

69 Dearborn Street

Chicago,
Sep. 17, 1903

E. B. Stevens

Southport N. Carolina

Bro.

I send you further notes on the war up nearly to the closing in for the night of the first days fight of Stones River.

You will find the subject more interesting if you like the details of a bloody battle rather than so much written of going into and out of camp, or the long marches to the south to engage the enemy on such historical fields as this and other fields presented to my mind. I am well and work hard. Hope you all in same condition. If of the latter item, or more of a success

Yours very Resp.

S. C. Stevens

We came onto the field unheralded on the afternoon of Tuesday the 30th and went into camp at the bend of the river, where from a westerly direction the stream turned abruptly north.

High banks are on either side. Here it presented to my mind that night from this point of observation, a rare view in the silent course; a placid, smooth stream, in silent contrast to the fierce encounter so soon to be made along its shores, high bluffs, and deep embankments, where the blood of friend and foe would mingle with its onward flow on the coming morrow.

The bluff on the South side of Stone River, where our camp was located rose far above the water's edge. Toward the eastward the ground fell off, at no great distance from the camp, where, there was a convenient and commodious place to water the horses, and also attain water for our camp uses.

Here was a pretty spot. The entire camp was situated in a quiet and pleasant nook. Adjoining on the east and toward the south was larger timber or woods. A small second growth of young pine trees covered the ground.

The Captain in coming into "battery" for the night, placed the guns to face the rear, pointing their muzzles to the bluff across the river and down the stream in its path toward the north. Why, he placed the battery in this position instead of toward the front, was one of the many excentricities and devices of a superior officer. I as a private soldier at the time had no need to ask. This was the first of the many events or records of that battle-field, now, to many

closed on that blood field, as since forever. And to one the question of the days of fighting—from one movement to another on the field the unanswered query—why?

To the left of the guns, was a little depression in the ground. This spot was covered with a dense growth of young trees. Here the boys built a booth of boughs; had our suppers and sang songs till the order for “taps” was given. If the time chosen had not been on the eve of a big battle, and on the outlook of the field, the scene would have been gay and the view picturesque, or if the elements had not so quickly destroyed its beautiful surroundings. Not unlike the perishing of those beautiful lives, who marched out of camp in glad hopes on that morning the last of the year of 1862, and to them the end of a soldiers’ dream of victory and eventual peace to a distracted country.

the Orders came for us to lie near the gun that night. Gathering a lot of the pin boughs from the limbs of the young trees, I laid them on the ground, by the limber of the gun; over these we spread our blankets. Jewett was still my partner. These pines make the sweetest of beds and grow on nearly all the poor spots of earth throughout the south. Is easily obtained and we made frequent uses of this kind of a mattress to keep ourselves off the damp, or wet ground in our sleeping accommodations, whenever camping, without our regular camp equipage. We rested here with our heads near the front wheel of the gun, and our feet considerably lower on the sloping ground, We were not disturbed the entire night.

The call in the morning was made by L. .H. over in his “section” by word of mouth and communicated to our squad. There was no bugle call. It was just beginning to get light in the eastern sky—almost dark while feeding the horses.

At “breakfast call” I heard the report from the front. “Only forty killed in the trenches or on the firing line last night”

“Only forty!”—I thought to myself on that morning. God; only forty; but then one of those forty, or more, might include me, the next night. Such thoughts will come to the bravest of soldiers on the expectancy of the hour.

I have made an accompanying outline of the battleground and designated each of our encampments by an X and numbered them 1. 2. 3. 4 and 5 and also the positions we occupied on the field with this mark. These four are the most important, there were other points we occupied not marked. Also you will note the location of the winter quarters after the battle. The outline is not correctly spaced but will give my recollection of the more salient points of the field, after so long an interval.

In this account I will describe the camping nights and the strange events of the days, as they presented themselves to the vision from a common soldiers standpoint of view.

Many intelligent people have written up the glories and success attained on the field of battle. Others have tried to describe a days fighting and have signally failed.

I would have a regular army officer detailed at head-quarters and there receive all the reports at the hand of the General Commanding, and have the historical records made up from all parts of the field while the engagement was on, and lasted.

