

A STORY OF THE BATTLE OF THE WILDERNESS

Being the personal experience of Waldo C. Van-Valin, First Lieutenant, Co. A. 45 P. V. I., as related by himself several years after the war.

When in the spring of 1864, General Grant took command of the Armies of the U. S. the people believed that something substantial was going to be accomplished in the way of putting down the Rebellion. His Head Quarters was with the Army of the Potomac, although he had given the command of that army to Maj.. Gen. Meade, still, as Commander in Chief of all the armies he, of course, had a general supervision of the Army of the Potomac and issued orders to General Meade as the exigencies of the service seemed to require. During the winter of 1863 and '64, the old Regiments had been recruited up to the maximum standard and now in the spring of '64, with an invincible General at our head we felt that another year would surely end the war - the backbone of the slave holder's Rebellion be broken. If indeed, not cut loose and pulled out.

Our Corps, the 9th, was under the immediate command of Maj. General Burnside of whom we were proud, for while we knew that he was also proud of us and already attached to our corps, we regarded him as an unselfish and incorruptible patriot fully equipped with all the soldierly qualities that go to make a skilled corps Commander.

Always on the eve of an active campaign, a thorough inspection and review of the troops is required by the Commanding General. When orders came for the 9th Corps to be ready on such a day for review by General Grant, we knew very well what it meant besides. It meant that it would be followed by a speedy departure from our pleasant camps at and around Annapolis, Md., and a general advance on Lee's Rebel Army which was then hovering near the Wilderness and extending its lines towards the Rapidan. This was really Grant's introduction to the Army of the Potomac, and the appearance of our troops on this occasion made a most favorable impression on his mind as we afterwards learned.

We were all anxious to see the new General of the Armies whose name had already become famous on account of his brilliant victories in the South and South-west, and who was now to lead us to new fields of slaughter, and, we hoped and believed, to victory.

We shall never forget how he looked when he rode along our battle line mounted on a large bay horse whose proud mein, with arched neck and distended nostrils, seemed to indicate a consciousness of the character of the man who was astride his back and who rode with the grace of an adept. Of the cavalcade of officers who accompanied him, there was not one who rode with the

ease and grace of General Grant, and when he thundered down the line and across the plain to take up a position, where our columns would pass in review before him, his fiery charger went with the wind, distancing all of his staff and leaving many of them far behind. Many of the boys who had formed an ideal appearance of grant, found, when they came to see the man himself, that they were very much mistaken. Instead of being arrayed in all the glitter and tinsel of War, there was nothing about him to indicate his superior rank save his high topped boots with spurs, slouched hat and plain fighting blouse.

In a couple of days after this review, we struck our tents and commenced our march towards the Wilderness, vis. Washington. It was given out before we reached the Capitol that we would be reviewed by President Lincoln while passing through the City. This pleased us, for we all wanted to get a sight of "Old Abe." When our regiment reached the edge of the City we heard tremendous cheering ahead, and as we neared the corner of 14th St., and Pennsylvania Avenue, we beheld Abraham Lincoln standing on an elevated portico of Willards Hotel. He was tall and straight with a sad and care-worn expression. He stood motionless as a statue with high silk hat lifted a little above his head. We were marching in column by Company front and covered the street from curb to curb, and as each Company swept past, its Commander faced about and gave the Command "Three cheers for President Lincoln," which were given with an earnestness that meant something more than the mere cheering. It meant that they recognized him as President of the Nation, that they were in obedience to his call and they were now going forth determined to do, and if need be, die for their country. No doubt, the great heart of Lincoln was deeply moved with pity for the soldiers, the boys in blue, as they marched blithely by, with drums beating, bands playing and colors flying, giving him their last and final greeting, for he certainly realized that many - very many of them - were surely marching to their death. Marching away, never to return, that they would soon seal their devotion to Country with their blood and leave their bones to whiten on Southern fields. But to all appearance, no such thoughts entered their minds, for while marching through Washington, and on out, turning our steps Southward, Company after Company broke out in song. "We'll hang Jeff Davis on a sour apple tree." and "Rally round the flag boys," which was taken up by Regiments and Brigades, until the grand chorus resounded along the entire column.

This day's march was a long one and unusually tiresome. Sore feet and tired backs made that night's sleep refreshing indeed. The soft side of a stone for a pillow and mother earth for bedstead, had greater attraction for us that night than the most elaborate and tastefully arranged sleeping apartments could have had under ordinary circumstances in times of peace.

