

PERSONAL NARRATIVES
OF EVENTS IN THE
WAR OF THE REBELLION,
BEING PAPERS READ BEFORE THE
RHODE ISLAND SOLDIERS AND SAILORS
HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

FOURTH SERIES - No. 10.

PROVIDENCE:
PUBLISHED BY THE SOCIETY.

1890.

71

The Providence Press:
SNOW & FARNHAM, PRINTERS.
37 Custom House Street.
1890.

BATTERY D,
FIRST RHODE ISLAND LIGHT ARTILLERY,

AT THE

SECOND BATTLE OF BULL RUN.

BY

J. ALBERT MONROE,

[Late Colonel First Rhode Island Light Artillery.]

PROVIDENCE:

PUBLISHED BY THE SOCIETY.

1890.

[Edition limited to two hundred and fifty copies.]

BATTERY D,
FIRST RHODE ISLAND LIGHT ARTILLERY,
AT THE
SECOND BATTLE OF BULL RUN.

BECAUSE I write and talk of Battery D, it should not be inferred that that battery, in my eyes, was the only one in the army during the Rebellion, or that I desire either to exaggerate its services or make it conspicuous above others.

I would, if I could, tell of every battery engaged in battle during the war, whether of the regular or volunteer force, and particularly of the batteries of the regiment our State sent into the field, but that I cannot do, for the very good reason that I do not know of their experiences individually in battle.

The only engagement I ever participated in with a single battery, excepting Groveton and several small affairs, such as skirmishes, etc., where I had any responsibility, was that of "The First Bull Run," with Battery A. That experience I gave in the first paper I read before the society more than ten years ago.* With the exception of Generals Barry and Hunt, probably no single individual had better or more ample opportunities than I during the war to observe, to study, and to become acquainted with the light artillery of the North, for, having served in three different army corps and in the reserve artillery in the field, besides having organized and conducted the artillery camp of instruction at Washington, D. C., to which most of the new batteries were sent for equipment and drill, as well as many disabled ones from the front, a very large number came under my observation. Considered as a whole, the light artillery of our army was about all that could have been hoped for in the way of efficiency, and more than could have been expected under the circumstances. No arm of the service calls for greater intelligence, capacity and judgment on the

* See FIRST SERIES, No. 2.

part of a commanding officer than the light artillery. A battery commander should possess not only executive ability, but he should be mentally qualified, as well as naturally inclined, to acquire a familiarity with every detail of the material under his charge—guns, carriages, implements, harnesses, etc., and possess the qualifications requisite to impart his knowledge to others, that he may instruct his men so that they may have as intimate and perfect knowledge of the objects and purposes of everything with which he comes in contact in the line of duty as he himself possesses.

Drivers should be as good cannoniers as drivers, and the cannoniers should be as much at home with the horses and harnesses as with the guns. Generally this was the case with our batteries, though the duties of cannoniers and drivers are distinct, and each habitually performs his prescribed duties or fills his own particular place. In a gun detachment each man in an efficient battery must be able promptly to fill the position occupied by any other man. When it is considered that a gun detachment, including the sergeant, under the old artillery system, consists

of sixteen men, and that every position calls for special training, the exercise of discretion, cool judgment, and at critical times quick, intelligent decision, some idea may be formed of the labor of a battery commander in the matter of instruction alone. Were this all that he had to do, the position might be filled creditably by many who have failed when the great responsibilities incident to an engagement have been thrust upon them. Not only must he be a capable instructor, but he must have a quick eye to determine at a glance if every part of his command, material as well as personnel, is in place, is in order, and ready for work. He must be correct in the estimation of distances, have the faculty for selecting advantageous positions for his guns almost intuitively, without laborious and time-losing inspection of the field. He should have all the dash and impetuosity of a cavalry leader, all the coolness of an infantry commander, for at times he must throw his pieces forward like a whirlwind to the very front line and fling his iron hail into the ranks of the enemy, where their success or reverse is just on the balance, or, if the onslaught is irre-

sistible, he must know, to the very last moment, how long he can hold his position and deliver his fire with safety. This is the time that tries his mettle. He sees the line of the enemy rapidly advancing, gap after gap in the hostile line, torn out by his shot and shell, filled as if men sprang out of the ground for the purpose of mocking him. On they come until his canister rattles forth from his pieces like rain. The gaps in the advancing line in his front increase in frequency, but they are no less frequently filled, and the new men appear to be fresher and more determined than the others. Then he knows that the escape of his command depends upon how much punishment he can inflict, how much weakness he can cause up to the very moment that he must get away.

