

A SOLDIER'S LETTER.

Description of the Battle by a Captain of the Second Regiment of New York.

The following letter from a captain in the Second Regiment of this city gives a vivid description of the battle at Bull Run, and the real nature of the panic:

CAMP POWELL,
HEADQUARTERS SECOND REGT. N. Y. E. M.,
WASHINGTON, D. C., July 6, 1861.

Dear —: Your favor of the 21st instant, as well as the previous one, were duly received; circumstances, as you are no doubt aware, prevented an answer to the first.

On Monday, the 15th instant, we received orders to be ready with three days' rations, and without knapsacks, carrying blankets only, to move in the advance at five p. m. the next evening. At the appointed hour the line was in motion, and soon after reached the Ohio volunteers' camp, who fell in our rear, giving New York the honor of the advance. We then moved off for Vienna, having been in the meantime joined by the Connecticut Brigade, which completed our division (Tyler's).

The enemy's pickets and advance guard rapidly fell back upon our approach, and after passing Fall's Church pressed on Fairfax at an early hour in the morning, and, being on the left of the division, we deployed towards Germantown, while the right entered Fairfax. After a short rest the right joined us, and we marched on in column and entered Germantown, the enemy being in sight and hastily running out of reach of our guns. At this point we were informed that the enemy, to the number of fifteen thousand, were on the retreat and only one and a-half hours ahead of our advance. Our scouts having brought us this information, the news having been confirmed by Lieutenant Tompkins of the dragoons, we again took up the line of march, the heat being dreadful, and the men suffering terribly. After marching until late in the afternoon, the men being fairly exhausted, our advance suddenly came on the enemy's camp, and eagerly pounced on the few remaining accoutrements, as well as considerable of their rations, which were left behind in their hasty flight; in fact some of our men found a watch or two, besides epaulettes, as well as any quantities of correspondence, in which the fair southern damsels begged their lovers to get a piece of a "Yankee's hide" for them, etc., and on other trumpery too numerous to mention. The men being exhausted and night approaching, as well as the road barricaded by fallen trees, we halted, threw out our pickets and camp guard, and after hastily disposing of an insufficient meal, (being the first since morning,) we wrapped ourselves in our blankets, and with no other covering save the trees, were soon sound asleep. During the night we had several alarms, on account of the enemy's cavalry trying to pass our pickets, in which efforts they suffered severely. At an early hour in the morning (Thursday 17th,) line was again formed, and the whole army of the Potomac moved on our right, in the centre and in the advance.

Centreville was soon after reached; line of battle being formed, and the scouts sent out. They soon after arrived with the intelligence that the enemy had again fallen back from their intrenchments, and at this stage I must say that I never saw a better place to make a stand, as the hills commanded all the approaches for over two miles around; however, subsequent occurrences have satisfied me that they had far superior locations at their intrenchments. The heat being terrible, and our men exhausted, we here halted to rest, and after an hour or so we heard heavy firing on the other side of Centreville, and very soon learned that our General (Tyler) had attacked the enemy's masked batteries at the head of Rocky Run, about two miles from Centreville, which, as the papers have ere this informed you, was the celebrated proceeding of the 18th instant.

During the heat of the engagement our brigade was ordered up, and upon reaching the scene, the Sixty-ninth and other regiments had been withdrawn. That affair at once destroyed both Tyler and others of his kind, in the estimation of the men, especially as Tyler had received orders to remain at Centreville—until further orders.

We then marched outside of that point about two miles, and encamped on the left of the road, (Warrenton,) while the Sixty-ninth, Seventy-ninth and others were opposite. We remained here, in sight of the enemy's advance posts, from that time until two o'clock Sunday morning when the advance took place. Both before reaching this point, and when we reached it, my command was engaged in that hazardous business of skirmishing, and on Thursday night in particular I was in advance of the line a mile at least, and remained out until ten o'clock at night, when I was called in; and while out, however, and about sunset, I arrested three men in citizens' clothes, who were hovering around our lines and satisfied me upon an examination that they should be detained. I accordingly brought them in and were duly examined by our Brigadier, General Schenck, who being in bed and rather sleepy, made a hasty examination and postponed the matter till the following morning, when after another examination, he discharged them.

After their discharge some of us who were dissatisfied took the trouble to search their houses, and succeeded in finding passes therein of a very recent date signed by our General Mansfield's Aide-de-Camp, Captain Drake De Kay, which showed that they were spies, and had used them for that purpose in our lines. From that I made up my mind that I should take no more prisoners, but if, while prisoners, they should be accidentally shot, I would not complain of my men.

