

## Thomas C. Potter Letters, Battery B, 1st Ohio Light Artillery

LETTER OF PVT. THOMAS C. POTTER, BATTERY B, 1ST OHIO LIGHT ARTILLERY,  
VIVIDLY DESCRIBING THE BATTLE OF STONES RIVER

In Camp 2-1/2 miles from Murfreesboro, Tennessee

Jan. 12th 1863

Dear brother and sister: Perhaps you may be interested to know what part our battery took in the late great drama before Murfreesboro. I propose to give below the outlines of our movements since leaving Nash[ville] up to the evacuation of Murfreesboro by the enemy's force under Gen. Bragg. We left our camp near Nashville Friday morning, Dec. the 26th, our brigade taking the advance on the Mur[freesboro] road. We found the enemy in considerable force near the little town of Lavergne [sic], some 14 miles from Nashville, [and] determined to dispute our farther advance. This soon brought on a splendid artillery skirmish which lasted until day, when we went into camp on the same ground. The only casualty of our company was John Blanchard, seriously injured by a premature discharge.

Saturday (27th) [we] formed our line soon after sunrise; drove the enemy before us with slight loss on our side, [and] went into camp that night within 10 miles of Murfreesboro. Here we stay[ed] until Monday morning, the 29th, when we pushed forward, the enemy disputing every inch of ground. [We] went into camp with our line formed and skirmishers out before the Rebel line of earthworks, [and] within some 2-1/2 miles of Murfreesboro.

Tuesday (30th) [We] formed our line some four miles in length. [There was] heavy skirmishing along the whole line all day [with] very heavy artillery firing all day from both sides. Our casualties of the day [were] one of our wheel horses shot through the heart by a musket ball. [We] camped for the night on the same ground as the night before.

Wednesday morning the 31st. This morning the grand ball opened on our right. Our battery was stationed at the point known as the Cedar point, on the right center. Our line at this point was formed in the shape of a crescent. Our brigade formed the advance. As you would say, [it] was the point most advanced. In our rear was the cedar thicket. In our front and right was a large corn field. Joining this on the left was the noted cotton field, through which the Rebel masses, maddened and half crazy by [drinking] whisky and gunpowder – which had been dealt out to them in large quantities – made charge

after charge up to within 30 yards of the muzzles of our guns, in solid columns, despite shot, shell, and canister that tore great gaps in their ranks. But [their ranks] were quickly closed up again, and a perfect storm of musketry [hit them]. Never did I see men face the music [like this]. When so close to our guns they pulled their hats over their eyes so that they could not see the flash of our pieces, and moved up as steadily as if they were on the parade ground. After our ammunition was all expended, we were ordered to the rear to replenish and refill our empty [ammo] chests. Until that time I did not notice the peculiar form that our division had assumed – Gen. Negley, on our right, had fallen back, thus uncovering our right flank. And two Rebel brigades occupied that ground that he [had] left. Our division had assumed the form of a triangle, and was fighting on four fronts. Everything on our right had fallen back, and [also] one battery on our left, and two on our right had been captured by the enemy. And as we passed to the rear over the ground where we were in camp the night before, we passed over large numbers of the enemy's dead that had fallen in our rear. We were held as a reserve the remainder of the day. Our casualties of the day [were]: Sergeant George Wolf of Cleveland, struck by a shell – killed instantly; Orderly Sergeant L. T. Thompson (Cleveland), struck by a spent James solid shot (weighing 12-1/2 pounds) [and] has since died; John Elliott (Troy) wounded in [the] small of his back (I afterward found him dead on the field); Samuel Ruple (Cleveland) shot through the neck by a ball from a spherical case shot from a 6 pdr. [sic] and since died; and some 12 others wounded. I think that they will all recover. In this day's work we had 15 horses killed or disabled.

Thursday (New Year's Day) [There was] very heavy skirmishing on picket to relieve the Chicago Board of Trade Battery. We took our position; no. 1 and 2 and 3 pieces in the center, no. 4, 5 and 6 pieces were just to the right. From [their position] 400 yards distant, and on our left the 4th Indiana Battery was formed on the same line with us. Our infantry support lay just to our rear under cover of the ridge on which we stood, while in front and about 600 yards distant running in a parallel line with us was a skirt of timber, which was in the hands of the enemy. Our skirmishers were about 100 yards in front of the battery. All night long we could hear the Rebels working on their entrenchments in the woods in front. Soon after daylight our skirmishers and theirs commenced amusing themselves by trying the accuracy of their rifles. Then the 7th Indiana B[attery] opened and drove their skirmishers back into the woods. Then one of Gen. Rosecrans' staff officers rode up and gave positive orders not to fire unless we saw large masses of the enemy. He had hardly rode out of sight when the Rebels opened on the 7th L[ight] A[rtilillery] with four batteries which they had masked in the woods during the night, and not more than 400 yards distant. Well, I have been in several warm places in my time, but this was a few degrees warmer than any place that I ever saw or imagined (in this everybody who saw or heard agreed with me). Within three minutes they drove every man away from the guns of the 7th Battery, and killed and crippled up the horses so that

