

From the files of
John Hennessy

LETTER FROM THE FIFTH REGIMENT.

We are permitted to publish the following letter from a member of the Massachusetts Fifth, giving his account of the battle of Bull Run:—

WASHINGTON, D. C., July 23, 1861.

My dear Father,—On Tuesday I sent you a few lines to inform you that I was still in the land of the living, which is something that I can account for but through the protection of Providence, I was in the thickest of the fight, my company did nobly and charged the enemy three times. Our Colonel was cool, and well able to lead a regiment in the field. I cannot say as much for other field officers. Our Captain was like a tiger, in the fight. Your son endeavored to do his duty. The whole battle was, in my opinion, a poorly managed affair, and was fought against Gen. Scott's wishes. I hope in future, they will let him alone.

To give you an idea of what was done in 24 hours, I will state, at 2 A. M., on Sunday, we left camp at Centerville (that is our division the third), marched ten miles through a circuitous route, to take a position on the enemy's right flank. When we arrived, about 11 A. M., we halted only long enough to throw off our blankets and haversacks, then marched by a flank, double quick, about 1½ miles to a swell of land and in front of Arnold's Battery formed by company in close order and commenced firing by company; that is, the 1st company advanced their fire, advanced to the brow of the hill then fell back, load and be replaced by the next company, and so on; Arnold's Battery, as well as the enemy, all the time firing over our heads, and balls were thick enough to satisfy any one. Soon after the Mass. 11th were sent to support us on the left and the N. Y. 38th on the right. After being in this position about an hour, we were ordered to file off to the right to the road crossing the Bull Run, and support the N. Y. Zouaves and Ricketts' Battery. We had just got into position when the enemy made a charge on the Zouaves and the battery, driving them through our ranks and taking Captain Ricketts prisoner. A good part of the Zouaves rallied on our rear, and with some of the Mass. 11th, we retook the battery and carried it off the field.

The battery had advanced to within 200 yards of the enemy's works, which I think was wrong, as they (the enemy) had splendid batteries, and they were more rapidly served than ours. Their infantry were much inferior to ours. We drove them every time they made their appearance with fearful loss. We were at last obliged to retire to the hill where we had left our blankets; here we formed on the left of the Rhode Island boys, under Gov. Sprague and Col. Burnside, with a battalion of the 11th on our left, and endeavored to stop the retreat but it was too much for us, and what commenced as a withdrawal in good order soon became a mad flight. Gov. Sprague seeing there was then no hope of arresting it, marched around the right and on the outside of the woods in sight of the enemy's batteries which was the only thing that saved us, as they, seeing us going off in good order, supposed the rest in the woods must be in like good order, and as they were evidently very glad to have us go, thought best not to trouble us. We have since understood that they were actually retreating when we were.

As we were coming out of the woods, about five miles from the battle-field, one of their batteries opened on us with shell, doing great damage, and piling the road with ambulances and baggage-wagons and preventing the artillery passing the bridge, and four of Arnold's guns fell into their hands.

At about 7 P. M. I got into camp at Centerville, tired and hungry. There I found all the officers, three sergeants, three corporals, and twenty-five privates. I immediately threw myself on the ground, and went to sleep, not having eaten anything since morning. After about an hour's sleep was called up by the Adjutant, and ordered to fall in as noiselessly as possible. An order had been given to fall back on Washington. For about three miles the regiment marched in good order by the flank, but after that the cavalry passed us, and the regiments began to crowd by each other and got mixed up, and some command was lost. My company kept their position with great difficulty until we arrived at Fairfax, when they dropped off from exhaustion by the road side.

I kept on with the hardy ones and before I reached Camp Mass. at 11 A. M., was overtaken by those that had rested. Here I found all but 18 or 20 of the Co. I took a cup of coffee and laid down to rest tired enough I assure you. I could not have slept more than half an hour when we were aroused by the order to fall in; it was raining big guns. Water and mud to our knees. Tired and hungry we marched to Washington a distance of 8 miles over a road that is bad enough in dry weather, and perfectly horrible in wet.

On reaching Washington, who should I meet but Dan —, John's old friend who put money in my hands to get a new pair of pants, and clean under clothes, my pants being covered with mud and cut in two places by shot. I then went to his room, had a wash, took supper with him, and slept the night in his bed.

