it ceased to be an effective unit. Chaplain Haney was sent back to Illinois to recruit for the regiment but was mustered out when General Sherman took Savannah in December. Haney took a pastorate in La Salle, Illinois, in the fall of 1865 and began a thirty-one-year career as a pastor and evangelist.

Reflections on Ministry

On November 3, 1896, Congress awarded Chaplain Milton L. Haney, formerly of the 55th Illinois Infantry Regiment, the Congressional Medal of Honor for rendering heroic service at Atlanta, Georgia, "in retaking the Federal works which had been captured by the enemy" on July 22, 1864. The Republican Congressmen always seemed eager to make such awards in election years, but Haney virtually ignored his. Haney did not mention the Medal in his autobiography, which he published in 1904. He was a humble person, more interested in his ministry for the Lord than in his Congressional Medal of Honor, no matter how richly he deserved it.

Haney did spend some time toward the end of his life thinking about the two years he had served as an Army chaplain in some of the fiercest battles of the Civil War. A short chapter in his autobiography entitled "The Duties of a Chaplain" reflects some of his conclusions in his own words:

1. The value of prior military experience was incalculable.

   It can hardly be realized how great a blessing it was to me as a chaplain to have first been an officer in the line. In my five months of experience as a Captain . . . I saw the wrongs perpetrated against the men by their officers and disapproved of them. This gave me power with all [the soldiers] in the line, so an attempt to put me down was a serious affair to any officer, for he knew in so doing he would bring [upon himself]

22Ibid.
the wrath of the men. So I fearlessly did many things in the chaplaincy I never could have done had I not gained these advantages. Hence to the end I was free to follow my own conscience, and none dared to meddle with me.23

2. Chaplains who were merely preachers and not pastors were usually failures.

There was a class of preachers who were not a success at home who secured the position [of chaplain] and failed. A chaplain who would remain at headquarters and only be seen by the men in connection with a perfunctory “Divine Service” amounted to but little. An army in motion, as was Sherman’s, rarely gives a chance for a set sermon. Hence the chaplain who depends wholly upon his preaching seems to be an idler, and easily gets the displeasure of the men.24

3. Chaplains need common sense, divine love, moral courage, and adaptation to personal contact with soldiers of many backgrounds.

Divine love ruling in a human breast always produces a real interest in the weal of others. A chaplain who is all head and no heart is a miserable makeshift. He must be able to put himself alongside men of a great variety of temperaments and in a variety of circumstances.25

4. Above all, chaplains must be watchful for opportunities to help and relieve suffering wherever and whenever possible.

There is a great deal of suffering in an army, especially when in the field. Men get sick or are wounded, and the best treatment that can be given, in many cases, would be looked on with horror in the home life. The presence of a wise chaplain filled with the sympathies of Jesus in such cases is as an oasis in the desert. Besides all this, the spiritual interests of a thousand men are on his soul, and so many in death, on field and in camp, who can be made to see Christ before they go! It will give me ages of comfort, the memories of what God did for me and through me in those years of war.26

Haney wrote of one incident after the Battle of Ezra Church, near Atlanta, which seemed to summarize by personal example some of the attributes of adaptation, courage, and love he thought chaplains should possess:

After the third assault that afternoon the enemy retired, leaving their wounded in our hands. I hastened to the front. At the root of a tree nearby lay three wounded and two dead Confederates. The wounded boys looked wildly at me as I approached them, having heard terrible things about the “Yanks,” but I quieted their fears by assuring them of the best care we could give them. At this stage in the war they died from wounds through which our men would live. Their food was insufficient and their power of endurance crippled by it. I wept more than once when burying the brave boys, on finding nothing in their haversacks but a little unbolted corn meal . . . the next day I was at the general hospital and some distance away I saw a

24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
Confederate holding up his hand... he asked if I was not the man who talked with him at the tree where he was wounded. I said, "Yes." He expressed a strong desire that I talk and pray with him. Up to that time he was a Christian and a Methodist class leader, but from the day he entered the army till now God seemed to have left him. I told him I was a Methodist preacher, and we both wept. While praying, the Lord saved him. He was wondrously blest from that hour.  

To Haney neither the color of a man's skin nor the color of his uniform was as important as his desire to find God. Haney believed that if all human beings could accept grace, through faith in Jesus Christ as their personal Savior, wars and conflicts would cease and God's people would be sanctified for companionship with him for all eternity.

The Measure of a Soldier of God

Chaplain Milton L. Haney died in Illinois after a ministry of more than fifty-seven years. Born on a farm and educated in a log school house, he served eleven churches in Illinois and then, after the war, led evangelistic work for another thirty-one years in Iowa, Indiana, Maryland, Oregon, Washington, Oklahoma, Wisconsin, Kansas, Colorado, Texas, and Ontario, Canada. He described himself as a preacher of "the Wesleyan doctrine of Christian holiness." It was said that he led not fewer than 20,000 people to a profession of faith in Christ without distinction as to male or female, black or white, north or south.  

Yet to Chaplain Haney's colleagues in the old Grand Army of the Republic, he was much more than a preacher or an evangelist. He was an example of the finest kind of Christian soldier: patient in suffering, heroic in battle, gentle toward the dying and wounded of both sides, modest in victory, and constant in his dedication to the high calling of winning souls for Christ. On the last page of his autobiography, written in his eightieth year, he penned his own epitaph:

Be it known by any who may read this story when the hand that wrote it is palsied: There was one heart which did not cease its efforts to save men, till it ceased its beating.  

In the heroic performance of his ministry, above and beyond the call of duty, and with total disregard to his personal safety and comfort, Chaplain (Colonel) Milton L. Haney reflected great credit upon himself, the 55th Illinois Volunteer Infantry Regiment of Martin's Brigade, XV Corps, and the Chaplaincy of the United States Army.

---

28 Ibid., 396.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid., 397.