This should be made an official record at the time, and used only in the matter of history. In no wise compromising the acts of, or a hindrance to, the Generals movements on the field or

flanks. He should belong to the secret service department, and in any wise giving the enemy no information leading up to, their advantage or to their support. In moving out of the camp on Wednesday morning, we had to cross the railroad track, to gain a little eminence between the track and pike. The cannoneers, as usual, were ordered to the front to fill in with fence rails and earth around the ties and rails to form an easy crossing for the guns and caissons. Before this, and the time taken up in getting the battery over this obstruction, there was the sound of heavy firing of guns and musketry, like one long continued roll of the discharge of fire-arms, which seemed to come from only a short distance from the cedars to the west. Some shot and shell reached us before our arrival at the railway track. The Captain in his eagerness to get into position gave our section orders to come into battery, which order we obeyed promptly, and the other sections came into their positions, taking their places to our right. Our gun in this formation occupied the left, There was no enemy in sight.

I do not know who gave the Captain orders to fire. Being in the front I should have had some knowledge, or have seen an officer giving the direction to the opening shot. I think now, as I did at the time, the order to "load", fire in rapid succession, was given by the Captain, for which he was responsible to his superior officer. Our gun was apparently sighted at, and discharged toward, the line of an imaginary foe, far down and in the direction of the cedars, from the point, from whence, same the sound of heavy guns and other arms, on our first move across the field for position--on the opening of this target practice, it was sad, as well as amusing. At the first volley from the guns, all the horses on the field, and along the lines, took up a sorry neighing among themselves. Then they reared and wheeled, plunged and shook the discipline out of all, and everything in the rear of the guns.

As each gun was discharged up would go their heads again, taking along in another plunge their riders, now dismounted, clutching them by the bit. The postillions hung on to their charges, dragged hither, and thither over the field. The sergeant detailed an extra man to help me hold my horses in cheek, It was a heavy struggle to quiet them and the cannoneers was not pleased with the order.

My team never could be quieted while in the engagement or later on, become accustomed to the discharge of guns of any kind.

The amusing part on the field was the appearance of a score of rabbits disturbed by the shots and driven out of the bushes; over the ground in every direction. The call to ones comrade was, here he goes there he goes. Quite contrary to all goof military discipline and also for the time being, absolutely out of the soldiers thoughts possibly he had a big flight on hand, or that this was on the field of battle. And another thought came to me at that time, and others have told me since, that before the first shot or shell from the enemies guns came within range, was this fact, Why, they are shooting at me, and as one remarked by way of reply, yes, camn it man they want to kill us. Heretofore we were brothers the same country and one people.

This is not a drill ground now. This is not a grand parade, or the Generals royal salute. Why, it is death and destruction to all who come within the range of these deadly guns.

We had fired several rounds when General Rosecrans rode up toward the battery, on our right, He was accompanied by his chief of Staff Gen. Gareshe, who was killed later in the day; his head was blown off by a shot from the enemies guns while sitting on his horse at the Generals side.

We ceased firing at the General's approach. He seemed flushed and excited when he returned the Captains' salute. Under his orders we moved across the pike and came to a halt in back did not open fire from this position; moved in a south west direction. Our guns had been firing almost due west.

Under the General's supervision our orders were to occupy a commanding position overlooking the brow of a hill. On reaching this point we came into "battery", our gun in its true position on the right. The cannonading in the cedars had ceased and if we had had a line of battle at that time, all was quiet along the entire front. In passing on toward the advance to this new post assigned us; on our right, in the open ground in a slight depression of the land, lay a dead horse, a broken caisson, or a disabled gun carriage, and other evidences strewn along the ground, of a bad disaster, a general rout to the men on our side, in an engagement, by an unknown battery, located in this position before us. The fight could not have been in the morning, and there was no action in the morning in this direction at this time we were sighting the guns and engaged in firing into, and beyond the cedars.

The loss was previous to that hour, and our men were worsted, and the General probably was acquainted with this knowledge, of the field when he promptly placed us here to fight, and knew the enemy was then a close range.

The General accompanied by his chief of staff and escort, as soon as the battery had come into position descended in front of our guns waving his hat for us to fire over his head. We opened at once. Whence the commander's escape was probably around to our right. If we had been firing from our first position as we did toward the sound of the guns in the cedars, we certainly should have killed our General. It was over this ground, in that part of the field, he and advanced after placing us in our position.

Possibly we did great havoc in the ranks of our men, during their mad retreat on the right wing of the army, forced back in an unfortunate surprise to our troops, by so fierce an attack of the enemy in the early morning hour. Whether this be true, or not, no one was cashiered and the matter never spoken of afterwards, only among ourselves--It was very evident the enemy had exhausted themselves. Or our opening up at this juncture from our target practice position with such a brisk cannonading a halt was made in their further movements.

So that if it was a mistake on the zeal or partisanship of States, and made it possible for Rosecrans to reform his line of battle, from a Southeast firing line, to a south west direction, the position in which he placed us giving the direction to fire.

