

Alfred French Letter

Glenwood Iowa Oct. 23 – 1933

Dear Kathie

You asked me to give you a little sketch of my army life in the Civil war. Now, that was seventy years ago, and whether or not I can make it interesting to you is a question. But I can tell you where I was at that time I was living at Amboy Ill. and August 14 – 1862 went to Chicago and enlisted for three years in Co. "A" 89th Ill. Vol. Infy [sic]. There were four of us who went from Amboy viz. Scott, Mellen, Walker and myself, and with Cahill a cousin of Walker's we formed "Mess No 3". We remained in camp in Chicago about three weeks, then were taken by train to Louisville Ky. Here we got a taste of army life: we had to go on picket, dig trenches, work on the fortifications etc. Then about the first of October we started on the march, my first experience: went to Shelbyville, then on to Frankfort. Marched about 20 miles a day, which was not bad. THEN, they called us up one morning at one o'clock and started us on the march. and not on slow time either. On we went until we reached the "Battle Field of Perryville" at 9. PM. Distance 35 miles The longest days [sic] march I ever made. We missed that battle by about four hours.

After a few days rest we started on again, going to Danville and Crab Orchard, then "about faced" and went West to Bowling Green and went into camp at "Lost River", a some what noted place. I remember reading about it in my reader when I was a six year old boy. It is in a deep ravine: a full fledged river, say 30 feet wide bursts out from under the ledge of rock, runs swiftly about 30 rods, then sinks away and is lost forever. A short rest here, then "on. on. on the boys went marching" until we crossed into Tennessee and went into camp at Tyree Springs. A very pretty place with only one house. The Confederates in their retreat from Ky. had torn up the rail road from Bowling Green to Nashville, Tenn. so that all of the supplies for the army had to be taken through by mule teams. Stations were located on the line about 25 miles apart and there the teams would stop for the night. It was a pleasant camping ground but rather heavy duty: we had to go on picket every other night, half of the regiment on duty one night, and the other half the next night. No rations were issued to us while here, we had to forage for our living. Two weeks later we marched on to Nashville, Tenn.

We arrived in Nashville Nov 20-1862 and our duty while there was picketing, scouting, and foraging for feed, for the horses and mules I remember one of those trips very well indeed – We learned of a large farm some seven or eight miles out, where the corn had not been gathered: the owner was a Colonel in the Confederate Army. As he could not well attend to the harvest, our regiment was sent out to do the work, and we did it. Was not that a kindly act on our part? We cleaned the field of corn, but I think they must have forgotten to tell us where the cribs were. Anyway we kept all and took it back to camp with us We staid [sic] in Nashville until the morning of Dec 26 – Then we started on the march and we did get into it for sure. Before noon we met with heavy opposition. Our

reg was ordered to support a battery of light artillery (six cannon) which was planted on a high ridge. Then they opened on the enemy with grape and cannister, and as they fell back, we followed them, up, through fields and woods until night and how it did rain. Not a pleasant experience. The next morning we were up and in "line of battle" at five o'clock, and for four days we were marching, scouting and skirmishing: Evening of Dec 30 we were four miles from Murfreesboro ready to march in

Dec 31-1862

This morning we were not in "line of battle" at five o'clock as usual. Why Not? That question has never been answered. A little past six, I was cooking my breakfast (bacon and coffee), the orderly sergeant sitting beside me. We heard a terrific yell right close. He said to me "That sounds like a charge." We jumped up and here came the enemy, on the "Double Quick". We were surprised. I had my equipments [sic] on, and my gun by my side, so I got in a couple of shots, but all was confusion, and there was nothing to do but to get back as fast as possible – WHICH I DID. After a while I saw a regiment that was in good order, and I asked one of their captains if I might fall in with them: so I kept with them the rest of the day. About 5 o'clock I saw a member of my company, and went with him back to the regiment. There were about 200 of them, out of the 500 of the day before. Mellen of our mess was wounded, lived only ten days. Our Brigadier General and our Lt. Colonel were captured together with I dont [sic] know how many men. They also got our tents baggage, and food supplies, leaving us with just what we had on our backs. Now was not that pretty tough for our first days [sic] fighting?

