

BATTLE OF MURFREESBORO

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From

the

Diary

of

Lieutenant

John H. Bolton,

of

Company F,

Twenty-First

Ohio Volunteer Infantry

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(As described in the John H. Bolton Diary)

Dec. 30, 1862. Tuesday -- Reveillie sounded before daylight and our command up and ready for action. Skirmishing by the dawn of day became sharp and soon the artillery opened from our batteries, the enemy sending shot and shell across through our lines, but not very effectual as they over-shot us most of the time. Gen. Negley with our division was ordered further to the right through a narrow strip of cedars to a small field beyond.

Here the skirmishing was kept up briskly all day with more or less rain falling at intervals. The enemy did not come out of their works in force to give battle. Consequently a general engagement was not brought on. Our brigade, commanded by Col. Miller, losing 39 men today on the skirmish line in killed and wounded.

This evening our regiment went to the front on picket line, and more or less picket firing all night.

De. 31, 1862. Wednesday. -- This morning we were relieved from picket duty before daylight by another regiment and we went to the rear about a fourth of a mile and made our breakfast upon warm coffee and army biscuit, which we had scarcely finished when it was evident that Gen. McCook, commanding our extreme right, was being driven back by the enemy.

The continuous roar of musketry and the more deafening sound of artillery gradually coming nearer and nearer told us but too plainly that the conflict had commenced in terrible earnest, and in a few moments we all would be engaged.

Gen. Phil Sheridan's division joined us on our right and soon he was already using both artillery and infantry to the full extent of his strength, and he now could be seen riding to and fro along the line of his division urging his men to their utmost who were bravely contesting every inch of the ground.

But as McCook had been driven back by allowing himself to be surprised by daylight in the morning, the gallant Phil Sheridan was now being out-flanked and was compelled to form anew his line so as to fire both to the right and front, and was after a sharp and severe contest compelled to move further back and reform his lines.

Now the enemy in our front moved out of their works and began to move onto us and we were at once hurried by double-quick into the small open field in front of and to the left of the Chicago Board of Trade Battery, which had been playing upon the enemy with considerable effect.

We had scarcely got into position when they charged us. But after a sharp and determined struggle they were repulsed in our front. They soon reformed their columns and made another desperate charge. The battle here now was terribly sharp and severe, the battery firing over a portion of the 44th Ohio, commanded by the brave fighting preacher, Col. Moody, and over Co. A of our regiment, a portion of the time using double-shot grape and canister and mowing them down in perfect swathes.

Whilst the infantry was suffering severely thus far, our division held its own. In the midst of the din of battle Col. J. M. Neibling could be seen along the line giving orders to the different companies' commanders and urging them on in the fight, cheering the men with his orders to repulse the attack at all hazards, and his commands were obeyed so far as it was within the power of human soldiers to do so.

The Rebel column charging us here was composed chiefly of the "Rock City Guards" of Nashville and was a good command, but here at this spot they as an organization were almost annihilated.

But notwithstanding our unflinching determination to hold this point of our line Gen. Sheridan was out-flanked and compelled to fall back, which soon gave the enemy a cross fire on us from our right and we were compelled to withdraw and reform our line of battle in the edge of the cedar thicket in our rear.

Here we had scarcely got into position when the enemy were again upon us and the first charge they made we again sent them back. But they reformed and again made another desperate charge, and owing to being now again out-flanked on our right and under a severe cross fire, we had to withdraw.

My comrade, John Shelly, and self did not hear the order to "about face" and march to the rear. We were so busily engaged in loading and firing that we were unconscious of our surroundings until we were ordered to surrender by a Rebel officer.

But both of us delivered a hurried shot at them and ran at the top of our speed through a volley of musket fire and succeeded in getting to our regiment with no marks or wounds, but our clothing was in different places pierced with musket balls.

Our regiment reformed in line on the other side of the railroad, and with several batteries of artillery which we here supported succeeded in driving the enemy back and holding our center.

In the evening just before sunset they made a heavy charge on our center with a determination to break through, but here we had about 30 guns with strong infantry support and they were compelled to fall back after suffering terribly from our fire.

In the midst of the last charge this evening, Gen. Rosecrans had several of our brass bands brought up to the line and strike up a number of national airs, such as the "Red, White and Blue" and the "Star Spangled Banner," and the effect was as if by magic our defeat this day was to be turned into victory. The Rebel columns were mowed down almost in entire columns and they were compelled to retire inside their earth works when cheers and shouts of joy rent the air along our entire line.

Thus closed the 31st day of December, 1862, the terrible battle undecided and as it were hanging in the balance of the fates of War, had to be concluded yet in the future whilst all around us lay strewn the dead and wounded whilst we who were left were too tired to give the help and relief that was needed.

The sun had now set, his refulgent rays no longer shone upon man's inhumanity to man, and we lay ourselves down on the damp cold ground in line of battle and slept the hours of night away with dreams of home, peace and happiness, which now to us, alas, was only a dream.

The moanes of the wounded and dying, with now and then a few shots by our pickets during the night, gave us that peculiar feeling and realization of sleeping on the field of battle in the midst of comrades scattered here and there who now "sleep the sleep that knows no waking" and have sacrificed their lives upon the altar of their country.

and rear, but they only made feint and drew back.

We formed in line and remained here close to the Murfreesboro and Nashville Pike all evening and during the night of Jan. 1st, and had an opportunity to make some tea and coffee and dine on crackers.

The Rebel General Wheeler with a large cavalry force got around to our rear about 6 miles and captured and burned a large number of our commissary and supply wagons, among those destroyed were a number belonging to our Regt., and I lost my portfolio, journal, clothing, etc.

January 2, 1863

The command up before daylight and everything in readiness to meet any emergency that might occur.

