

PERSONAL NARRATIVES
OF EVENTS IN THE
WAR OF THE REBELLION,

BEING PAPERS READ BEFORE THE
RHODE ISLAND SOLDIERS AND SAILORS
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

SECOND SERIES No. 19.

PROVIDENCE
SIDNEY S. RIDER, A G T
1883.

PROVIDENCE PRESS COMPANY, PRINTERS.

BATTLE OF CEDAR CREEK,

OCTOBER 19, 1864,

BY

JOHN K. BUCKLYN,

LATE CAPTAIN FIRST RHODE ISLAND LIGHT ARTILLERY.



PROVIDENCE
SIDNEY S RIDER, A G T
1883.

THIS EDITION LIMITED TO
TWO HUNDRED AND FIFTY COPIES.

BATTLE OF CEDAR CREEK,

OCTOBER 19, 1864.



[Read before the Society, 1881.]

IN the western part of the State of Virginia is one of the most beautiful, fertile and healthful valleys in the world. Rich in agricultural and mineral resources, shut in by lofty mountains which rise like natural fortifications, it is not surprising that it was early settled and became a prosperous portion of the Old Dominion. Many of the hill farms in the time of the rebellion were occupied by Quakers, who received all with kindness, but refused to take up arms on either side. These men bought their exemption from military duty at five hundred dollars per man. The large farms of the valley were

generally cultivated by aristocratic and wealthy men, whose selfish interests in the ruling class made them friendly to the power that would destroy the Union to perpetuate slavery. The cavalry, both regular and irregular, drawn from this country was composed of brave men, accustomed to the saddle, and it did most effective service, as many a smoking wagon train could prove. The officers were usually men who had learned to love and wield power during generations of financial independence, refined culture, and haughty assumption of superiority. The rank and file were frequently composed of the poorer classes, who had been taught by social position to revere their leaders, and by necessity or choice to ride at great speed over difficult roads and through mountain passes. Their horses were trained to this work before the war, and were far superior to ours for cavalry service. What wonder, then, that the finest cavalry of the army was recruited in this valley. * What wonder that they made it for us "the valley of humiliation." This valley was naturally fertile and had been carefully cultivated. Wheat needs scarcely more attention than it receives

at the west, and the yield is abundant. The bottom lands have never been fertilized by man, and yet they present a yearly harvest of grain that enriches the owner. The proximity of this valley to Richmond made the grain available for the use of the confederate army. Hence they came every year to reap the crops, pouring so great forces into the fields that they swept us before them like dead leaves before the autumn wind. A handful of our army could hold the valley while the crops were growing, but a strong army might suffer defeat when the harvest time came. The first battle of Bull Run was a success to the Union army until reinforcements came from the valley and turned the tide of war. From that time until late in 1864 we met with disasters in and around this place. Mosby in the lower valley, and McNeal in the upper, with their peculiar advantages could swoop down upon an unprotected wagon train, or small squads of troops, or single travellers, like vultures from their lofty mountain crags, and they filled the land with sorrow. It was through this valley that the great raids into Maryland and Pennsylvania had been

made. The troops that fought at Antietam, Gettysburg, and in front of Washington, passed through here. Here the war was commenced by the attack on John Brown, and here it received its death blow.

When General H. G. Wright, with the sixth corps, had driven Early through the valley, he directed General Crook, with the eighth corps, to follow cautiously, and the sixth corps commenced a forced march towards Washington. Before that city was reached, the corps countermarched and hurried to succor General Crook. Early promptly retreated, and a season of countermarching ensued. In September the business became serious. Then commenced a campaign which, at Winchester and Fisher's Mountain, made great havoc among the confederates. When Early passed through the mountains, on his retreat, we sent him a parting salute, and kept his herd of cattle and flocks of sheep. Like some school boys he did not appear duly grateful for his chastisement and plotted mischief.

On retiring down the valley, the army passed Cedar Creek, a tributary of the Shenandoah, and

encamped on the eastern bank, with wings thrown back and wagon trains on the turnpike which led through the middle of the army. Strasburg was in front, beyond the river, and Middletown in the rear. These valley pikes are among the best roads in the world, and there are no policemen handy to forbid fast driving. The eighth corps, called also the Army of the Kenawha, General Crook, held the left. The nineteenth corps, General Emory, held the centre. In this corps President Hayes held a command. The sixth corps, from the Army of the Potomac, General H. G. Wright, held the right. General Sheridan having been called to Washington, General Wright assumed command of the army, and General Ricketts the command of the sixth corps.

