



*Cordiently yours,*

*William G. Donnan*

HON. WILLIAM G. DONNAN.

Iowa soldier in the civil war; State Senator and member of Congress; founder of the Hospital for the Insane at Independence, Iowa.

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## A REMINISCENCE OF THE LAST BATTLE OF THE RED RIVER EXPEDITION.

BY HON. WILLIAM G. DONNAN.\*

When requested to write, for THE ANNALS OF IOWA, a report of the last battle of the Red River campaign, I thought to make an early compliance; but, remembering that I could not speak from personal knowledge, of the entire battle-field, I have long hesitated to write at all. However, after reading the official reports, of both the union and the confederate generals, I have determined to write (for reasons which will herein appear), at least of that part of the engagement, in which our own brigade actively participated.

This brigade was composed of the following troops, viz: the 14th Iowa, the 27th Iowa, the 32d Iowa, the 24th Missouri regiments, and the 3d Indiana battery; Col. W. T. Shaw, of the 14th Iowa commanding. It was named the

\*William G. Donnan was born at West Charlton, Saratoga county, N. Y., June 30, 1834, the son of Alexander and Elizabeth (McKindley) Donnan. He is wholly of Scotch blood. He received his education at Cambridge Academy, N. Y., and at Union College, Schenectady, N. Y. He was graduated B. A., in 1856, and settled in Independence, Iowa, Sept. 8, 1856, where he was admitted to the bar in April, 1857. In the latter year he was elected Treasurer and Recorder of Buchanan county, Iowa, and re-elected. In 1862 he enlisted as a private soldier in the 27th Iowa Infantry Volunteers. He was promoted to 2d lieutenant and 1st lieutenant, and brevetted Captain and Major, serving a large part of his term as Brigade Adj't Gen'l. He received honorable mention by his Brigade Commander in several official reports of battles, and was honorably discharged at the close of the war. He was elected to the State Senate and served in the 12th and 13th General Assemblies, and also in the 20th and 21st. He was elected to the 42d Congress, re-elected to the 43d, and was Chairman of the Republican State Central Committee in 1883. He is now President of the First National Bank of Independence, Iowa. During Mr. Donnan's service in the State Senate it was mainly due to his efforts and influence that a State Hospital for the Insane was established in the city of Independence.

2d Brigade, 3d Division, of the 16th Army Corps, and was a part of the army commanded by Maj. General A. J. Smith.

Smith's entire command, consisting of seven brigades and three batteries (about 10,000 men, effective for duty), was, on the 9th of March, 1864, loaned by General W. T. Sherman, to General N. P. Banks, for an agreed period of twenty days, to join Bank's forces, and assist in his proposed Red River Expedition, the objective point of which, was the capture and occupation of Shreveport, La., by the Union army.

In the first battle of the campaign, Shaw's brigade, after marching twenty-six miles, on the 14th of March, took a prominent part in the siege, charge, and capture of Fort De Russey, with 319 prisoners, ten pieces of artillery, and a large amount of ordnance and ordnance stores.

In the sanguinary battle of Pleasant Hill, on the 9th of April, this brigade was placed in the most advanced position of the union forces. It was in the fiercest of that day's terrible fighting. That the men fought desperately, is attested by the fact that Shaw's brigade suffered a loss of no less than 483—by far a greater casualty list than was sustained by any other two brigades. The valor of Smith's troops, and the value of his command, may be correctly inferred by a single sentence. Just after the final charge, General Banks rode up, and warmly grasping General Smith's hand, said: "God bless you, General, you have saved the Army."

As I am not seeking to write of the whole Expedition, but only to recall some facts connected with the last engagement of that campaign, let it suffice to say, that after the carnage of the battle at Pleasant Hill, Banks concluded to forego the attempt on Shreveport, and commenced his retreat. This was long delayed, in getting Porter's fleet of gunboats over the shoals of the rapidly falling river near Alexandria, which was only accomplished by the morning of the 13th of May. Thereupon, the army took up its line

of march for Simsport. It was opposed in front, and harassed in flank and rear, every day by the courageous enemy. Smith's troops covered the retreat the entire distance, frequently halting, to fight and drive back the Confederates.

