

John McCabe's Bloody Contest

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44th ANNIVERSARY OF STONE [sic] RIVER

Interesting Story of Bloody Contest written by John McCabe on the Battlefield

This, the 31st of Dec. and tomorrow, the 1st of Jan. is the 44th anniversary of the memorable battle of Stone [sic] River, during the Civil war and in commemoration of that battle and the participation of one of our fellow citizens who wrote to his family the following letter a few days after the battle giving a graphic description of that awful struggle, we republish the letter which appeared in the Daily Citizen twelve years ago believing it will be read by many new readers with as much interest as when first made public. The letter follows:

Headquarters on The Battlefield. January 5, 1863

Dear Wife and Children: The great battle of Stone [sic] River is over and I am alive, thank God! I wrote to you last Sunday and told you of the hardships we passed through marching from Nashville to Stuard [sic] Creek, where we laid in camp all day Sunday, when I wrote to you last.

Well, I will tell you what I can about the battle. It was the first one that our regiment was in and would be glad if it would be the last one. At 7 o'clock the bugle blew "Fall in!" and we formed in line of battle on one side of the creek, and the "Johnnies" were on the other side. The command was, "Forward, march!" We started in line of battle. The order was forward, and we had to go. We went. The creek was frozen over and we had to wade it that cold morning; but we wouldn't have cared for that so much if the rebels had not been shooting at us. We got wet up to our waists. We marched all day in line of battle, over bushes, fences and streams. It was a hard day on the Eighty-four. It was a fight all day. The skirmish line firing continually. We camped on the battlefield that night. It was very cold. We had no blankets, nothing but the clothes we had on our backs. I didn't think so much about the cold as I did about the "Johnnies." We moved around considerably getting in position. Tuesday the rebels had made a stand here, and every man knew what was coming. The 84th was on picket Tuesday night. Wednesday morning we were relieved and thought we would have a soft snap. Our colonel ordered us out in line and made us a little speech; told us the hard battle was coming and this would be our first battle and to remember what State we were from. He said: "If there was one in the regiment that thought he wouldn't go through the fight, come to him and he would give him a pass to go to the rear." I would have given my right arm to go back

to the rear that morning, though I would not say so. In less than 30 minutes from the time we broke ranks we were in the fight. The "Johnnies" had surprised McCook on our right. Though they were pressing our men hard we knew from the firing that we would soon be in it. I had time to say a short prayer and thank God. The Lord answered that prayer and I don't believe there was a man in the regiment but what prayed that morning.

About this time the "Johnnies" were coming, driving our men out; we were demoralized and panic stricken; our hardest struggle was along the pike. The line of battle was about eight miles long and we were in the center. Here I had a little of experience. We were ordered to lay down and fire at will; I could not get my gun to go off; I laid on my back, picking powder in the tube of my gun in order to get it to shoot. In 10 or 15 minutes we were ordered to our feet and forward. Charley Roberts was wounded; I saw him fall; I ran and got hold of his gun and then I was all right.

Our regiment opened a brisk fire upon them as soon as it came into position, which told upon the enemy across the pike, as we could easily see in the course of the next half hour. Col. Grose, our brigade commander, retired to the left of our regiment to make room for the battery, which swept the advancing columns of the enemy as they charged up toward the cedar woods. The regiment immediately on the right of our [sic] fired briskly for awhile and temporarily maintained their position; but in the course of an hour they began to fall back, which gave the enemy a strong position in the thick cedar wood on our right. Now the balls came upon us in a perfect shower from that direction. Our regiment was now terribly exposed, especially on the right, for the enemy was coming in upon us through the thick cedar, giving us a perfect enfilading fire. After enduring in this position, most withering fire for some time, perhaps an hour, and when the enemy were within about sixty yards, the right of the regiment wered [sic] so as to front the enemy and we again fought desperately, every man working as though his life depended upon his own exertion. The enemy continued to advance and was gradually turning our left flank.

The "Board of Trade" battery was all the while throwing shell and grape and canister over our right and Mendenhall's battery over left sweeping trees, underbrush and the advancing enemy down at each discharge. The enemy was pouring in upon us a most galling fire as we lay in this position. The balls fell like hail in a hard storm. At last when we were the only regiment remaining west of the pike the order came to retire, which was obeyed promptly.