Wavering in mind for a single second then, indecision for an instant at the supreme moment, will prove to be his destruction, the severe crippling, if not the entire loss of his entire command. If he leaves a minute too soon the enemy quickly reaches the position he has occupied, comparatively fresh, and pours into him a destructive fire as he hastens with his ex-

hausted men to the rear. If he uses that important minute to hurl canister from pieces well depressed, the enemy reaches the position he has abandoned, exhausted, torn and bleeding, and while he is gathering himself together, the self-contained, well-manned battery may seek cover with comparative leisure.

Considering all this, it is marvelous that our volunteer artillery proved so efficient, so reliable as it did. Our best volunteer batteries were not a whit behind those of the regular army in action, though in camp and on the march the latter generally gave evidence of better management and better discipline. Still there were exceptions even in these respects. The value of the light artillery in the army as a factor in the suppression of the Rebellion, has never been accorded that credit to which it is entitled. Yet there does not seem to have been a disposition on the part of any writer to belittle its service. In nearly all Southern literature pertaining to the Rebellion, the authors have described in detail the movements of particular batteries in connection with the cavalry and infantry, and, so far as my observation goes, with great accuracy.

Our Northern historians, when it has been necessary to mention the artillery, have not been so painstaking, and have generally only incidentally mentioned that "a battery here or there" did so and so, ignoring entirely what particular battery it was or who commanded, unless, indeed, it was a regular battery, and in that case it is designated by its commanding officer's name. The exceptions are comparatively few, and they seem to be accidental, rather than intentional.

I frankly admit that my reading of "war literature" has been restricted more to what has come in my way than what I have sought. Still it has been sufficient to note the marked contrast between the honorable mention of infantry and cavalry with that of light artillery batteries. Though it is freely recorded that batteries, or a battery, were brought into action at this or that juncture, it is stated in such general terms that it seems as if this was but a matter of course, and that they were merely following out a line of duty marked out by a general officer, which called for no special mention; whereas, no unit in the entire organization of the

army was more independently moved by its commanding officer, without orders from superior authority, than that of a light battery. Light artillery is an adjunct only in military operations, but there never was a general action since it was first introduced when it was not a very important adjunct, and there have been cases where the whole tide of battle turned upon its efficient work, of which many examples might be cited. But I have already dwelt too long upon this subject, which could be extended to the length of a paper.

The "Second Bull Run" battle actually commenced with what is popularly known as the "Battle of Groveton." Southern officers have called this "Gainesville," but it really took place between the two hamlets. This was in the evening of Aug. 28, 1862. The battle continued four days, ending with Chantilly, where General Kearney was killed, September 1st. August 31st was a sort of breathing day for both armies. Nearly all, if not all, writers have chosen to designate the battles of these four days as Gainesville, Groveton, Second Bull Run or Manassas, and Chantilly. Others, as Groveton the 28th of

August, Second Bull Run, 29th and 30th, and Chantilly, September 1st.

In giving the experience of Battery D at Second Bull Run, it is proper to commence with Groveton, August 28th, and in so doing it is unavoidable to repeat what has been narrated in the paper entitled *Incidents of the War*, read before the Society, in two parts, several years ago. Groveton was an unanticipated action, an accident more than anything else, but it was a brilliant one, terrific and fierce.

“The conflict here was fierce and sanguinary.” The “Federals maintained their ground with obstinate determination,” says General Jackson. “It was one of the most terrific contests that can be conceived,” says General Taliferro. The bare memory of such a contest is glorious, and sets one’s blood tingling with pride that he was a participant in it. Its lines of blazing fire so close together that, looking at the contesting infantry partially in flank, they seemed to mingle and to be almost lost in one sheet of flame, lighting with lurid glow the faces of both friend and foe. We were moving from the vicinity of Warrenton, the common understanding being that

