

The Indianapolis Literary Club paper for Feb. 2012

By Hal Schimmelpfennig

The Long Handled Stirrer

The name of this paper is the The Long Handled Stirrer and my handle is Hal Schimmelpfennig. Yes, the name is long and sometimes causes concern. So, I spoke with a government authority about shortening it. The response was certainly compassionate and understanding. They asked what I would like to drop or change. I told them I would like to drop the H. But, they said, you have only one H in Schimmelpfennig. No, no, I told them. I want to drop the H in the first name Hal and become known as Al Schimmelpfennig. They weren't impressed and that didn't happen.

The name, as you may have guessed, is of German origin. A Schimmel is a white horse and a pfennig is a German penny. In fact, there is a Prussian penny struck in the mid 19th century with a white horse on it which carried a nickname of Schimmelpfennig, similar to our buffalo nickel or Indian Head penny nicknames.

While growing up with an unusual name, I found you are pretty much on a constant look-out for others who may be sharing your malady. One name I came across was Alexander Schimmelpfennig, a General the American Civil War. He was born in East Prussia on July 20, 1824 into a family of prominence, thought to be part of the Junkers. Meaning

“young master” and is understood to be a country squire. The family name at that time was

Von Schimmelpfennig. Those in senior military positions and high civil service appointments exerted a strong political influence during this period. Many of the less affluent Junkers took up careers in civil service, the military, or as mercenaries. This was

especially true of the younger sons in a family, who had little or no inheritance compared to

the oldest son. It was during young Schimmelpfennig’s military training that he dropped the Von from his name. He was commissioned by the military in 1842 with a specialization

in military tactics. During this period of his life, he would have been influenced by all the

talk of the tremendous political upheavals that had been sweeping across Europe. The French revolution and Napoleon’s military incursions were still in the minds of everyone.

The motives for most of this unrest were individual freedom and a republican government. .

It was this passion for democracy that may have been in the mind of our young army officer Schimmelpfennig, directing his thinking toward becoming a political stirrer himself.

But, it was this stirring, as you will see, that lead to his early death.

During this period, Louis Phillipe became king of France. He was a progressive noble who supported the French revolutionary government but fell from power due to his inability to win the allegiance of the new industrial classes. This led to the establishment of a republic in France and stimulated German liberal groups to push even more passionately for the formation

of their own republic and major constitutional reform. At about the same time, the German-speaking inhabitants of Schlesweg and Holstein revolted against Danish rule. These seafaring states between Germany and Denmark had been the subject of territorial claims and counter claims by Denmark, Prussia, Sweden, Austria and the Holy Roman Empire from the 15th century. With German as the official language, their tendency was to look south for support rather than to Denmark in the north. This desire for German affiliation grew strong by the 1840's and these states asked for aid from Germany. Young Lieutenant Schimmelpfennig was a part of this aid. He distinguished himself in the fighting against the Danes and was rewarded with a promotion to Captain. Despite military victories by the liberal German forces, the political leaders in Prussia agreed to an armistice with Denmark that included withdrawal of the Prussian troops. This was a major disappointment for the liberal military because they wanted to lessen Danish influence and cooperation not increase it, and spurred them to seek support from other German states to fight for broader country-wide democratic reform. This increased stirring was largely ignored by the powerful princes except in the states of Bavaria, Palatinate and Baden and led Captain Schimmelpfennig, along with Carl Schurz, Franz Sigel and Louis Blenker, to leave the army and form a resistance group.

In 1849, this newly-formed resistance group joined the revolutionary army of

Palatinate and became deeply involved in developing and training their army. Working from this large area of southern Germany, the goal was to overthrow the rule of the Prussian princes, establish democratic reform and a unified German republic. This military preparation was far from complete and insufficient to withstand the Prussian army

sent to put down this uprising. Schimmelpfennig faced more misfortune by being wounded twice at the Battle of Rinnthal. He and his group, following this crushing defeat,

were forced to seek safe haven in Switzerland, which was a wise and fortunate move as they, along with hundreds of others, were tried for treason in absentia by Prussia and given

a death sentence. Schimmelpfennig's stirring and fierce principles seemed to have him in

the wrong place at the wrong time. Even later at the more exalted level of General, he was

not immune to misfortune. When in command during the American Civil War, he and other German officers, with different accents and unusual names were often made scapegoats for the failures or defeats of other commanders. We will see more of these situations later in this essay.

