

NEW YEAR'S EVE ON FIELD OF BATTLE

[Margin Note: Post Dec 31-1915]

Capt. Alfred Piirtle [sic] Recalls What Happened at Stone [sic] River
December 31, 1862.

DEATH OF COL. FORMAN

Young Louisville Soldier Had Won High Rank by Conspicuous Valor.

(By Alfred Pirtle.)

At the holiday season there are mingled with my memories of childhood Christmas times, reminiscences of Christmas week of 1862.

At that time I was ordnance officer of the First Division of the Center, Army of the Cumberland, Federal Army, Gen. Lovell H. Rousseau, commanding. Gen. Rousseau had been a citizen of Louisville for many years when the Civil War broke out, and he had early in the summer of 1861, gone over to Indiana, and on the banks of the Ohio, some two miles below Jeffersonville, raised more than a regiment of infantry and a battery of artillery for the Union Army. His career had been extraordinary, and in the fall of 1862, he had risen to the rank of major general, and his command was the strongest division in that part of the Army of the Cumberland, commanded by Maj.-Gen. George H. Thomas, commander of the Center, in Maj.-Gen. Rosecrans' army.

The army had been marching and at the same time fighting, since the morning of December 26, with the Confederates under Gen. Bragg, and on the coming night on December 30, both armies went into bivouac, not far from Murfreesboro, Tenn., on the banks of Stone's [sic] river - the battle is now known as Murfreesboro, and Stone [sic] river - it is likely the latter has been used the more.

I had under my charge thirty-seven six-mule army wagons, fully loaded with ammunition for small arms, and for cannon - remember all this was for muzzle loading pieces.

You shall not be detained with a general account of the battle, but I shall try to give you some impressions of the battle as I saw it or had a part in it.

The whole army had been aroused before it was good daylight on Wednesday, December 31. Very soon thereafter, the sounds of firing were borne to our ears, from the westward, which was on the Federal right. Our division had been moving southward

on the turnpike that led into Murfreesboro [sic] from Nashville. As I had been given orders to keep my train up within a short distance of the last troops of our division, I was not far from them, when they moved into a dense grove of cedar trees, on the west side of the road, and disappeared into what is now the lustric [sic] "Cedars."

I guided my train, until it had moved up to the summit of a slight hill, from which I had a clear view of the cleared ground in every direction. It gave upon all sides an uninterrupted view of the lay of the land. This view I had taken of surroundings was of great value in the events that came soon.

The sounds of battle on the right grew louder and more marked, the small-arms firing increasing every moment. For half a mile there was a cotton field to the right, which had been picked clean, leaving only the dead plants. Across this a few men straggled leisurely towards the way we had come, now our rear; an ambulance came into view; a squad of soldiers followed it rapidly. I saw more unhurt men every moment; it looked badly for us, as the crowd grew larger quickly. A color bearer with the colors thrown carelessly over his shoulders took his way to the rear, and the space before me became so full of men, so disorganized, I feared it would become another Bull Run.

In no time there were hundreds of fugitives crowded among the ambulances and cannon, intent on reaching the turnpike from the cedars and to take the route for Nashville.

Rousseau's Orders.

Out of the cedars came a battery at a rear of the First Michigan Battery looking towards the dark cedars, where the enemy were, because of the fact that none of them were in sight on the old cotton fields over which they had driven our men and none of our forces were beyond the front formed by these two batteries and their supports.

A small space lay before us; then the turnpike, then a small patch of a cotton field about three hundred yards wide.

As we faced this cotton patch we were looking west, and near the edge of that is toward the north, was a clump of small trees, tall weeds, and deep grass. Lying scattered on the surface of the cotton patch were some dead men and some wounded ones, all in gray, and the latter moved now and then, though not much; the cedars lay farther away, giving no signs of life, but all eyes were directed there, for those shaded depths held the enemy, and unless they came out we would have to go in there in pursuit.

As I looked an officer on foot, sword in hand, sprang into view with a shout; instantly the edge of the timber was alive with men, with a mass of arms, legs, heads, guns, waving swords, gray uniforms, brown uniforms, shirt sleeves, and the enemy were coming, yelling, leaping, running. For a few jumps not a shot, and then a man or two stopped long enough to throw up his piece to fire at us, keep yelling and run forward to make up the ground he had lost. What order had been given I had not heard, when the twelve cannons were fired as one, covering them with an impenetrable cloud of smoke, into which the batteries fired as fast as men could load.

How Battery Was Handled.

At this point in my narrative I will digress in order to put on record the tactics of handling the guns of these two batteries, which are much more laborious and slower than those now used and pertaining to the breechloaders. Seven men constituted a gun crew, "Aim the gun" is first ordered.

Then No. 1 stands at the right of the muzzle outside the wheel.

No. 2 stands at the left outside the wheel.