While we remained at Rocky Run, and before advancing, I was led to suppose that we were waiting reinforcements of both men and heavy guns. At the appointed hour, two a. m. Sunday morning, and before prayers, we moved off at a quick pace but without making any unnecessary noise. Our division, (Tyler's,) consisting of the Second New York, First and Second Ohio, Sixty-ninth, Seventy-ninth and others, took the lead. In the meantime our scouts and pickets being thrown out. At five a. m. the line halted and our regiment was thrown forward in advance, while the Sixty-ninth and Seventy-ninth took a position on our right. After reconnoitering the enemy's position with our glasses, and waiting for the signal gun to be fired, we drew up by the flank so as to be under cover of the woods, and at the same time near enough to make a charge on the enemy's battery. At a little before six we first drew the fire of the enemy by imprudently showing our command, or rather a portion of them. Supposing it to be a small battery, as it was, we quietly passed on for the purpose of outflanking it, and in doing so, we took an apparently new made road, and marched by the left flank, and very soon after, within three hundred feet of us, we espied the enemy in large force (about 8,000 infantry). We took immediate steps to attack them, but to our astonishment the enemy flanked by the left, and hastily moving off unmasked eight rifled guns on our brigade (Schenck's) with terrific effect.

The scene that followed beggars description; for fully over a half hour we stood a perfect shower of grape, canister and round shot. Upon my honor I have never been in a hell storm where the shots fell so thick and fast. Our General (Schenck) left us there and looked out for himself, whereupon our Colonel, upon his own responsibility, ordered us to withdraw from such a murderous man-trap—in fact I may call it nothing save a slaughter-house. Here we suffered most.

The brigade then took up another position on the Warrenton road, to defend our batteries—Carlisle's battery, and a heavy 32-pounder being in position. The strife continued; the right consisting of the Sixty-ninth, Seventy-ninth, Seventy-ninth, Zouaves, &c., having forced the enemy from their positions across the Warrenton road, while we were outflanking them on the left, at the same time exposed to a terrible cross fire from their batteries, which they shelled us. At 3 p. m. we accomplished our purpose by getting on their flank and driving our right in front of their batteries—our left being the whole time engaged in a terrible struggle.

The scene that followed was a most terrible one. At that time I saw Captain Carlisle, U. S. A., and his battery in full retreat as fast as they could go. I very soon after saw that the Black Horse Cavalry were upon us, to the number of three or four hundred. Seeing that our line was broken, and some officers in full retreat, several of the officers, more particularly Lieutenant Colonel Wilcox, Lieutenant Downey, Captain Hueston and others, rallied the men, and gave them a terrible volley, which caused a great scattering among them, having emptied a number of their saddles, and reduced their number before the third volley to about fifty or sixty men.

At that charge we lost several of our men, and as we did not see some of them fall, those that are now missing may have been taken prisoners, but as I saw them cutting right and left with sabre, carbine and pistol, apparently not caring to take prisoners, I am of the opinion that those or the most of those now among the missing who were not officers in uniform will never be heard of again.

I am confirmed in this opinion from the fact that they not only beset the wounded on the field, as I saw myself, but attacked our hospital, containing the dead and wounded of their own as well as our side; and not satisfied with that I distinctly saw them set fire to the same, and shoot and cut those endeavoring to escape. My blood boils to think of their atrocities, and makes my feelings savor of hate and revenge for fallen comrades. We mourn the loss of our physician, Dr. Alfred Powell, a noble man, who refused to leave those under his care, and was brutally murdered by them while engaged placing our wounded in the ambulance and our Assistant-Surgeons Ferguson and Connolly (son of Charles W. Connolly, of the firm of Chas. W. Connolly & Co., New York,) after a brief defence, were taken prisoners.

During the excitement our Colonel (Tompkins) was cut off from his regiment by a party of the cavalry, and, together with Colonel Corcoran, was chased and fired at by them for some distance, and our Colonel says that he saw them shoot at Colonel Corcoran and thinks he was wounded and taken prisoner, as not being as well mounted as our Colonel (who was on the Lieutenant-Colonel's magnificent black horse), he was undoubtedly rode down.

At the time of the rally I speak of Lieutenant Colonel John A. Wilcox was in command, and bravely stood his ground, and reformed the regiment in good order, and was ably assisted therein by the major (J. J. Dimock), Captain Hueston, Lieutenant Downey and a few other brave spirits. Those that know me can easily determine where I must have been, as I do not believe in one blowing his own horn too much. I will leave my actions to be praised or censured by others than myself.