In front of the army was Massanutten mountain, occupying the middle of the valley, and making a signal station where the enemy could clearly see our camps, count our troops, and observe all movements.

The 18th of October was a sunny day, and the army, as usual, proceeded with the camp routine.

But little fortifying had been done, and the army was resting, enjoying this beautiful October weather. There was no more thought of a battle in our camp than there is to-day in the streets of Providence. We knew that the enemy was in our front, but we had beaten him so badly at Winchester, and crushed him so thoroughly at Fisher's Mountain, and devastated so many miles of the valley, that we believed his power broken, his spirit crushed, and his resources destroyed. These thoughts had lulled the army into a feeling of security that was soon to be very rudely broken.

General Early was smarting under the remembrance of recent defeat. He possessed complete knowledge of our position, numbers and condition. His plans were laid in wisdom, and executed with a celerity and secrecy that challenge our admiration even in an enemy. Taking all useless and noisy equipments from a chosen body of men, he started them at early evening, in Indian file, around the base of the mountain, where it was thought troops could not move, and fording the creek in the Luray Valley several times, finally forded the north branch

of the Shenandoah, in the early evening, where the water was four and one-half feet deep, and massed in rear of the eighth corps. When the line had closed up the troops moved silently towards the eighth corps, protected by a fog that lay quite heavily over the land. Coming from the rear, they found the soldiers asleep in their tents, and captured many there. Their language to the rudely awakened soldiers was more forcible than elegant. Soon a soldier, slipping from his quarters, ran, thus drawing the enemy's fire, and making further concealment impossible. On they rushed with wildest yells and maddest rage. The eighth corps was pushed on to the nineteenth, and both were crowded on to and through the sixth. The cavalry moved to the right and rear; wagons that escaped moved hurriedly towards Winchester, where a part of the sixth corps was stationed. As soon as the enemy in Strasburg heard the rebel yell they pushed on across the bridge at Cedar Creek, and attacked in front. The uncertainty of the position, the noise and darkness created a panic among many troops that could not be checked. They fled like sheep, leaving only

a handful with the various flags. I had been accustomed to rise very early, and felt the importance of wakefulness at daylight. I probably heard the first gun fired, and arose to listen. Immediately another shot cut the frosty air. Calling to Lieutenant E. N. Whittier, "They are fighting," picking up my clothing and equipments, calling to my man, Levi Jackson, to saddle my horse, I ran to the General's tent, dressing on the way, and said to him, "They are fighting, shall I hitch up the batteries?" "Yes," he replied, and away I went, putting the bridle on my horse while galloping over the plain. I shouted, "Corporal of the Guard, Boots and saddles!" as I passed through the various batteries, and the quick notes of the bugles answered by call. Immediately the call to "pack up" was heard, and the "long roll" echoed across the plain. All trains hitched up and moved to the rear *en masse*, each driver showing a lively interest in the Winchester road. Coming around as soon as possible to where headquarters had been, I saw only the tree to which we tied our cow, all else had gone, and the bullets were falling thick and fast. Hence I had nothing for breakfast.

the same warmed up for dinner, and the remembrance of these for an early tea.

The sixth corps, which had been on the extreme right, facing up the valley, was now on the right and left both, and that, too, without changing its position. The batteries were pushed forward, the brigades moved out, and a line of battle formed facing westerly and southerly. We waited a moment to see where the storm would burst. General Wright having failed in an attempt to hold the nineteenth corps in position, came across to the sixth, and asked if the troops occupying a bluff on our left were friends or foes. I volunteered to ascertain, and rode towards them at full speed. Immediately the whole line opened fire upon me with artillery and small arms. My horse was wounded in many places, but a depression in the ground saved us, although five shots passed through my clothes.

General Tompkins says, "I never think of this battle without thinking of your charging the enemy alone." Our batteries and rifles immediately replied.

“Then shook the hills, with thunder riven;
Then rushed the steeds to battle driven;
And louder than the bolts of heaven,
Far flashed the red artillery.”

My task seemed to have been accomplished, and passing around the foot of the bluff in front, I came out from under the storm of iron and lead.