But the Battle was not over-

January 1, 1863

We were up early this morning. No cooking to do, but as we had been driven back about two miles the day before, we wanted if possible to recover that during the day. No time was wasted in cooking as we had nothing to cook. I found some nuts under a black walnut tree, which I cracked and ate as I got a chance: also in some way, our commissary got hold of a load of corn, and each man was given one ear. The fighting was not heavy today, but continual skirmishing, as we moved our lines forward until we were practically back where we were the evening of Dec 30.

Jan 2-1863

The forenoon was spent in getting the men in the best position for the final struggle. Our Brigade was placed in front, and Col. Gibson in command said to us, "Boys, I expect we will be called on to make a charge, and if so, I want every man to feel that the result of this battle depends upon himself alone, and fight accordingly." Scarcely were the words spoken when General McCook, bareheaded and swinging his sword shouted, "Colonel, take your Brigade and meet them on the charge." (The confederates, 10 deep were charging on us)

Then there was something doing. I cannot describe it. But we broke the Confederate ranks, and won – The Battle of Stone [sic] River.

The next two days we gathered and buried the dead, then marched into Murfreesboro. It was a pleasant place, and we camped there until the first of June, spending most of our time in building forts and fortifying the city. On the evening of June 23-1863 the order came: "Be ready to march at 7 o'clock tomorrow morning, with three days rations in your haversacks, and 40 rounds of cartridges in you [sic] cartridge boxes." So the next morning we again started on the march.

A little before noon we came to a farm where eight ~~eight~~ or ten men were engaged in harvesting a field of grain. We captured them and found them to be confederate soldiers who had been detailed to help the farmers harvest their grain. So we invited them to eat dinner with us before they were sent back as prisoners. About two o'clock in the afternoon we came upon the enemy in force: then the trouble began. The Confederates were on the crest of a high ridge which was covered with trees, while the sloping sides were cultivated. Our brigade was ordered to take possession of that hill. Now you will understand that was no enviable undertaking, but we must obey orders and we did. In about three hours we not only occupied the hill, but had their tents and much of the camp equipage which we found very convenient that night.

The next morning we learned the enemy was not satisfied with the result of the work of the previous day, but made no great effort to regain possession of the hill: but the third day they came back in earnest. Three desperate, but unsuccessful charges they made upon us, then gave it up, and – The Battle of Liberty Gap – was won. That night we gathered fuel and built large camp fires, then about 9 o'clock we quietly started south and marched until one o'clock, when we camped for a few hours rest. Then we went on to Hoovers Gap. We hoped for a day of rest here but no. We must go on picket and when we came back the next morning, the order was "We march at 7"

[note at bottom of page: Should you wish a fuller account of this battle see my book of letters pages 63 and 64]

Now it is one thing to order a body of troops to start on a march at a certain hour and, some times, quite another to get them started at that time, any way it was nearly noon when we really started on what turned out to be The Hardest Days March I Ever Made. We marched very leisurely for two hours, then they began to hurry us, and it was Hot. Hot. Hot. I was ready to stop at five o'clock, but no, it was "Forward. Hurry up." Six-seven-eight. No sign of stopping. Nine, and "Halt," and then the order was given "One hour for coffee, then four miles to camp." At ten we started again, and at the same time it began to rain. I kept agoing [sic] until one o'clock, then I said to Walker, "I cannot go another step." "That's just my fix," said he. We stepped a few feet to the side of the road, and I spread my blanket on the ground, we laid down and he spread his blanket over us, and we lay there until eight in the morning. I think there were only 16 in the regiment who on until they reached the place where we were expected to camp which proved to be ten miles from where we "Made our Coffee." Instead of four. It was a very comfortable place, and we lay there two days doing absolutely nothing.

