

Chas. H. Merri
August 5, 1861
Hampton's Legion



Extracts of a Private Letter.

FROM A MEMBER OF THE WASHINGTON LIGHT INFANTRY.

CAMP OF THE LEGION, MANASSAS JUNCTION, July 24.

On Friday afternoon, at 7 o'clock p. m., we left our camp at Richmond and started for this place. The distance is only a hundred and fifty miles; but as we were travelling as freight, and on a freight train, our progress was terribly slow. At some places we stopped three hours at a time, waiting for other trains to pass, but at last we reached the long wharf for goal of our desires, Manassas Junction. BEAUREGARD, as you are aware, commands here in person—the invincible, ill-fated BEAUREGARD. When we reached this place, which was at daybreak Sunday morning, we understood that Gen. BEAUREGARD was momentarily expecting an attack from the enemy, who were advancing on this place, in great force, via Centreville. Col. HAMPTON received a dispatch ordering the advance of the Legion as soon as they had eaten breakfast. We pitched one large tent, crowded all our baggage into it, burned all our letters, eat a hasty breakfast, and took the road. Just as we were leaving camp we heard the artillery, about six miles distant, firing upon the enemy.

The morning was calm and beautiful; a clear, cool Sabbath morning; and while, at home, our friends were quietly preparing to go to Church, we were hurrying on to the field of battle. It was a strange Sabbath day! As we hurried along through the beautiful forest roads, the men in excellent spirits, conversing cheerfully and hopefully of the work before us, I was forcibly reminded of these lines from BYRON'S Waterloo:

"And Antons waves above them her green leaves,
Girding, if aught inanimate e'er grieves,
Over the unretreating leaves."

Alas! how true of many of them this—unretreating! At the first fire, two fell, who never spoke again; one of them, young PHELPS, of Charleston, the other a brave Pole, whose name was BLANKENIE.

About five miles from camp we first saw the enemy. A dense column of them were steadily moving up a lane, about half a mile off, upon which our artillery was playing with fearful effect. At each discharge of our pieces a wide break would suddenly appear in the long line of glittering bayonets, and ere they reached cover, many a foeman bit it dead. While on the hill, the enemy turned their artillery on us. The miserable scoundrels, contrary to the usage of civilized warfare, fired chain shot at us; but their aim was not good, and they flew over our heads, whistling like a flock of blackbirds. One round shot struck under the belly of Col. HAMPTON'S horse, covering him with the red clay. Finding that we were too far off to attack the enemy here, we wound around the base of the hill in order to cut them off. As we came out from the cover of the hill and reached a little hollow sparsely covered with trees, the enemy poured a withering fire upon us—round shot, chain shot, shell, musket and rifle balls fell like hail among us; it seemed as if a great hurricane was sweeping the valley; bushes and trees were cut to pieces. Here the Legion lost their first man. I cannot tell how many fell. The Manning Guards had three men killed by one grape-shot; they were terribly mangled, but the poor fellows did not suffer, as they were immediately killed. Here we passed a few moments, they hastily forming made a rush up the hill, but could find no enemy. We then fled down a lane, deploying the men at the same time under a cover of a rail fence. We could no longer see their columns advancing—one immediately below us of three thousand, one to the left about five thousand, and to the right about ten thousand strong. The column nearest to us had a palmetto flag, and by this means completely deceived us. An old Texan scout, who was along with us, told us they were enemies, but our officers would

