

Comment by the Editor

THE HORNETS' NEST

About half way between Pittsburg Landing and Shiloh Church, the Corinth highway was transected by an abandoned road so deeply weathered as to afford natural rifle-pits for Colonel Tuttle's brigade — the Second, Seventh, Twelfth, and Fourteenth Iowa Infantry. To the right and to the left of this position stretched the battle line of the Union army.

Early on Sunday morning the fighting began. Gradually the Confederates pressed back the flanks of their opponents until the center of the line along the sunken road formed the apex of a gigantic wedge. Twelve separate times the finest regiments of the Southern army were hurled against this "Hornets' Nest", and every time their well-formed ranks were paralyzed, then "shivered into fragments", and repulsed. From mid-forenoon till six o'clock, this inaccessible barrier "blazed with sheets of flame" and "poured forth a murderous storm of shot and shell and musket-fire which no living thing could quell". Not a foot of ground did the Iowans yield, though the enemy swept their "devoted spot" with field artillery from right and left. By four-thirty in the afternoon the Union batteries were driven from the field and the encircling gray line closed in. Still the "hornets" clung to their "nest".

Just before the artillery was withdrawn, the Second and Seventh Iowa regiments fought their way out of the *cul-de-sac*, but the order to retreat never reached the Eighth, Twelfth, and Fourteenth Iowa, the Fifty-eighth Illinois, and Prentiss's regiments. For an hour and a half they held the chief attention of the Confederate army; but at last, completely surrounded, their ranks depleted and their ammunition exhausted, they surrendered.

To what purpose was this sacrifice? For the captured men it meant months of terrible hardship, pestilence, and even death in Southern prison camps. If the order to retreat had been delivered they might have saved themselves. But if resistance had ceased at four o'clock, the overwhelming Confederate forces concentrated in the center might have had time to break through the Union line and "drive the enemy into the river". As it happened, the final desperate stand at the Hornets' Nest gave General Grant time to form a new line of battle; "time for Lew. Wallace, for Buell, and for Night to come". Who knows but that the last hopeless defense of that "altar of sacrifice" was the deciding factor in the Battle of Shiloh?

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