

John W. Hopper at the Battle of Stones River

It was January 2, 1863. A bitter cold fairly dark winter day just north of Murfreesboro, Tennessee at the Stones River. My fingers, toes, and cheeks were numb and my nose would sting as I inhaled the crisp winter air. It was so quiet I could hear the occasional crunching of footsteps on the frozen ground. We knew the Rebs were on the other side of the river, waiting for God knows what. The darned thing was only about 30 or 40 feet wide.

My son Frank (Francis Marion Hopper) had joined the army about a year or so earlier. He was living with relatives down near Gestville, Kentucky at the time.

Times were tough in Pittsboro, Indiana, where me and the rest of my family lived when I joined up some four months ago. The army was going to give me some money when I signed up so I went to Indianapolis and did it.

Rosie (General Rosencrans) heard that the Rebs were getting together down here and sent us (The Indiana 79th and others) to hold them. He was afraid they might set up camp and use it as a jumping off place to attack other places important to him. That seems like so long ago.

All I wanted to do was just go home and get warm.

It was almost 2:00 PM. The boys weren't moving around much.

Then it happened.

Somebody fired a shot across the river and all hell broke loose. The boys were falling dead on my right and on my left. I could tell we were hitting them back as hard as we could.

I heard someone behind me moan and I turned to see who it was. Then it felt like someone hit me in the side with their fist and I fell down on the hard cold ground. I'd been shot. I layed there as the fighting went on into the darkness of night.

When the fighting stopped, I could barely see bodies of my friends laying all around me, frozen to the ground with the glue of their own blood. Oh! It was a horrible fight and a worse day.

One of our officers could see that those who weren't dead – were rightly scared. He was afraid that they might cut and run it was so bad.

He rounded up several guys who could play some kind of musical instrument or another and charged them to play some favorite Union marching songs. It seemed to help.

Just after our boys finished their first song the Rebs across the river must have had the same idea because they started playing one of their songs. On it went into the night 'til our boys started playing "Home Sweet Home". The Rebs didn't wait. They just joined right in.

After that it was so dark and quiet a person might think they had already died – only every now and then – I could hear a quiet voice whispering, sobbing, almost crying: "Be it ever so humble – there's no place like home... no place like home..."

Over 10,000 boys died in that battle on each side. But we held them. We held them.

They sent me to the hospital at Nashville. Guess they thought I was going to die, but I didn't. I'd never be the man I was when I joined up – but I lived.

I later found out that my son, Frank, had joined the "Confederate" army and was sent to Camp Burnett in Tennessee to muster in. He was assigned to the same Kentucky 4th Infantry that was at the Stones River just north of Murfreesboro on that same January 2nd.

NOTE: This story was written by Dan Hopper, a descendant of John W. and Frank. It is based on documents found in the National Archives in Washington D.C.

There is no family lore to suggest that John and his son Frank ever discussed this battle or even knew they were both there on that fateful January 2nd, 1863.