

## In the Battle of Winchester

The summer of 1864 was a season of gloomy discouragement for the North. Practically nothing decisive had been accomplished since the fall of Vicksburg and the Battle of Gettysburg. Gradually troops had been concentrated in the East and when the spring opened it had seemed that the cry, "On to Richmond", was about to be realized at last. But the hardest blows that Grant could deliver about Petersburg and Richmond were repulsed, while Lee, with consummate generalship, was able to dispatch a corps of his best troops under General Jubal A. Early to the very suburbs of Washington in July. Failing to capture the national capital, the Confederates retreated across the Potomac where they continued to be a source of anxiety for more than three months.

Lying just beyond the lofty Blue Ridge of Virginia was the rich Valley of the Shenandoah. Though subordinate to the main theater of military activities east of the mountains, the Valley of Virginia, as it was also called, played an important rôle during the whole drama of the war, both as an avenue of invasion and a granary for the subsistence of Southern armies. By moving northward down the friendly valley to the Potomac River, a Confederate force could penetrate sixty miles north and in

the rear of Washington, as "Stonewall" Jackson had done in 1862, or march into Pennsylvania, as Lee had done the following summer. The source of so many Union disasters deserved to be called the Valley of Humiliation. Moreover, when Confederate forces occupied the valley their horses fattened on its forage and the men feasted on the best the country afforded, while in quitting the valley on an invasion of the North the commissaries filled their wagons from the farms and storehouses. A large population of Dunkards and Quakers, whose religious scruples kept them out of the army, were none the less hostile to the Union so that as producers of food and clothing they were hardly of less military value than an equal number of combatants.

To the Shenandoah Valley General Early withdrew about the middle of July, 1864, apparently on his way to join Lee in Richmond. But when several divisions of the pursuing Federal troops were ordered back to Washington the crafty Confederate turned suddenly upon General George Crook, drove him back to Harper's Ferry, and again advanced into Maryland. A raiding party sent into Pennsylvania burned the town of Chambersburg.

Obviously something had to be done to prevent such incursions north of the Potomac. Grant hastened to Washington and began the concentration of troops for a campaign into the Shenandoah Valley which Early was planning to hold until after harvest at least. The brilliant General Philip H.

Sheridan, then only thirty-three years old, was chosen to command the reorganized army. It was his task to occupy the valley, seize or destroy ruthlessly all the horses, cattle, and food supplies, devastate the Garden of Virginia so that "a crow flying over the country would need to carry his rations", and thus end the danger of future Confederate invasions from that source.

After a month of fruitless maneuvering, Sheridan found an opportunity to strike an effective blow. Early's forces, seriously weakened by the transfer of a division to aid in the defense of Richmond, were strung along the pike between Winchester and Martinsburg. On the eve of a decisive battle one division lay across the Berryville Pike two miles east of Winchester, another was at Stephenson's Depot five miles north on the Martinsburg Pike, a third division was hurrying southward on the same road, General John B. Gordon with his division was at Bunker's Hill fifteen miles away, while the cavalry was at Martinsburg twenty-two miles north of Winchester.

Opposed to this force Sheridan had about thirty-seven thousand effectives in line between Clifton and Berryville about ten miles east of Winchester. The Union forces consisted chiefly of three divisions of the veteran Sixth Army Corps, the Army of West Virginia composed of two small divisions under General Crook, three divisions of cavalry, and two divisions from the Nineteenth Army Corps com-

manded by General William H. Emory, a veteran who had graduated from West Point the year Sheridan was born.

In the Army of the Shenandoah were three Iowa regiments, all in the Second Division of Emory's corps commanded by General Cuvier Grover. The Twenty-second Iowa Infantry was in the Second Brigade under Colonel Edward L. Molineux, while the Twenty-fourth and Twenty-eighth Iowa were in the Fourth Brigade with Colonel David Shunk in command. Recruited in the summer of 1862, these regiments had been seasoned by two winters of onerous campaigning in Arkansas and Louisiana, had participated in the siege of Vicksburg, and had engaged in fighting so deadly at Champion's Hill that over thirty-seven per cent of the effective men in the Twenty-fourth Iowa were killed or wounded. In July, 1864, they were sent East by sea, and August found the intrepid Iowans skirmishing up and down the Shenandoah Valley.

By three o'clock in the morning of September 19th Sheridan's army was out of its intrenched position and on the march along the Berryville Pike toward Opequan Creek about five miles east of Winchester. At the head of the column went the veteran Sixth Corps, followed by the Nineteenth, with Crook's divisions last. Across Opequan Creek the road followed a narrow ravine winding among heavily wooded hills for a distance of nearly two miles. Beyond lay an irregular, undulating valley, faced on

the south and west by an amphitheatre of stony heights occupied by the Confederates.