sounded just as if we were in a swamp, with clouds of mosquito about our ears. Several times, when I raised my head to fire, the balls would cut the edge of the ditch, and throw the dirt in my face. One spent ball cut my upper lip, but gave me no pain. Three times we were driven from this position, and twice, unsupported, remained it. The third time several other fresh regiments assisted us. We fought through lanes, over fences, around farm houses and in all sorts of places. Once we came near losing our colors, and when our company rallied to its support, only thirty out of almost five hundred were left. Col. HAMPTON was shot, and our gallant Capt. GUSMAN, senior Captain, took command. About 5 o'clock KEEZMAN'S Regiment, with several others, reached the field, when they gave a cheer and firing volley advanced at the charge of the enemy's column broke in confusion, and fled like dogs. The battle raged along a line of several miles, and everywhere our troops, though badly cut up, were victors, and about five o'clock the rout became general. President Davis arrived at 11 1/2 miles from Richmond with seven thousand fresh troops; they were, however, too late to take part in the fight. The five hundred cavalry pushed the enemy some miles. Infantry followed them as far as Centreville. Every now and then the flying artillery would wheel into line and pour a deadly volley into their ranks. The enemy threw away everything. We captured sixty-two pieces of artillery, among which were SHERMAN'S celebrated battery and DOUGLASS'S famous big rifle cannon; whether we got all his pieces or not, I cannot say. CONRAN, of New York, was killed, and a great many others of the best men either were killed or captured. About two thousand of the enemy were killed on the road to Centreville. The Louisiana Zouaves fought like tigers—a squad of officers would not believe him; he, however, advanced to the fence, and laying his rifle on a gate post, took a long and steady aim, and when he fired the smile of satisfaction that lit his rugged countenance showed that his aim had been true. The Texan's shot drew the fire of the enemy upon us, and the musket balls flew in clouds above us. Some ten of our men fell; two of them partially blinded by splinters—AMOROS and BOB HAXAN, from Charleston. ASCHEB'S face was fearfully disfigured, and BOB BOWMAN was reported mortally wounded, and so was old Mr. G. J. JERRY of Mt. Pleasant; others were wounded badly, but are in a fair way to recover. We now poured a deadly volley amongst the Yankees, and, jumping the fence, charged them; but they were too fast for us, and succeeded in joining their column to the right. We took one prisoner, who came up voluntarily to Lieut. LOGAN and told him that he surrendered himself a prisoner. LOGAN took his rifle—a magnificent breech-loading piece (one of SHARPE'S patent)—and gave it to old CALVERT—our Texan scout—a splendid shot. CALVERT unscooped himself in a little hollow, and, with the Yankee's rifle, picked off fifteen of the enemy. We now advanced by the right flank to another lane, where we lay for an hour or two under the fire of twenty thousand men. The air was filled with balls. We were partially covered by a ditch—about eighteen inches deep; and here my Zouave drill helped me a great deal in loading lying down. Lieut. Col. JOHNSON was killed here by a Minnie ball passing through his temple and out at the back of his head. He fell without a groan. As we lay in this ditch, the balls flying over us

From the files of
John Hennessy

(4)

bowie knives in hand, chased some twenty five Yankees into a thicket, and there cut them up with their knives. They are terrible-looking fellows; a great many of them are Pennsylvania, craggy-looking brown fellows, with thick, crooked brows and warty mustaches. I could relate much more that is horrible to think of, now that the excitement is over, but will refrain on account of the ladies. Such a battle was never before fought in America. For ten or eleven hours seven thousand men were opposed to seventy five thousand; and at the end of that time utterly routed them, captured all their artillery and taking one thousand or more prisoners, and killing thousands of others. Seventeen thousand is the highest estimate of our men who were actually engaged, and seventy five thousand is the lowest estimate of the enemy. Some of our prisoners say that they had eighty-five thousand, and others ninety. The enemy were confident of victory that they took only three days' provisions, thinking that they would suffice to take them to Richmond. Letters were found among their effects, written to their friends, informing them that on Sunday they would attack Beauregard, and then push right on to Richmond. Alas! for all human calculations, they never reached Manassas. About one thousand victors came from Washington to see us, amongst them many members of Congress—when the news reached them that their troops were in retreat, they fled like sheep, leaving weapons and cartridges behind them, stowed with champagne and good things of all kinds. I could write on for hours. I have not told a fourth part of the events of that day, but hope at some future day to tell you all in detail. The retreat of the enemy from Fairfax was very amusing. An old gentleman from there says that all of their losses who were beaten here fell back on that place, together with Congressmen, Members of the Cabinet, &c., and that at 12 o'clock at night a scout brought the word that our troops were advancing. He says that only our troops were never seen to retreat. In a few moments the place was deserted, baggage, arms, ammunition, everything was left behind. President Davis says that he has all the arms he could wish for, and that the 21st of July was Southern Independence day.

Among the wounded was SWEET, whom I have mentioned in one of my letters. He and I were in a ditch, when the Company was ordered to fall back. We both tried for a space that just as he fired he fell back wounded in two places, in the side and arm—severely but not mortally. There are not more than one-third of the Company who have not received a scratch of some sort. There are more holes through coats and hats, than one can count. But I have written enough.