While his resistance group was living in Switzerland, they continued to meet regularly to discuss how they might be involved in helping others, within Germany, with any revolt against the establishment. As a part of these interactions, Schimmelpfennig worked with

Carl Schurz, teaching him the military tactics that he had studied as a cadet in Berlin and also trained himself in engineering. Both of these activities will play a prominent role in his life before and during the Civil War in the United States. He also began work on a book about the Crimean War, to be published later in the United States. It was considered by many an excellent study of the conflict between the Russian, Turkish, British and French empires. He continued his stirring of the establishment and looked for every opportunity to show the need for change to a republican type of government from the autocratic and warring monarchy system.. However, over time, his resistance group began to realize that major change in Germany was probably not going to happen at this time. They also faced the fact that returning to their mother country with a death warrant hanging over their heads was not a good alternative. He and his compatriots all set out to make a new life, and the first step was a move to England. They selected St. John's Wood near London, which was \ heavily populated by refugees and where Schimmelfennig married his German fiancée Sophie Von Glumer. Soon, the possibility of realizing their political goals of living under a republic seemed possible in the United States. The couple immigrated to Philadelphia in 1853. Schimmelfennig was able to find-employment as an engineer with the War Department in Washington, DC and completed his work on the book analyzing and

forecasting the outcome of the Crimean War. In the early 1860s Schimmelpfennig was

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drawn to talk of forming a volunteer military force in preparation for the anticipated secession of southern states. Most of this build up and the formation of military units was

being done by individual cities and states. Schimmelpfennig answered a call for leadership

from a Pittsburgh regiment and was made commander. After completing training, his unit

was mustered into service in the summer of 1861 as the 35th Pennsylvania Volunteers. He was commissioned as Colonel of the then renamed 74th Pennsylvania Regiment. After a

stop in Philadelphia, where two other companies were attached to them, they were ordered

to join the Army of the Potomac under his former Prussian colleague General Louis Blenker. While still in Philadelphia, two more of Schimmelpfennig's misfortunes occurred. His horse fell, and Schimmelpfennig's ankle was badly broken. A short time later he contracted smallpox. These untimely misfortunes forced him to remain for hospitalization and recuperation.

Colonel Schimmelpfennig faced his first action leading Union troops in August 1862 at Freeman's Ford. He was to cross the deep waters of the Rappahanock River with his entire regiment and all their support equipment and supplies for reconnaissance on General Stonewall Jackson's troop movements and to

disrupt his supply train mission. Schimmelpfennig attacked and captured a group of Confederate soldiers and pack mules loaded with supplies. Two

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additional regiments from the brigade headed by General Henry Bohlen, another German officer who had become rich as a liquor dealer after coming to the United States, were sent in for support and assistance. This culminated in a bayonet charge led by Schimmelpfennig to give the impression there was a large Union force ready for action. The battle cost the Union 68 men and the death of General Bohlen. Schimmelpfennig replaced him as brigade commander just prior to the crippling Union defeat at the Second Battle of Bull Run.

President Lincoln still needed to find an effective leader for the eastern army so he selected General John Pope whom he moved from the western theatre after his success in opening the upper Mississippi River for the Union. He and his family were well-connected politically, and he was even related by marriage to Mary Todd Lincoln. His bombastic style and tendency to blame others for his failures made him controversial, and he was not widely accepted by the eastern forces. This appointment is now considered to be one of Lincoln's poorest decisions. Pope had two major objectives: to protect Washington DC, and to draw Confederate forces away from General

George McCellan and his Peninsular Campaign attempting to capture Richmond. But, General Robert E. Lee saw the picture differently. He saw an

