

The Battle of Wilson's Creek

Ere this (August 10, 1861) you have probably received by telegraph the outlines of the battle of Springfield or Wilson's Creek — the bloodiest in proportion to the forces engaged ever fought on American soil. Its details will give birth to both pride and deadly sorrow in our own State — pride at the gallantry displayed by her sons, sorrow at the numbers who sealed their devotion to their country by their blood. Iowa will weep as she learns how many of her children were swept down by the terrible missiles of the battlefield, yet she can reflect with a thrill of honest pride that almost the very last words of General Lyon — words uttered as the mists of death were gathering rapidly over the senses of the fallen hero — were in commendation of those whom she sent forth to represent her in this terrible conflict.

Ever since the battle of Carthage, as is generally well understood, the Secession forces have been gathering in southwest Missouri with a view to operations upon Springfield and this portion of the State. The fact was well known here — not merely was the direction of the enemy's destination known,

[This vivid description of the engagement at Wilson's Creek is adapted for THE PALIMPSEST from the account written by Franc B. Wilkie just after the battle on August 10, 1861, and published in the Dubuque *Herald* on August 21st.— THE EDITOR]

but his exact force, arms — in short, everything. Day after day the enemy gathered strength and messenger after messenger was sent by General Lyon for reënforcements. None came, and he with a force of less than 6000 men was left in the heart of the enemy's country to preserve all the hard-won possessions of the Government against a force that outnumbered him six to one. For weeks no one has doubted the result that reached us to-day — all knew it to be inevitable unless instant steps were taken by the Government to reënforce the command. The result has been that all the operations of the Government in southwest Missouri have been rendered nugatory, an army nearly cut to pieces, the prestige of the Federal arms weakened if not destroyed wholly, the Union cause in this part of the State given its death-blow — all arising from the infamous and criminal hesitation of the Government in responding to the demand of General Lyon for aid. A fearful responsibility rests somewhere — it should be fixed instantly upon the ones to whom it belongs.

On Thursday the entire force under General Ben. McCulloch moved up and occupied a ravine, known as Wilson's Creek, lying some fifteen miles south of Springfield. The ravine is deep, some eight hundred yards wide at the top, densely timbered and watered by a small stream. Its general direction is a little north of west, as one enters it from the State road and follows up the ravine. In this ravine the enemy, to the number of 23,000, cavalry and infan-

try, twenty-one pieces of artillery, and an immense amount of impedimenta, entered from the State road and, proceeding up and down the ravine, took up a position which occupied one mile east of the road and two west. The point is a strong one — stronger by nature than a majority of the most formidable military works — and reminds one in its general character of Bull's Run and vicinity.

During the day General Lyon determined to attack the enemy here and not wait for their sortie upon Springfield — which at furthest would be delayed but a day or two. Accordingly Thursday night the entire force, with the exception of the First Iowa Infantry and a small force to guard the town, was detailed for the expedition, and soon after dark set out and at a distance of some four or five miles from the enemy halted. At midnight he sent down word for two companies to advance and drive in the enemy's pickets for a distance of two miles from his own command; and immediately set out with his staff to superintend the projected attack in person. It was his intention to reach the position of the enemy, so as to fall upon them at daylight, if possible, taking them by surprise. To do this the Federal forces should have left their position by at least two o'clock, but two passed and a faint grayish tint in the eastern sky announced the approach of daylight, and yet the General gave no order to move. Suddenly he glanced at his watch. "Why good God", said he, "it is three o'clock. I have made a

terrible mistake!" And so it proved. In looking at his watch before he had not held his timepiece in the right position—it was two hours later than he thought! Too late to make the surprise, and the whole force was immediately turned about and marched to Springfield.