Immediately the enemy struck us on three sides, and pushed rapidly for our rear. I have never seen more rapid movements. Scarcely were batteries put into position before they were flanked and compelled to retire to escape capture. The enemy pushed so furiously that he seemed to arrive first at every place which we wished to occupy. Captain Jacob H. Lamb, with Battery C, scarcely commenced work in a position assigned him by General C. H. Tompkins, when the enemy struck his flank, and with difficulty he retired with one-half of his command. Out from the fog and smoke in front came a hostile line, and immediately the first battery was lost, and a rebel flag waved over one of the guns. Two batteries, a little to the rear, sent canister among them and the flag went down. We drew

back the guns by hand, but soon lost them again. Positions changed so rapidly that staff officers could not report and commanders could not wait. Every man seemed to be doing his best, and more daring acts of courage and desperation have seldom been seen. At times regimental flags were surrounded by foes, but the Spartan bands, with shout and a rapid bayonet charge, would break through and deploy again. Batteries were discharged almost in the face of the enemy. Guns were limbered up and brought away when the enemy was already within the battery. Hard words were time and again bandied between the opposing troops. The men seemed to be mad,—neither discouraged, nor frightened, nor subdued, but *mad*. The moment the enemy ceased to push on the flanks the line halted, the regiments spread out, the guns went into position, and all through the corps was heard the remark, "We will retake those guns before night." The eighth and nineteenth corps went into position. The cavalry came on to the flanks. General Wright ordered the artillery refitted, so far as possible, ammunition issued to the regiments, and the army

to be ready to advance at three o'clock. I know this, for he gave me these orders, which I carried to others and helped to execute them. The enemy made a slight attack upon us, but was easily repulsed, and only showed his continued interest in us by irregular picket firing.

Why did Early not push us until he had destroyed the army? Captured officers told us at evening, and General Early afterwards wrote in his address to the army, that the men left the ranks to plunder, and having obtained a supply of whiskey could not be controlled. Hence we must give whiskey credit for some assistance on this occasion.

In the beginning of the engagement my horse had been wounded, but I continued to ride him until he was severely wounded in five places, and was unable to move. I dismounted, took off the saddle and bridle, and bade him good-bye as the enemy rushed towards us with a yell. Seeing me leaving him he uttered the most heart-rending cry that I ever heard. It rings in my ears to-day. I have read of the sad cry of the horse in times of great danger, but this is the only place where I ever heard it. He was a

noble animal, and would follow me anywhere, appearing to have the greatest confidence in me, and affection for me. After the fight I had him buried where he fell. After a little time I borrowed another horse of Captain Adams, and rode to headquarters. General Wright, with the blood streaming down his face, grasped my hand and said, "My dear fellow, I thought you was killed." The memory of his kindly words and manner have always been cherished by me.

General Tompkins was very busy with the batteries. All supplies within several miles of the troops were brought up. Teams were arranged as well as possible, and a feeling of confidence pervaded the army. If General Sheridan had not come up, we would have attacked at the same time, three o'clock, and would have driven Early across the river, but his presence was a help, especially in the cavalry corps.

At or about one o'clock, when our arrangements were about completed, General Phil. Sheridan came on to the field, riding like mad, and swearing like Sheridan when he is aroused. His horse showed

hard service, and he showed total depravity. He rode so fast, and talked with such rapidity, that his interjections may not have reached the field to-day, but, like the ghost of John Brown, may be marching on. General Sheridan made few changes in the position, and at the appointed time pushed. The coffee brigade had gone to Winchester in the morning, and every man remaining was a hero. The ambassadors of Pyrrhus once reported to him that the Romans seemed to be a race of kings. The same might have been said of our army. They were all capable of the most dauntless heroism and reckless audacity.

When we first struck the enemy's line a lively fight commenced. Nothing could stop the impetuosity of our men. From behind each rock and tree they poured in their fire for a few minutes, and then on with a shout. The artillery was pushed on to the skirmish line, and worked with a will. I placed one section within forty yards of the enemy, and a charge of canister sent him flying with our men in hot pursuit. I saw all of the general officers of the sixth corps close up to the skirmish line, and

if it had not kept moving they would have been in advance of it.

Seeing a group of officers near Middletown, I told a captain to drop his compliments among them. He did so and they scattered. We soon learned that this was General Early and staff, and he abused us severely for our impudence. This seemed unkind, since we had only done as we had been done by, and we never asked him to pay for the shot.

During the advance we found many dead comrades, stripped of their clothing, and this sight roused us to still greater exertions. As the sun sank behind the western hills we drove the enemy pell-mell across Cedar Creek, and followed him so closely that he could not burn the bridge. Then the field echoed with a shout such as Philadelphia may have heard when the old bell of liberty rang out independence. General Early had neglected to secure his captures when he could, and now the road between Cedar Creek and Fisher's Mountain was filled with vehicles of every description.

