

## Donelson's Charge at Stones River

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DONELSON'S CHARGE AT STONE [sic] RIVER.

DECEMBER'S days were drawing to a close. The weather, dark, damp, and chilly, caused every one to hail the camp-fire with delight. Heavy marching and skirmishing, wounds and losses, stubborn resistance to steady advance, and flanking, had all marked our route since we left Nashville. If the signs meant any thing, the humblest soldier knew a great battle was to come, and soon. But one day more remained of 1862 when we went into bivouac near Stewart's Creek.

I was assigned to duty on the staff of Major General Lovell H. Rousseau as ordnance officer. We were in Major General George H. Thomas' corps, or the "center," as it was known.

The night before New Year's eve, as I was preparing to take what sleep I could, an orderly requested me to report to General Rousseau, who desired me to go to General Thomas' headquarters to receive orders from him about the handling of my train of ammunition wagons on the next day. A guide was furnished me, and we rode out into the winter night. A mile or more, perhaps, over an obscure pathway led us near a house. A sentinel challenged us, received the countersign, and gave us directions to headquarters.

Tents were pitched in long row upon a small lawn in front of a frame house, such as were common in that section, because General Thomas preferred to sleep in his tent rather than turn the family out of their home. Before one of the tents, in which candles gleamed, burned a huge fire; sentries paced their beats, which were so arranged as to completely surround the tents. Again we were halted by a guard, who passed us in after demanding and receiving the countersign. I gave my bridle to the orderly and went to the tent, where I recognized the adjutant-general busy with orders and reports. I reported my business, name, and station. While I did so I saw General Thomas sitting astride a chair, on the other side of the fire, apparently asleep, resting his arms on the back of the chair. In my boyhood days I had seen a picture of Napoleon the night before Austerlitz, and it rose in my mind as I looked at the veteran, too tired to keep awake, and too anxious to go to bed. I have often recalled the scene of the tents, the the [sic] camp-fire, the nodding general, the gleam of steel here and there, and the frequent footfalls of the sentinels. Hardly had I finished my report when the General roused up, asking who I was. I neared him and repeated my report, to which he listened closely. Then he said that at the battle of Perryville there had been much valuable time lost at a critical turn in the action by the ammunition wagons being too far to the rear, and he would like to have my train within a short distance of the rear line in case of a battle the next day. I saw the General the next day when I was well up with the troops, a fact he remembered a long while, as he told me after the war was over.

The dawn saw the opening of the battle of Stone [sic] River. It was my first battle. I had been in the service many months, and had feared the war might be over before I saw a battle. After that day I was in hopes it would end before I had a hand in another.

I shall not attempt an account of this battle, only of one important act in it which I saw, and "a part of which I was."

Rousseau's division marched into the woods, made famous afterward as the " Cedars," as soon as the sounds of firing on the right made it evident that there was the place it would be needed. My train moved up until halted on a slight elevation, from which I had a full view of all the cleared ground.

While pausing here I first saw troops under fire. A full regiment of blue coats, well drilled, was marching up a slope about half a mile away. With colors gaily flying, non-commissioned, line, and staff officers, all at their proper intervals in the rear, they advanced, as if on parade, in line of battle.

From my seat on horseback I could look over the crest of the hill up which there were moving, and in the distance I saw some troops, but could not determine what they were. The line advanced - I saw they moved "guide center"— keeping the most accurate alignment, with all the exactness of battalion drill, until the full array was displayed on the summit; then three white puffs of smoke rose from the troops in the horizon, the guns were heard, and the shells flew into the right, center, and left of the regiment so bright and gay, and, with a unanimity that seemed to have been drilled into them, they every mother's son of them turned and run down the hill, save here and there a man killed or wounded lay upon the ground.

Away off to the right the noise of the combat was growing louder, more distinct, more small-arms firing, every thing showing it was a big fight. Across the cotton-fields a few men straggled leisurely to the rear; an ambulance trotted out of the cedars with wounded men, then a squad of soldiers moved rather briskly away from the front; I saw the number of sound men growing larger very rapidly; it looked badly, as the crowd increased every moment. Indeed, I was mortified to see a color guard with their regimental flags falling back, and then the swarm grew apace, so that I thought I was in the midst of another Bull Run. By this time there were hundreds of men and officers, mingled with cannons and what not, hurrying out of the cedars toward the turnpike to Na

A battery walking their horses, and at regular intervals, caught my eye as they debouched from the cedars right in front of me, which I recognized as the First Michigan, under the command of First Lieutenant Van Pelt: Captain Loomis, its late commander, had just been promoted to major, and was serving as chief of artillery of Rousseau's division. At the same moment General Rousseau, followed by a single orderly, advanced at a gallop from the cedars. I spurred my horse toward him, and turned so as to face my wagons. I said, "General, shall I post the battery where my [2 illegible words]. It is [rest is illegible] loped over the cotton patch and delivered my order to Lieutenant Van Pelt, who was as cool as if on a march. He looked at the spot I

pointed out, nodded affirmatively and rode away to direct the foremost piece of the battery. Then I put my horse at full speed, reached my wagons, and moved them into the slight depression behind the knoll they had stood upon, parked them as closely as possible, dismounted all the drivers, telling them to lie down under the wagons and keep as quiet as they could.