Friday he determined to renew his attempt and meet the enemy in his own position, anticipating an attack, which he learned McCulloch would the next day make upon Springfield. I am constrained to believe that this attack was made against the advice of a majority of his own officers, and even against his own convictions. He knew the immense superiority of the enemy—knew their vast strength in position and artillery; and yet, urged on perhaps by the hope that some turn of Fortune's wheel might befriend him, or determined that he would not yield possession of southwestern Missouri without a struggle, he concluded to make the attack. I know that for the last week it has been the earnest feeling of all that their command should fall back upon Rolla—not conceiving it to be their duty to hold this place against such tremendous odds, while the Government persistently disregarded their demand for help.

However, General Lyon determined to make the attack and did it, as I said, even against his own convictions. In a conversation with one of his staff Friday evening he asked the other if he believed in presentiments, saying he did, and was assured that the attack would prove disastrous. That his premo-

nitions were fearfully correct, is shown by the bloody record of the next twenty-four hours. And not only did General Lyon attack the enemy in the face of his own and his officers' opinions, but even planned it in a manner that a majority of his advisers disapproved. His force was small and weak at best — to divide it made it of course still weaker, yet he determined to attack the enemy at two points. General Franz Sigel, with six pieces of artillery and about 1300 men, was sent down the State road to make a detour and attack the enemy at the east end of his line, while General Lyon with the main body of 3900 proceeded to attack from the west. Before starting out the General reviewed the forces, passing in front of each command, saying something cheering and complimentary, which was everywhere received with enthusiasm, for no other officer in the army enjoyed so fully as himself the esteem and confidence of the soldiers.

I may remark here that the Iowa First was commanded by Lieutenant Colonel William H. Merritt — Colonel John F. Bates being sick with a fever. He made an effort to go, but after riding a short distance his further progress was absolutely prohibited by his physician and he reluctantly returned to his bed. Lieutenant Colonel Merritt and Major A. B. Porter were both in the thickest of the fight all day, and constantly encouraged their men both by word and example. "Up and at 'em boys!" was the refrain constantly sung and well was it obeyed.

The entire force of the Federal troops was 5200 men — of which there was one company of Kansas cavalry and four of regular dragoons. The artillery force was sixteen pieces — of which six went with General Sigel to attack the east end of the ravine — the balance, including Captain James Totten's and Lieutenant John V. Du Bois's batteries, accompanied the body under General Lyon. It was arranged that the attack should be made immediately by both commands at about daylight. A small company of cavalry under Lieutenant Kelley and a quantity of home guards and two guns were left to guard the town. The balance left soon after dark and, moving up respectively to within five miles of their intended points of attack, halted and slept on their arms till within a couple of hours of daylight.

Everybody who was in Springfield was up long before daylight and awaiting with feverish anxiety the event of the day. Daylight came slowly — minutes seemed hours, and yet nothing was heard from the direction of the enemy. About ten minutes past five the heavy boom of artillery rolled through the town like the muttering of a thunder storm upon the horizon, and sent a thrill through every heart like a shock of electricity. I instantly mounted my horse and set out for the scene of the action, which was fully twelve miles distant, and as I neared it the explosions of the artillery became one continuous roar that only now and then was broken enough to distinguish the sound of single guns. At times for

ten minutes the whole earth shook with one continuous, tremendous peal that seem the prolonged howl of a hundred thunder-storms mingled in one — then it would slacken for a moment, and perhaps a single gun would be heard — then a half dozen in succession so quick that each succeeding sound lapped on the preceding one — and then the lapping on would become indistinguishable, and the whole would be merged again in one terrific volume.

It was like an old-fashioned "fugue" tune where the parts were the tremendous voices of heavy ordnance — a single voice would lead off a note or so, then another would join and another in quick succession till all the sulphurous voices in one sublime chorus were reverberating over the hills and across the prairies with a volume that shook the earth like Niagara. Nearer the battle ground, the regular volleys of musketry were heard mingling their sharper tones in the grand concert, while at all moments there was an incessant crashing of guns that was never silent for a moment, but sounded like a continuous discharge of huge fire-crackers. Still nearer and the words of command were heard, with now and then the crash of heavy bodies of cavalry tearing over the ground — the dull thud of bullets as they buried themselves in trees, or their fierce whistle as they tore high in the air — the savage music of round shot, and the peculiar fizzing whirr of shells, and the sharp crack of their bursting. It all made up a scene, the like of which must be wit-

nessed to appreciate half of its terrible, awful character.