On the morning of the third day, we were told to clear the ground a for a permanent camp It was an ideal place, in the timber, level, plenty of water, so by noon we had it in good shape to commence putting up tents. While eating our dinner, the order came. "We march at one o'clock," and we obeyed, and at eleven o'clock that night (July 1-1863) we camped at Tullahoma Tenn. where we remained until Aug 16-1863. That last week in June was truly a hard one. And the weather! It rained every day, and every night. Here is an incident that may interest you When we left Murfreesboro on our march, we left our knapsacks to be brought on by wagons, when we should get definitely located. But the roads were very bad, and one day coming to a Bad mud hole they piled the contents of two (I think) of the wagons into it to make the road passable for the wagon train Some time later, the 75th Ill. marching by, one of the men saw a Bible sticking in the mud. He got it out, found my name, company and regiment in it, and brought it to me as they marched through Tullahoma and I have it yet.

Our stay at Tullahoma was very [missing] Weather was fine, little to do, and after the first week we had plenty eat.

We left Tullahoma at 5 P.M. Aug 16 (Nice time to start on a march) and six days later we reached Belle Fonte Alabama. It was not a long march in miles but as it was in a mountainous region, we had much heavy work in moving our wagon train and artillery. From Belle Fonte we moved slowly eastward, meeting no opposition, until Sept 17 – when we camped on the east side of the Mountain Ridge. Sept 19 – we resumed our march eastward at 7 A.M. and before noon we could hear the roar of the artillery below us. We did not stop for dinner but moved rapidly forward until a little past 2 P.M. we stood upon The Battlefield of Chicamauga [sic], Georgia.

Chickamauga

At once we were ordered to take the place of a Brigade whose amunition [sic] was exhausted and charge and take a battery that was cutting our men down Instead of moving the men away, (whose [pl is crossed out] place we were to take), they were made to lie flat on the ground, and we charged right over them and on we went. But I went but a very little ways.

A musket ball struck my left arm. I told my Captain, who was not far from me, that I was hit, and he asked :Can you get back alone" and I said, I thought I could and he said [crossed out] in reply "All right if you can." So I turned back, and he went on with the company. I got nearly back to the men we had charged over, when I began to get faint, and I heard some one say "there's a boy that aint [sic] going to get back much farther; couple of you jump up and help him" and two men came and helped me back to where I would not be under fire, laid me on the ground, and left me (That was about 3 P.M. and I lay there until until [sic] 10 AM next day). My Captain was wounded about two hours after I was, and was brought back and laid near me. He only lived two hours. Our Lt. Colonel was killed that same afternoon.

This ended my service with my regiment and for a time, ended "Mess No 3." I was the only representative of our mess in this great battle. Cahill broke down under the hard marching in Kentucky and was discharged: Mellen killed at Stone [sic] River – Scott was sick a [sic] Nashville Hospital, and Walker had been sent North on recruiting service, but these two, later both Walker and Scott returned to the company and were mustered out with the regiment at the close of the war.

(Now, going back to page 11) A little before noon Sept 20 I, with hundreds of others, were gathered from the battle field and taken in an ambulance train to Chattanooga, some 7 or 8 miles, and laid on the floor of the old Confederate barracks: two days later we were taken in army wagons acro[cut off] river and unloaded in the woods, and that night about 9 P.M. for the first time I had a surgeon dress my wounds rceived [sic] five days before. Two days later we were given [illegible word crossed out] a tent with bunks made of fence rails, and covered with straw; there was room in a tent for 16 men. Rations were scant, often a cup of coffee and a cracker filled the bill (but not my stomach) I remained here about a month. Then 7 or 8 miles by ambulance to the Boat landing [missing text] miles by steamer to Bridgeport Alabama [illegible word crossed out] We lay here two days. Then a cattle car was [illegible] some straw thrown in, and twenty of us took possession. We were given a box of Army Crackers a half barrel of water and a tin cup and the car was locked. Thirty six hours later it was unlocked and we were taken to Hospital No 19 [illegible word crossed out] Nashville Here we got good care and a plenty to eat.