our objective point was Manassas or Centreville, and had passed Gainesville, when the column halted, for the skirmishers on the left flank had begun to feel something. We regarded this only as a slight, temporary affair, that would pass off with a few shots at bushwhackers or guerillas, and at an intimation from Gen. Rufus King that a bite would be acceptable, our mess cook and Dick furnished a lunch, of which we all partook. The firing continued, but in a desultory sort of way, and I left the party before the meal was finished to see what was going on at the front. I came near to getting into such a predicament that the Society never would have had this paper in its archives, for, before aware of it, I was directly on the skirmish line, and was brought to my senses by an infantry officer calling, "Don't you see that fellow in the grass there drawing a bead on you?" A puff of smoke and the click of a bullet as, in passing, it struck a buckle or some other piece of metal attached to my horse equipments, verified the officer's warning as well as proved the poor marksmanship of the Johnny even at short range. A friendly haystack was near, and I immediately rode behind it and

to the rear. Turning into the road, I again started for the front, riding towards Groveton. Very soon I came across Major Tillson, of the Maine Light Artillery, placing a gun in position, and in his front I saw a large body of the enemy massed in what appeared to be a break in the timber. They seemed to be packed together as one sees men at a huge mass meeting. It was evident that we were in for it, and I hastened back to the battery, which started at a quick trot for a knoll that I had observed and which appeared to be a good position. As the leading carriage reached the foot of the knoll an officer rode rapidly toward me from its top, saying, "For God's sake, Captain, get out of this; they are putting a battery right on this hill." I lost no time, for I could see the horses of the rebel artillery above me, and we turned back to the road, the drivers using whip and spur with all their might and main. We took cover in the road, where timber skirted both sides of it for a short distance. We were very uncomfortable here, for the battery that had stolen the hill from us knew our position, and at less than six hundred yards range sent its shot and shell crashing

through the trees and over them, exploding their shells directly above us. We were where we could do nothing, and I determined to run the gauntlet of fire that swept over the open road beyond the timber we were in, to another copse that would afford more shelter, and at the same time probably an opportunity to get our guns into action; therefore, the necessary order was given, and the battery passed over the space intervening at a sharp gallop. This movement resulted in very few, if any, casualties to the men, but a shot struck the stock of one of the caissons, disabling it. To prevent its capture by the enemy it was blown up by Lieutenant Parker. It had now grown quite dark, and the opposing lines were easily traced by the sheets of flame and flashing powder-ash pouring from each, while the positions of their batteries were as plainly discernible. The ground the battery had secured appeared in the darkness to be unfavorable for the use of all the guns; therefore, two were posted in the road, where they had a flank fire upon both the infantry and artillery of the enemy. A captain of one of the rebel batteries engaged here told me several years after

that the guns away off to his left, which he had understood were those of a Rhode Island battery, inflicted terrible punishment upon him, and that he lost more heavily in men, horses and material than in any one action of the war. Considering that we had but two guns in position, this was a high compliment to the efficiency of Battery D. Before or about nine o'clock the action was over. General Gordon says: "The contest ended at nine at night. Its close was terrific. Fire leaped in waves from the musket's mouth, and men saw in the darkness the angry flame; bullets filled the air or struck with heavy thud a living mark, and men heard the cruel sound; but neither fire, scream nor blow, nor the presence even of almost certain death, appalled the Federal lines."

This language, vivid as it is, does not fully paint the scene, nor could any language depict it. It can only be imagined, even, by those who have been under galling fire. Men standing at arm's length, as it were, figuratively speaking, giving and taking, life for life, each resolute and determined, ceasing action only from sheer exhaustion, which was as com-

plete upon one side as upon the other. Each held his own with a determination as conspicuous as ever inspired a song of Spartan courage. The loss of the battery had not been severe. No one was killed, so far as we could learn, but there were three missing, and one, Sergeant Andrews, was severely hurt by his own horse; besides these we had the loss of the caisson. After midnight commenced the movement for the ground upon which the Second Bull Run battle took place. We made a long detour, which, I think, even at this day, I could identify on the ground, but which I have been unable to trace on the maps which have been made of the territory covered by these operations. We reached the "Henry House" plateau some time early in the afternoon, and rested for quite a space of time, although the battle was going on in our front and at some distance to our right as we faced westerly. We performed some evolutions here, more for the purpose of occupying the minds of the men than anything else; in fact, we had a regular field drill on a battle-field, and one involving the most difficult of battery manœuvres.

