

The following letter received from Harvey O. Stowe, is of interest to the GBSHHA members.

Sir:

In the interest of historical accuracy I have some information about the Stovall Brigade and their part in the Battle of Atlanta on 22 July, 1864. In your July 2009 Newsletter you write, "The 42nd Georgie charged into the guns of Battery H, 1st Illinois Artillery, commanded by Captain Francis DeGress. DeGress Battery had four 20 pounder Parrott rifles that had been shelling Atlanta earlier in the day. the rest of Stovall's brigade was close by as they come up the slope. Manigault's brigade, again next to Stovall as at Jonesboro came at the battery from the side and was able to capture it briefly." I have studied the Battle of Atlanta in depth more than any other battle of the war, so when I read that the 42nd had captured the Degress Battery with its "four 20 punder Parrott rifles" I was surprised because I had always understood it was Manigault's brigade that captured these guns. Every major historical source I can find, as well as the Cyclorama in Atlanta gives Manigault the credit. So, being a Stovall brigade "fan" I began looking into what had happen during the battle in hopes of giving the 42nd credit for their actions that day.

I recently spent time in Atlanta doing some genealogy and Civil War research. The following is information about Stovall's brigade and the 42nd's part concerning the DeGress Battery that I'd like to share with you. I will give you a somewhat long explanation in place of a short answer. The 42nd web site has the following description this action:

The 42nd Georgia marched one and a half miles through whistling shells and balls until Sherman's line was broken by their solid front and De Gress' battery of four 20 pound Parrott guns was captured. Colonel Thomas led the Regiment in this desperate charge. He won great praise for conspicuous gallantry and heroism for the capture of that great battery. This Regiment was the first to carry the enemies' works, fighting hand to hand against fearful odds-one man killing a Federal with a shovel. De Gress' battery, beside many prisoners and accouterments were captured and held for nearly two hours, and until then they were left along when a retreat was ordered.

Since the battle on 22 July 1864, there have been claims that the 42nd was the first unit to capture the "DeGress Battery". The significance of capturing this Battery seems to be that this was one of the pivotal and important moments of the battle and the unit that captured the Battery carries some degree of fame. The Cyclorama in Atlanta has made this episode in its painting the most prominent and climactic point in its depiction of the battle.

A quick overview of unit placement on the 22nd of July might help in putting the following explanation in perspective. Clayton's Division, which Stovall's brigade was part of, was placed on the extreme left of the Confederate line north of the Georgia Railroad. Baker's Brigade was on the extreme left with Stovall to his right. To the right and south of Stovall was Manigault's Brigade (Brown's Division) with the railroad to his right.

The earliest written account I can find about the 42nd attacking and capturing DeGress's battery is found in a book published in 1899, "Confederate Military History, Vol. VI" (this volume is specifically about Georgia units involved in the war.), page 332. "The Forty-second regiment had the honor of capturing a number of guns supposed to be that of Degress's Battery."

The "Order of Battle, Federal Forces Engaged in the Campaign for Atlanta" found in William R. Scaife's book "The Campaign for Atlanta", page 160:

ARTILLERY Captain
Francis DeGress

1st Illinois Light Battery A (4 Napoleons & 2 – 10 pounder Parrott rifles) – Lt. S.S. Smith

1st Illinois Light Battery B (6 Napoleons} – Lt. Israel P. Rumsey

1st Illinois Light Battery H (4 – 20 pounder Parrott rifles – Capt. Francis DeGress

Since Degress was in command of three Batteries and also his own Battery H, any unit capturing guns from any of these Batteries might claim they had indeed captured the "famous" Degress Battery "H". The two Batteries of concern here are "A" and "H". It's important to remember that it was the DeGress Battery "H" with four Parrot rifles that were stationed at the Troup house north of the railroad.

From Vol. II of the "The Georgia Confederate 7,000", page 77: " Captain William T. Smith writes that while he was in brief command of the Georgia 42nd, Co. B for Captain L.P, Thomas....that the 42nd alone can claim the honor of capturing the DeGress Battery." Later on the same page, it states "The Georgia 42nd then moved on forward; and was right in front of the DeGress Battery and continued to move forward until the confederate soldiers were at, and across the Union forces works! Georgia 42nd Pvt. Wesley Clower, the oldest man of Co. B, was the first to get on top of a piece of DeGress artillery. Adjutant H.M. Wylie, of the 42nd tried to use the guns that we had captured but they were spiked."