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opportunity to destroy Pope's army and then return his attention to the defense of Richmond. Stonewall Jackson welcomed the opportunity for retaliation against the attack on his supply train. He wanted to capture and destroy the Union supply depot at Manassas Junction and disrupt Pope's communication with Washington DC. Lee also sent General James Longstreet's three divisions to support Jackson. Pope was so concerned about this heavy concentration of Confederate forces and the importance of defending Washington, DC, that he organized his men in a militarily strong area on the north side of the Rappahannock River. Colonel Schimmelpfennig's brigade was unluckily, or perhaps intentionally, placed at the key point in this defense and would serve as the first line of resistance. This heavy concentration of troops culminated in the largest simultaneous assault of the war and two days of heavy fighting. Schimmelpfennig's men held firm but too many other units broke, resulting in Pope's army being driven from the field. During the retreat, Schimmelpfennig's brigade was assigned rear guard duty and was the last unit to withdraw from the Second Battle of Bull Run.

Following Colonel Schimmelpfennig's field leadership during this battle, he was

recommended for promotion to brigadier general, along with his fellow officer Colonel

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Krzyzanowski. There was considerable delay, but, finally, Secretary of War Edward Stanton presented the recommendation to President Lincoln, at least in part, to make the point to other German immigrant soldiers that Washington DC was supporting them. Lincoln agreed and said with a laugh and a dramatic Schim---mel---fen---nig must be appointed. The recommendation was sent to the Senate along with Colonel Krzyzanowski's, but only Schimmelpfennig's was approved. Rumor had it that no one could pronounce Krzyzanowski's name.

After the Union defeat at Fredericksburg, VA, in December 1862, and seeing the seriously sagging morale of the troops, Lincoln replaced General Ambrose Burnside with General Joseph Hooker. This was immediately popular with the troops. Many had trained under Hooker and felt that he was sensitive to their needs. They also liked his "Fighting Joe" image. He set out to prove himself and the effectiveness of his army by developing a plan that was to catch Lee's army in a trap. Hooker had a great strength advantage so he moved about a third of his 134,000 men upstream and across the Rappahannock and Ripidan Rivers west of Chancellorsville. This movement included the XI Corps with Schimmelpfennig's First Brigade in General Carl Schurz's Third Division. They were now positioned to move back eastward toward Lee's left and rear at his encampment near Fredericksburg about ten miles

away. To allow time for this rather long march and cover his intentions, Hooker deployed another third of his troops to the frontal position of Lee's encampment. This, considered a diversionary action, would hold Lee in his present location until the double headed trap could be sprung. It was expected that when Lee realized his encampment was caught between the two larger units, he would withdraw toward Richmond, or if he decided to attempt a defensive battle, he would be at a tremendous disadvantage. However, through intelligence reports and his intuition, Lee guessed what was afoot and put a daring and risky plan of his own into effect. Despite the usual military practice of not dividing your forces when facing an opponent of greater strength, he split his units to leave only a small force where he sensed the diversionary tactic was being set-up and sent the bulk of his units on the offensive toward Chancellorsville rather than remain there on the defense. This resulted in some very heavy fighting with staggering losses on both sides, but so surprised Hooker that he seemed to lose his nerve and withdrew his men. In the process of going into a defensive location, he made the fatal mistake of leaving the right flank of the XI Corps unprotected. This weakness was pointed out to Hooker by his field commanders, but he would not change his orders. The error was also recognized by Lee and he decided to attack there. To do this, Lee divided his forces again to send Stonewall Jackson on a day-long circuitous route to get directly at this exposed right flank while

the other half of his men continued the main frontal battle. Jackson's movements were observed by Union reconnaissance and reported back to Generals Hooker and Howard but they were not convinced of the importance of the information. Jackson's 14 mile maneuver brought him into position to attack General Charles Deven's First Division of the XI Corps at 5:30 p.m. when the Union forces expected the day's fighting was over, had stacked their arms, and were preparing the evening meal. This initial surprise assault resulted in the loss of nearly a thousand of Deven's men and caused the remainder to retreat in complete disorder. The retreating men and their horses overran Schimmelpfennig's First Brigade in a defensive location next to them making it virtually impossible to maintain an organized defense. Another case of our long handled stirrer being in the wrong place at the wrong time. The First Brigade lost an additional 419 men making the total loses for the XI Corps at Chancellorsville greater than 2400 soldiers. The Rebel side also suffered heavy loses but Stonewall Jackson was able to completely overwhelm the unprepared Union troops and turn the battle into a Confederate victory. Hooker was forced to give in to Lee's superior strategy and withdraw his units. The entire Chancellorsville operation was considered Lee's masterpiece in executing a near flawless offensive against overwhelming odds. Despite the fact that Hooker was warned repeatedly about this right flank problem he refused to accept that this was the major reason for the defeat and officially placed the

