

ARLINGTON NATIONAL CEMETERY'S FIRST BATTLE CASUALTY

By

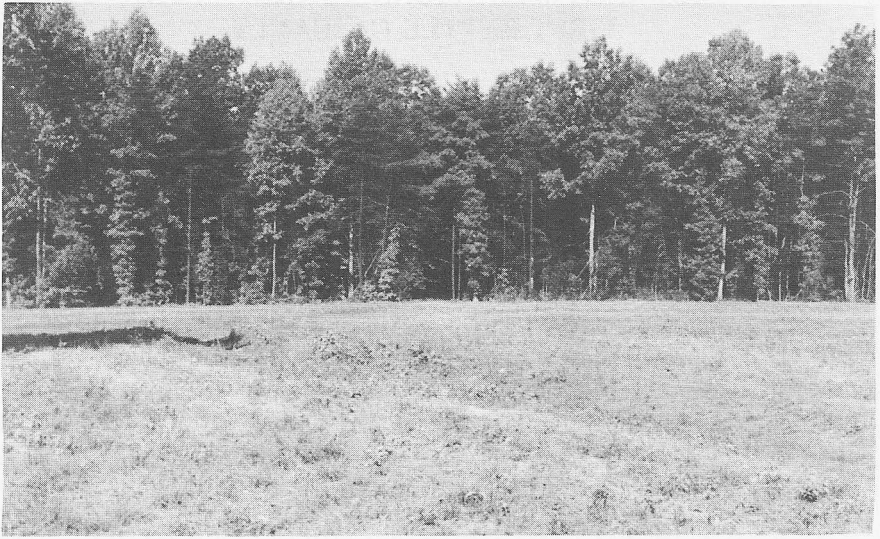
George W. Dodge

The first soldier who was laid to rest in Arlington National Cemetery as a result of wounds received in battle was private William B. Blatt.¹ He was born in 1842 in Berks County, Pennsylvania.² At the age of 19, on September 1, 1861, he became a soldier when he enrolled in Company K of the 49th Pennsylvania Infantry. Military duties would place him amidst the 1862 battles at Antietam, Maryland, and Fredericksburg, Virginia. In January 1863, Blatt's company, Company K, was consolidated with Company B. As a member of Company B, Blatt was present during the success of the November 7, 1863, Union attack at Rappahannock Station, Virginia. On December 24, 1863, Blatt re-enlisted as a veteran volunteer.

On May 10, 1864, the third day of the Battle of Spotsylvania, twelve Union regiments were selected to attack a section of the Confederate lines defended by a small brigade of Georgians under the command of General George Doles. Doles' brigade, about 1,500 soldiers, consisted of three regiments: the 4th, 12th, and 44th Georgia Infantry. Commanding the Union assault force of approximately 4,500-5,000 soldiers was Colonel Emory Upton. Upton ordered an assault formation of four battle lines, each line consisting of three regiments. Leading the Union attack were, from right to left, the 121st New York, the 96th Pennsylvania, and the 5th Maine. The second line consisted of, from left to right, the 5th Wisconsin, 6th Maine, and Blatt's unit, the 49th Pennsylvania Infantry.³

The veteran 49th Pennsylvania was instructed to line up on the right of a path that went southeast from the Shelton House through a thicket of pine trees towards an open field where General Robert E. Lee's Confederate army was stationed behind a series of recently built logworks which were six to eight feet high. The horizontal logworks, complete with a firing step and a gap beneath the head log for rifle fire, were secured by a double line of stakes. Although the works were sturdy, the Georgian officers negligently failed to order the placement of sufficient abatis (trees felled and placed with sharpened branches towards the enemy) in front of their works to impede attacking infantry. The Georgians also failed to replace pickets and skirmishers in front of their defenses to warn of a Union assault.⁴

It would be the task of the 49th Pennsylvania and the second Union assault column to secure these works, as the first line was instructed to protect the Union flanks upon reaching the enemy works. Young Blatt and his comrades



The field at Spotsylvania, Virginia over which the 49th Pennsylvania advanced during Upton's Assault on May 10, 1864, as seen from the position of General Doles' Georgians. Pine trees still mark the treeline as it existed in 1864. The path from the Shelton House to the battlefield used by the attacking Union force is in the small opening in the center of the picture. Blatt was mortally wounded in the assault.

loaded their rifles and fixed bayonets. They were forbidden to place percussion caps on their rifles, the last step before firing, as Colonel Upton did not want the advancing soldiers to stop and fire during the charge, thus slowing down their momentum.⁵ Upton's tactics would prove effective.