By the morning of the 18th of May, Banks' army had crossed the Atchafalaya, and was beyond further molestation. Early in the day, the enemy made a strong attack on our rear line. Smith, who had gone to the landing, had left orders with Gen. Mower, that in case of attack, he should take what force he deemed necessary, and repel it. Mower ordered out three brigades and two batteries, recrossed Yellow Bayou, gave battle, and rapidly drove the enemy nearly two miles, across a large level tract upon which many dead trees were standing, and through a belt of timber, where he found the enemy in heavy force, upon the farther side of a cleared space. The enemy opened upon us with twelve pieces of rifled artillery. Mower quickly formed battle line—two brigades front. Shaw's brigade to the left and rear, in reserve. We were here under severe artillery fire, probably two hours. The 24th Missouri regiment was early detached to support the battery on the extreme right. The 14th Iowa was also moved to the left to support a battery there.

Probably about 2 o'clock, Col. Shaw seemed to grow restless and suspicious. He declared he would ride out in front of the lines. As he did not order me to remain with the command, I accompanied him. We rode into the timber, to the left and front of our battle line a distance of 350 yards, or more. Here he sat, watching and listening. Occasionally bullets from the enemy's line, were clipping the leaves and twigs about us. Just at this time, Major Sampson (Mower's Adj't Gen'l) rode rapidly up, and said: "Col. Shaw, the General directs that you throw your brigade to the right and prepare to meet the charge of the enemy." Shaw turned in his saddle, and asked: "To the

right? To the left, you mean!" "No!" said the staff officer, "the order is to the right!" "H——!" exclaimed Shaw, "I tell you, if I don't throw my brigade to the left—in 15 minutes, we are lost!" "Wait till I see the General," responded Sampson; but Shaw whirled about, and putting spurs to his horse, rushed out of the timber, towards the command, losing his hat in the underbrush. I climbed off my horse, seized his hat, and followed him, as quickly as possible. Reaching the line, I found Shaw, bareheaded, in the blazing sun, using language extremely emphatic, but such as the editor will hardly care to print, furiously urging the brigade upon an advanced line, but so greatly fronting to the left, as to make nearly a right angle with our principal line of battle. He ordered me to go and assist in hastening the 32d Iowa regiment, upon the new alignment. Having performed that duty, I returned to his side.

Almost immediately thereafter, on came the rapidly charging line of the enemy, emerging from the timber at close range and parallel with our changed front; and coming (as we learned from officers captured a little later) with absolute confidence, that they had successfully turned our left flank, and would surely capture us. A close and severe engagement ensued. It was hot, short, sharp, and decisive. Both lines fought with fine courage and desperation; but the rapid, and well directed fire of the three Iowa regiments, with the splendid service of the 3d Indiana battery guns double shotted with canister, finally sent them flying back with heavy loss, leaving in our hands a good share of the 156 prisoners taken in the action.

Later in the afternoon the Confederates made another advance, but were met, repulsed, and driven back a considerable distance to the protection of their artillery. By this time, they seemed to have had sufficient experience with Smith's troops, and made no attempt at any further attack. This ended the fighting of the Red River Expedition.

Maj. Gen. Richard Taylor, commander of the Confederate

army, in his official report, as published, says this was a very severe action, and admits that his loss, in killed, wounded, and prisoners, would reach at least 500; while our total loss, officially reported, was only 267.

Military law is the extreme reverse of our democratic institutions. The average citizen can hardly imagine how completely it changes the man into a mere machine. The soldier's freedom of will and of action are submerged. Aside from "tactics" he is taught that obedience to the orders of his superior is his duty, and his whole duty. And the lesson is enforced by discipline, and the infliction of punishment for failure to obey.

Theirs, not to reason why,  
Theirs, but to do, or die.