As I approached the battlefield, when at a distance of two miles, squads of men could be seen galloping madly hither and thither, while out on the prairie were scores of saddled horses grazing peacefully, whose riders had left them, in many cases forever. I met also men getting away from the fatal timber, over which hung a thick smoke, as if hell itself were flaming within — some of them limped painfully along, others supported upon the arms of comrades — some hatless, and with locks clotted and countenances ghastly with blood — while a few had helped themselves to horses, and all were making their way as fast as they could toward town. Going still farther, I came to a spring situated in a ravine a few hundred yards from the line of fight, and here the wounded were conveyed and here the doctors were busy in their humane but unwelcome duty.

But to return and take things seriatim from the beginning. Both of the Federal forces arrived on the grounds designed for the respective attacks of each a little after sunrise; and instead of making a surprise as was expected, they found the enemy all prepared for them, having been notified by their videttes, who ran in without firing a shot — at least this was the case on the side approached by the forces under General Lyon.

At the west end of the enemy's line, the ravine takes a short turn and runs to the north. The enemy

was in the ravine, his flank extending up to the point where the ravine makes its turn. Right on the west bank of the bend, and commanding the ravine to the east, Captain Totten's battery was stationed. A little back of Captain Totten, and a little more to the left was Du Bois's battery, also commanding the ravine, and sweeping it, in connection with the other battery, with a cross fire. On the right of the batteries, and facing the south bank of the ravine the First Missouri regiment was stationed, while to the rear, on ground that sloped from the brow of the ravine down to the spring, the Iowa and Kansas regiments were stationed as a reserve. Following down the right bank of the ravine, at a distance of one hundred and fifty yards, was a space covered with a stunted undergrowth of oak which reached the timber where the enemy was posted in great strength. Following on down the right bank of the ravine, at a point about half way between the brow and foot of the hill, was the first battery of the enemy, and a little farther on, and more to the left, another. Three-fourths of a mile or so farther down the ravine was the baggage of the enemy and their camp. About two miles beyond, where the ravine ran south again for a short distance, was posted another portion of the enemy, and right there General Sigel commenced his attack.

The engagement was opened by throwing a company or so of regulars who acted as skirmishers, in front of the Missouri regiment. A few volleys from

them elicited a heavy return from the enemy posted in the timber in front, before which the regulars fell back in good order, although considerably cut up. A rush from the enemy followed whereupon Captain Totten opened on them with his four pieces with round shot and cannister. His guns were well served, and their music was soon after joined by Du Bois, which was replied to by the two batteries of the enemy at the end of about five minutes. Scarcely were the batteries at this point in full working order, ere the roar of conflict came up from the point to be attacked by Sigel, showing that he too was at work — a circumstance that met with tremendous cheers on the part of the Federal forces. The cannonade from sixteen pieces on one side and twenty-one on the other was, as can easily be imagined, none of the lightest, and it was kept up with scarcely a moment's intermission for nearly four hours.

The battle was thus fairly opened on both sides, and thenceforth the work was serious to the last degree. The enemy directed their batteries upon the Federal artillery, and upon our right line, firing shell and round shot with great rapidity but poor aim — nearly all the dangerous missiles passing too high, a fact shown in the circumstance that during all the tremendous fire poured upon him, Captain Totten did not lose a single man.

