

Letter of Nathaniel Rollins, 2d WI. Rollins's excellent diary (which ought to be published) is at the Wisconsin Historical Society.

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THE WISCONSIN SOLD IN THE BATTLE!

A FULL AND GRAPHIC ACCOUNT!

[Correspondence of the State Journal.]

ARLINGTON HEIGHTS, VA.,
Near Washington, July 25, 1861.

I have just received your paper of the 22d, and do not feel justified in allowing the grossly false accounts of the battle of Bull's Run, given in your telegraphic dispatches, to go uncontradicted. I wish to give a sufficient explanation of the battle to let our friends know that it was not cowardice of the men that caused the defeat.

We left camp near this place, on Tuesday afternoon, and proceeded by way of Vienna and Germantown to Centreville, the rebels retreating before us. About one mile beyond Centreville we encamped in an open field, without tents; and while in this vicinity we had the battle of Thursday, in which a few were killed, and of which your readers have doubtless heard. On Saturday we received orders to march at 6 P. M., but near evening this order was changed to march at 2.30 A. M., on Sunday. The next morning, at 2 o'clock, we got up, prepared in light marching order, formed a column, and advanced towards Bull's Run, directly west, marching left in front. Our column was under Msj. Gen. Tyler. To the north of us advanced a column under Gen. Hunter; to the south of us advanced a column under Col. Richardson, and another under Gen. Schenck, all moving westerly, to attack the rebels at different points. We proceeded about three miles, when our column filed to the north, into the woods, made a turn in the woods, and came back to the road, so that our left rested on the east and west road, and our line extended north. The other regiments were formed at different points, covering batteries.—Carlisle's battery was placed in front of us, and the 32 pound rifled cannon, of which we had one, instead of eight, as stated in your report, was stationed in the road. These movements were all made very quietly. At precisely 6 o'clock the performance was opened by a shot from the 32 pounder. It was instantly answered by a gun at the north-west, probably from Hunter. Again all was quiet as a Sabbath morning in a country village. By dressin our line forward, we advanced by the front through the woods, near to the open field, where we found our batteries had been placed ready for action. Here we halted and sat down in line. The regiment was behind a rise of ground and about fifteen rods from our battery. We shortly heard from Richardson's guns at the south of us, near where the battle of Thursday had been fought. Very soon

our guns opened a fire across the open field in front of us. This field here is about one hundred rods wide, skirted on the west by thick bushes and farther on and up the next hills by heavy woods.—The firing continued from this position for about one or two hours. A few shots were returned but they fell short. Many of our officers went up near the guns to see the report which we watched with much interest. After the fire had continued perhaps an hour we saw the line of Hunter's column moving rapidly forward on the road north of us, and bending to the south, evidently coming in to the rear of the rebels. He was discovered by them shortly after he was by us, and they at once began to change the direction of their forces to meet him. His column soon emerged from the woods on to a large elevated plain, where they encountered the rebel army in considerable force. This plain is about one and one half mile from the position occupied by us and across Bull's Run. The fighting that ensued there was of the sharpest kind. In a few minutes that field was covered by a dense cloud of smoke, through which we could see the blaze of Hunter's cannon as he advanced and drove the rebels into the woods to the south west side of the plain. They soon appeared to be reinforced and rushed from the woods and renewed the fight. But Hunter was too much for them still and again drove them back. This much of the fighting had been in plain sight of our position. Still the heavy cannonading continued at the south of us, near the battle ground of Thursday. Hunter's condition becoming critical by the continued reinforcements of the enemy, our brigade was ordered across Bull's Run to reinforce Hunter. We flanked to the right and moved rapidly off to his assistance. We passed round over a high ridge of land to the north west of our former position and before descending the hill to cross the Run, we halted and relieved the men of their blankets and then proceeded at double quick time down the hill, then about one-half mile to the Run. Here we were halted and filed on the right into line of battle along the north-east bank of the Run. Sherman's Battery came down, but being unable to cross the Run there, returned up the hill. When they returned our Brigade flanked to the right and filed across the Run and up the rugged bank on the opposite side and hastened on to the high ground. When we reached the upper plain several regiments were already there and the rebels had retreated. On the north-west side of this plain is timber from which Hunter emerged. On the south-west side is the timber into which the rebels first retreated. This high plain contains several large farms. To the east

contains several large farms. To the east the ground descends about one hundred and sixty rods. The high ridge extends around to the south in a circle forming a basin of about one mile in diameter with an outlet to the north-east toward Bull Run. We now occupied the high ground on the west side of the basin. The rebels occupied the east side, where they had a strong battery or fort that had already opened a fire upon us of cannon balls and shells. Our batteries of flying artillery now began to come up the hill. Several regiments of infantry were now formed fronting the enemy's battery, and we began to move down the hill to the east. Some regiments were in advance of us and some following. The plain in the rear of us showed signs of hard fighting. Many dead and wounded men were lying on the ground, although most of them had been carried into the edge of the woods. This battery of the rebels with several others near it, was masked by thick woods, and from our position we could see nothing of it except the smoke from their guns. As we moved down the hill the balls and shells plowed up the ground all around us, frequently throwing dirt all over the men. The bottom of the ravine is not smooth, but the water from the high land around had cut it into numerous smaller ravines. When we had got to the foot of the western slope of the basin, we were ordered to halt and lie down. Here we laid for some minutes. The most of our line by lying close to the ground were a foot or two below the range of their shot, which flew over us thick and fast. While lying here, some things occurred worthy of note.