The "Board of Trade" battery saved us very much as we were falling back, and the officers and men deserve great credit. Our greatest loss was at the ledge of rocks near the pike, and in falling back to the railroad 25 of our regiment fell dead and scores were wounded. Our regiment rallied on the west side of the railroad, where they were under fire for six long hours. We had shot all of our ammunition away and we were released from the front. We marched back to the rear, probably a mile, stacked arms, and we only had 113 guns. Tears rolled down the cheeks of our brave colonel when he found

that one half our regiment were killed and wounded. We fell back in the woods, as our services were not needed in front. It was a good time for us. I was the ranking officer in our company; the colonel told me to take charge of the company. I had thrown away my overcoat during the day; it was very cold and we were not allowed any fire that long, cold night, and had no blankets.

At the end of the first day's battle at Stone [sic] River. I will give you the names of the killed and wounded in our company, as far as I can: Lieut. [sic] Wisdom, Mitchell, Rall, Wortman, Tuggle, Clark, Crane, Pelsor, Roberts, Spear, Shepher, Slyter, Waters, Edson, Mitchell, Deardorff, Patricks, Parks; 18 wounded in Company A. I can't give you the names of killed and wounded in the regiment.

Now I must tell you about brave George Yoken. He was color-bearer. He fell dead at about 10 o'clock. Col. Waters rushed to the spot, grabbed the old flag and brought it off of the battle field. Our brave colonel sat on his horse in the thickest of the fight as cool as he would be in an ordinary law suit. We were all happily disappointed in our colonel. He was as brave a man as ever rode a horse. Thursday there was no general engagement. Both of the armies moved around for position. There was some skirmishing. On Friday our brigade was sent across the river. We had no battery. At 2 o'clock we were attacked by rebels, Breckenridge's Corps. We had made some temporary breastworks and laid behind the works till the "Johnnies" came very close to us. The Eighty-Fourth and the Sixth Ohio sprang to their feet with a yell, gave them a volley, then loaded and fired at will. The Twenty-fourth Ohio, Thirty-sixth Indiana and Twenty-third Kentucky fell back in considerable confusion. The Eighty-fourth Ill. and the Sixth Ohio charged the rebels with a yell that could be heard three miles. The enemy gave back; we advanced and drove the rebels perhaps a mile. Finding our ammunition short, we fell back and went into camp for the night. This was Friday, the second day of January. It rained all night: I told you we had nothing only what we had on our backs. We were not allowed any fire and had nothing to eat only roasted coffee and hard tack.

Wife, now can you imagine what soldiers have to go through? It certainly is not for the \$13 a month; no not that, it must be for something else.

Think of a man lying or standing out all night in January during hard rainy night with not a spark of fire.

The next morning I started over the battlefield; I only went a short distance before I took sick. On turning back I saw the dead rebels lying in heaps.

My God, how long will this unholy war last!

This day's battle decided Stone [sic] River fight. It is said, that there were 2,100 rebels killed on Friday in 40 minutes. Saturday the sun came out and everything looked cheerful, only those poor fellows who had lost friends in the fight. It was evident that the rebels were leaving. Our army advanced to Murfreesboro about 8 O'clock and found the

rebels had gone. This ended one of the hardest fights of the war with all of our hardships. I am sure you are praying for me while I am doing my duty.

Now I will tell you something about the condition of the wounded during the great battle. On the morning of January 1, 1863, I helped gather together at one of the field hospitals all the wounded of the regiment, where their wounds were attended by Surgeon McDill, and others. There was not one-tenth of the wounds dressed. Most of them had to lie out of doors upon the damp ground, covered only with a blanket and having a good fire at their feet. As rapidly as possibly [sic] they were sent to hospitals at Nashville, but suffering as they were, they rode twenty-six miles in army wagons. On the 4th of January we visited the general field hospital, where the vast amount of pain and suffering made our hearts ache. Here were acres of ground covered with hospital tents, all of which we found full of men wounded in every possible manner. Nearly four thousand were there. One hundred brave men dying every day. Such is war. We can not describe its horrors. Excuse this long letter. I will write again in a few days.

From your dear husband,

John McCabe.