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Notes and Documents

THE BLOODY SEVEN DAYS' BATTLES

Edited by GEORGE A. MACDONALD

The Army of the Potomac during the Peninsula Campaign in northern Virginia engaged in one of the most fiercely contested conflicts of the Civil War. From June 26, 1862, until July 2, 1862, the Bloody Seven Days' Battles raged less than ten miles north of Richmond. This conflict did not receive the publicity which was accorded other battles because Richmond, the ultimate goal, was never realized. The heroic behavior of the Union and Confederate Armies during this phase of the war is worthy of a more detailed account than has hitherto been accorded it.

Historical publications bring within reach of everyone the official reports of the various campaigns and battles of the Civil War, but they deal only slightly with individuals and their motives, with small units and seemingly unimportant battles, and, for the most part, leave the trials, hardships, and virtues of the troops largely to the imagination.

Since one finds that romance and personal adventure do not appear in the pages of history, it then becomes apparent that for a more individual and humane treatment one must look to other sources. One source, which often proves most interesting, is, of course, letters from soldiers to their friends at home. These deal not with armies, grand strategy, and generals, but with regiments, companies, and fellow brothers-in-arms of the writers, upon whose shoulders focus all the pain, misery, and hardship of war. Such letters contain the burden of history, but receive little recognition.

The following letter is one of these tributes to brave action in battle. It was written by Sergeant John F. Cook to Olin K. Harvey of Passumpsic, Vermont, and it has the uniqueness of being one of the most vivid accounts of the Peninsula Campaign yet discovered. With the author's graphic portrayal of the incidents of the several battles, his keen observation of detail, and his lively sensitivity to the feelings

and actions of others, the letter transports us to the battlefields of 1862, where we too experience fatigue, scorn the "rottgut" of the Rebels, and commend the "sober man to fight."

Harrisons Landing; Va. July 18 1862.

Friend Olin:¹

Your wellcome² letter, wich bears for its date the 13 inst., I received by this mornings mail. As you mention nothing in particular of your folks, I take it for granted, that all are in the enjoyment of good health. Your papers, you say state, that we had quite a hard time before Richmond.³ Well my friend I can assure you, that a hard time it was indeed. It would be useless perhaps, for me to give many particulars, as no doubt you are ere this pretty well informed of all principle events of the bloody "seven days" fighting, but after all, the papers do not verry often, say or know much about the thousand little accidents, dangers, and hairbreath escapes, that happen and are only known in fact to those, who are actually engaged in the carnage of the battlefield. Perhaps it will prove interesting to you, if I should mention to you, a few in this letter.

For two days the battle raged in all its fury on the east side of the Chickahominy,⁴ there on the 26th of June the battle of Mechanicsville was fought, and on the following day that of Gaines Mills, our Division, (Smiths)⁵ was quartered on the west side of that river, directly opposite of Gaines Mills, and while all day in line of battle, momen-

1. Olin K. Harvey, the recipient of the letter, was born in Barnet, Vermont, August 31, 1836. Less than two months after he received this letter he enlisted in Company F. 15th Vermont Regiment. He was killed in action at Fairfax Court House, Virginia, on December 29, 1862.

2. The letter is reproduced with its original punctuation, word order and spelling.

3. The author refers to the retreat of the Union Army from the base of supply at White House Landing to Harrison's Landing, Virginia. A clear account of this retreat may be found in George T. Stevens' *Three Years in the Sixth Corps*. A vivid picture of the battle from the Southerners' viewpoint is found in Douglas S. Freeman's *Lee's Lieutenants*. Other accounts of this battle may be found in the following: Francis A. Walker's *History of the Second Army Corps*, Eckenrode and Conrad's *George B. McClellan*, and in (Vol. VI) of James Schouler's *History of the United States*.

4. See map, p. 235.

5. Major General William F. Smith from St. Albans, Vermont, was in command of a division during the Peninsula Campaign. Among the units of his command was the famous Vermont Brigade which included the 3rd Vermont Regiment.

tarely expecting an attack on our position, we witnessed the whole of that days terrible work. During the night, while our forces fell back, the rebels placed batteries into position and on the next morning opened on our camps. They done but little damage, and while most of our artillery, during the previous night, had been removed to the rear, we slowly fell back out of their range, into the woods. The rebels however knew, by lessons we had learned them in the past, that Smith's Div. was a rather saucy one to deal with, and consequently they deemed it not prudent to follow us verry rapidly. In fact nothing was again seen of the *devils*, untill in the afternoon of Sunday, at Savage's Station. This is a railroad station in a large field, surrounded on three sides by woods, in the opening on the fourth side, 20 pieces of our artillery were placed in line, all masked with bushes excepting two of them, wich boldly stood out, glittering in the sun. Behind these, lay our infantry on their faces, invisible to the foe.