In the meantime the right of the artillery, protected by the First Missouri, was swept by the mus-

ketry of the enemy. A full regiment of the enemy suddenly made a dart forward, upon the Missouri First, and had reached within fifty yards of them when the deadly fire poured in upon them from the gallant First caused them to falter, and finally to break for the cover they had just left, leaving a goodly number of their force upon the ground. A regiment, however, was nothing to them, for scarcely had the fragments of the other vanished in the shelter of the timber, ere another came pouring out, and advanced in the track of their predecessors. Again did the gallant First pour in volley after volley upon them, till they too broke and fled to the rear. A third regiment took their place and one more effort was made in the same direction as before, with precisely the same result.

But the incessant storm of lead that swept the ground occupied by the Missouri First, had told fearfully upon them, and their shattered ranks were ordered to the rear, while the Kansas First regiment came up and took their place. The Kansas men gallantly stood the storm for a while, and then with decimated ranks gave way to the First Iowa.

It is impossible to particularize all of the events of the battle upon this part of the field. It was here that a tremendous struggle was constantly kept up, one which tried the courage of our men to the utmost. From the large area in front, the vast hordes of the enemy directed a shower of balls that did not leave a square inch of ground unsearched while their

artillery kept the air filled with missiles which, however, were generally more terrific from their noise than their contact. Lying flat on their faces our men poured in their fire with telling effect, and finally drove the enemy gradually down the ravine till they, thinking the battle lost, fired their baggage wagons and prepared for retreat. But with no fresh body of troops to aid them, our wearied men could not retain their advantage, even after they gained it, as was shown once in the case of one of the enemy's batteries from which every man was driven and the guns silenced by the deadly accuracy of the fire poured in upon them by Totten and Du Bois. If the Federal forces had had men enough to have sent reinforcements forward at this juncture the battle would have been decided.

Numberless were the diversions, feints, and other efforts made by the Secessionists to outflank the Union forces. At one time a body of at least eight hundred horsemen made a long detour and came in to the rear of the artillery. Captain Totten instantly wheeled his four pieces and as they were then riding along at a distance of three hundred yards, he opened upon them with round shot and shell. The effect was absolutely awful. Every round shot marked its course by long lanes of fallen men and horses that opened through their lines, while each shell in its explosion was marked by a large area of writhing steeds and their riders. Three or four volleys were enough for them — they

wheeled and sought shelter in the woods from which they came.

On the east side of the north ravine was a large cornfield and in this the Secessionists threw two regiments in an effort to turn the flanks of the Federals. Scarcely had the last files entered the field when both batteries opened upon them with shell and cannister. The distance was not more than two hundred yards and the effect was frightful — it was not simply killing men, it was a wholesale massacre. They went down not by dozens but by fifties. One single shell burst exactly in the center of what seemed a large crowd of human beings, and the next instant not a soul could be seen in the vicinity. In a few minutes not a man of the enemy who could get away remained in the cornfield.

At another time a Louisiana regiment, having a magnificent, large flag came suddenly out of the woods, and began forming with great rapidity. Du Bois's artillery paid its respects by scattering them like chaff — the flag and bearer went down together. Another man seized it and attempted to climb over the fence with it, but as he was astride the top rail a twelve pound ball struck him square in the back, and seemed to scatter him, flag, and all, as if a keg of gunpowder had suddenly exploded within his body.

Soon after the fight commenced General Lyon saw how fearfully the enemy outnumbered him and he gave up the day as lost. From that time he seemed utterly regardless of life, and in fact seemed scarcely

conscious of anything. A ball struck him in the leg, to which he paid no attention, and soon after another struck him in the head inflicting a severe flesh wound. He bled freely, but refused to move out of the line of fire. The Iowa regiment was occupying the brow of the hill to the right of the battery, exposed to a galling fire from the woods in front. General Lyon stood calmly a few steps in the rear of the color company, bareheaded, with balls hailing around him in frightful quantities.

"If some one will lead us, we will clear that woods with the bayonet", remarked one of the men.