As the last rays of daylight were fading away,

General Custer, one of the most dashing officers of the world, with a few cavalry, perhaps one hundred, was seen fording Cedar Creek, and winding like a serpent up the hill towards Strasburg. As they passed the summit they struck the enemy, and immediately was heard the rattling fire of carbines, the ringing of sabres, and the echoes of feet swift in flight or pursuit. He quickly sped out of hearing, nor stopped until he arrived at the summit of Fisher's Mountain. The fight was ended, and the day so full of surprises and escapes, of defeats and victories, of carnage and conquest, of joys and sorrows, was ended, and we turned sadly and wearily toward our old camp-ground. We were exhausted.

Looking back it seemed to me that years had passed since morning, the day had been crowded so full of experiences. I could realize Byron's

“Thinkest thou existence doth depend on time?”

I seemed to have grown old many years since yesterday evening.

At the close of daylight, looking northward across the plain, I recognized the gallop of a large horse,

on which I had mounted my servant Levi, and I made my way slowly towards him.

In the stampede of the morning, Levi had packed my possessions and gone off with the wagon train. The driver having broken the wagon pole was hurrying away with his team leaving all of the headquarters baggage to be plundered, when Levi caught him, compelled him to return, and having fitted another pole from a fence-rail, went with the wagon to the rear. Having reached Winchester, he set about preparing dinner with the materials he had saved from the wreck. In the afternoon he started to find me twenty miles away. The other men with the train laughed at him, and advised him to keep out of danger. Having wandered up and down the field for hours he found me thus at the close of the day. But for his thoughtfulness we should have continued fasting until a late hour the next day. General Tompkins remarked, as we sat down to lunch, "This is the only mess that has supper to-night."

Worn and weary, more dead than alive, we had just lain down beneath a small piece of canvas, when

General Sheridan sent for General Tompkins. After a brief interview, he returned, and directed me to take all of the battery teams I could find in the army, and crossing Cedar Creek, bring in the spoils and park them near General Sheridan's tent. I collected a large number of teams, and passing along the road gathered in vehicles of many kinds. From the front of Fisher's Hill my train extended to the hill east of Strasburg. We were compelled, by lack of horses to lash several carriages together, and after many hours of collecting we moved off across the bridge, and parked the train as directed. It has been said that beauty consists in unity and variety. Here was a plenty of variety, but the unity was conspicuous by its absence. A Virginia reach found place beside a nobby little cart, and a twelve pound gun rested innocently beside the doctor's ambulance. Have you seen all the vehicles that followed a southern army? Behold they were all represented there, and many others which usually remained in the back-yard.

As daylight reddened the east, I dismissed the teams and rode across the field to where head-quar-

ters had been. On the battle-field of yesterday I saw the white faces of many intimate friends, cold and stony, staring at me in the morning light. I questioned if they were not happier than I. They had met a soldier's death in the shock of battle, and their memory should be kindly cherished by a grateful country. I was still enduring a soldier's sufferings,—cold, hunger and weariness. They had entered the harbor. I was still on the restless sea, and where should I find rest?

COMRADES:—

Where the rifle bullet whistled, and the cannon loudly crashed,
Where the bugle called to battle, and the sabre brightly flashed,
Where the swamps so foul and fetid that the bravest held his
 breath,
Where each breeze, with poison laden, bore the chilling shaft of
 death,
Where the mountains rise in grandeur, nor fear the wintry blast,
Where the valleys hold in beauty the rivers speeding past,
My comrades, you are lying, where the bravest fought and fell,
In ditch and trench and shallow grave, by us remembered well.
You fought the fight of freedom, where freedom's cause seemed
 lost;

We look upon your lowly graves, and try to count the cost.
And from those graves your comrades made when the fight was
done,
Your shadowy forms, before us, seem rising one by one,
To bid us now remember that each one gave his life
To save our homes and fatherland from internal strife.
The hand we clasped at early morn, when our good-byes were
said,
At night was but a useless thing. That hand was of the dead.
But still you live, you cannot die while comrades live to tell
How bravely you withstood the foe, and foremost fighting fell,
Repeating still the story, bequeathed from sire to son,
Men shall tell in hall and hut how noble deeds were done,
While men shall love their fatherland, your story told by me,
Shall echo down the ages, till ages cease to be.
Your work is all completed, and nobly was it done,
The old flag waves above the fields so bravely lost and won,
Shattered and rent with shot and shell, yet ever shall it wave
Where grass is green and flowers grow above a comrade's grave.