Our 32 pounder had been brought across the run and planted at our left on the high ground, and opened a sharp fire on the enemy's battery on the hill. Most of our other batteries had been brought across and planted on the high ground in our rear, when all (six batteries, I think) commenced fire on the same battery of the rebels. This firing continued from one to two hours with perfect fury. While lying here I saw a regiment coming down

the hill behind us in column of companies. A cannon ball aimed at the column hit their color bearer, cut his head off, and broke the flag staff. The colors were caught by one of the color guard before it struck the ground, was raised to its place. The companies closed in, and in less than a minute the column was moving on again at quick time as if nothing had happened.

During this cannonading one battery after another of ours was silenced by the guns of the rebels. Still the enemy's fire was as fierce and effective as ever. The air seemed to be full of balls and bursting shells. During the firing, we got up, flanked to the left, and filed over the hill side down further into the ravine, and immediately to the bottom of the hill on which the enemy's large battery was located. Before we left our first position, the fire from our batteries had nearly ceased, and while lying there, (which was by order of the General) we saw the New York Fire Zouaves, Ellsworth's regiment, charge on the hill. They were repulsed and driven back after a terrible resistance, by a large body of infantry and cavalry. The fight between the Zouaves and the rebels became so hot that all lines and forms were broken up, and they were entirely overpowered by numbers; their retreat was of course a confused mass. We afterwards learned that this was the point at which the rebels had just been reinforced by twenty thousand fresh troops under Johnston. When the rebel cavalry charged on the Zouaves, they turned on the rebels and swept their men and horses like chaff. By this time all our cannon except one or two were silenced, and the enemy's battery appeared to work as briskly as at first. As the Zouaves began to fall back, the battery opened on them such a fire of grape shot and bullets as we have never seen before. Under this fire it was absolutely impossible for men to form and rally, but before they had got fairly to retreating down the hill, another regiment of infantry was ordered to charge in the same place. Our cannon was now silent, demolished, ruined. We were ordered forward. We had come from our first position to the foot of the last hill, during the charge of the Zouaves and two or three other regiments. A narrow road is cut into the hill on the south side leading up to near the battery. On the North side of the road, next to the battery the bank is some three to five feet high. On this side of the road the water had cut a ditch one or two feet deep. Here the road, and especially this ditch was crowded full of dead and wounded men. By getting close to the bank they were partially protected from the enemy's fire, and here the poor fellows had crowded in, and crawled one upon another, filling the ditch in some places three or four deep. I will not sicken your readers by a description of this road. By this time the ground on the lower side of the road was covered with men from different regiments, who had charged up to that battery and been overpowered by the superior numbers, and fallen back.—

They were already in such a confused mass that they could not be reorganized without much trouble, even if they had not been exposed to a fire, much less could they do it when the air was literally full of grape shot and rifle bullets. Under these circumstances the 2d Wisconsin Regiment were moved forward along this road and halted. The smoke prevented us from seeing the length of our line, and the noise from hearing commands, even if any were given. By a sort of mutual consent we rushed over the dead men, climbed up the bank, over the fence, and up the hill to the rebels' guns. Here the rebels displayed a Union flag, when a part of our officers cried out, "They are friends, don't fire." By means of this delusion they gained an advantage over us, when down went the Union flag, and up went the emblem of treason. This piratical warfare is a favorite game of theirs.

We had rushed up too near to be much effected by cannon, when our men commenced the wickedest kind of a fire ever known. The woods in front of us was full of men firing on us. The fort now plainly seen was full of men, and its embankments lined with the fire of musketry aimed at us. Under this fire they stood some minutes returning it steadily but with terrible effect, when they fell back three or four rods toward the road, firing all the time, here they stopped retreating and rallying again rushed back to the rebels and poured three or four rounds into them. On their side ten guns were fired to our one. The bullets whistled all kinds of tunes, but mostly in quick time. As we fell back a little toward the road again, the New York 69th, about which there has been so much gas, fired a full volley into us from the rear. Our men after standing such a fire from the rebels, and then a rear fire from a set of fools from our own side, retreated to the road, and there got mixed with other regiments, and as was an inevitable consequence retreated down the hill in confusion. The 69th after firing one or two rounds, broke and ran in perfect confusion. As we went down the hill they opened a terrible cross fire from the woods on our left, at the same time the fort in our rear

kept up a constant fire of grape shot and shell after the retreating regiments. The regiments had been sent up one at a time, not near enough to render each other any assistance, and still so near as to be in each others way when they were forced back. As the men retreated there were no officers of high rank to stop them and rally them again. No reserve had been prepared to cover our retreat in case of defeat. We went into the battle with not more than thirty thousand to the outside. The rebels had full sixty thousand in the morning and were largely reinforced during the day. Their artillery was better and heavier than ours. They were at home, acquainted with the country, and had been fortifying these hills for months. The result is before the world. The retreat was bad enough, Heaven knows, but I deny positively, that it was through any fault or cowardice of the men. Through the battle Lt. Col. Peck led his regiment as became a soldier. The fault on the field was higher up than the rank of Colonel. But it commenced with certain parties at the North, such as the editors of the *New York Tribune*, in urging this battle before the army was ready. There is no doubt it was fought, at this time, very much against the wish of Gen. Scott. Northern impatience wanted a battle and they have had it. But let the proper parties father the imp and not charge it upon the men who fought like tigers against every odds and disadvantage.— During the engagement Col. Coon acted as aid to Col. Sherman, (acting Brigadier General,) and did his duty bravely and well. I have made this letter much longer than I had intended. We all hope your next news from us will be more cheering.

N. R.