"I will lead you!" said he, and at that instant a ball entered his breast, passing through his body just above the heart. He fell instantly, and a moment after reaching the ground said: "*Iowa regiment, you are noble boys!*" A little later he grew weaker and his last words were: "Forward, my brave men, I will lead you!" He did not live a dozen seconds after being struck by the last ball.

It is believed by many that he did not desire to live after finding that he could make no headway against the immense odds opposed to him; he saw at a glance the result of a defeat both to him and to the cause which he revered; he saw that all his efforts from the hour in which he took Camp Jackson to that of his splendid effort at Bonnevillle, and from that down to the present — the tremendous fatigues of the march to Springfield, the labors at Forsyth, Dug Springs, Greenfield, Carthage, and Mt. Vernon

—all were vain, and like a brave but despondent soldier, he dared to die rather than live. All honor to his memory, and as for the Government which persistently refused to sustain him, let it be *anathema maranatha*. Two horses were shot under him a short time before his death, and one of his white-plumed body-guard almost at the very same moment of his fall, dropped mortally wounded by his side.

“They fought like brave men, long and true”, but what availed gallant fighting and desperate charges when, as fast as each regiment was driven from the ground or cut to pieces, the enemy was able to supply its place with a fresh one, and so, after driving the enemy for more than a mile from his original position, the Union troops were compelled from sheer exhaustion to suspend the labor of slaughter, and soon after to retire from the field as best they could. Here again the shattered forces of the Iowa First were gathered in line to resist the onset of the enemy while the wearied, broken fragments of the army were collected in order preparatory to a retreat. The enemy saw the maneuver and again and again hurled themselves against the First Iowa in order to break through it and precipitate themselves upon our fragmentary columns. Had Iowa yielded then woful would have been the result — the retreat would have become a savage massacre, an indiscriminate, terrible rout. But they breasted like rocks the iron hail and tremendous charges of the enemy — pouring in a deadly fire and holding the enemy in

complete check till the Union forces were forming and moving, and then and not till then did they leave their position. They came away in splendid order — not a man quickened his step, and when a soldier fell from the ranks, they closed up and shoulder to shoulder moved slowly from the field.

The Iowa regiment suffered severely. The gallant Captain Alexander L. Mason, of the color company (C), while urging on his men, received a ball through the thigh, and in ten minutes thereafter was dead. His First Lieutenant, William Pursell, received a severe wound. Three others of the company were killed in their tracks, and some ten others wounded, but through all the colors never for a single moment kissed the dust, and when the regiment covered the retreat of the dispirited forces, they still fluttered as proudly as ever in the smoke of the battlefield. Poor Joseph H. McHenry, of Company I, rose incautiously on his knee to cap his musket, but had scarcely done so ere a musket ball tore through his head scattering his blood and brains upon his comrades on either side of him. He was dead ere he reached the ground. At one time the Iowans were ordered to rise and charge upon the enemy who lay concealed less than fifty yards away. "Come on, boys," cried George Pierce of the Governor's Greys, springing to his feet and fearlessly facing the storm. "Come on, boys, and let us chase them out!" At that instant a fine-looking officer mounted on a magnificent sorrel charger galloped out in front of the

enemy and appeared to urge them to charge. Pierce drew a bead on him with his musket and fired — the officer tumbled like a log from his horse and at almost the same instant George dropped, shot through the thigh. Sergeant Dettmer, of the Jackson Guards, fell badly wounded and the handsome Frederick Rhomberg, a private in the same company, fell dead, pierced through the brain.

The killed on the Federal side was about one hundred and fifty and the wounded about six hundred and fifty, while the casualties of the enemy were treble this number. Captain Gordon Granger, who was constantly over the field during the whole day, says that he saw more than eight hundred of the enemy lying on the field from Totten's battery eastward along the south bank of the ravine. Their loss must have been immense as their columns were always dense, upon which the veterans who manned our batteries scarcely ever threw away a shot. The prisoners taken admit that their loss was perfectly awful. In addition to the killed, the Union men took two hundred and fifty prisoners, about four hundred horses, a beautiful Secession flag, and several cases of revolving rifles, Minnie muskets, swords, and other equipment.