At three o'clock P.M. the rebel skirmishers advanced from the woods on the opposite side of the field, and soon after their black columns came on, at double quick, yelling like demons, intending to take our guns. Not a shot came from our side, untill the rebels were to within about 100 yards of our batteries. Quicker than lightning, our guns were unmasked, and each laden with a double charge of canister, they opened on their lines. Great God! Olin, what a sight! they fell in heaps, and the way they put back to the woods, was a caution to see. But soon a heavier force came on again, but the same fate awaited them. For the third time they came on, fairly covering the field with their hordes, but this time they fared worse than before, fearfull was the slaughter wich our canister made in their crowded ranks, but as soon as they got up allmost to the mouth's of our guns, up rose our infantry and more than 10,000 rifles were emptied into their already thined ranks. In terrible confussion they brocke and run, and with fixed bayonets, and a yell that seemed to shake the verry sky, our boys charged after them. At this time the rebels appeared in the woods on our left flank, the Vermont brigade was immediately ordered in, and in a few minutes we were engaged. It was now nearly sunset. But by the time it was dusk, we had whipped the rebels completely of the field. Our Capt. (Thos. Nelson)⁶ had three toes shot off his left foot, early in the fight, but he stood through the whole of it like a hero.

6. Thomas Nelson was born in Ryegate, Vermont, January 15, 1816. He was commissioned captain June 11, 1861, and was severely wounded on June 29, 1862, at Savage's Station. He was promoted to major on June 15, 1863, and was mustered out of the service on July 27, 1864.

Six more were wounded in our Co. and one killed. I am unable to give a full list of the casualties in our regt. or brigade, no doubt you will get it in some of your papers. The loss of the 5th Reg't. was heavy. The loss in our Reg't. would have been severer, but as we mostly laid down, loading while lying on our backs, and then rolling over and firing, the rebels shot over us. Fortunate for me, I did not get hurt. One ball went across my breast, and as it passed through my breast pocket of my shirt, it tore to pieces one half of a picturecase, I had in my pocket, hurting however neither myself nor even the face of the picture. Quite a close call; I thought. I could tell you of many more instances, like or similar to the above, but I have no room here. During the following night, we marched all night, and on Monday morning arrived on the other side of the *White Oak* swamp. In the afternoon the rebels attacked us again, but they got another thrashing. And so it has been all along; in the daytime we fought, and at night we marched, until at length on the evening of the second of July, we arrived on the James River, weary, tired, and worn out. For five successive days and nights I never for a moment had my belts off, and did not get ten hours sleep in all. I leave it for you to judge, whether this would be called a hard time. A great many fell out on the road; some have since come in, others no doubt have been captured by the enemy's cavalry. Our camp is now some four miles from the river, on high ground, and we are already strongly entrenched. We have a splendid position, and the rebels will get a warm reception, should they attack here. Our old position had a front of some 30 miles; in order to hold it, we ought to have had, three times our number.

But as there was no prospects of getting reinforcements, our Gen. knew that it would be useless to try to hold it: consequently we fell back. In what style we accomplished our change, and reached our new base of operation, history will tell, all I have to say is: "I am proud that I belong to the Army of the Potomac."

After the battle at *Savage's Station*, I went for a few minutes over the battlefield. The rebels lay there in rows, in some places three and four thick, legs and arms lay scattered in every way and the wounded lay groaning, covered with the dead, and unable to get out. There was a strong smell of rum, and on picking up some of their canteens, I found that in most of them, was some rotgut. The fact is Olin, they were nearly all drunk, and this accounts for their boldness in walking up almost to the cannons mouth. Give me however a sober

man to fight; liquor may deaden a mans senses to danger, but when you come up to hand to hand work, a drunken man can do no execution; he'll do verry well to be shot down. I have since seen from the Richmond papers that they themselves admit a loss of 8,000 in that battle, I know it was much larger, while we did not lose one sixth part of that number in killed and wounded.⁷

My friend, I could write a dozen more sheets over, and then not get half through, but as my letter is allready quite lengthly, I will close. I hope the states will answer promptly to the late call for more troops, and then this rebellion will soon end.

I see by the papers that Vt. leads the van, and I am glad to hear it. I have been unwell for a few days back, but today I am somewhat better. Our Captain has gone home. It has been verry hot of late, and quite sickly, but the health of the boys is rapidly improving. Give my best respects to all of your folks as well as all inquiring friends. Hoping you will answer as soon as possible I will close; while I remain as ever

Your true friend

John⁸

Sergt. John F. Cook
3rd Vt. Regt. Co. I
Smith's Division
Army of Potomac

The letter deviates from the conventional in the respect that its description of the battles as a common soldier saw them is rare. It is difficult to ascertain whether Cook deliberately failed to acknowledge defeat, or whether he was not aware of the fact that his army had just suffered a series of setbacks and narrowly escaped a crushing defeat, which, had it occurred, could quite possibly have changed the entire outcome of the war. It is possible that Cook was endeavoring to raise the morale of those at home by not becoming discouraged himself. His letter exemplifies confidence, strength, and "esprit de corps." The

7. The losses of the Army of the Potomac during The Bloody Seven Days' Battles were as follows: killed 1734, wounded 8062, missing 6053: total 15,849.

8. John F. Cook was born in Hardwick, Vermont. He left as a private with the 3rd Vermont Regiment at the time it was mustered into service. He was promoted to sergeant on June 1, 1862. He rose from private to the rank of major during his service. On May 12, 1864, he was severely wounded, but recovered. He was discharged from the United States Volunteers April 8, 1865.

personification of these qualities was a necessity during that crucial period when the outcome was in doubt, and it reflects great credit on the author and all men of his kind.