This took only a short time, but in that period the fields around had become covered with troops much demoralized and mingled in a good deal of confusion. Lieutenant Van Pelt had opened fire, drawing some return from infantry in the edges of the woods; another battery had been posted directly to his right, and was firing occasionally. I became so much interested in the fight that I left my train and went to the crest of the knoll to see what was going on. There I found that the battery at Van Pelt's right was Battery H, Fifth United States Artillery, and had been posted there by order of Major Loomis, and on its right for support was the Regular brigade, Major Carpenter in command. On the left of the First Michigan battery was a brigade of Van Cleve's division, but I could not tell whose command it was.

There came a lull in the noises of the battle; it seemed to mean something. I was standing near a gun, rather to rear of the First Michigan battery, looking at the dark cedars where I knew the enemy were, for none of our forces were in advance of the front of these two batteries and their supports. In front of us was a small space of ground, then the turnpike, then the cotton patch about three hundred yards wide. Toward the right of this cotton patch was a clump of bushes, tall weeds, and dried grass. Lying about the surface of the cotton patch tell were some dead men, and some wounded men in gray moving now and then, but not much; no signs of life in the cedars, but all eyes were fixed there, for in their depths the enemy had gone, and from them they must come or into them we must go.

As I looked, a man on foot, sword in hand, with a shout precipitated himself into view; the edge of the timber in an instant alive with [rest of line is illegible] then one or two paused to throw up their pieces, fire and yell, then run forward to try to gain the front. By no order that I heard the whole of the guns of our two batteries together fired, covering the field with a cloud of smoke, hiding every object in it. And then as fast as they could load they fired into the cloud.

They ceased, and not a moving object was in front, but the dreadful effects of the cannonade were shown. The dead and wounded had been dreadfully increased, while cries and groans reached our ears. On our side men and horses had been killed and wounded, yet no large loss was inflicted. One of the Michigan men lay almost at my feet, wounded badly, but refused to leave the spot.

My train was unhurt and could not leave the ground. Back to the front I went again to take in the scene, as I felt sure the enemy would make another charge, because this was the first point where they had met with any thing like successful resistance, and the position must be carried. For miles they had swept up every thing in their impetuous

rush, and now victory was within their grasp, for if the stand now made was carried, Rosecrans would be driven away from the road to Nashville and routed.

Major Loomis was encouraging his old battery by a few words of praise. I heard him tell Van Pelt the enemy were going to make another charge, and "You give them double-shotted canister as hot as hell will let you." He went over to the Regular battery, where Lieutenant Fred Guenther and his second Lieutenant, Israel Ludlow, were preparing for the next charge, and gave them the same war-like orders.

The interval this time was spent by our men in getting the guns depressed so as to rake the ground from the turnpike to the cedars; in filling swab-buckets, taking harness off dead horses, replacing damaged implements, or in caring for the few wounded.

The enemy were reconnoitering the position carefully, keeping out of sight as much as possible, though now and then one would be seen, yet the silence on their side was ominous. Our army was moving into a new position, making the batteries the pivot or center, extending a line of battle rapidly both ways.

The advance of the enemy the third time was in several deep lines of battle, of a front long to cover both batteries. These lines (I could not see how many, for they soon became obscured in their own smoke and that of our artillery) advanced across the open rapidly and completely uncovered, and then our batteries opened on them, a deafening, unceasing fire, throwing twenty-four pounds of iron from each piece, across that small space, with no perceptible intervals in the discharges.

I found myself at this moment between the two batteries in company with Major Loomis and Major Carpenter, commander of the Regular brigade. They, like me, were fascinated by the rash bravery of our foes, who seemed determined to have those guns at any cost. I never saw guns served as fast on trial drill as those were. Before the recoil was expended the gunners grasped the spokes and threw the pieces into position; like magic the swab was run in, the handle turned, withdrawn, the charge sent home and the gun fired. Such a roar was deafening. and our little group conveyed our ideas by gestures.

And the enemy! they were swarming across the field, firing and shouting; we could not hear them, but we could get sight now and then of their waving arms and guns, while every few seconds a bullet would hiss near us or we would see some man fall, or, perhaps, a horse rear, plunge, and drop. We kept our gaze fastened on the charge coming, coming on like the insatiable sea, ever nearer at each succeeding wave. But men were not born who could longer face that storm of canister, sweeping death and destruction to every thing before it. They broke, they fled, and some took refuge in the clump of trees and weeds I mentioned. [see footnote below]

We made the welkin ring with our shouts, which were taken up right and left, as soon as it was seen that the charge had been repulsed, while hand-shaking and congratulations

were going on at every side. which were changed to a perfect frenzy of cheers when an officer rode out from our lines and returned with a group of prisoners.

Alfred Pirtle.

[footnote: The charge made by Donelson's brigade of Polk 's division. Sixteenth Tennessee. Colonel Savage, lost 207 men out of 402. Eighth Tennessee Colonel Moore, who fell mortally wounded, lost 306 out of 425.]