After the charge was disposed of the regiment being formed and under good order, by Lieutenant Colonel Wilcox and assisted by Adjutant Rea, the Zouaves, Wisconsin, Connecticut and Maine regiments being in advance of us, we slowly retreated, the Zouaves having beaten back another attack of the Black Horse Cavalry while on another road and before meeting us. Whatever others may say I emphatically say that our line withdrew in good order, and that the New York Second was the last to leave, as they were the first in the battle-field. As an instance to show the falsity of any panic being in existence among the men, some of our men engaged themselves picking blackberries on the road side, while others were occupied endeavoring to spike with their own ramrods the deserted pieces of Carlisle's battery. If that looks like a panic or a stampede I am very much mistaken. The fact is, that the men were exhausted by eleven hours of the severest fighting that ever took place on this continent; and, as some European officers have been heard to say, surpassed anything they ever saw. I do not think history can show an instance where 23,000 men attacked upwards of 100,000, and fought them in an entrenched camp with concealed batteries, as well as men for that time. The whole panic was outside of five miles from the battle-field, and in the neighborhood of Colonel Miles's resorts at Centreville. Otherwise we would have been cut to pieces before reaching the reserve, as has been testified to by several experienced officers, that the good order of Schenck's brigade in retreating saved the whole army.

After falling back to Centreville and taking our position behind the reserve we received orders to fall back to our old camp, a distance of thirty miles, (Hall's Cross Roads,) which we reached in good order at 6 o'clock next morning. About 11 o'clock Sunday night orders were issued for the whole line to fall back—the reserve and all which they did in good order, and without being annoyed by the enemy save by numerous barricades on the road, which had to be removed.

We were subsequently removed to Washington, and are now in camp recruiting as well as reorganizing the regiment. We number all told now only 700, so you see this campaign has pretty well used us up. We named our camp Powell, in honor to our noble surgeon. As far as I can ascertain the enemy lost four times as much as our side, otherwise their main body would not have fallen back on Manassas Gap to recruit; however some of their advanced cavalry are still hovering around our pickets at Vienna and Fall's Church, but will not dare advance nearer.

In conclusion I must say that although repulsed we are not disgraced, but have taught those cowardly rascals, that though in entrenched camps and behind masked batteries, and hid in the woods, they were whipped twice that day by one-quarter of their number, and that our side withdrew from exhaustion only. In fact, I must say that at a convivial party of the officers of our regiment held during Saturday night, the probability of a defeat was canvassed, and firmly believed by a majority of us who were present.

Our party sang a different tune on the following night (Sunday), although on account of our fortunate escape we were joyful in the extreme. Our loss will be heavy, but at present, on account of the number of missing, we are unable to make out a full report.

Our men behaved nobly and surpassed the finest troops in the world, but our volunteer (political) generals, as well as some favorite political colonels, behaved shamefully, and in many instances exhibited both cowardice and inefficiency—the exceptions, otherwise, were very few.

I shall await the reorganization of the regiment before taking steps, but if we are again placed under the command of politicians I shall resign my position and return to civil life. However, in the interval I will endeavor to obtain a furlough for a while, and see you again before entering upon another campaign.

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the woods, but skirting the road, and while here the Sixty-ninth, Seventy-ninth and Eighth Zouaves and others came straggling along, thoroughly exhausted and out of order. At this point I had the pleasure of shaking hands with Colonel Corcoran of the Sixty-ninth and other officers of the same and other regiments with whom I was acquainted. At this time the batteries of the brigade had ceased firing, and were drawn up in the road, the pieces being limbered up. Our brigade were about getting ready to fall in by the left flank for the purpose of marching off to cover the retreat, when, quick as a flash, we heard terrible yells up the road in our rear, a great dust flying—the cracking of pistols and rifles without number. Looking up I saw Captain Carlisle, U. S. A., and his battery in full retreat as fast as they could go. I very soon after saw that the Black Horse Cavalry were upon us, to the number of three or four hundred. Seeing that our line was broken, and some officers in full retreat, several of the officers, more particularly Lieutenant Colonel Wilcox, Lieutenant Downey, Captain Hueston and others, rallied the men, and gave them a terrible volley, which caused a great scattering among them, having emptied a number of their saddles, and reduced their number before the third volley to about fifty or sixty men.

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