The

Artillerymen

**18-Year-Old CSA Artillery Officer ‘Invented’ Concept of Indirect Fire**

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Fall 2001 - Vol. 22, No. 4

One of the most significant contributions to the evolution of artillery tactics and strategy during the American Civil War was the concept of indirect fire pioneered by a Confederate sergeant, Milton W. Humphreys.

Gunners tried to use the terrain to their best advantage to become less vulnerable targets. Placing a gun behind a swell or rise, so the projectile would just clear the ridge, afforded some protection. The enemy could see only the barrel and the top of the wheels.

When the cannon fired, it recoiled a few feet, and if the rise was great enough, the cannon could be reloaded out of enemy sight. Reloading out of sight was considered a great advantage until Sgt. Humphreys pioneered the new concept of indirect firing.

Milton Wylie Humphreys was born in Greenbrier County, Virginia (now West Virginia) on Sept. 14, 1844. When he reached school age, his father began to teach him the alphabet, but discovered that Milton could already read.

He told his father he had taught himself to read because he wanted to know what was in the newspaper. By the time he was 13, he had enrolled at Mercer Academy in Charleston, where he pursued college level studies.

The story of Humphreys’ arrival at Washington College was retold in the “Confederate Veteran”:

"In September, 1859, there came to Washington College, at Lexington, Va., a young man who walked from near Clarksburg, in Northwestern Virginia, and, appearing before the President, said: 'I want an education. I have no money, but I am willing to saw wood or do any work to meet my expenses.'

“He was received into the college and, though imperfectly prepared, soon showed real genius, and by hard study took a high stand in all his classes.

“When the war broke out, he at once enlisted in an artillery company, displayed the highest qualities as a soldier, and became especially distinguished as a gunner for the quickness, accuracy, and cool courage with which he handled his piece.

“He was made Sergeant, refusing higher promotion because he would not leave his loved gun. He carried his Greek classics and his books on higher mathematics in his haversack, and studied them around the camp fires, frequently teaching classes of his comrades when in camp."

Humphreys was just 18 when he enlisted in Bryan's Battery of the 13th Virginia Light Artillery, but he immediately showed his aptitude as a gunner. On May 3, 1862, Bryan's Battery was ordered to Fayetteville, in Fayette County, West Virginia. They were ordered to attack the Federal fortification there.

On the morning of May 19, two miles from Fayetteville, the small force under Col. John McCausland, of which Bryan's Battery was a component, encountered a small force of Union cavalry. Bryan's guns drove them back. The Confederates arrived at a plateau about a mile and a half from the fort.

Humphreys gave the following account of the battle in his book, *Military Operations in Fayette County, West Virginia.*

"The infantry went down into the woods toward the works. The road to Raleigh (now Beckley, W.Va.) after running in a straight line nearly three fourths of a mile from Fayetteville, turns square to the left, and ascends to a small cleared plateau with a hill on the right. On this ridge were posted Bryan's third and fourth.

“The second piece (mine) was posted on the plateau at the end of a straight opening which had been cut in the woods and ran directly toward the Federal fort.

"My piece opened first and was immediately answered, and my third or fourth round cutting away the Yankee colors, they shelled us so vigorously and accurately with several guns that we were compelled to move to a place nearby where we could not be seen for the timber in front of us and the smoke behind us rising from the woods beyond the road which were on fire."

This position concealed from the enemy gunners gave Humphreys the perfect opportunity to test his theory of indirect fire. As Humphreys later wrote, "Indirect fire is firing upon a point or place A from a point B which is not visible to people at A. A gun thus concealed from those at which it is firing, is said now to be defiladed… ."

Humphreys estimated the distance of the Federal fort at a mile. Knowing the range of his cannon, he calculated the elevation of the muzzle to shoot over the trees in front of him in order to drop a shell on the fort. With the help of a man on a nearby hill to direct his fire, Humphreys successfully bombarded the fort for two days.

The confused Union troops had no idea where the shells were coming from. A Union patrol finally had to be sent out to locate the cannon, forcing the Confederates to withdraw.

Humphreys again used his brilliant innovation of indirect fire on Sept. 19, 1864, at the Battle of Winchester. Here, Humphreys used a low hill to conceal his cannon.

As to his invention of indirect fire, Humphreys later commented: "I claim no credit for the 'invention’; the thing is so obvious. In fact, if I invented it, I did not do it at Fayetteville, but in my day dreams when I was about eight years old."

Following the war, Humphreys returned to Washington College and embarked on a distinguished academic career. He received a master's degree in ancient languages and earned a doctorate at the University of Leipzig. Humphreys served as a professor at Vanderbilt University, the University of Texas, and finally at the University of Virginia, where he retired in 1912.

But the title Humphreys claimed to be most proud of in his life was First Gunner of Bryan's Battery. Humphreys died in 1928 and is buried in the chapel of the University of Virginia.

The discovery of the concept of indirect fire by an 18-year-old gunnery sergeant in the Civil War changed history. In every subsequent major conflict where artillery was used, indirect fire played an integral role. As recently as the United States’ 1998 bombing of Iraq and NATO's 1999 bombing of Yugoslavia, Humphreys’ principles of indirect fire were utilized. The launch of cruise missiles from U.S. Navy vessels at distant targets is the same principle first used by Sgt. Milton Humphreys at the battle of Fayetteville, West Virginia, in 1862.