This was indeed good generalship, and if true was immediately taken advantage of by the General in person.

What did it signify if our men on the retreat were slaughtered in front of our guns, down in the cedars,--if the tide of battle was staid, and our General able to reform his lines and reinstate his reserves.

In coming into position under the direction of the General commanding, it was evident he knew to what point he was leading us. And, that he was familiar with the ground and knew in advance of this position. That it was a dangerous and important post, and the rallying point on the field.

It is a truthful fact, that during the time the Board of Trade Battery held this position on the field, that they also occupied a position of trust, which was not betrayed; and the true key to the battlefield of Stone River.

It was evident the enemies purpose, from the position they then occupied to shake our lines and endeavor to cover our line of retreat, by the pike, in our rear, toward Stuarts Creek and beat back our retreating troops with great slaughter, against the shores of the northwest bend of the Stone river, and coup up the Generals remaining forces to a possible surrender.

The events of the morning, if my premises, are correct to show, that-if, in the Generals mind the Captain blundered in the opening shots in the morning--He would place him in a position where if he succeeded, his (Rosecrans) lines were secure, or in the event if Stokes was killed and his battery annihilated, at this deadly post his blunder for which some one was responsible, would never be learned or discovered. In either event the opportunity offered a solution of the affairs on the field at this hour about nine o clock Wednesday morning December 31st.

At the signal, the opening shot being given, the other guns opened in regular order, directing their fire in a south-westerly direction.

The maneuvers of each gun squad are executed alike,

At the order "Commence firing" all the men take their places beside the gun at attention. At the word "load" the man who thumbs the piece steps to the side of the gun, presses with his left thumb, encased in a thumb-stall, the mouth of the touchhole of the piece. The ramrod in the hands of the rammer, sponges out the gun by creating a vacuum kills the fire if by accident, any live substance was left in the gun in a previous discharge.

At the muzzle on the left of the piece a man receives the powder cartridge from the ammunition man. This is inserted into the mouth of the gun. The rammer sends it home. And the shot or shell received in the same manner also placed in the muzzle of the gun and rammed down into the powder charge. The man with the lanyard, during the movements of the others, makes ready his fuse to insert at the place, when the man who thumbed the piece removes his thumbs, Drawing his lanyard taut waits at the word, "fire" he gives the lanyard a strong pull, the fuse ignites the powder, and the gun is discharged.

Each man "Breaks off" from the right and the left, so the shock of the concussion in the discharge of the gun will not affect his person. Then the cannon recoils and the piece rolled into position by hand and sighted by the gunner and the practice goes on till the gun is silenced or disabled, or the cannoneers are killed or wounded or the command "cease firing" is given. At the opening of the fight all the battery became engaged. The enemy replied at once, with a shower of musketry; many Minnie bullets carried far over the field to the rear. We had encountered a true enemy, who had the range of our position, possibly occupied the ground on the front, when the unknown battery was silenced and defeated. The engagement became general.

After the command "Commence firing", then the sergeant of each gun, without distinction, handles his men and gun in his own way.

The firing was rapid and continuous and probably did great execution.

Then there cam a lull and hostilities ceased. During the interval one of the enemy came into our line.. When I saw him he was seated; seems to be weary, on a little hillock in front of

our guns, near to the edge of the bushes to the left of our position at that time, to those with whom he talked, he said he was a rebel major. and disliked the service on the other side and had come over to us. Would gladly lay down his arms and be pleased to fight with us on our side, I could not leave my post, but I looked upon him, as a rebel spy--Never heard more of him, or saw him again. Maybe it was he, if he returned to the enemies lines, to his friends, to whom he gave us the name of the h--l fired battery, for by that name the battery was known long before this post was evacuated by us.

It was not long that the firing ceased, In the meantime reserves of Infantry were brought up, and formed in the rear, and to the left of our position, as a support, with instructions to lie down, with guns in position. They presented to one's view a long blue sinuous line, by placing them along the inequalities of the field. This part of the ground presented in the position to which they were assigned, very little protection to their entire line, from a raking fire from the enemies' guns, unless it was made possible, without exposure by hugging the earth.

The signal by bugle call was given to "commence firing" anew.

There was a rapid work with Schenkle shell, and percussion shot, and an incessant rear from our guns was kept up along their entire front.

The smoke became so dense, that one of the ammunition boys carrying up the cartridges from the rear to the front, came near the mouth of one of the guns, just as was being discharged. He was blown down the hill in front of the pieces and narrowly escaped being killed. I saw him as he came back through the lines in a dazed, blinded, burnt condition going toward the rear.

