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WAR LETTERS SERIES

The Editors of *Blue & Gray* are pleased to present another informative war letter from the vast document collection of award-winning Civil War author and historian, Wiley Sword.

PVT. THOMAS C. POTTER, STANDART'S BATTERY B, 1ST OHIO LIGHT ARTILLERY VIVIDLY DESCRIBES THE BATTLE OF STONES RIVER

One of the finest "battle letters" extant from the terrible conflict at Stones River (Murfreesboro, Tenn.) on December 31, 1862, and January 2, 1863, was written by a "high" private, Thomas Corwin Potter, of Capt. William E. Standart's Battery B, 1st Ohio Light Artillery. The unit served in Brig. Gen. John N. Palmer's division of the Army of the Cumberland, led by Maj. Gen. William S. Rosecrans. Together with the letter of Capt. Henry Haymond, 18th U. S. Infantry, dated January 7, 1863 (in the Charles S. Pearce, Jr. Collection at Navarro College, Corsicana, Tex.) it is one of the best descriptions of the battle yet discovered.

Private Potter's remarkable affinity for writing and telling a story in vivid detail is clearly apparent. Yet this attribute was abruptly ended with Potter's death by the accidental premature discharge of his cannon at the Battle of Chickamauga in September 1863. Fortunately many of Potter's letters have survived, providing a graphic insight to the wartime experiences of a soldier who was present amid some of the most dramatic events of the war.



William S. Rosecrans, USA

which lasted until dark, when we went into camp on the same ground. The only casualty of our company was John Blanchard, seriously injured by a premature discharge.

Saturday (27th) [We] formed our line soon after sunrise; drove the enemy before us with slight loss on our side, [and] went into camp that night within 10 miles of Murfreesboro. Here we stay[ed] until Monday morning, the 29th, when we pushed forward, the enemy disputing every inch of ground. [We] went into camp with our line formed and skirmishers out before the Rebel line of earthworks, [and] within some 2-1/2 miles of Murfreesboro.

Tuesday (30th) [We] formed our line some four miles in length. [There was] heavy skirmishing along the whole line all day [with] very heavy artillery firing all day from both sides. Our casualties of the day [were] one of our wheel horses shot through the heart by a musket ball. [We] camped for the night on the same ground as the night before.

Wednesday morning the 31st. This morning the grand ball opened on our right. Our battery was stationed at the point known as the Cedar point, on the right center. Our line at this point was formed in the shape of a crescent. Our brigade [Brig. Gen. Charles Cruft's] formed the advance. As you would say, [it] was the point most advanced. In our rear was the cedar thicket. In our front and right was a large corn field. Joining this on the left was the noted cotton field, through which the Rebel masses [i.e. Chalmers' Mississippians], maddened [page 2] and half crazy by whisky and gunpowder—which had been dealt out to them in large quantities—made charge after charge up to within 30 yards of the muzzles of our guns in solid columns, despite shot, shell, and canister that tore great gaps in their ranks. But [their ranks] were quickly closed up again, and a perfect storm of musketry [hit them].

In Camp 2-1/2 miles from Murfreesboro, Tennessee
Jan. 12th 1863

Dear brother and sister: Perhaps you may be interested to know what part our battery took in the late great drama before Murfreesboro. I propose to give below the outlines of our movements since leaving Nashville up to the evacuation of Murfreesboro by the enemy's force under Gen. [Braxton] Bragg. We left our camp near Nashville Friday morning, Dec. the 26th, our brigade taking the advance on the Mur[freesboro] road. We found the enemy in considerable force near the little town of Lavergne, some 14 miles from Nashville, [and] determined to dispute our farther advance. This soon brought on a splendid artillery skirmish

"When so close to our guns they pulled their hats over their eyes so that they could not see the flash of our pieces, and moved up as steadily as if they were on the parade ground."