they were obliged to leave their guns on the field. They (Rebels) then concentrated their fire on our three guns; we were laying still on the ground a few minutes with a terrific storm of shot, shell, and canister flying over and around us. It seemed just as if they would sweep us from the ground, when a shell struck just ahead of us and filled our faces with mud. This was more than Lieutenant Baldwin could stand. He sprang up with, "come boys and give them...[hell]. We opened on them with a will, but the infernal missiles [continued] howling around us. After we had fired about ten rounds a piece, the lieutenant ordered us to fall back, or [else] we would lose every man and horse that all [others] had. By this time, two of our batteries had taken position on the ridge about 600 yards in our rear, and opened on the batteries on our front. We succeeded in disentangling our dead horses. We got our piece back under cover of the other batteries. No. 2 piece, the boys pulled off with one horse (5 being killed on that piece), and no. 3 had to leave their piece on the ground until we got ours under cover, and [then] went back and pulled it off by hand. Our loss on this occasion: Chauncey Lyons (driver from Lorain Co., Ohio) struck by a solid shot, killed instantly; N. Lerone, struck by a fragment of a shell slightly; Wm. Grant, slightly, and 7 horses killed. For my part, I considered myself fortunate to escape with my hair and eyebrows singed by the explosion of a 12 pdr. [sic] shell. I chanced to have one of Waverly's novels in my overcoat pocket, and the same explosion set it on fire. The fragments of the shell I avoided by throwing myself flat on the ground within three feet of it. As the boys term it, "comes the [shell] drop down on it." Well, we refilled our ammunition chests and picked up horses enough to make up for our lost ones. About 4 o'clock p.m. the enemy made a furious assault on our left wing [for] nearly half a mile. As half of our battery was still out to the front, were we not ordered out until sometime after the engagement had grown pretty lively. When we arrived on the ground, our reserves were just ordered forward to charge the Rebel masses that were moving through a large field in great force. They stayed their ground like veterans, but they could not stand such a fierce artillery fire and a charge at the same time. They gave way in some confusion, and fell back to their first line of earthworks. From [this] we soon dislodged them, by bringing up nearly 50 pieces of artillery to enfilade their rifle pits. It was here that Colonel Stanley's brigade charged and captured four pieces of the famous Washington white horse battery of New Orleans. Our boys drove them in splendid style until darkness closed in their favor, and saved them from a perfect rout. If we had had two hours more of daylight, we would have went into Murfreesboro. Thus closed the 2d day of Jan. ('63).

Saturday the 3rd. Our reveille this morning was the deep toned thunder of Rebel artillery, as they opened on our camp with four batteries – probably as a cloak to cover their evacuation. Heavy skirmish firing [occurred] along our whole line. The ball closed by a heavy musketry engagement, commencing at 6 P.M. and closing at 9:30 P.M. [It] was occasioned by our infantry advancing down the pike, driving the Rebels from their

first line of rifle pits. It was a splendid sight from where we were on a ridge, nearly half a mile in rear of our men, with an open field between us. It appeared like two long sheets of flame, with now and then a change of scene as forth belched red artillery [fire]. The only thing disagreeable to a spectator was sometimes a few rifle bullets would sing along overhead, far back in[to] the timber.

Sunday morning the 4th; All [is] quiet. Murfreesboro had been evacuated during the previous night. After breakfast, I started out to take a view of our first day's battleground, which was about one mile distant. I passed along musing on our probable loss. The field was alive with little silent groups. 'Twas [sic] plain to see their occupation: burying their fallen comrades. [After] reaching the cedars, [I] passed through them and came out near where our battery was engaged. I passed along among a group of our own and the enemy's dead, when a familiar face, upturned and ghostly, startled me. A nearer view assured me that I was not mistaken. It was the earthly remains of poor John Elliott (of Troy). I covered his face and hastened back to the battery. Two of his messmates returned with me, and selecting a quiet spot, committed him to his last resting place – peace to his ashes. He was a noble hearted boy, a brave soldier, one that was beloved and respected by both officers and men. Sister, please pardon me for passing in silence over the horrid, ghastly details of this fatal tragedy [in] this great military drama. I refer you to the periodicals for the shadow, and yet you [can] draw on your imagination for the balance. Well, on Monday, the 5th, we moved to our present position. Where the Rebels are now is more than I know [but] madam rumor says that they are coming back to see us, but I think Gen. Bragg has seen just [end of letter]

Total number of shots fired from the battery 1670

Private Thomas Corwin Potter enlisted at age 20 on Sept. 5, 1861 in Battery B, 1st Ohio Light Artillery. He served with his unit in combat at Mill Springs, Perryville, Stones River, and Chickamauga. On Sept. 20, 1863, at the Battle of Chickamauga, Pvt. Potter was mortally injured when both of his arms were blown off by the premature discharge of his gun. He died the following morning at 3:00 A.M., and was later buried in the National Cemetery at Chattanooga.