To move twenty or thirty thousand infantry troops a distance of seven miles, ford a stream, and file through a gorge along a single road took time. It was fully four hours after the cavalry carried the first Confederate works at five o'clock in the morning before the infantry arrived, and it was close to noon before the Nineteenth Corps, delayed by an ammunition train, finally got through the congested ravine. "The road was crowded with artillery, ammunition wagons, and ambulances, all hurrying forward", wrote an officer. On each side "a line of infantry in column of march stumbled over the rocky, guttered ground, and struggled through the underbrush. The multitudes of men who belong to an army, yet who do not fight — the cooks, the musicians, the hospital attendants, the quarter-masters' and commissaries' people, the sick, and the skulkers — sat on every rock and under every bush, watching us pass." By the time the head of the column emerged from the ravine and swung to the left Early had been able to concentrate practically his whole army at Winchester, and throw a considerable force into the valley facing the ravine.

Sheridan's plan of battle, after it was too late to destroy the enemy in isolated units as he had hoped, was to deploy in the valley, keep the enemy's right engaged, fight vigorously in the center, and turn the left so as to execute a flank movement, gain the rear,

and nullify the advantage of the Confederate position on the heights. The object of Early was to allow part of Sheridan's men to deploy, drive back the attacking columns upon the advancing troops, and during the resulting confusion to push his strong left wing forward to the mouth of the gorge and thus cut off retreat. For the Northern army the battle of Winchester was to be either a splendid victory or annihilation, for it would be impossible in case of defeat to escape on the Berryville Pike through the gorge. Success or failure was to depend upon the ability of the Nineteenth Army Corps to repulse the Confederates at the center and hold the ground at all hazards until Crook's divisions could get through the ravine and sweep to the right on the more brilliant mission of turning the hostile position.

The Iowa troops in Grover's division emerged from the defile about eleven o'clock and moved forward in perfect order. "Steep hills and a thick wood, impracticable for artillery until engineered, rendered it necessary for the infantry to open the contest without the support of cannon. In face of a vigorous shelling the column swept over the hills, struggled through the wood, and emerged upon a broad stretch of rolling fields, on the other side of which lay the rebel force, supported by another wood and by a ledge of rocks, which answered the purpose of a fortification, with the semicircular heights of Winchester in the rear, as a final rallying

base." With a charge of unusual impetuosity, the skirmishers firing as they ran, Grover's men of the Second Division carried the wood with a rush and hurried on pell-mell, driving the enemy three hundred yards beyond. The Iowa troops were in the thick of the fight.

But such a vehement advance is liable to sudden reverse when it reaches a strong second line. From a sheltered position an overwhelming mass of infantry arose in front of the charging brigades, fired a stunning volley, and moved irresistibly forward against the disorganized Union men. For a time they fought desperately at close quarters and clung stubbornly to their position, but the Confederate onslaught was too powerful. "The bloody but victorious advance was changed into a bloody and ominous retreat." The already disorganized troops fell back in utter confusion.

To retreat in the immediate presence of a powerful enemy is the most demoralizing maneuver that an army can be required to execute. "There is no inspiriting return of blow for blow; there is no possibility of quelling the hostile fire by an answering fire; the soldier marches gloomily in his file, imagining that his foe is ever gaining on him; the ranks are rapidly thinned, and the organization of the companies shattered; and thus from both physical and moral causes, the bravest battalions go to pieces." So it was in the battle of Winchester. Men crowded up the Berryville Pike, while to the

right and left the fields were dotted with fugitives rushing to the cover of the timber. Some of the regimental organizations disappeared for the time being. Steadily Early's veterans advanced with yells of triumph and murderous musketry, threatening to rout Sheridan's army before the battle had fairly begun. Generals and brigade commanders rode hither and thither endeavoring by threats, commands, and entreaties to halt and reform the panic-stricken stragglers. "It was the bloodiest, the darkest, the most picturesque, the most dramatic, the only desperate moment of the day."

In contrast to the general panic one instance of coolness and discipline was conspicuous. Through the midst of the confusion came Captain William T. Rigby with Company B of the Twenty-fourth Iowa Infantry, "all marching as composedly as if returning from drill."

"Captain, you are not going to retreat any further, I hope", called an artillery officer who was trying to rally the fleeing soldiers.

"Certainly not", replied Rigby, "Halt, front! Three cheers, men; hip, hip, hurrah!"

The little band cheered lustily — the first note of defiance that broke the desperate monotony of the panic. It stopped the retreat in that part of the field. In a few minutes Captain Rigby's company had swelled to a battalion of men from half a dozen regiments determined to hold their ground. The rally spread and the Confederate attack was



checked. Piece by piece the shattered Union line was reëstablished and most of the lost ground was recovered.

Then followed the long hours of holding on in the face of terrific fire until the left of Early's line could be forced back. How well the Nineteenth Corps performed its portion of the task is shown by the list of killed and wounded numbering nearly two thousand. "Swept by musketry and artillery from the right, pressed violently by the one grand column of attack which Early massed to decide the battle, it bled, but it stood, and, after hours of suffering, advanced." By sundown the battle was won and Early's army was fleeing down the Winchester Pike toward Cedar Creek and Fisher's Hill.

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