The attack, known as Upton's Assault, began at approximately 6:00 p.m. There were 200 yards of open field between the edge of the pines and the Confederate works. Within 60 to 90 seconds the Union advance line had reached the Confederate salient — a bulge in the defensive position out from the main line.⁶ That position was known as the west angle of the Mule Shoe salient, so named because the bulge resembled a mule shoe, thus making the position vulnerable to flank and frontal attack. Confederate engineers, however, purposely constructed the Mule Shoe salient to permit the Confederate line to retain the high ground of that part of the field. The 49th Pennsylvania reached the Mule Shoe salient but a few feet in back of the soldiers of the 121st New York — the first line of the assaulting column. The Georgian defenders fired only once before they were overwhelmed. The 49th Pennsylvania and the regiments of the second attacking column followed the Union breakthrough, capturing 950 Confederates.⁷

The Union breakthrough, however, was not reinforced due to several errors. The assault was planned to have support in the form of simultaneous attacks along other sections of the Confederate line. However, General Gouverneur Warren's Fifth Corps attacked prematurely at 4:15 p.m. at nearby Laurel Hill. General Gershom Mott's troops of the Second Corps likewise attacked at the wrong time — 5:00 — as Mott was never advised to delay the attack until 6:00 p.m.⁸ General Burnside's Ninth Corps failed to link up to their right with the rest of the Union line to augment Upton's attack.⁹ So, at 6:00 p.m., Upton's command had no support to follow up on the successful assault. As darkness fell, the twelve regiments of Upton's Assault were ordered to withdraw from the captured works. The position which had been gained at the cost of approximately 1,000 Union casualties was now abandoned and re-occupied by Confederate infantry. Despite the Union withdrawal, General Ulysses Grant was advised of the breakthrough which had been conducted by a brigade of 4,500 troops. Two days later Grant would order a similar assault. However, the Union attack planned for May 12, 1864, would consist of the Second Army Corps, or 19,000 men.¹⁰

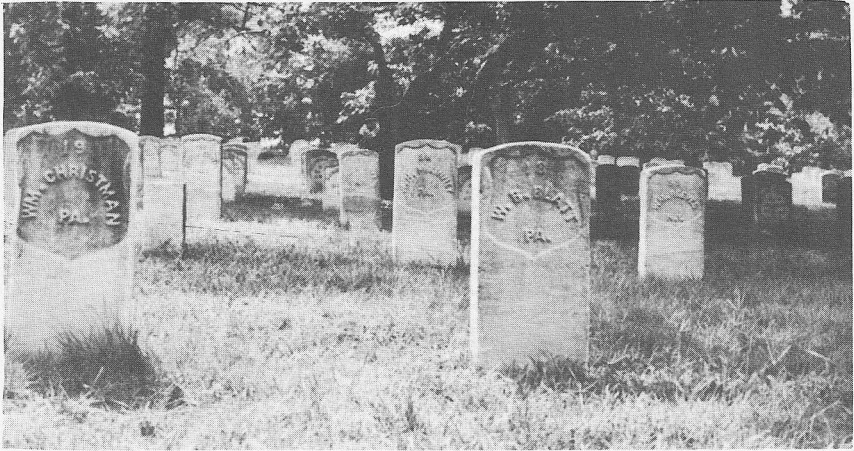
The 49th Pennsylvania suffered terrible losses in the May 10, 1864, attack with over 50% casualties — 260 soldiers killed or wounded — the highest Union regimental loss in Upton's Assault.¹¹ Among the casualties was Private William Blatt with a "gun shot wound of [the] head." He was transported by a hospital ship up the Potomac River to Washington, D.C. Blatt appears to have died on the ship as burial records indicate that he was brought to Arlington from the 6th Street Wharf, which was across the Potomac River from the riverfront estate of General and Mrs. Robert E. Lee. Service records indicate that he was "brought in dead" to the wharf as he "had died on [the] way to [Armory Square] hospital [on] May 13, 1864."¹²