The men, undoubtedly, thought this a most singular thing to call upon them for a drill in the direct presence of the enemy, but I wanted to know by experience how "steady" they could contain themselves with the immediate prospect of coming under fire. The result was satisfactory, and I would not have hesitated to march through the whole Confederacy with those men.

Toward night we were ordered to a position on the ground between the "Stone House" and the Dogan place, north of the Warrenton turnpike. We went into position on the low ground below Bald Hill, on the summit of which, and in our rear, were several batteries. We opened fire upon the enemy, the batteries in our rear firing over us. These batteries cut their fuses so short that their shells burst over us and we were forced to move to the rear to escape destruction from our friends. As we reached the top of the hill and went into position again, General Siegel, whose command occupied this ground to which we had been ordered, either through mistake or somebody's freak, said to me, "What you come back for?" I replied: "Your batteries

are hurting me more than the enemy." He answered, "I thought you could not stay there. I saw their shells burst over you."

As we went into battery a shot from the enemy struck one of our guns, but beyond a scar no damage was done, yet it was a narrow escape for the men about the piece. We were sadly worn by several days' heavy work, and when we laid down after having performed all our duties we slept the sweet and quiet sleep that tired nature requires, although within a few hundred yards of the enemy. Early in the morning we went into battery in the rear of the Dogan house, a fine position, that commanded an extensive plain of bottom land, heavy timber skirt-
ing its further limit at the west of us. We had but little to do except to keep in readiness for immediate work, for in case the enemy drove our infantry from the timber and across the low plain in our front, we would be able to deliver a murderous fire upon him. A personal inspection of the plain was made in order to ascertain if it would be advisable to take the battery there, but it resulted only in ascertaining that it was no position for a battery, for the

enemy's bullets were peppering the ground, and there was no possibility of getting at him except at great risk to our own men (infantry). We were much amused early in the afternoon by the appearance of a battery in column, the captain of which asked why I did not place my guns on the plain below us. The reason was explained, but he evidently thought the reason given a poor one, for he took his command through the intervals of Battery D and went into battery several hundred yards in our front. Probably there was a lull in the fire of the enemy when he reached the position he thought advisable to take, and he gave a contemptuous look in our direction as he gave the order, "In battery!" The order was neatly executed, but the horses had scarcely come to a halt when I heard, "Limber to the rear! Caissons left about, march!" and in a jiffy the battery came toward us at a trot. The captain had found the bullet shower.

A shell came over to us occasionally, but we did not mind them, fearing that we might jump out of the frying-pan into the fire if we changed position, and not be able to be of much service if our infantry was driven out of the timber.

We had some casualties, however, losing several horses and one of the most efficient men of the battery, William Oaks, who was hit in the shoulder by a fragment of shell. In the form of parenthesis I will say what often has been said before, that such a position is one of the most trying to which men can be subjected. I have heard the remark, "The regiment was not in the fight; it only lay still all day and did not fire a shot."

Perhaps it did not, but if it occupied ground to which shot, shell and bullets came from the enemy and over the heads of our engaged line, it required nerve on the part of every individual member of the regiment to hold the command in position. The retreat of one man, who possessed the confidence and respect of the majority of a company, would stampede the regiment.

The men of Battery D passed the long hours in inactivity, exposed all the time to a desultory fire, which occasionally disabled a man or a horse. We were armed with smooth-bore, twelve-pounder guns, which I believe is the most efficient arm known to the world even to this day, in the hands of skilled

men, for open field work. If the battery had been one of rifled guns, fire could have been directed upon the enemy over our infantry in the timber, and the men's time would have been spent in activity and their minds occupied with work. But situated as we were, with guns of limited range and the chances that our position might prove to be of inestimable value, there was nothing to do but to stand and take whatever came along. About four o'clock in the afternoon, according to my recollection, an officer of General McDowell's staff, whom I recognized, rode up hastily and ordered the battery up on the hill near the Lewis house, indicating the locality with his hand, and added, "For God's sake, hurry up, for they are massing in our front there." The guns were moved quickly as possible, and Lieutenant Parker followed promptly with the caissons, losing one by the breaking of a pole, considerable confusion already having set in.