A day or so more of hard marching brought us to a place called Nokeville. Here we encamped for two or three days waiting for the

different Army Corps to concentrate, and while lying here we made out our Company pay-rolls.

Breaking camp on the 3rd of May, we started for the Rapidan, via Warrenton Station which was a good two day's march. We reached the Rapidan on the 5th and crossed over, passing by the log where Gen. Grant sat but a short time before, when he wrote the memorable dispatch ordering Sherman to move, to commence his, now famous, march toward Atlanta and the Sea. it was getting dusk when we entered the edge of the Wilderness, where we bivouacked for the night.

I cannot describe to you my feelings (which I presume were common to all) as we lay down that night among the trees and close to the scene of the battle which had been going on from noon till night, the roar of which we distinctly heard while on the march a considerable distance away, giving us an idea of what we ourselves might expect when we arrived at the front. "The Wilderness," is a wild desolate tract of country, situated in Spottsylvania county, about five miles broad and ten miles long. It is an immense jungle, covered with a thick, almost impenetrable underbrush, cut up with ravines, making the movement of artillery and cavalry, almost impossible. General Lee and his men were familiar with this ground and he was satisfied to allow Grant to advance without opposition, thinking he might be able to destroy his army in the very beginning of the campaign, for, hidden in the forests, Lee could mass his troops and hurl them upon any point of the Union line which he chose to attack.

The 2nd, 5th, and 6th Corps, under the command of General Hancock, Warren and Sedgwick, respectively, comprising 80,000 men had crossed the Rapidan about a day ahead of our Corps which numbered 30,000 making an army of 110,000. General Warren with the 5th Corps held the advance of the Army and moved rapidly into the Wilderness. About noon they were attacked by an overwhelming force. The onset was terrible. Being outnumbered, two to one, Warren was compelled to fall back, stubbornly contesting every inch of ground, but receiving reinforcements the 5th Corps pushed the Rebels back with great slaughter. Grant then ordered a general advance along the entire line, but before the order could be executed, darkness came on and prevented another bloody scene.

Now, as to a little of our personal experience. As I said before, as we threw ourselves down that night on the edge of the battlefield, tired and hungry, our feelings were not of the most agreeable kind. Many of the wounded and dying were being carried to the rear. Their groans were all around us. There were more than could be attended to as the field hospitals were already crowded. They told us that the enemy was still holding his main position although they had driven him back at some points a considerable distance, and that the fighting would certainly be renewed the next morning and we could then take our turn. This was

pleasant to contemplate, or rather, I mean to say, it was not.

"Attack along the whole line at five in the morning," was the order from General Grant. The Rebel Army had orders from Lee, to attack our lines at the same hour as we afterward learned, but I think we must have got the bulge on them, for long before five in the morning, I think as early as two o'clock, we were in line, after having partaken of our coffee and hard tack. We moved out in four ranks, into a narrow road which lead toward Mine run, a short distance away. It was quite dark and we could not see where we were going but merely followed the lead of those next ahead. At one time we were considerably jumbled up and came to a stand-still for several minutes. During this pause our attention was suddenly arrested by a rushing noise behind us, accompanied by some stern commands, such as oblique to the right, oblique to the right, ease off to the right. At first we thought it was a Regiment of Cavalry trying to get past, from the sound of horses' hoofs but we soon discovered as they came up, that it was General Burnside and Staff feeling their way through the dark. His large and powerful bob-tail war-horse crowded me from my place. In fact, I was glad to get out of his way for he would have tramped me down as the General was digging him with his spurs. As soon as Burnside had forged to the front, our column moved up rapidly.

Just about break of day we arrived at the point where we were to form our line of battle, which was to be an extension to the left of Hancock's line of the 2nd Corps. We could now see a portion of the line dimly ahead of us, forming at the edge of the slope which was covered lightly with an undergrowth of bushes. The head of our Regiment drew up in a small open place, our Company A being in advance. Our regiment was halted here for a few minutes as if waiting for directions as to which way we would move into line. Now, just at such a time as this, when we all knew that we were going into battle, and in probability, one of the hardest battles of the War, it would naturally be supposed that the men would feel pretty serious, at least too much so, to be given to any fun or jokes, but such was not the case at this time. We had a recruit in our Company who was rather comic and it might be, a little bit scared, who struck up a dialogue with one of our old Veterans which caused some amusement to the Company. The Colonel had just ridden up to the drum Corps and ordered them to the rear. This was noticed by our recruit which brought out a lot of questions. "Say, boys, what does that mean?" "That means fight," says the old Veteran. "Whenever the Colonel orders the drum Corps to go to the rear, then we know there is a fight ahead." "But say, what's them fellows goin' back for?" "They are excused from going into the fight." "Well say, haint them fellers just as good a right to fight as us fellers?" "No." "They're non-combatants." "Oh! I wish I was 'nuncom-bat-tant!" "Say, didn't they enlist for a sojer?" "No." "They enlisted as musicians and are on the master rolls as such." "Oh! What a fool I was." "Well, say, don't they ever git shot at all?" "Sometimes, when the Colonel orders them up