On Saturday, May 14, 1864, the five foot nine inch, twenty-two-year-old Blatt was buried in Arlington's new "Soldiers Cemetery." Buried with Blatt on the second day of burials at the Arlington estate were five other Union soldiers. Blatt was the third soldier buried at Arlington National Cemetery. Fellow Pennsylvanians William Christman and William McKinney, the first two burials, were buried the day before, having perished from disease.¹³

William Blatt's death and burial followed U.S. Quartermaster General Montgomery Meigs' plan for an accessible potter's field for the common soldier. However, at some point after the cemetery's humble origin the Arlington burial ground became a place of honor. Blatt, who was nearly buried as unknown, became historically significant as the first battle casualty to be buried in the most famous military cemetery in the U.S.¹⁴

Of all the Arlington Civil War burials, the grave of William Blatt is among the closest to the Potomac River, several hundred yards away. The grave is near the Ord & Weitzel Gate, in the northeastern corner of the

original 200 acres requested by Meigs and approved by Secretary of War Edwin Stanton to be set aside for soldier burials.¹⁵ There is no land along the Potomac's banks more humble, yet more honorable, than the Arlington burial site selected by Quartermaster General Montgomery Meigs.



The Section 27 front row headstone of William Blatt, Arlington National Cemetery's first battle death. The headstone of the cemetery's first Civil War burial, William Christman, is to the left. Christman died of disease and was buried on May 13, 1864. Blatt was buried the next day.

Notes and References

*An Arlington native, George W. Dodge is an Arlington Special Justice and lawyer. He is a frequent contributor to the *Magazine*.

¹Register of Burials, Department of the Army, Arlington National Cemetery.

²Military Service Record of William B. Blott/Blatt, Co. B, Co. K, 49th Pennsylvania Infantry, National Archives.

³William D. Matter, *If It Takes All Summer, The Battle of Spotsylvania* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: UNC Press, 1988), p. 158. See also Upton's Report in *The War of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, D.C.; Government Printing Office, 1881-1902), Vol. 36, Part I Reports, p. 667.

⁴Noah A. Trudeau, *Bloody Roads South* (NY, NY.: Ballantine Books, 1989), p. 158. See also Matter, *Battle of Spotsylvania*, p. 156.

⁵Matter, *Battle of Spotsylvania*, p. 158.

⁶*Ibid.* p. 162.

⁷*Ibid.* p. 167.

⁸*Ibid.* p. 160.

⁹*Ibid.* pp. 168-69.

¹⁰*Ibid.* p. 189. See also Trudeau, *Bloody Roads South*, p. 162.

¹¹William F. Fox, *Regimental Losses in the American Civil War 1861-1865* (reprint; Dayton, Ohio: Morningside Bookshop, 1985), p. 268.

¹²Military Service Record of William Blatt, National Archives.

¹³Register of Burials, Arlington National Cemetery.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Philip Bigler, *In Honored Glory* (Vandamere Press, 1987), pp. 27-28.



WHY DO WE CALL IT?

Potomac River

Potomac was the name of an Indian settlement at the mouth of a creek which empties into the River just below the mouth of the Aquia. The name first appeared on a map in 1612 and was applied only to the lower part of the river as we know it. Later the whole river from its headwaters to its outlet into Chesapeake Bay was called Potomac.

The word is usually translated a “trading place,” although some give it as “the place where the tribute is brought.” In the early days it was spelled in many different ways: Potomack, Petomecke, Pawtomake, Patowmack, and Patawomack are some of them.

WHY DO WE CALL IT?

Fairlington

The large apartment development known as Fairlington was built in 1943 by the Defense Homes Corporation to relieve the war-induced shortage of living units in this area. The property acquired for this purpose lay partly in Arlington County and partly in Fairfax County — a fact which suggested Fair-lington as an appropriate name.

The portion which lies outside Arlington County was included in the 1952 annexation from Fairfax by the City of Alexandria, so that the name Fair-lington no longer has its original significance.