Never did I see men face the music [like this]. When so close to our guns they pulled their hats over their eyes so that they could not see the flash of our pieces, and moved up as steadily as if they were on the parade ground. After our ammunition was all expended, we were ordered to the rear to replenish and refill our empty [ammunition] chests. Until that time I did not notice the peculiar form that our division had assumed—Gen. [James S.] Negley, on our right, had fallen back, thus uncovering our right flank. And two Rebel brigades occupied that ground that he left. Our division had assumed the form of a triangle, and was fighting on four fronts. Everything on our right had fallen back, and [also] one battery on our left, and two on our right had been captured by the enemy. And as we passed to the rear over the ground where we were in camp the night before, we passed over large numbers of the enemy's dead that had fallen in our rear. We were held as a reserve the remainder of the day. Our casualties of the day: Sergeant George Wolf of Cleveland, struck by a shell—killed instantly; Orderly Sergeant L. T. Thompson (Cleveland), struck by a spent James solid shot (weighing 12-1/2 pounds) [and] has since died; John Elliott (Troy) wounded in [the] small of his back (I afterward found him dead on the field); Samuel Ruple (Cleveland) shot through the neck by a ball from a spherical case shot from a 6 pdr. & since died; and some 12 others wounded. I think that they will all recover. In this day's work we had 15 horses killed or disabled.

Thursday (New Year's Day) [There was] very heavy skirmishing along the whole line. This evening [January 1, 1863] our battery was sent out on picket to relieve the Chicago Board of Trade Battery. [page 3] We took our position; no. 1 and 2 and 3 pieces in the center, no. 4, 5 and 6 pieces were just to the right. From [their position] 400 yards distant, and on our left the 7th Indiana Battery

was formed on the same line with us. Our infantry support lay just to our rear under cover of the ridge on which we stood [this was the ridge overlooking McFadden's Ford on Stones River], while in front and about 600 yards distant running in a parallel line with us was a skirt of timber, which was in the hands of the enemy. Our skirmishers were about 100 yards in front of the battery. All night long we could hear the Rebels working on their entrenchments in the woods in front. Soon after daylight [on January 2nd] our skirmishers and theirs commenced amusing themselves by trying the accuracy of their rifles. Then the 7th Indiana B[attery] opened and drove their skirmishers back into the woods. Then one of Gen. Rosecrans' staff officers rode up and gave positive orders not to fire unless we saw large masses of the enemy. He had hardly rode out of sight when the Rebels opened on the 7th I[ndiana] A[rtilillery] with four batteries which they had masked in the woods during the night, and not more than 400 yards distant. Well, I have been in several warm places in my time, but this was a few degrees warmer than any place that I ever saw or imagined (in this everybody who saw or heard agreed with me). Within three minutes they drove every man away from the guns of the 7th Battery, and killed and crippled up the horses so that they were obliged to leave their guns on the field. They [the Rebels] then concentrated their fire on our three guns; we were laying still on the ground a few minutes with a terrific storm of shot, shell, and canister flying over and around us. It seemed just as if they would sweep us from the ground, when a shell struck just ahead of us and filled our faces with mud. This was more than Lieutenant [Norman A.] Baldwin could stand. He sprang up with, "come boys and give them [hell]." We opened on them with a will, but the [page 4] infernal missiles [continued] howling around us. After we had fired about ten rounds a piece, the lieutenant ordered us to fall back, or we would lose every man and horse that [we] all had. By

A 19th century image of McFadden's Ford on Stones River. In the distance is the ridge where Rosecrans' chief of artillery, Capt. John Mendenhall, placed 58 guns, which helped turn the tide for the Union against a major Confederate assault on January 2, 1863.



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April 28 - May 1 • In the Footsteps of "Stonewall" Jackson, III - based in Fredericksburg, Va. Featuring tours of Jackson sites at Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville, including Jackson death site, led by Frank O'Reilly. Talks and panels featuring Dennis Frye, John Hennessy, Greg Mertz and others. Bonus bus tour of Wilderness and Spotsylvania led by Greg Mertz.

May 21 • Lincoln Symposium - Chambersburg, Pa. Panels and talks with assassination expert Ed Steers; Marton Gordon on Lincoln in the Black Hawk War; David Valuska on the Emancipation Proclamation as a war measure; Kevin Rawlings as Walt Whitman discusses "Walt Whitman's Reminiscences" of Lincoln and others.



July 27 - 31 • In the Footsteps of the "Killer Angels" and Hidden Gettysburg - Chambersburg, Pa. Tours, panels, talks, exhibits and music featuring James McPherson, Ed Bearss, Alan Nolan, Tom Desjardin, Richard Sauers, Joseph Whitehorse and many more. View sites associated with Buford, Chamberlain and Longstreet as well as many off the beaten path areas of the battlefield. Bonus tour with Ed Bearss follows Ewell's advance from Winchester to Chambersburg.

