

Battle of Bull's Run and Manassas

Letter from One of the Mercer Guard, 6th Louisiana Volunteers.

We have been favored with the following letter from a private of Col. Seymour's Regiment, Mr. John Tobin, of this city, belonging to the Mercer Guard, who was promoted from the ranks to a lieutenant for his gallantry. The letter was written in pencil to a friend, with all the freshness and frankness of the true soldier, and will be found highly interesting, as everything must be to us at this time on this subject:

UNION MILLS, Va., July 31, 1861.

Dear Friend—We are now encamped at this point, on the Orange and Alexandria Railroad, five miles from Manassas Junction and five miles from Fairfax Station.

We have passed through many scenes and phases of life since I last wrote you, and have seen as hard duty as is common to volunteers. We have, for a week at a time, slept on the bare ground, without any shelter or covering except what the heavens saw fit to bestow upon us. We have been on duty during heavy rains, all night and day, unable to change our wet uniforms for clothing more dry and comfortable, for the simple reason that we were without a change of wearing apparel—our baggage having been transported to some place unknown to high privates and subalterns. Such is the life of a soldier; his toils, trials and privations are our every-day experience.

At 2 o'clock on the morning of July 17, while encamped at Fairfax Station, we were aroused from our peaceful dreams by the morning reveille. We were taken unawares by this unthought for alarm; however, we willingly performed the first duty of a soldier, (to obey orders,) and took our respective places in line to receive orders. Tents were struck, and baggage of all kinds, cooking utensils, &c., packed in double-quick time, and 'twas then we understood that the enemy were advancing upon our position, and 'twas our intention to give them a warm reception. Our baggage, and every moveable and cumbersome article being packed into our camp wagons, our men proceeded to take their position behind the breastworks they had a few days before erected.

Our company (Mercer Guard) and Calhoun Guard composed the reserve, and were detached from our regiment, and entrusted with the honorable position of covering the retreat. We were expecting the attack every moment, when Brig. Gen. Ewell, commanding this brigade, (6th Louisiana and 5th Alabama Regiments,) ordered a retreat; the enemy were then within a few minutes' march of our late encampment, and had we remained to give them battle we would have been completely cut to pieces, or compelled to surrender.

The reserve of which we were a part brought up the rear of the retreating party, and halted at Union Mills, where we are now encamped. We retreated along the Orange and Alexandria Railroad, and took the precaution to burn some four or five bridges between this point and Fairfax Station, to prevent the enemy's artillery from coming by this road. Twenty minutes after our retreat the enemy, consisting of some 20,000 men, were upon our late camp ground. They rent the air with their shouts of exultation, and were so elated with their victory that they immediately took up their march, expecting to overtake and slaughter us. To our regiment is due the honor of decoying and misleading the enemy, and drawing them on to Bull's Run, where they suffered so inglorious a defeat. Too much praise cannot be bestowed upon the officers commanding our regiment. I would make mention of Col. Seymour, but he is too well known a soldier to receive any praise from my pen, either for bravery or capacity.

On the night of the 17th, both armies slept on their arms, being stationed about one mile from each other. On the morning of the 18th, the enemy advanced towards Bull's Run, and attempted to cross at Mitchell's Ford, and as you know ere this reaches you, with what success. Our company, on the night of the 19th, were posted as picket guard for two miles along Bull's Run, it rained incessantly all night, and we were compelled to lay flat on the ground to prevent the enemy seeing our position, and most important of all to keep our powder and muskets dry. Occasionally you could hear the sharp report of a musket, then probably a volley, and you might bet your life that every report told its tale of death, and the returning echo seemed to answer that every shot had accomplished its purpose. On the morning of the 20th, we were relieved from picket guard by another company, and went to our quarters to take whatever rest the wet ground afforded us. Nothing eventful occurred until the morning of the 21st, the day was beautiful, the sun shone in all its splendor, and to make our cause more holy, it was Sunday, and the battle of Stone Bridge, the greatest battle ever fought on this continent was enacted. On the morning of the 21st, at sunrise, the battle was opened by the enemy's artillery: it is impossible for me to give you anything like a correct idea of this well contested battle. I will not attempt it, but will confine myself to such facts as I know to be true.

Neither party had any advantage up till 3 o'clock, P. M., when the battle looked very gloomy for our side. Our troops at one time were panic stricken, and we would have lost the day had not the reserve taken their position so as to receive the enemy's fire, and cover our retreating forces. Our troops were reformed, and again led on. They were ordered to charge bayonet, and with one yell they charged, and great God! what havoc and butchery there ensued! The enemy were formed thirteen deep around their batteries, but had they been ten times that they could never have withstood that charge. Our forces came down upon them like a thunderbolt, and with one cry of despair the enemy broke and ran—the day was ours. The sun, which had been concealed by dark clouds a few hours before, now peeped forth upon this scene of carnage and death. The dying looked upon its radiant brightness, and felt its healing influences for the last time. The groans of the dying and wounded could be heard on every side, the living too eager for the fray to be of any service to their dying comrades. So much for a soldier's experience. Let us drop the curtain on this appalling picture, and return to something more interesting.

The enemy retreated towards Centreville, closely pursued by our forces; they were pursued with great slaughter as far as Alexandria. All of their artillery, consisting of 67 pieces, were captured. Among them were several Armstrong guns and Sherman's crack battery. The battle-ground covers a space of some ten miles along Bull's Run. The loss on both sides must have been immense. We took almost 1000 prisoners, and some 500 cavalry horses, and captured about 10,000 stand of arms—truly, a great victory.

Our regiment arrived just as the enemy were retreating. President Jeff. Davis was on the ground in time to see the enemy disappear from sight.

Such was the glorious victory achieved by our forces at Stone Bridge, July 21, 1861.

I would not attempt to give the strength of either party; it is currently stated here that their force was 60,000, and ours 35,000. I give you this for what it is worth. It is true that they were the best equipped army that ever went into the battle field; they were clad from top to bottom in the best—all the money in Christendom could not have given them a more complete outfit.

It will soon be dress parade, and I must bring this long epistle to an end.