

Captain Wesley Porter Andrus, 42nd Illinois

Tullahoma Campaign Letter

“All In Our Favor”: A Federal Officer in the Midst of the Tullahoma Campaign

After four days of marching in nearly constant rain and sticky Tennessee mud, Capt. Wesley Porter Andrus of the 42nd Illinois spent Sunday, June 28, 1863, in camp attending to one of a soldier's most mundane tasks: washing his muddy clothes in the Duck River. It being a Sunday and his activities reminding him of domestic life, Andrus thought of his mother, Lucina, back in his home state of New York. After reveille that night, he sat down by candlelight and wrote her the following letter.

Captain Andrus and the 42nd Illinois had already seen much service. Andrus (also spelled Andrews) was born in 1834 in Yates County, New York, and moved to Illinois with his younger brother, Samuel, before the war. Mustering into service as first lieutenant of Company I in July 1861 (Samuel enlisted as a sergeant), Andrus followed the fortunes of the regiment in the Western Theater. The regiment spent its first winter in Missouri and earned praise for its actions in securing Island No. 10 on the Mississippi River in April 1862. As part of Sheridan's division at Stones River, the 42nd Illinois held a critical point near the Wilkinson Pike, suffering more than 200 casualties before being driven back. Sheridan's division emerged from Stones River with a reputation as one of the best fighting divisions in the Army of the Cumberland, a reputation Andrus was determined to preserve. He was promoted to the rank of captain in April 1863 and given command of Company H.

As the Civil War approached its turning point at Gettysburg and Vicksburg, Captain Andrus and his comrades of the Army of the Cumberland were also doing their part to turn the fortunes of the war in favor of the Union.

Andrus' letter to his mother

In bivouac near Tullahoma, Tennessee

June 28, 1863, 10 p.m.

Dear mother,

I intended to have written you before I left camp, but I did not find time to do so. I therefore seize this, my first opportunity, to perform that pleasant task. The grand advance of the Army of the Cumberland commenced on the morning of the 24th instant; we moved in three columns with McCook's corps (ours) on the right, Thomas' corps in the center, and Crittenden's on the left. We have met with more or less resistance along the whole of our front, but nothing as yet approaching to a general engagement. Our

division (Sheridan's) has not yet been brought into action, as we are being held in reserve. General Rosecrans has given our gallant little Phil the post of honor as he had shown himself capable of filling at Stones River. The enemy is contesting our advance obstinately and several sharp engagements have taken place, all of which have resulted in our favor.

We have taken a battery and at the least estimate over 1,000 prisoners. Four hundred of Wheeler's cavalry were captured yesterday, and I must say for them that they are the finest looking lot of butternuts I have yet seen. They are nearly all large men and look fleshy and healthy; they have not that gaunt and woebegone look which is the usual characteristic of Rebel troops. I talked a little with some of them. They said that General Wheeler was close by when they were taken and if he was not captured, too, it was because our troops could not distinguish him from the rest of them. They seem sanguine as to their ability to whip us Yankees as they invariably dominate us and establish their independence.

I asked one of them what they thought of our arming the Negroes against them. "We will kill every one of them we can get hold of," was his reply. "Will you?" said I. "Good, we have got 400 fine fellows to retaliate with," I very coolly remarked. "Unfortunate foreigner," (he was a Dane) I continued, "you are a prisoner at a very precarious period if your policy shall prove to be that adopted by your government for, mark you, every Negro you kill after surrender or capture, a white Rebel soldier hangs!" I said this quite loud so that as many of the Rebels as possible might hear me. It made the eyes of a good many of them stick out, but not one of them made any reply. The Danish gentleman thereafter subsided.

The country is very hilly and there are a great many gaps and knolls of which the enemy are not slow to avail themselves to check our progress. We are pressing them hard, however, and driving them slowly but steadily. Our effective force is between 50,000 and 60,000 and as good soldiers as there are in the world. This army was never in so good fighting condition as at the present time notwithstanding the drenching rain storms that have soaked us through and through both night and day since we left camp. I would like to be in one battle when it did not rain just to see how it would seem. Nevertheless, great enthusiasm prevails among the men. They are all tried soldiers and eager to smell burnt gunpowder again and listen to the Eolian harp-like music of bullets. They have unbounded confidence in their General and are anxious to avenge the loss of their comrades who fell at Stones River. If we have a general engagement, and I don't see how it can be avoided, it will be one of the most hotly contested of the war for this army will fight, and there is no mistake.

It wounds our pride to think that Lee and his Rebel hordes should have the audacity to treat with such supreme contempt the arms of the Union which is so emphatically manifested by his movement into Pennsylvania, recklessly exposing his communications to the Army of the Potomac. The audacity of that movement has no parallel in the history of the world. Oh, for a leader like Charles the 12th, Frederick the

Great, or Napoleon! But I fear it would do us no good if we had the best general that ever lived; I fear he would be immolated. I do fear it. But I am a soldier and must not talk so. History will pronounce judgment in due time, and "ours is not to reason why, ours but to do and die, freedom's true defenders."

We must leave all to an overruling Providence hoping that all may yet be well. Whatever my fate may be in the approaching contest, my first wish is that our arms may triumph. If I fall, I die in a good cause. Dulce est pro patria mori. [Latin: It is sweet to die for your country.] I have told you many times in whom I place my reliance and I have not made a new choice of masters.

P.S. If there are any "peace men" up there in New York, give them my disregards and tell them General Lee commanding the C.S.A. in Pennsylvania very respectfully desires their august presence in convention at Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on the 4th of July 1863 to determine upon what terms the states of Pennsylvania and Maryland shall be retained in the Union. [end of letter]

The 42nd Illinois did not see action during the balance of the Tullahoma campaign, the entire brigade only losing one man wounded. Later that year, the 42nd Illinois would find battle again, losing more than half of their number at Chickamauga. Andrus was discharged in May 1864 and returned home. The following year he moved to Michigan, perhaps at the behest of his comrades in Company H, which was comprised entirely of Michiganders. Wesley and his brother Samuel married two sisters (Alice and Ella Thomas) and went into the hardware business together at Cedar Springs, Michigan. Captain Andrus passed away in 1898 and is buried at Elmwood Cemetery in Cedar Springs.