Sargt. Adams before this, was badly wounded in the foot by a cannonball from the enemies guns just as he was "breaking off" preparatory to the discharge of his gun. He was taken to the right of our position behind the bushes, and trees which was such a grand protection to number Ones men, and the horses attached to the other limbers. Afterward he was removed to some old house, in the rear where, so early in the morning, a hospital was already established for the relief and treatment of the wounded, of our men, and the 88th Illinois. When the cannon is loaded and discharged and after its recoil and before loading it is run up into position by hand. The cannoneers take their places at the word "load"; the piece is sighted and the action is kept up continuously.

By the carelessness of Sergt. Deane in the excitement, he took no notice of necessary recoil of his gun, and at each successive discharge of his ordinance the wheels of his gun carriage became embedded in the soft earth. As this practice continued, the wheels sunk deeper and deeper in the mud. The axle finally gave way and orders came to us postillions to "limber up" our gun.

To do this was to "mount", turn with the horses our limber, and ride to the front. Wheel again near the gun as possible, and then back the teams into position, where the cannoneers could fasten the trail of the gun to the limber. To accomplish this was to expose the horses, and their riders to a galling musketry fire, at the time, from the enemies guns. I came into full view in making the "wheel" in limbering up" from that bad, bold eminence on this occasion.

The order was obeyed and the feat accompanied in safety, to the horses and their riders, but to the chagrin of the Sergeant, who, with his men were left without a command.

Orders were given us, Maple Weeks, and myself, to take that gun well to the rear: we moved slowly as the gun would permit, in its disabled condition; taking the direction toward our camping place of the previous night, at the bend of the river. Passing the pike and cassion by railroad track, by an old dirt road, we came to a sharp turn in the road. A shot, a shell from the enemies lines, some distance now from the front, came whistling over the field.

At the rear of our gun, as we passed the turn in the road the shell struck an old tough stump, at this point, and tore it in pieces.

Coulkin, who did not belong to our section, was skulking behind following our piece, unable to stand in his place, at his own gun. In a fit of cowardice took this opportunity to retire from the field.

The shell hurtled over his head and struck the stump, which we had just passed, at his feet. In looking back to see where the shot struck, I discovered Conklin, and shall never forget his dazed condition, at so near an escape. So it was on that field, as dangerous in the far rear, as the in near front--I did not see him again in proximity to number one gun that day, Evidently he thought it not safe to follow along that line, "well to the rear" given in our orders.

We turned toward the left in the direction of the road, after the bursting of the shell, to reach the Nashville pike.

On the battlefield in the rear are strange objects met, and funny articles seen.

To mention anything, I saw on this field would cover all goods, and articles of a civilized country, and all the equipment and munitions of the civil war.

Red caps. Blankets, piano-covers, tools of all sorts, cookery of any description, muskets half cocked, with ramrods, sticking out of their muzzles--Swords without scabbards, Sabre and cartridge box belts cut in swain. knapsacks with their contents strewn on the ground; calico overcoats, cotton cloth, Trapping of cavalry horses, and broken down artillery horses, Pack saddles--camp. kettles, and musical instruments, and every kind of article used in domestic life, and the soldier in the camp or on the drill ground, thrown away by the retreating soldier, and the army followers, in their mad haste to get away from the front.

Here are mules hitched to Army wagons and ammunition trains, Heres to ambulances, and gun carriages and their cassions. Broken down animals turned out to die, all fly blown, and covered with vermin, wagons driven over the rough roads containing wounded men, hanging to the sides, or lay dying at the bottom, Orderlies on horseback with their messages in their belts and staff officers on fleet horses galloping from front to rear. Musicians--non combatants, Niggers--and stragglers of every kind, on foot, or on horseback all moving to the rear, without order or any apparent destination, but all the while moving on.

These objects and scenes I saw or met in the movement to the rear. And I thought of the difficulties, and obstacles to overcome, by the General up at the front;--planning his new lines, and in bringing up his reserves, if he had any, to renew the ever increasing fight---In this stream we followed till reaching the pike toward Stuarts Creek.

There was no further obstruction in this direction, to hinder us in a free movement to the rear. In going or passing down the pike at a careful pace another solid shot, this time, came for

over, and out of the woods, and struck a high rail fence, newly built, on the right of the road, in our advance; knocking down length after length of the rails, doing no other damage.

