

THE FIRST CONFLICT AT BULL RUN.

The following graphic letter was received by Capt. Wm. Day, in this city, from his nephew, who was connected with the 1st Massachusetts Regiment:—

FORT ALBANY, Arlington Heights, Va.,
July 27th, 1861.

This is the first opportunity which has presented itself for some time, and I improve it in writing to you. We have had a hard battle since I last wrote.

On Tuesday afternoon, July 16th, we received orders to march into Virginia, and crossed chain bridge about four o'clock, en route for Vienna where we arrived after a long night's march.— Here we snatched a few hours' repose, and at about, 8 A. M. we started for Fairfax Court House.— Our brigade was thrown on the left to out-flank the enemy in the town, but they fled at the approach of the entire column, headed by Sherman's battery. They ran all that day till at night we were glad to desist from the pursuit and rest in Centreville. As we passed through Germantown the rebels set fire to the houses. It was a terrible sight; the houses flaming everywhere, amid the dense woods, on the plains, and upon the distant hills. The rebels knocked in the heads of the flour barrels and stirred it in the mud rather than we should have it, and kegs of crackers and barrels of salt beef were mingled on every side, with cartridges, broken wheels, wagon bodies, etc. &c. They kept only half an hour ahead of us the whole way. When our brigade halted for the night, our company was appointed to do picket duty, and we marched off in the direction of the enemy for about a mile, then separated into squads of four, and hid ourselves in the bushes, where we awaited their coming, but were not attacked, although the pickets of the Ohio regiment were. On Thursday morning the Massachusetts First led the van, and we pushed forward for Bull Run, five or six miles distant. Halting about two miles off, our Company and Company G, were detailed to support two companies of Cavalry in a reconnoissance. We hurried rapidly forward under a blazing sun, and suddenly found ourselves in the face of the enemy's batteries. A precipitate retreat was ordered, and we fell back on the main body. Sherman's battery advanced at a quick trot, and fired the first gun at about 2 o'clock. The enemy commenced his reply and then retreated. We followed after in full feather, but as our skirmishers on the left were rushing on through the under brush they were saluted by a raking fire from a masked battery in the ravine below. They were scattered and nearly annihilated. The Boston Fusileers were ordered up to support them, and finding the place too hot for them, our Company and the National Guards were sent to their support. Our company crossed the ravine and ascended the hill, densely covered with wood, and passing the crest, found themselves on a comparatively open plateau sloping down to a pond of water, surrounded by a dense wood. From this wood the rifles and cannon belched forth their fires, and bullets screamed over our heads like a hornet's nest. As we rushed down the hill at the battery, two men, Sergeant Thomas Harding, and George Bacon, were killed at my side one on my right, and the other on my left. We were broken by the fire, and obliged to retire to the crest of the hill under cover of the trees, leaving four men, two dead and two wounded on the field, beside those whom we were able to carry off—some six or eight. Twice we charged down the hill, and twice we returned, and then the word "retreat!" was passed along the line. Our Lieut. Col. Wolls, fought like a common soldier—he rushed from man to man, grasping their muskets, and firing them, and shouting for another loaded one. So did our Captain, and the men, encouraged by their example, fought like devils, as was said by an officer in the regiment of artillery, who had been in the Mexican army. But what could three companies do against four thousand men who were in the battery and woods? Nothing, and we were obliged to retreat. Just as we leaped the fence, the Lieut. Col. called for volunteers to go down the hill and try to bring up our two wounded men. I said I would go, and handing my musket to the captain, ran down the hill as fast as I could amid a perfect storm of bullets, which made me bend over almost double in order that they might go over my head, as the enemy aimed most astonishingly high. Whole platoons fired at once, but the bullets passed over the heads of our men. I reached the nearest man, both threw up their hands and begged me for Christ's sake not to leave them to the enemy who were bayonetting the wounded. I looked behind me, and judge of horror and peril to find myself alone; not a man had followed me down hill. I was not one hundred feet from the enemy, and without arms. I threw myself down on my face and grasped his hand, bidding him good bye. I told him I was so weak I could scarce get off myself, and that I was alone and must leave him. I then sprang up and ran as fast as I could up the hill, waving my cap and shouting friend! as loud as possible in order to keep the skirmishers of the New York 12th from firing on me—for amid the confusion of the hour it was almost impossible to distinguish friend from foe. The enemy shot my canteen off my neck as I ran up the hill, but I reached the N. Y. regiment in safety, and sank on the ground inside their line utterly exhausted. The other regiments now moved to the line of battle, but none entered the wood again. The men were much exhausted by their hard marching and the poor food they had had for the last three days; and we had been living on raw salt pork and hard bread. Finding retreat inevitable, Gen. Tyler ordered us to retire to Centreville, where we arrived about 8 o'clock, and dropped down to sleep under a pouring rain. We lost 15, viz: killed, 5; wounded, 9; missing 1;—from whom we have heard nothing; no doubt he is dead. It is also believed here that one of our company, who was dying of a cannon shot in his leg, was burned to death at Fairfax when the enemy burnt the hospital after the retreat of the second battle. This ended the first battle of Bull Run. We lay at Centreville all night, and at earliest dawn were marched to within two miles of the enemy, where we rested the next two days, till on Saturday night we were thrown out to sustain our pickets; our regiment laid down on a fresh ploughed field, and being much exhausted, went to sleep, waked every now and then by the sound of the enemy marching in with reinforcements to Bull Run.— They came with rolling drums and bugles playing martial airs, so close to us that we felt the jarring of the ground. But we lay still without noise, and they apparently knew not that on the other side of the wall in the corn-field lay a regiment of their sworn and deadly foes. I fell asleep and dreamed of faces left behind, till called up in the grey of the morn, when we rushed forward to take position on the right bivouac in order to support the Artillery of the left battery of the central division.

It was a fair and lovely Sabbath morning when we filed into the woods, in the rear of our cannon, and sat down to await the commencement of the battle! *Bang*—went our cannon—echoing through the startled wood, and a rifle shell went crashing off like an express train in the direction of the enemy! Far away like distant thunder came the answer of our other batteries all along the line. Then on the right large bodies of our troops charged on the foe; whole regiments fired at once, and whole squadrons of the enemy's horse tore over the groaning ground. For nine hours the battle continued, and we sat there in those woods waiting the order to advance, but none came. As I reclined half dozing on my blanket I could not realize the awful scene only two miles distant. The cannon seemed to my mind a tolling bell calling to worship, as a thousand Sabbath bells were doing then in my far off Northern home, and spiritually I worshipped at the olden altar, as I read from my little Testament and Psalms:

"Lord make me to know mine end, and the measure of my days, what it is, that I may know how frail I am!" Behold Thou hast made my days as an hand's breadth, and mine age is nothing before thee; verily every man at his best estate is but vanity.

Lord! what wait I for? my hope is in thee; O! spare me that I may recover strength before I go hence and be here no more!"

At 4 P. M. up galloped an aid-de-camp, and a hurried retreat was ordered; while the enemy's fire came pelting on our rear, we retired hastily to Centreville. Thence by a forced march to Arlington Heights, thirty miles. Here we are now, but know not how long we shall remain.

J. W. D., Co. H. Mass. 1st Reg.