We went into battery in a hot place, where the bullets were coming thick and fast and bursting shells apparently almost filling the air. There were batteries to the right of us and to the left of us, vomit-

ing fire and smoke and destruction to the enemy. We were well supported by infantry, for they were in a sunken road in our front and there were two lines in our rear. We fired solid shot, shell and shrapnel, but apparently to no purpose. Shrapnel began to burst over us and it came down like hail. As it struck the ground it was like the falling of pebbles into the sea when thrown up by the hand.

Lieutenant Harkness's horse was shot, and in falling injured the lieutenant's ankle so that he was obliged to go to the rear. Lieutenant Fiske's horse was wounded and disabled. The horse the captain was mounted upon was hit in the breast by a shell, and the remount was so wounded that another had to be secured. The guidon staff was shattered in pieces, and the flag itself, now in the archives of this Society, was riddled. Its bearer, Samuel Oglesby, dismounted from his horse, picked up the pieces of the staff, and waved the flag as if defying the enemy to come on. A general officer, a man crazy under the excitement of the occasion, rode into the battery, hollered, and made all sorts of exuberant manifestations, which would have been amusing if the situa-

tion had not been so serious. I would not refer to him particularly had he not, in an official report, somewhat reflected unpleasantly, to say the least, upon the command, although he did not give its name. Of this officer it has been written: "It often happens in this world that he who clamors most for recognition of heroic service is the most deceived as to the quality of his heroism. Milroy's achievements, as he officially reported them, were grandly heroic; while, as they were seen by others, they were the furious frenzies of a madman." (Gordon, p. 397.)

"Milroy's manner was very much excited, so much so as to attract attention of all present, and to induce many to inquire who that was that was rushing about so wildly and what he wanted." (Buchanan's correspondence with McDowell.)

"He (Milroy) does not hesitate, in his report, to censure the 'brass battery,' which he did not order to its station, and had no authority to command to remain or to depart, to fight or cease fighting, for taking advantage of his absence to withdraw." (Gordon, page 397)

The infantry in our front broke and went pell-mell through us, but the battery stood firm and threw canister with all the rapidity that trained, desperate and determined men could effect. The infantry in the rear broke, still the battery held its ground, and it was not until the Johnnies were in among the guns that it ceased firing, and by extraordinary skill of the men went to the rear in safety. It was the only battery on that line that escaped intact, without the loss of a gun. The behavior of the battery, witnessed by many observers, called forth unbounded expressions of praise.

A few years ago I heard an officer tell how he and others saw the battery withdraw from its position and the same night that he told his story I wrote it, as nearly as possible, in his own language. Afterwards I submitted it to him, requesting that he would make corrections, if any were necessary. He assured me that it was perfectly correct. He is present in the audience and can tell you what a sight it was.* The story was as follows :

* Lieut. Pardon S. Jastram, Battery E (Randolph's Battery), First Rhode Island Light Artillery.

"The heat of the battle was over on the right of our line, at the Second Bull Run, and we were watching the movements of the troops away up on the plains at the top of the hill by the Lewis house, or where it had formerly stood.

"Kearney was there with us and several other general officers, as well as a large number of officers and men of the line, all watching with breathless interest the operations of the contending lines clearly exposed to our view, save where a clump of timber hid a portion of the rebel line and concealed what was going on. There was a line of our batteries supported by infantry all heavily engaged in an effort to repel a determined attack that the enemy's artillery and infantry were making.

"It was evident Lee had concentrated his efforts upon this point, and that he proposed to carry it by hurling all his available force against it. It was so plain, from our standpoint, that he would be successful, that Kearney remarked: 'You will see a second stampede from this field before night.' Slowly the rebel line advanced, and rapidly the rebel artillery poured shot, shell and shrapnel into the Union lines,

which stood steady and unbroken, but all aglow from the rapidity of the fire streaming from it, which had a sulphurous hue as seen through the enveloping smoke which rose in the air and floated away in great clouds. Guns were served, as it seemed, they never were before. It appeared as if the heavens would be rent in twain by the thunders of the artillery and the discharge of the small arms on both sides combined. The rebel line never faltered but continued to move on, notwithstanding the deadly havoc in its ranks. Finally came the charge, and, with yells that rang out clearly over the space between them and us, they impetuously dashed upon the apparently firm immovable line before them. The quickened fire of the artillery told that they were throwing canister with all their might and main, and that if human power, so far as those men were concerned, could stem the approaching crest of glittering steel, they would do it. It looked as if it was an impossibility for any living force, however determined, to advance through that storm of iron and lead, but the rebel line wavered for a moment only, then it gathered its strength again almost in the very second that it ap-

peared about to lose it, and with renewed ardor swept on.

