

James E. Hanger

Very few soldiers in the War for Southern Independence had a shorter career as a combat soldier than James E. Hanger. He does have the honor, although dubious, of being the first amputee of the war. Fortunately, that is not his mark in history.

James was born on February 25, 1843, at Mount Hope, his father's plantation, near Churchville, Virginia. He was the son of William Anderson and Eliza (Hogshed) Hanger

On June 2, 1861, he was a sophomore at Washington College (now Washington and Lee) in Lexington, Virginia. A fine specimen of an 18 year old young man, he decided on this day to join the Confederate States Army (CSA). An ambulance corps of Confederates happened to be passing by and he just joined in with them. When they reached Phillipi, Virginia (now West Virginia) he enlisted in the Churchville Cavalry under the command of Captain Franklin Sterrett. The unit would become a part of the 14th Virginia Cavalry which fought throughout the war, but not with James.

James' parents were very much against the idea of him going off to war, but they were somewhat appeased to know that he would be joining the same unit as two of his brothers and four cousins. His mother provided him with some additional clothing to share with his brothers.

On June 3, a Confederate force of around 800 met a much larger Union force near Phillipi. Many consider this to be the first land battle of the war.

Private Hanger related his story to Robert J. Driver author of 14th Virginia Cavalry, part of a series on the Virginia regimental history. *"We were ordered to pack up and be ready to move on a moments notice. About dark we were notified that we would not move until midnight. Early in the night it commenced to rain and rained hard until nearly daylight. At midnight we did not move, perhaps on account of the rain and the belief that the enemy would not march in such rain and darkness...the Federals were moving in on us and would be there soon, and were entirely too strong for our forces equipped as we were, not a single cartridge in the command, only loose powder, ball and shot. Arms – old flintlock muskets, horse pistols, a few shotguns and colt revolvers..."*

"As the Co. [column] on the Clarksburg road passed old Mrs. Humphrey's home about 2 miles from Philippi about daybreak, she started one of her boys to notify our command. Her boy was captured by some stragglers and she fired a gun at them. The commander of the battery took this for the [prearranged] signal and commenced firing about 4:20 a.m. He told me that this firing was the first notice we had that the enemy were near us. The Col. that was to cut off our retreat was delayed some 30 or 40 minutes on account of heavy roads, which gave our forces time to get away."

"The first two shots were canister and directed at the Cavalry Camps, the third shot was a 6 pound solid shot aimed at a stable in which the Churchville Cavalry Company had slept. This shot struck the ground, ricocheted [sic], entering the stable and struck me. I remained in the stable til they came looking for plunder, about four hours after I was wounded. My limb was amputated by Dr. Robinson, 16th Ohio Vol."

Without any anesthesia his leg was removed about seven inches below the hip joint in a surgical procedure that lasted about 45 minutes. He was the first of over 50,000 amputees. After the amputation he was moved around quite often. His first stop was the Philippi Methodist Episcopal Church which had been converted into a hospital. Then he was moved to a private home owned by Southern sympathizers. He was then moved to a farm in the country where he was fitted with his a heavy, straight wooden leg, the original "peg leg." He was still a POW and was sent to Camp Chase in Ohio. Finally he was sent to Norfolk, Virginia where two months later he would be part of a prisoner exchange.

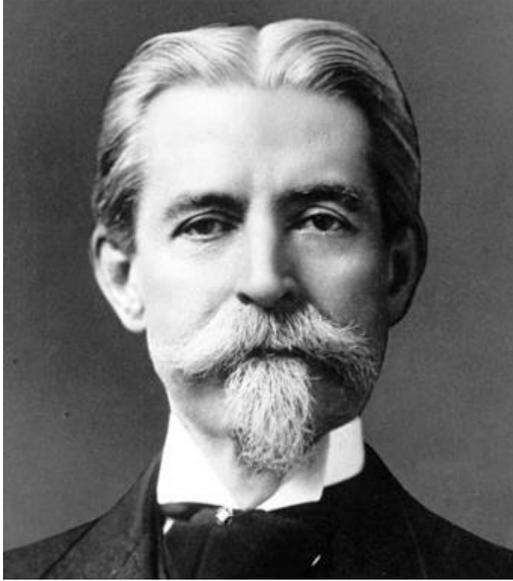
No longer a prisoner, he returned to the Mt. Hope plantation where it is said he locked himself in his room for three months and saw no one. His family was afraid that he had slipped into a deep depression. He asked for his meals to be left outside the door. An hour later his mother would find that the food had all been eaten.

It was not depression. Using staves from old whiskey barrels and nothing to cut with except a small pen knife, the former engineering student had built the first prosthetic leg that was articulated at the knee and the ankle. It provided him with stability while allowing the joints to bend and looked like a real leg.



The family reported after three months they were totally amazed to see him come walking down the stairs. The "Hanger limb" was born. He then began to build limbs for other soldiers and this brought him fame. He obtained his first patent on March 23, 1863, with the Confederate Patent Office. It was number 155, "for an artificial limb."

He opened his first store in Richmond and then returned to Churchville to continue his work. One of his early limbs was made for Captain Daingerfield, a fellow Confederate who was wounded just minutes after James. His leg was removed the next day, the second amputee of the war.



In 1873 James married Nora McCarthy and they would have six sons and two daughters. All six sons would follow him into the business. The company headquarters was moved to Washington, DC in 1883. James retired in 1905, but never gave up the title of President. Today, J. E. Hanger, Inc., ticker symbol HGR, trades on the NYSE at \$32.87 as I write this and is now headquartered in Austin, Texas (good move).

James died on June 9, 1919, and is buried in the Glenwood Cemetery in the District of Columbia with his wife Nora.