On this same page are two "Notes". The first, "Note; It would appear that in the confusion of battle that the Georgia 42nd, Co. B, had actually captured the 1st Illinois Battery H." The second one, "Note; Current research shows that this reported capture of the DeGress by the Georgia 42nd was actually their capture of the 1st Illinois Battery H." I don't think these notes are correct and only add to even more confusion since the DeGress Battery was "H" north of the railroad, and as you will see Stovall's Brigade fought south of the railroad.

The following note is from "Confederate Military History", Vol.VI, 1899, page 332, which describes the placement of the Illinois Batteries. "*The location of these guns was described as follows by the adjutant-general of M. L. Smith's division (Official Records, serial No. 74, p. 189): "Friday, July 22d—pushed forward and occupied [Confederate] works with our main line at 6:30 a. m., the First brigade on the left and Second brigade on the right [north] of the railroad.

The skirmish line was pushed forward supported by a section of Battery A, First Illinois light artillery. Then the works were reversed, and Battery A, First Illinois light artillery, placed in position, two guns on the right and two on the left of the railroad, which at that place runs through a deep cut, and Battery H [DeGress'] of the same regiment, on the extreme right [north] of the line." This "extreme right (north) of the line" was at the Troup house where the four Parrott guns of the DeGress Battery were placed. It was Manigault's Brigade that fought north of the railroad at the Troup house and captured the "famous" DeGress Battery "H". Stovall's Brigade fought south of the railroad and never attacked the Troup house where the DeGress Battery H was.

To add even more confusion to which unit captured which "Battery", William Saife writes in "Campaign for Atlanta" on pages, 98-99; "Manigault then realigned his brigade and dashed forward, capturing four Napoleons of Battery A, 1st Illinois and cracking the federal line.....Continuing on, Manigault's men captured the two story brick Troup Hurt House and the four 20 pounder Parrott rifles of Frances De Gress' Battery H, 1st Illinois Artillery, which was posted just north of the house. Jacob Sharp's brigade, advancing in support of Manigault, wheeled to the right, smashing James Martin's brigade in flank and capturing the remaining two Napoleons of Battery A, 1st Illinois Artillery, near the railroad."

Stovall's Brigade was originally assembled, in the present day Inman Park/Springvale Park area, north of the Georgia railroad and slightly SW of the DeGress Battery. The Union lines were about ¾ to a mile up a slight incline. Col. Abda Johnson who was in temporary command of the Stovall Brigade writes that around 4:00p.m. "I was instructed to move forward, keeping the sun at my back, as nearly as possible and drive the enemy and occupy their line. I was assured that I should be supported; and deployed the Georgia 43rd as skirmishers, under the command of Capt. Joseph M. Storey. I moved out. It was known that the enemy's sharpshooters were in our front, but they retired without firing a shot, nor did his skirmishers engage ours at all."

About half way up the slope before they would have reached the Troup house where the DeGress Battery H of four Parrott guns were station, they were ordered at a "R oblique" which caused them to cross the Georgia railroad to the south. As soon as they crossed the railroad Col. Johnson changed direction and moved forward perpendicularly to the railroad. Col. Johnson, "Moving a few hundred yards we found the enemy in force and strongly entrenched with two guns (Napoleons) just by the road." (This should be the 1st Illinois light artillery, Battery A. which had four Napoleon guns assigned) "We drove the enemy entirely from our front and many of my men passed the works some distance. I expected support, which would of course have been thrown to my right, and then I intended to resume an advance, which I supposed was only suspended, but failing to receive it, I was compelled to withdraw".

This part of the battle is depicted in the Cyclorama painting of the Battle of Atlanta. It shows Stovall's Brigade leaving the trenches described and descending the slope to meet the enemy near the railroad cut and almost directly across the railroad track from the Troup house and the DeGress Battery "H".

“Decision in the West”, page 412, addresses the losses in Claytons Division, “Stovall’s and Bushrod Jones (Holtzclaw’s Brigade) the only heavily engaged lost 298 and 128 respectively. Col. Johnson writes, “The number of casualties, as reported from the regiments amounted to 298, a heavy loss for the number carried into action.”

Please understand that in no way am I trying to diminish the bravery and accomplishments of the 42nd on that day by showing they did not capture the “famous” four Parrot guns of the DeGress Battery “H”. I was hoping to find out and show they had in fact been the unit that captured Battery “H” and give them credit. I would truly welcome any documentation that shows my conclusion is wrong. .

So my short conclusion to a long narrative is, that it appears the 42nd captured two Napoleon guns of “Battery A, 1st Illinois Artillery” which was part of DeGresses command of three Batteries, but not the famous “DeGress Battery H” of four Parrott rifles at the Troup house.

If you think this would be interest to the association you have my permission to share it.

Thank you for your time

Harvey O. Stowe