The same rule is applied to commissioned officers, but with a more strict accountability. The higher the grade which the officer may hold, the greater will be the penalty inflicted. Therefore, disobedience to the order of his commander, by an officer high in rank, especially while engaged in battle with the enemy, is, in military law, a flagrant crime, and renders such officer liable to extreme punishment—humiliation—disgrace.

Now, Shaw, an old soldier of the Mexican war, and a longtime officer in the union service, was wholly familiar with the requirements of the military code. He knew that all he had to do, was to move his command as Mower had directed, and though disaster befell, his rank and reputation were safe. He also knew the terrible punishment which was liable to follow any failure to obey orders, while in conflict with the enemy.

Whether any such thoughts entered Shaw's mind, I do not know. But I do know, that even if they did, he did not hesitate for a single moment. He felt sure of the impending danger to our army. I then believed, and now believe, that had he obeyed the order as given in my presence and hearing, we must all have been either slain, or captured.

He assumed the great responsibility. Danger to self was unthought of, or uncared for, as weighing not a feather. Safety for his command, and for our remnant of an army, contesting with a greatly outnumbering foe, was everything. He moved his brigade in accordance with his own (as it afterward proved) better judgment. He turned inevitable defeat into substantial victory. Of such material are heroes made.

In his official report, Shaw plainly stated that he moved his brigade to the left, contrary to orders. The next day after it had been forwarded to Division headquarters, he said, "Mower is dissatisfied with my report." I asked, in what respect? Shaw replied, "He wants me to strike out 'contrary to orders', and say 'in obedience to orders;' and I told him I couldn't do that; it wouldn't be true." Yet, in the official report of our brigade as published in the Records of the War of the Rebellion, Shaw is made to say that he moved his command, "without waiting orders." When, or by whom the original report was tampered with, and changed, I have never learned. (Vol. 34, page 357.)

In his official report of the battle, General Mower pays only the following scant compliment to the Commander of the 2d Brigade: "Col. Shaw handled his men with skill and coolness, and aided in repelling the charge of the enemy on the flank, and in driving them back." (Vol. 34, page 321.)

Had General Mower been half as magnanimous as he was personally brave and impetuous in battle, his report would have contained something like this:—"Col. Shaw, with keen perception, discovered sooner than myself, the flanking movement of the enemy. His rapid and timely change of front to the left, although at variance with my order, is not only warmly commended, but it stands as an additional proof of the high soldierly qualities of this intrepid officer; and I earnestly recommend his prompt promotion."

This article is prepared with the hope and desire that its statements may be published in THE ANNALS OF IOWA in simple justice to our old brigade commander, Col. W. T. Shaw, who merited far more than he ever received from the state, or the nation.

NOTE—Perhaps this paper should have been submitted to Col. Shaw in advance. However, I am so sure of its truth, in substance and in fact, that I send it forward at once. If any corrections are necessary, I hope Col. Shaw while he yet lives, will make them over his own signature.

W. G. D.

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A WHIG PRESS, under the supervision of Mr. L. P. Sherman, has arrived in our town and will soon be ready to issue. We wish its adventurous proprietor success in everything but the extension of his political sentiments. The establishment of another press, and that a Whig one, in a region so new and so Democratic as this, speaks volumes in favor of the destiny that awaits our town and county. The press is the pioneer and the herald of improvement; and although we differ materially from our new neighbor, yet we hail his advent as evidence that Fort Des Moines is attracting that attention abroad which the importance of its situation demands. When we see his paper we will hold a talk with him.—*The Fort Des Moines Star*, Dec. 28, 1849.

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THIS COUNTY is now receiving a large emigration from the East. Almost every boat brings us more or less of those who seek a home in the West. The advantages of this portion of Iowa are beginning to be duly appreciated. Our beautiful timber, our immense water power, our healthy climate, our rich and varied soil, are attracting the attention of the emigrant, and as a consequence the country is rapidly settling up. The emigration to California, though very large, will be more than supplied by industrious and enterprising families from the old States.—*Western Democrat*, Andrew, Iowa, April 26, 1850.

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