The success of General Sigel was indifferent. He commenced the attack in fine style, but was met by a heavier force of men and guns. He defended his position bravely for several hours, but finally the enemy flanked him and, his artillery horses all being

killed, he dismounted five of the guns, set fire to the carriages, and with a single piece cut his way through and retreated upon Springfield. Those were the only guns lost in the action.

There are many incidents of great interest connected with the battle. After Captain Mason of Company C was killed, and Lieutenant Pursell wounded, no other commissioned officer remained. The color bearer also fell at the same time, when Sergeant William Grant suddenly caught up the flag and, waving it aloft, took command of the company for some time. Captain Markoe Cummings of Company A subsequently relieved him and took command of both companies.

Gus Monroe of Company I, while carrying his gun at a trail had it struck by a cannon shot, which shaved off the breech as completely as if done with a saw. Charley Clark of Company I was struck by three balls which shaved two buttons from his coat and did no other damage. Captain F. J. Herron was knocked over by a shell, but was not materially hurt.

At one time during the action Captain Granger of the regulars saw a large force of the enemy stealing through the timber on the north bank of the ravine evidently intent upon passing to the left and gaining the rear of our position. He instantly took three companies of the Iowa regiment to a small ravine directly in the line of the advancing column, and directed the men to lay flat down. On came the enemy unsuspecting of a trap and chuckling in antic-

ipation of the success of their maneuver. "Now, boys," said the Captain, as the enemy came exactly opposite, "keep cool, aim low, and give 'em hell!"

"By God, sir!" said the Captain afterward in relating the circumstances to me, "your boys raised on 'em just as cool as a cucumber and in ten seconds there wasn't a one of 'em in sight."

"Yes," said Major H. D. Sturgis, "your fellows fought like devils, and if any man after this ever says to me that volunteers won't fight, I'll make it a personal matter with him! Yes, sir, by God, your men fought just like devils!"

I am full of the belief that these emphatic compliments to the volunteers, and particularly to the Iowa regiment, were well earned by the gallant men to whom they were paid. To be sure a few men from each company sneaked from the fight — but there must be cowards of necessity in so large a crowd. The shooting of the enemy with small arms was universally low — they aimed to wound and not to kill, probably knowing that every wounded man required two others to carry him to the rear, thus weakening the force much more than by killing men outright.

Several times during the day our forces were drawn into deadly traps by the enemy concealing a force or masking a battery and then displaying the American flag — artifices which twice at least during the day were successful.

By three in the afternoon the forces had all retired, and soon after the wounded began to come in.

The hospital was filled, and then a large hotel, the Bailey House, was appropriated, and finally a large Methodist Church. Some of the wounds were horrible — some had the lower jaw shot away, others had arms torn off, others came in with legs dangling over the sides of the wagon. All were thirsty, calling almost incessantly for water. A flag of truce went out soon after to bring in the wounded and bury the dead, and up to a late hour the work still went on. The men who bore the flag report that they were taken to McCulloch in person, who treated them with great courtesy, joked with them a little about their ill success, assured them that he intended to kill Sigel at all events, offered them some refreshments, and readily gave them the desired permission to carry away the wounded and bury the dead.

During the whole day and last night Springfield was the scene of great confusion — citizens anticipating an instant attack were packing up their effects and flying in crowds to all parts of the State for safety. The troops commenced a retreat upon Rolla about three o'clock this morning, deeming it madness to attempt, with the present small force, to hold this place. If not attacked they will probably reach Rolla by Wednesday next. The wounded are all left here under competent medical attendance. The Iowa regiment will probably be at home by the last of next week.

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