blame on the unlucky XI Corps. Even though this was a tremendous victory for Lee, and a humiliating defeat for Hooker and the XI Corps, it was also a great loss for Lee as his "right arm" man, Stonewall Jackson, was accidentally shot by his own men while he was on a reconnaissance mission at dusk. In addition to the mortal wounding of Jackson, the Confederate Army lost 22 percent of their men and Hooker lost 13 percent of his, a total of about 20,000 men.

Despite these heavy losses, Lee's victories at Chancellorsville and Fredericksburg buoyed him to move north into Federal territory. This move would disrupt Union campaign plans and would supply his men with a better source of food and supplies from the rich northern farms. He also hoped to demoralize the North by threatening their home area near Washington DC and thereby weakening their resolve to continue the war. Such a move might also work against Lincoln in the approaching election and bring in a new president more open to a negotiated peace. It was also possible that if the South showed real strength and a possibility of winning independence, that Britain or France might officially recognize the Confederacy and

provide assistance. England was concerned about losing its supply of cotton to keep its textile mills running. France would have been relieved to have the mighty British navy diverted from nearby waters to America.

The battle of Gettysburg was called the turning point of the entire war. Confederate troops never fought so far north again; in fact, Lee never took his army across the Potomac again. So, Gettysburg became the last great offensive of the Army of Northern Virginia.

Lee selected a route north via the Shenandoah and Cumberland Valleys. General George Meade, a 48-year-old renowned tactician whose facial features and temper outbursts earned him the nickname of "the old snapping turtle," had just replaced General Hooker. He observed these Confederate movements from his location east of the mountain ranges. Lee's army ended up north and west of Gettysburg and the Union army ended up south of the town, which surprised Lee because he had no warning from General Jeb Stuart and his cavalry. Although neither side intended to engage in battle, there was an accidental engagement on June 30, 1863, just west of Gettysburg. The first unit involved, many historians say, was the famed 1800 man Iron Brigade, which was the only all western brigade in the eastern theatre. This brigade was a part of General John Reynolds' First Corps made up of regiments from Indiana, Wisconsin and Michigan. A complete and interesting account of this Brigade's activities was published in 1961 by our own Literary Club member Alan T.

Nolan. The loss of General Reynolds, who was killed on July 1, 1863, was especially devastating as he was highly respected by his men as a "soldier's general" and one of the best battlefield commanders, in whom General Meade placed great confidence. Commanders of the units involved in this early encounter called for help, and with large numbers of troops on both sides within a day's march, the battle escalated quickly and substantially. General Schimmelpfennig, with the XI Corps, reached the north side of Gettysburg by mid-day on July 1. The top-ranking Union commander in the field, replacing General Reynolds, was General Oliver O. Howard. He intended to set up a battle line with his units north of town to be prepared for General Jubal Early's Confederate force to arrive from that direction. Howard's biggest problem was defending this large area with the limited number of units he had available. To accomplish this, he spread his 6000 men thinner than the established norm and this resulted in a major weakness. The right flank of the XI Corps was inadequately protected. The Union force was little more than one rank deep compared to three ranks deep for the Rebels. Since this placement was considered indefensible, Schimmelpfennig and the other unit commanders tried unsuccessfully to persuade Howard to alter his plan. This poor judgement did not seem to be an exception for Howard. His military history was, as one biographer put it, "a paradox of...surviving so many tactical errors of judgement....and emerging later with increased