Soon after passing the spot where this last shot struck the fence, we turned off the pike, and came into the woods, at the end of the fields, which this new fence enclosed. Here in a depression, often found in the Southern woods, we drove the horses and halted in this secure place. Possibly secure, not exposed to chance shots of the enemy from which we had escaped in two instances, in the move to the rear. We probably started with the gun off the field, about eleven o'clock. It was now possibly two. We sat down on the ground and had our lunch or dinner from the contents of our haversacks. Maple and Weeks were for unhitching the horses and camping in this place for the night.

They said it was a safe retreat, and the gun could not be used, and the horses worn out. I did not agree with them, I was resolved that it was our duty to let the Captain know, where the gun was located--I could not bear the inactivity of this position, while the others were up to the front endangering their lives. They took sides against me--Told me they would not go to the front, when the orders were to "take that gun well to the rear" Beside here, they said, we are safe and they should stay. The discussion was warm--I told them if they would take off their horses, I would have the gun back to the front, by my team alone, and they could go into camp here or go down by the river side, where there was easy access to the water, for the animals. Further could I obtain their consent to do this nor could I, or had the right to unhitch their horses, and I would ride up to the front and report, They would not do this, or would they agree to let me take one of my horses off from the gun, and ride to the front. Then I told them plainly I would go up the pike on foot, to the battery, if they would look after my horses, and would remain here in this place where we were then located, so I might find them on my return. With some show of reluctance to this proposition they finally agreed, for they saw I was positive in actions--I started off afoot leaving my horses very regretfully while looking back, in gaining the pike, for never had left my team, in the hands of others without a command, beside it was a long walk and the time then near four o'clock, and in winter days, only a short time before the dark, to gain our batteries position. If the tide of battle had changed affairs, since the mornings fight how would I find the command, or get through the lines in the dark, if challenged by the General, or sentries on duty. To a cavalry or artillery man to be unhorsed one does not feel just right, This was my condition in coming out of the woods where I gained the pike. Passing up the road beyond the place where the shot struck the rail fence after having walked about a mile, I noticed coming out of the woods, to my right, a familiar dressed horsemen in artillery uniform, and struck the pike going in my direction, Hastening up to him, I found the soldier to be, the blacksmith, Ed Fennel, mounted on his little black horse. He was glad to see me and to hear from the battery, and surprised to hear of the misfortunes of the day and that number One gun was lying over in the woods, close by, in a disabled condition with Maples and Weeks in attendance.

I told him of the situation, explaining the matter fully, and that I wanted his horse to take me up to the front, so I could report to the Captain. Fennel was a kind fellow and saw at once the position I was in, and after considerable more talk, he declined to give me the animal. For then, he said, he would have no horse, and did not know where he could find the Forge. I told him I would give him my team to use, till I returned, in exchange for his horse, and that it was only a short distance from this place to where the boys were located. He said he did not like to be made a postillion, Then I told him he should take word up to Sergeant Dane, at the front, and let the Captain know, where the gun could be found. He did not relish the idea of going to the

front, so in the goodness of his heart he dismounted, and let me have his horse and all his accoutrements. On mounting I pointed over in the direction where he would find our gun.

And I started off in a fine gallop, congratulating myself on so fine a mount. and also gaining so decisive a victory, over these fellow, who did not dare to go to the front in fear of being shot.

I arrived at our old position, of the morning about sunset. Everything was quiet on the lines--I learned of the disasters in the killed and wounded of the battery boys, during the day, so soon after the retiring of our gun from the position on the right. I looked around for Captain Stokes, asked several where he was. Some one said he was down in the woods to the right, in our immediate front. I dismounted, and fastened the horse to the bushes, which protected us in the morning from the enemies fire.

I walked down, the hill under cover of the woods, and there to my surprise, I saw long lines of Infantry, five to seven men deep ranged along the sides of that hill, under cover of the woods to our front and right. I found the Captain--made my salute and told him where the gun could be found, and asked him if the orders were to bring up the gun to the front, He did not seem to me at the time, to intelligently understand, what I told him. Nor could he tell me my instructions in the situation. "Ges" was his reply at last, "bring up the gun." This was sufficient for me, having the Captains word, Again mounting Fennels horse, I rode briskly back to the location of the disabled gun. They had unhitched their horses and were going into camp for the night. I gave them the Captains orders--It was with difficulty, I could persuade them to "hitch up". I repeated to them the Captains order for us to bring the gun to the front. They were finally persuaded and very reluctantly made ready and we started on the return.

I was glad to see Fennel mount his horse and follow us. They never forgave me this authority over them, in my success up to the front.

We arrived safely at the battery long after dark.

Yours,

S. C. Stevens