November 4-5 • The Union Army on the Roads to Gettysburg - Chambersburg, Pa. Talks and tour with John Schildt and Jeffery Wert. Bus tour will follow the route of the Army of the Potomac from Edwards Ferry to Gettysburg. Sites visited include Meade's headquarters and Custer promotion site near Frederick, camp of the 11th Corps and Howard's headquarters at Emmitsburg, Union and Confederate campsite at Union Mills, Meade's headquarters and signal station in Taneytown, first day's action at Gettysburg and much more.



October 21 - 23 • The Irish and the Germans in the Civil War - Chambersburg, Pa. Talks and panels featuring David Valuska, Mike Cavanaugh, Bud Livingston and others. Bus tour of Irish and German regimental sites at Antietam and Gettysburg. Concert of traditional Irish music.

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this time, two of our batteries had taken position on the ridge about 600 yards in our rear, and opened on the batteries on our front. We succeeded in disentangling our dead horses. We got our piece back under cover of the other batteries. No. 2 piece, the boys pulled off with one horse (5 being killed on that piece), and no. 3 had to leave their piece on the ground until we got ours under cover, and went back and pulled it off by hand. Our loss on this occasion: Chauncey Lyons (driver from Lorain Co., Ohio) struck by a solid shot, killed instantly; N. Lerone, struck by a fragment of a shell slightly; Wm. Grant, slightly, and 7 horses killed. For my part, I considered myself fortunate to escape with my hair and eyebrows singed by the explosion of a 12 pdr. shell. I chanced to have one of Waverly's novels in my overcoat pocket, and the same explosion set it on fire. The fragments of the shell I avoided by throwing myself flat on the ground within three feet of it. As the boys term it, "[when in] comes the [shell] drop down on it." Well, we refilled our ammunition chests and picked up horses enough to make up for our lost ones. About 4 o'clock p.m. the enemy made a furious assault on our left wing nearly half of a mile. As half of our battery was still out to the front, we were not ordered out until sometime after the engagement had grown pretty lively.

When we arrived on the ground, our reserves were just ordered forward to charge the Rebel masses that were moving through a large field in great force. They stayed their ground like veterans, but they could not stand such a fierce artillery fire and a charge at the same time. They gave way in some confusion, and fell back to their first line of earthworks. From [this] we soon dislodged them, by bringing up nearly 50 [page 5] pieces of artillery to enfilade their rifle pits. It was here that Colonel [Timothy R.] Stanley's brigade charged and captured four pieces of the famous Washington white horse battery of New Orleans. Our boys drove them in splendid style until darkness closed in their favor, and saved them from a perfect rout. If we had had two hours more of daylight, we would have went into Murfreesboro. Thus closed the 2nd day of Jan. ('63).

Saturday the 3rd. Our reveille this morning was the deep toned thunder of Rebel artillery, as they opened on our camp with four batteries—probably as a cloak to cover their evacuation. Heavy skirmish firing along our whole line. The ball closed by a heavy musketry engagement, commencing at 6 P.M. and closing at 9:30 P.M. [It] was occasioned by our infantry advancing down the pike, driving the Rebels from their first line of rifle pits. It was a splendid [page 6] sight from where we were on a ridge, nearly half a mile in rear of our men, with an open field between us. It appeared like two long sheets of flame, with now and then a change of scene as forth belched red artillery [fire]. The only thing disagreeable to a spectator was sometimes a few rifle bullets would sing along overhead, far back in the timber.

Sunday morning the 4th; All quiet. Murfreesboro had been evacuated during the previous night. After breakfast, I started out to take a view of our first day's battleground, which was about one mile distant. I passed along musing on our probable loss. The field was alive with little silent groups. 'Twas plain to see their occupation: burying their fallen comrades. [page 7] [After] reaching the cedars, passed through them and came out near where our battery was engaged. I passed along among a group of our own and the enemy's dead, when a familiar face, upturned and ghostly, startled me. A nearer view assured me that I was not mistaken. It