rank". To his credit, on the civilian side of his life, he was instrumental in establishing Howard University, in Washington DC. The situation of the XI Corps was made much worse when General Francis Barlow took it upon himself to move his division away from the main defense line to occupy a small knoll. Although the knoll was a good defensive location, it broke up the established defense line and left a large open area of about a quarter mile. This vulnerability was immediately recognized by General Early when his Rebel troops arrived from the northeast. Early was joined by General A. P. Hill's divisions and General Robert E. Rodes' division. This gave them superior numbers for their attack at the Union's undefended open area. The first Confederate wave was held back and Schimmelpfennig launched a counter-attack with the 157th New York Regiment but they had insufficient numbers to be effective. The Confederate's second wave was overwhelming and it was necessary for the Union to pull back to the south in an attempt to find a defensible position. This pull back into the sleepy little college town of 2400 was hampered by small streets with lots of dead ends and fences. It was at this point that Schimmelpfennig lost his horse when it was hit by enemy fire. Schimmelpfennig was knocked unconscious and left for dead on the street. By the time he regained consciousness, the Confederates had taken over the area. Schimmelpfennig managed to find an enlisted man's coat so that if captured by the Confederates he would not become a trophy senior officer. He then made his way to the back of a private home on

Baltimore Street near the center of Gettysburg where he managed to hide between a wood shed and a pigsty, covering himself with wood to elude capture while Confederate troops were searching house-to-house for Union soldiers at the end of this first day's battle. He remained in his hiding place for two more days while the town was under rebel control. The house and sheds were owned by the Henry Garlick family, and he was given food and water by Mrs. Garlick, despite the danger to her personal safety. The house is still there and still belongs to the same family. A plaque has been erected by the tourism bureau to point out the location of this incident. Was Schimmelpenninck unlucky again? When you consider that sixteen brigade and division commanders were killed or wounded in the battle, he could be considered very lucky indeed to come out of this incident alive. This casualty list included General Barlow, who had moved his troops out of the defensive position. He was wounded and captured. By the end of the day, the XI Corps would lose 3200 men, over half the initial strength.

The many unsuccessful Confederate attacks over the next two days ended with the fateful and disastrous Picket's Charge where 12,500 Rebels charged across 1700 yards of open ground and up a hill toward Cemetery Ridge. Only 5000 lived to retreat. After the three-day battle of Gettysburg, Lee ordered a full retreat of all his units back across the Potomac.

It was only after these two additional days of fighting that Schimmelpfennig was able to come out

of his hiding place and was amazed to find his lifelong friend and comrade-in-arms Carl Schurz riding through town. The two had a joyous reunion after he had been given up as killed or captured. They were treated to a celebration breakfast by a much relieved Mrs. Garlick.

With Gettysburg past but not forgotten, lingering memories of incompetent superior officers and the continuous citing of the unlucky XI Corps as scapegoats for others' failures, our long handled stirrer began to stir again. This time he requested a transfer from the XI Corps. His request was honored; he was assigned to lead a brigade on Folly Island in Charleston Harbor. Charleston was a key southern port and therefore important to both sides. So there were challenging objectives to be met for the Union. His actions were mostly diversionary; keeping Confederates occupied so that they could not join the defense of Jacksonville and attacking James Island to draw the Rebels away from the heavily fortified batteries on the other nearby islands. Facing the approach of Sherman's army, Charleston was generally evacuated late in the war and Schimmelpfennig entered to accept the Southern surrender. But, an unforeseen danger would have a greater impact on Schimmelpfennig than any of the previous dangers. The South Carolina climate was host to many viral and bacterial diseases. Chronic dysentery was rampant among the troops due to polluted water, and the

swamps and marshes were ideal breeding grounds for insects, making malaria common. Schimmelpfennig's health had not been good for some time, and he was soon to be attacked by malaria, chronic dysentery and, later, even tuberculosis. All this led to acceptance of a medical leave and a return to his home in Pennsylvania, where he entered a medical clinic. He had been promised by General Grant that he would not be mustered out of the army during this recuperation period. But as a final unfortunate insult, that commitment was not kept and Schimmelpfennig was discharged just two weeks before his death. As a result, his widow did not receive the usual pension of a soldier dying on active duty. His life of stirring ended at 41 years, and he was buried in Reading, Pennsylvania. He might have found Kurt Vonnegut's words apropos for his story "So it goes".