“Our advanced line of infantry, occupying a sunken road in front of the artillery, broke and rushed pell-mell through the intervals between the guns and limbers; and the second line, just behind the limbers of the batteries, joined them in their mad race to the rear and down the hill. Double canister went from the well-served guns, and great gaps appeared in the hotly charging line, but it was only for a few seconds, for in that brief space of time they were in among the guns and gunners, the latter seeking safety in precipitate retreat. There was nothing else to do except to remain and become prisoners. The guns were silent; they could hardly be seen on account of the great number of the enemy in among them. The drivers hastily mounted the horses of the limbers, and making a short left-about, hurried away with the fleeing cannoneers.

“Not so, however, the limbers of one battery. Like lightning they dashed forward towards their pieces, and almost in the twinkling of an eye they emerged from the confusion in an unbroken line with

a light twelve-pounder attached to every one of them, the captain of the company proudly riding before, wildly waving his sword. It was a bold movement and evidently one that the enemy had not anticipated, and so quickly had it been executed, he did not have time to realize it until the guns were beyond his reach. Except the men with these guns, not a Union soldier nor a Union command of any kind, save in hasty retreat, could be seen on that, the south side of the Warrenton turnpike, while the rebel lines continued to increase in extent and to advance as rapidly as formations could be made.

“Our interest was centered in the battery, now all alone, entirely without support, and all expected to see it gallop to the rear and join the general stampede.

“To our infinite surprise, after advancing two hundred or three hundred yards to the rear, the captain again went into battery, as if, single-handed, to defy the whole center of the rebel army. The assurance of the battery commander, his effrontery and impudence were as much of a surprise to the rebels apparently as to us, and they seemed to be staggered

for a few minutes, as if in doubt whether or no our lines had reformed and were about to advance again. Their doubts were soon dispersed, and then they charged with such a dashing, impetuous rush that, apparently, the battery could by no possibility escape. Again the horses and limbers plunged wildly forward and it seemed as if the pintle-hooks of the limbers actually shot into the lunettes of the trails of the gun-carriages. Before the charging line reached the ground that the guns stood upon and fired from, the battery was moving away at a sharp trot. It looked as if the battery captain was playing and trifling with the enemy, for when he reached the crest of the hill leading down into the valley he went into battery again to pay a parting compliment to the Johnnies, but he failed to surprise them for a third time and they resumed their formation for a charge. The captain saw his danger, and without firing a shot he limbered to the rear and coolly moved down the hill, where he was lost to our sight.

“Several of us were light artillery officers, and we knew from our own experience on the drill-ground and under fire what skill must have been exercised

by the battery commander in training his men and horses to enable him to handle his battery like a plaything in the face of overwhelming numbers of the enemy, and to take what would have been enormous and unpardonable risks with a command not almost absolutely perfect in drill and discipline."

Such was the manner Battery D retreated from its position at the Second Bull Run battle.

The records at the Adjutant-General's office, State of Rhode Island, contains the following, as shown in a report made by Capt. J. Albert Monroe in September, 1862, of recent losses of Battery D :

AUGUST 28, 1862.

Prisoners—Henry W. Pratt,
Daniel W. Hopkins,
George E. Arnold.

Wounded—Sergeant R. H. Andrews.

AUGUST 30, 1862.

Killed—Corporal George A. Eldred,
" Otis F. Hicks,
Hugh Doran.

Wounded—W S. Cushing, wounded in the leg;
Thomas Davis, wounded in the face ;
William A. Oakes, wounded in the shoulder ;
Charles A. Sheldon, wounded in the leg.

Overcome by Exertion and Sick—

Corporal E. R. Knight,

Willett A. Johnson.

Besides these there was a large number of slight casualties, which might have been taken advantage of by the injured men to escape duty had they been less true than they were.

