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Fire Eater! Editor

Marching in Charleston

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In April, 1861, my cousin, Roger Atkinson Pryor, stood at the harbour in Charleston, looking out toward Fort Sumter. He had been given the opportunity to fire the "first shot" of the War, but declined. The "Mouth of the South", as he was known, had no words for a few minutes, for he knew that Americans had arrived at a turning point in history. Either the principles of constitutional federal government would prevail or a tyranny of centralised government would emerge.

"My friends and I had joined up with the 44th Georgia boys, and a good bunch they were, putting up with me, Choctaw uniform, feather dangling down from my long hair. Though I was in good company. Surrounding me were hard-core reenactors, some of them with unkempt beards and long hair themselves. They looked like yankee killers."

Freedom lost, and an American empire was born.

Now, 143 years later, on my momma's birthday, 17 April 2004, I stood on the Battery at Charleston, also looking at Fort Sumter in the distance. My view, however, included the sight of the hired thugs of the empire in patrol boats with 50-calibre machine guns on their bows. Police also lined the streets of Charleston. "To protect and serve."

The day grew hot and sunny. About me swelled a chorus of men in gray uniforms, myself included, and women in period mourning dresses, large hoop skirts floating by, veils over their faces. Everywhere I looked I saw thousands of Confederate uniforms, battle flags, muskets, swords. Charleston found itself, once more, listening to the sound of Confederate boots marching through its streets. The flag of freedom hung from balconies and the hands of the spectators.

I had arrived in Charleston with my wife, Nancy, and friends: Steven Prichard (SCV) and Maj. Steve Bacon, (USAF). We had come to Charleston, as so many thousands of others had, to honour the crew of the CSS Hunley, whose remains were to be interred in Charleston's Magnolia Cemetery. This event was not a reenactment, but the real thing: the funeral of Confederate soldiers.

The funniest moment of the day came when we arrived at the parking lot and saw busloads of Confederate soldiers hurling down the streets of Charleston. Now there's a sight I've not seen before.

Charleston itself is a beautiful city, as cities go. It is, above all, an unmistakeably Southern city. We did not get to see much of it, however, for the crowds were large and getting around was difficult. My two favorite Southern cities are Savannah and Charleston, and after the funeral my wife and I drove on down to Savannah to rest for a day. For my friends in Europe, if you get the chance to visit Dixie, make sure you stop in at Savannah or Charleston.

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My friends and I had joined up with the 44th Georgia boys, and a good bunch they were, putting up with me, Choctaw uniform, feather dangling down from my long hair. Though I was in good company. Surrounding me were hard-core reenactors, some of them with unkempt beards and long hair themselves. They looked like yankee killers.

The order was finally given to commence the five-mile march from the Battery to the Magnolia Cemetery. My boots were hurting my feet already, and we'd barely moved. But the four-column battalion moved out, following thousands of Confederates in front and trailing thousands behind.

What struck me most about that march? The faces. The citisens of Charleston lined the streets, as did visitors from afar. Old, middle-aged, young, toddlers. And battle flags seemed to wave everywhere. I saw a black man and his young daughter both proudly waving the battle flag. I saw babies in strollers with battle flags dangling by them. I saw huge battle flags hung from houses along the way. I did not see but a couple imperial flags, perhaps because I was marching.

My wife kept pace, bless her heart, with the digital camera as well as the movie camera, snapping shots as she went and running up with water from time to time. Fortunately, I was marching alongside my friend, Steve Prichard, who had a canteen which he shared. And all of us in the 44th Georgia shared what we could with each other. It was a hot day, and a long march, and some dropped out along the way. No dishonour there: they tried. But my feet started to ache and I knew that they were bleeding beneath the leather of my boots. Keep marching. Ignore the pain. By God, I wasn't going to let down those fine Georgia boys with whom I was marching.

Sights along the way. A man in a suit holding a huge portrait of Robert E. Lee for the marchers to see. Many ladies who came up to us, when the column halted, to say "God bless you!" Most memorable to me, however, was a woman on the sidewalk who stood watching the procession with tears rolling down her face. It was then that I knew I had

done the right thing by coming to Charleston.

Before and after the funeral, I heard many negative comments about the Hunley funeral. The event was controlled by yankees. Battle flags would not be allowed. It was a "media circus" unbefitting a funeral, and so forth.

"For me, the funeral was not just for the brave crewmen of the Hunley, it was for all our Confederate kin, and for an America that we had lost years ago to empire."

Perhaps it was all these things, but for me, and for thousands of others, it was more. It was both a solemn funeral for the eight crewmen of the CSS Hunley, and it was also a joyous recognition of our Southern heritage.
Proof of that is the fact that not one Southern governor of the empire bothered to show up. Fine with me. No cowards allowed, I say. Fix bayonets.

At the Magnolia Cemetery, I shook hands with H. K. Edgerton, who stood with his battle flag. No time to talk, though, for the column kept marching on into the cemetery. Several people were intrigued by my Choctaw uniform and asked questions of me. When I told them that my great-grandfather(3), McKee King, Choctaw Statesman, had signed the Treaty of North Fork that allied the Choctaw Nation to the Confederate States of America, cameras came out.

Magnolia Cemetery was crowded to overflowing. A sea of Confederates, mourning women, photographers, TV news folk, and the platform upon which rested the remains of the Hunley crew. Four flagpoles with the First, Second, and Third National flags, and the Battle flag as well, all flying at half-mast.

A man on the platform sang "Going Home". The moment was electric. Various speakers, various prayers, a 21-gun cannon salute, and Taps, the mournful melody swirling over the cemetery.

Afterwards we disbanded and headed for our cars, took some pictures, then removed our boots and started applying bandages and mole skin to our feet. As we drove out of Charleston, hungry, tired, and hot, I knew that somewhere my Confederate kin were smiling down upon me, and my heart was gladdened that I had made the trip from the Colorado Territory to Dixie to honour them. For me, the funeral was not just for the brave crewmen of the Hunley, it was for all our Confederate kin, and for an America that we had lost years ago to empire.

Robert Lloyd said it best: "I'm an American without a country." But for one day, I had my country back. Down in Charleston with the 44th Georgia.

May God forever bless the South, her people, and the America of Jefferson, Washington, and Henry.