Very sharp skirmishing commenced along our entire line at an early hour this morning, with an occasional shot from the artillery, which at times sounded like a general engagement. But this only proved to be a feint, as the forenoon by us was occupied in maneuvering and endeavoring to get advantageous positions and checkmate any _____ the enemy might make, as from general appearances they undoubtedly intended making an attack in force on some part of our line with the object of breaking through.

All forenoon a very brisk fire was kept up along the principal portion of our line, which at times sounded almost as though a general engagement was progressing.

On the first day of the engagement Genl. Van Cleve crossed the river below on our left with his entire division and was drawn up in line of battle on the other side, thus far being only opposed by skirmish force of the enemy, and that in front of him now for some time had been very quiet.

Directly after noon we received orders to march double quick to our left in the rear of Genl. Van Cleve's division, with the river between us, as a support for him, and before we got into position we were vigorously attacked and Van Cleve's division, being taken by surprise, was being driven through the river in the utmost confusion.

We here had formed in line and lay down until the retreating column of Van Cleve had passed over us and the Rebel color bearer had got into the river crossing over. We were ordered to advance onto the river bank and fire.

Whilst laying in this critical situation and our troops being driven pell mell over us to the rear a number of our regiment were killed and wounded whilst laying helpless on the ground awaiting for all our men to get away from our front so we could open fire. Among those who were killed at this spot was Wm R. Thomas, my old friend and schoolmate, shot through the head and instantly killed.

Soon as we were ordered to advance and fire we rushed up onto the bank of the river and the heavy column of the Rebels were on the other side and some of them almost through the river onto us. We delivered a number of very effective volleys in quick succession and then charged through the river, up the banks, and drove them steadily before us.

Their battery of six guns on the other bank which was playing upon us with terrible effect we charged ^{upon} and took. The officer refused to surrender and was bayoneted by Corporal Hines of Co. A.

We took and turned their own battery upon them and drove the enemy back across a large cotton field into the woods, when, night coming on, the pursuit had to be abandoned.

On this portion of the battle field where Negley's division drove the enemy back, fourteen hundred killed and wounded were counted and a number of Rebel colors were taken and quite a large number of prisoners.

The contest here was sharp, but did not last very long, the enemy being repulsed at every point along the entire line today.

This being a pleasant mid-winter day, aside from the perils of the deadly battle in which we were active participants, the charge upon the enemy this afternoon through and across Stone River (the water being almost icy cold and had to be waded from knee-deep to up to our waists), was the most disagreeable part we had to perform.

Here we lost a number of our men. Some were shot and wounded in going through the river and for the want of help were drowned. Others again fell whilst charging up the bank and taking the Rebel battery, where the contest raged with unmitigated fury until they were driven back and all action ceased by the close of day.

In the evening after dark we recrossed the river and went into camp on the other shore for the night without tents or shelter. We partook of a scanty morsel and lay down. But about 11 o'clock at night it commenced to rain and continued all night. We got up and stood with our blankets and rubbers over our shoulders, but, as the rain fell in torrents, a large portion of the time we were thoroughly drenched, before getting dry from going through the river during the fight.

During the night a sharp skirmish fire commenced along our center and soon along that portion of our line the engagement appeared to become very sharp. Our men drove the enemy back and before morning everything seemed to be quiet, with but now and then a few shots exchanged by our pickets.

January 3, 1863.

Considerable rain falling today, making the roads very heavy and almost impassable, whilst the cold rain is very trying and hard on all of us here in the field. Some skirmishing going on and our men have taken possession of a portion of the enemy's works, and this afternoon rumors of their retreat are current throughout our commands, which a little later proved to be true.

They are now in full retreat and our cavalry is sent after them, but with what result we know not, as we are ordered to be in line ready to march at a moment's notice this evening. We may meet them soon again in another engagement.

Our men busy gathering the dead and burying as best they could, and endeavoring to care for the wounded. Saw the bodies of a great many of my comrades and schoolmates today who fell during this engagement. The three brothers, viz., David Stoker, Cyrus Stoker and Darius Stoker all fell, the first two were killed and the last-named severely wounded. R. C. Watson and John Shelly were also severely wounded. All of the above-named belonged to my mess and formerly schoolmates of mine in Ohio.

This afternoon, as I passed over a portion of the battle field with a squad of men in search of the killed and wounded, many strange sights would meet the eye, where both friend and foe had fallen, lay side by side ^{one} wrapt ~~in~~ in blue the other in grey and sleeping the sleep of death.

The destructive evidence of a fierce contest were plainly visible on every hand. Here an entire battery the enemy had run out to bear upon us lay with guns dismounted and all of its horses dead with their riders beside them on the ground. Hundreds of horses, dead and dying, lay strewn for a distance of about two miles along our lines of action. And in every direction one could see men bearing away their dead or wounded comrades, the former to a place of burial, the latter to the different field hospitals for such treatment as could be given on a battlefield.

Close by, and on the right-hand side of the railroad as we go toward Murfreesboro are several hundred dead heroes who fell in the conflict--laying in line with their blankets around them for their shrouds, whilst a number of men are busily engaged in digging a long trench in which they are to be placed side by side and buried.

On the field of Stone River Battle, look where you may and go where you will, the "Harvest of Death" is plainly pictured before you, and as I look upon the place where we fought and see the destruction and carnage there I feel surprised to realize that even a single one of us were able to come out alive.

Both the Rebel and Union wounded are receiving all the care at our hands that is possible to bestow under such circumstances, with the limited amount of means at our disposal.

Our loss in this engagement is estimated at about 1700 killed and 6425 wounded and 3550 missing, the missing being mostly prisoners of war taken on the first day of the engagement when Genl. McCook's division was being driven back by the enemy.