to carry off the wounded." "Our other colonel used to order them right up to the front and it was a very unhealthy place for them, but they didn't like that Colonel as well as they do this one." This conversation was cut short by orders to move quickly into line.

Vollies of musketry were now being exchanged away on the right which shewed that the Rebels were on the move. I was ordered to deploy Company A as skirmishers which were thrown forward some distance in front of the Regiment. This was always our fate, because we were one of the flanking Companies of the Regiment. A portion of this ground which we were now advancing over had been hotly contested the day before, the 5th, and here evidence of a sanguinary conflict, as bloody shirts, knapsacks, blankets, canteens, cartridge boxes, and other trappings common to Infantry. This indeed was a dense Wilderness. We had not advanced far till we got into a thicket of undergrowth and trees which made it impossible to preserve our alignment, and then to render our perplexities and difficulties greater, we were almost strangled by smoke caused by the leaves and brush taking fire from powder used the day before. Still, onward we pressed, nothing materially stopping our progress. Finally we came to the chosen ground where the enemy lay like a concealed lion, ready to spring from his lair. He poured into our line a deadly volley, killing and wounding many of our men. Two valuable officers fell dead, of our Regiment. Capt. Campbell and Lieut. Goodfellow. Then commenced a general fusillade - sharp shooting and rapid firing. The roar of musketry was deafening, and continued all along the line, for a least half an hour when we advanced with a cheer and drove them from their position, pushing them back, back through jungles and trees until we were complete masters of the ground.

But wait. While we were feeling good and rejoicing over our victory at this part of our line, we found that it would not stay long in our grasp. All at once, an oblique fire from the Rebels came pouring in from our left and rear. We saw at once that we could not stand this, if we stood our ground we would be shot down or captured. The enemy had evidently gotten on our flank and had all the advantage. The Colonel gave the order to face about and 'get to the rear as fast as our legs could carry us,' and we got. I thought then what the Irishman said, "the devil take the hind most," and right away after, I thought he might get me, for the ring of my sword strap caught on a bush or twig and held me fast. I pulled and jerked, but to no effect. I then summoned all my strength and gave one prodigious jerk and a twig, or something, broke and away I went. Just as I broke loose, two soldiers ran past me, one of them was shot dead in the head and turned a complete somersault right in my way, and I almost fell over him.

When we had gotten past or out of the gauntlet of fire, we halted and rallied on Colonel Christ's brigade which was a lucky pop for us, as he had just arrived with his brigade in time to save

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us. We soon formed our line again solid, moved up with Christ's brigade on our left, striking the Rebel flank and giving them in turn a taste of their position, held the ground all night, which seemed, in pity, to come to our relief.

This closed the two day's battle of the Wilderness, which was really a defeat to Lee as he had confidently expected to drive Grant's army back across the Rapidan if he did not destroy it. But he met a foeman worthy of his steel, one who had come to stay. Our loss in the two day's battle was 18,000. I will not take time here to describe to you the ghastly scenes of that battleground.

That night after the darkness had closed down on the bloody scene, I was ordered to take charge of the detail of men, hungry and tired as we were and move out cautiously a considerable distance in front of our line, and as close to the Rebels as we could get in order to strengthen the picket line. Groping our way through the darkness, I stumbled over some dead men lying near together. Stooping down to examine I noticed something shining, it was an officer's sword. Three men were lying close to him, all dead, but yet warm. I thought I might see them in the morning but being drawn away from the line before day-light, did not see them again.

The next day we had the sorrowful task of burying our dead.

(The above was copied from what appears to be a carbon copy of the original manuscript written by Waldo C. Van Valin and preserved through various members of the family. This story describes but one of his experiences during his Civil War enlistment. He also fought in the infamous Petersburg Mine Crater battle where he was captured and imprisoned for seven months. This story appears here as originally drafted with the exception of the correction of errors in spelling or typing. Clyde E. Van Valin, August 29, 1997, Bowling Green, KY.)