was the earth. The arms of poor John Elliott
 ... his face and hastened
 ... Two of his messmates
 retained with me, and selecting a quiet spot,
 committed him to his last resting place —
 peace to his ashes. He was a noble hearted
 boy, a brave soldier, one that was beloved
 and respected by both officers and men.
 Sister, please pardon me for passing in sit-
 le- ... ghastly details of this
 fatal ... this great military drama.
 I refer you to the periodicals for the se-
 quence, and yet you draw on [page 8] your
 imagination for the balance. Well, on Mon-
 day, the 5th, we moved to our present posi-
 tion. Where the Rebels are now is more than
 I know, but madam rumor says that they
 are ... to see us, but I think Gen.
 Bragg has seen just as much of Gen.
 Rosecrans at present as he wants to. Well,
 our army has implicit confidence in our gen-
 eral commanding. He was with us in the
 thickest of the fight, everywhere directing
 the movements himself. Our army fairly
 adore ... Well, I must close. I have writ-
 ten to ... in haste. I guess it will take
 you some time to read it. I wrote a few hur-
 ried lines to you from the field. Did you
 get it? Write soon. Remember me to all in-
 quiring friends.

Your brother,
 T.C.

Total number of shots fired from the bat-
 tery 1670.

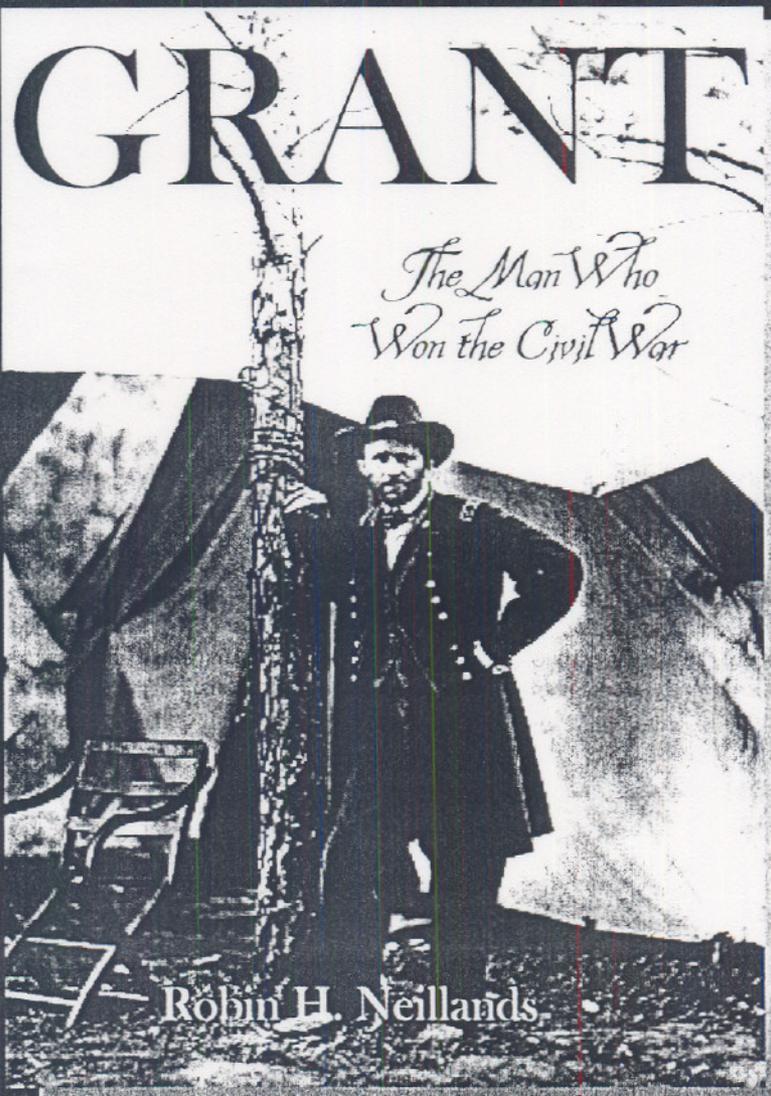
*Pvt. Thomas Corwin Potter enlisted at
 age 20 on September 5, 1861 in Battery B,
 1st ... of Artillery. He served with his
 unit in combat at Mill Springs, Perryville,
 Stones River and Chickamauga. On Sep-
 tember 20, 1863, at the Battle of Chicka-
 mauga, Private Potter was mortally injured
 when both of his arms were blown off by
 the premature discharge of his gun. He died
 the following morning at 3:00 A.M., and
 was ... in the National Cemetery
 at Chattanooga.*

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