No. 3 on the right and in line with the breech.

No. 4 on the left and in line with the breech.

No. 5 stands on the left and half way between the gun and the limber (the limber is the chest on the front axle that carries the ammunition.)

No. 6 stands at the limber.

No. 7 stands behind the limber.

Then to "load," No. 3 jumps to the breech and places his left thumb, protected by a leather pad, over the vent (or touch-hole) and presses down so as to close the vent so that air will not enter. No. 1 jumps inside the line of the wheel and after seeing that No 3 is in [illegible line of text] open and, as they said, "they had any show at all."

Batteries' Great Work.

While concealed in the cedars the enemy had formed for the third charge, in several lines of battle, long enough to overlap the front of the two batteries; how many lines there were, were soon hidden in the smoke. They came with a rush and completely

extended, at which instant our batteries opened on them with a deafening roar, an incessant fire, unceasingly throwing twenty or twenty-four pounds of bullets at each report across the small space between the coming charge and the guns. I found myself at this moment between the two batteries in company with Major Loomis and Major Carpenter, commander of the battalion of the Nineteenth United States Infantry and by seniority commanding the regular brigade. Like me, they were fascinated by the rash bravery of our foes, who seemed determined to have those guns, cost what it might. I never saw cannon served as those guns were them. Before the recoil was expended the gunners grasped the spokes and threw the pieces into position like lightning, the sponge was run in, turned and withdrawn, the load sent home and the piece fired. Such a roar was deafening and our little group communicated by signs.

When I first told my friends at home about this moment of thrilling interest, some one asked me if I was afraid, knowing I had never been under fire before. To this I said, "I do not remember that I was afraid, or conscious of the danger, but I was so filled with the sense of the great excitement and importance of repulsing the enemy that I wished that they had but a single neck, that I might cut it off with one stroke of my saber."

And the enemy! They were running across the field, firing and shouting. We could not hear them, but we got a sight now and then of their waving arms and weapons, while every moment a bullet hissed near us, or we could see some man in the batteries fall, or perhaps a horse, rear, plunge and drop. We kept our gaze fastened on the charge coming, coming, coming on like the breakers of the sea, always nearer at each succeeding wave.

But men were not yet born who could longer face that storm of iron sweeping death and destruction to all in its path. They broke, they fled, some taking refuge in the small clump of trees I have mentioned. Our fire ceased. And cheers of victory rose from the manly throats of our brave cannoneers which was taken up on the right and left as soon as it was seen that the charge had been repulsed, followed by a general hand-shaking, that was changed into a frenzy of cheers at the rush of the Second Ohio Infantry into the bunch of bushes that has been spoken of, returning with a captured flag and a body of prisoners.

Turning my back on this scene I extracted my wagons from their crowded position taken so hurriedly, and as officers were demanding ammunition, I issued it to all comers, knowing that the situation demanded no sticking on formalities. As each wagon had painted on it, plainly, the caliber of the cartridges contained in it, the distribution was rapid and correct. I was interrupted in issuing ammunition by a battery of the enemy getting the range of the wagon tops, and the first thing I knew shot began to fly around

us, and one of them struck the wagon I was issuing from. I lost no time, but sprang to the ground and spread myself out about as thick as a sheet of paper, expecting that the load would explode, but it didn't, and therefore I took the hint and moved my train to a safe place in the rear.

After this my duties kept me in the rear with my train, so that I saw but little of the fighting, yet for two or three days the Confederate cavalry kept us moving from place to place to keep in touch with the troops sent to protect us. In the four days of the battle I issued 100,000 rounds of small-arm cartridges and twenty wagonloads of fixed artillery ammunition. The recorded reports of the Confederates show that there were engaged in attack on the batteries the Sixteenth Tennessee Infantry, Col. Savage, which lost 207 men out of 402; the Eighth Tennessee Infantry, Col. Moore (who died of his wounds), which lost 306 men out of 425, and the Thirtieth Arkansas Infantry, which lost during the day ninety-five men out of 266, making a striking demonstration of the bravery and devotion of American soldiery.

Colonel Forman Slain.

You will remember that I have previously spoken of the stout and determined resistance put up by the Federals during the long, straggling contest that had lasted from almost the first attack of Bragg at daybreak. In one of those affrays, just before the coming of Van Pelt's battery from the cedars, the Fifteenth Kentucky Federal Infantry had a severe engagement and lost heavily, having the terrible experience of losing their colonel, James B. Forman, and being compelled to leave his body in the hands of the enemy. This remarkable young man was a citizen of Louisville, where he was born and reared. At the outbreak of the Civil war, though not yet in his majority, he espoused the Union side and in September 1861 at nineteen [end of text]

[photo: COL. JAMES B. FORMAN, Young soldier from Louisville, who was killed at Stone [sic] River.]