

Patriotic Instruction Oct 2023

Albert Woolson

With Remembrance Day coming soon in November and the annual Memorial Service at Woolson's Memorial, one might ask the question why do we gather to remember Albert Woolson? Even though he was the last surviving member of the GAR, he never saw action and served less than one year.

Whereas Corporal Horatio D. Chapman of the 20th Connecticut Volunteers experienced the following:

... the dead in some places were piled upon each other, and the groans and moans of the wounded were truly saddening to hear. Some were just alive and gasping, but unconscious. Others were mortally wounded and were conscious of the fact that they could not live long; and there were others wounded, how bad they could not tell, whether mortal or otherwise, and so it was they would linger on some longer and some for a shorter time-without the sight or consolation of wife, mother, sister or friend. But such is war and we are getting used to it and can look on scenes of war, carnage and suffering with but very little feeling and without a shudder."

Albert Woolson did not have this type of experience. Nor was he with Joshua Chamberlain who described the end of the first day's fighting at Fredericksburg as follows:

"But out of that silence rose new sounds more appalling still; a strange ventriloquism, of which you could not locate the source, a smothered moan, as if a thousand discords were flowing together into a key-note weird, unearthly, terrible to hear and bear, yet startling with its nearness; the writhing concord broken by cries for help, some begging for a drop of water, some calling on God for pity; and some on friendly hands to finish what the enemy had so horribly begun; some with delirious, dreamy voices murmuring loved names, as if the dearest were bending over them; and underneath, all the time, the deep bass note from closed lips too hopeless, or too heroic to articulate their agony...It seemed best to bestow myself between two dead men among the many left there by earlier assaults, and to draw another crosswise for a pillow out of the trampled, blood-soaked sod, pulling the flap of his coat over my face to fend off the chilling winds, and still more chilling, the deep, many voiced moan that overspread the field."

The combat soldier experiences various traumatic stressors such as: witnessing death or dismemberment, handling dead bodies, traumatic loss of comrades, realizing imminent death, killing others and being helpless to prevent others' deaths. If you survived your war you still had to face a formidable foe:

The Aftermath!

- Countless veterans left the war with diseases, wounds, destitution, and mental disorders.
- Many soldiers suffered from *Old Soldier's Disease*, a term applied to soldiers addicted to pain killers.
- Hearing loss was common.
- There was no shell shock, battle fatigue, or (PTSD) to help explain mysterious conditions.
- Tens-of-thousands veterans were homeless.
- Many suffered a disability which prevented them from enjoying life's basic tasks and responsibilities.
- Union veterans did not receive VA benefits and assistance.

Corporal Charles Morey, 2nd Vermont wrote:

Society will not own the rude soldier when he comes back, but turn a cold shoulder to him, because he has become hardened by scenes of bloodshed and carnage.” I tell you, dear sister, there are feelings, tender feelings, down deep in the soldier’s breast, which when moved will prove that all that s good is not quite dead.”

Albert Woolson did not see combat, however, he served and was willing to. He did not go untouched by the war because like so many he lost his father to wounds incurred at Shiloh.

The GAR started as an organization for Veterans to network, maintain connections with each other, and became an advocate for these Veterans. Albert Woolson as the last member of the GAR and last Union Veteran of the Civil War also died the last living soldier advocate and representative of the Boys in Blue. That is why we remember Albert Henry Woolson.

Today we the members of the SUVCW represent those soldiers who saw the elephant. Let us assure that we do so in Fraternity, Charity, and Loyalty.