

John Russell Files

21st Illinois Infantry Regiment

Camp near Murfreesboro

Jan. 14, 1863

Dear Sister,

I take this rainy morning to write you a few lines to let you I am well. I received your note and paper the 12th. I see it was written the 26th of Dec. On that day we fought the battle of Knob Mountain Gap. It was a very rainy disagreeable day, but one of victory that fully compensated us for the wetting we got. On Monday, we again moved for Murfreesboro and in the evening late our advance had some skirmishing with the enemy. On Tuesday after drying our clothes we moved on the enemy, but it set in raining again and we were compelled to halt and did not move again till 3 P.M. when we moved forward and soon engaged the enemies [sic] skirmishers. Our Co. was sent out as skirmishers. It will not be interesting to give particulars of the battle and I will only relate the part I took in it as you doubtless have a full account before this of all else. We were ordered to drive the rebel skirmishers out of the woods which we advanced to do and soon were engaged with them. We drew their fire and then advanced on a run. So drove them from their hiding places and fired at them as they ran then took trees to load. As soon as loaded we again advanced on the run in zig zig [sic] course so as to prevent the rebels taking aim. They fired at us and run again. We fired at them as they run. We kept it up till they were driven back to their lines. Several balls came close to me and B.F. Walker was killed and several of the boys were slightly wounded. The 15th Wis. And the 21st was then ordered to charge the rebel lines, which they did. I with several of our boys were in front of the 15th as they came up we fell into their lines. The Rebel lines were broken and we were moving on in the full tide of victory when we were opened on by a masked battery on the right. We were ordered to fall back which they did about 150 yds. Our comp. as the line fell back, took up the line of skirmishers and held the ground till night. Russell and I and 8 or 10 of our boys were within 30 yds of the rebel lines which position we held till we had shot all our cartridges (60 rounds) away. I told the boys we had better fall back on the 15th, for them to hold the ground and I would go and bring up some relief. I went back to the 15th and told the Maj. that we were out of ammunition and wanted him to send some men to relieve us. He called for some to volunteer to go and soon they were ready. I deployed them and ordered them to advance at a run and keep under cover of the trees as much as possible till they gained the position held by

us. From the time I left cover till we were relieved the balls flew thick all around me. I necessarily had to expose myself in directing the movements. The balls flew past me on both sides and between my legs apparently by the double handful yet by the Mercy of God, no one was permitted to harm me. We then retired and got a new supply of ammunition. Russell and one or two others returned on their own account and kept up the fight till night. The balance of the Co. was similarly situated in front of the 21st but of them I will not speak except to say they all did their duty most nobly with two or three exceptions. The next morning when we were outflanked and compelled to fall back in consequence of Gen. Johnstons [sic] allowing himself to be surprised, I tried to discharge my duty and after each stand fell behind our forces and formed one in a volunteer line of skirmishers to cover our rear and hold the enemy in check. I aided in rallying our men at each of the 5 stands we made in that eventful day. I helped to limber up Hotchkins [sic] battery and take it off the field when nearly off of his horses were killed and he had but men enough left to manage but 3 pieces. Some of our boys remained with him throughout, and to them is much of the credit due that we lost none of our guns. Russell was close by me when wounded. He gave a little hollow [sic] and kept fighting and kept with us till we rallied when F.W. Brown and Robt. Curry took him to the hospital. Brown was taken prisoner. Curry succeeded in making his escape and joined us soon after and did good serves to the close of the fight.

At length after 6 hours hard fighting in which we had been driven 2 miles, we had the pleasure of seeing reinforcements file into line. We formed on the right of them. I think this was the happiest moment of my life. Here after a most terrible conflict of perhaps 15 minutes the rebels gave way, and our men charged after them with fixed bayonets. We were not permitted to join in the pursuit but moved back and got a fresh supply of ammunition, then moved to our position on the right. I took no farther part in the fight that day though 1 or 2 of our Cos. were engaged in a slight skirmish about sundown. I was considerably exposed and many a brave man fell close by me yet I was suffered to escape. I witnessed a fine cavalry fight just at sun down. There were 5 or 6 Regts. [sic] on each side. It was a most magnificent sight I ever saw. Our cavalry was victorious. We were engaged more or less each day till the close of the fight but were in no general engagements but were skirmishing almost constantly to the close, but nothing of special interest occurred.

During all this time we lay in line when not engaged without fire and most of the time it was raining, or quite cold, freezing pretty hard at night. We suffered considerable but not a man got sick during the time in our Regt, notwithstanding the exposure. On Tuesday after the fight, we sent our burying parties. I went out with them though not on the detail, Col. Carlin gave me permission to accompany. My reason for wanting to go was Corp. Wm. Nash was killed and he was a neighbour [sic] at home and I wished to see him have as decent an interment as possible under the circumstances, which I did. He was shot in the left side under the arm, the ball coming out about one inch to the right of the right nipple, killing him instantly. He was shot on the retreat. He had partly turned round and was in the act of firing when he was stricken down. I had him buried in

a wood near where he fell and placed a board at his head with his name, Co. and Regt. carved on it. I write this for the benefit of any of his friends who may enquire of him.

Alfred Dillman is missing. He was probably taken prisoner. I have no more to add. I am in the enjoyment of good health. I hope you are all the same. I want you to write soon. Tell Ann to write. I wrote to Doc first because I thought you would soonest get the word that way from me. Give my love to all. I will write John and Ann as soon as I get anything to write. Give my love to Sam and Amanda. Tell them to write, too. I can scarcely write to all but when I do write none of you are forgotten.

Give my love to Pap and Mother. Tell them God has most wonderfully preserved me through scenes of danger and though many fell upon my right hand and upon my left yet by His Mercy I suffered no harm for which I hope I am not unthankful. He also gave me strength and courage sufficient for the hour of trial to enable me to discharge my duty in amount acceptable to those in command for which I would thank Him.

May God Bless and protect you all is the earnest prayer of your affectionate brother

John Russell