I do not care about breaking any of the articles of war, or I might tell a hard story of some of our high officers.

The Massachusetts Fifth in the Fight.

The following is an extract from a letter furnished to the Journal from a member of the 5th Massachusetts Regiment, and gives an interesting account of the gallant conduct of that regiment in the recent fight:—

WASHINGTON, July 26, 1861.

It will be impossible for me to give you a description of the battle of Sunday, as I saw it in a different light from others close beside me. I can, however, tell you the part our regiment took in the battle. We, as you know, were in Heintzelman's division and in Franklin's brigade. Our brigade consisted of the 1st Minnesota Regiment, 5th of Massachusetts, and 11th of Massachusetts, and we marched in that order. We left the Centerville camp at about daylight, with three or four brigades in advance of us. The battle opened about two hours before we reached the field. On arriving there the 1st Minnesota took a position out of our sight. We were ordered to go to our support of one or two batteries, playing on the rebels. We at once started on the double quick, and halted on the top of the hill, directly in front of the enemy's batteries. We were flanked by the 11th Massachusetts on the left; Col. Franklin ordered us to charge down the valley, on to the enemy's batteries. Col. Lawrence told us to wait for his orders; we did. He then ordered us to charge to the brow of the hill by companies, fire and retreat to the rear of the regiment, load and await our turn. Before the entire regiment had time to follow his instructions, we were ordered to cross the ravine and support the Zouaves, who then were in the thickest of the fight. In as good order as any double quick movement was ever made, did our regiment countermarch and form on the left flank of the Zouaves, who, according to all accounts, were subject to a galling fire. We did this, then halted for the word of command, which did not come. (Col. Lawrence had fallen while we were changing positions.) After a few moments delay we rushed to the support of the Zouaves, and held our ground as well as any regiment on the field; three several times we charged and only retreated when the whole field in our rear was crowded with flying soldiers, cavalry, artillery and citizens. We were utterly astounded at the fight of those in our rear, and even while the Zouaves were hurrying from the field the men cried loudly for their officers to lead them forward. I tried to do my duty during the fight. I walked off the field slower than I ever walked State street.

Our regiment formed under Capt. Brastow and filed to the rear of the Rhode Island brigade, and marched in good order to our old camp at Centerville. We had been there an hour or more when Col. Franklin ordered us to retreat instantly to Washington. I have no desire to praise our regiment. I know that the Zouaves say we were the only regiment who supported them well. Adjutant Fairbanks, aide to Heintzelman, told Capt. Brastow that our regiment stood their ground as well as any regiment on the field; that if others had done as well we could have held our ground.

The New York and other regiments were praised very highly, but they did not lose as many men in proportion to numbers as we did. We had 531 fighting men on the field and lost fifty-nine, which is over 10 per cent. So you see we must have had some work to do. In reference to our colors, the State flag was brought from the field by our Sergeant Major, the stars and stripes by the Color Corporal. Our defeat was caused by the want of a proper and prompt reinforcement. We won the field and it was for the reserve to keep it. The regiments facing the batteries did not retreat until the forces in our rear were entirely and completely broken up. In changing our position we were subject to a terrific fire, directed to sweep the road.

In our charges the balls flew around us like hail stones, and God only knows how we ever escaped as we did. The army officers could not stand the fire, but hastened from the field. There was no order or regularity displayed by any one. I saw a whole regiment refuse to obey the order to support the Zouaves. We did our best, that is all I have to say. The Washington papers speak well of us. The men rallied around the colors and stuck to them to the last. Every man of the Fifth would have preferred to have killed then and there than to have returned to Massachusetts without our colors. We expect to return within a few days. The boys would like another chance at the rebels, and I think most of them will re-enlist after a visit home.

Capt. Brastow is recovering from his bruises. I thought we had lost the old hero at one time, when he was thrown down and rolled in the dust by a charge from the cavalry, but he was on his feet and at our head, sooner than you can read this. He inspired us all.

The army is nearly organized; but few stragglers can be seen. The Zouaves are nearly all in camp. Our regiment could be called out in thirty minutes.