

CHAPTER VIII.

Early In The Valley-----His Advance Into Maryland,
And Upon Washington-----March To Harper's Ferry-----
To Hillsboro-----Snicker's Gap-----Battle Of Snicker's
Ferry-----Wounding of Colonel Washburn-----Hard
Fight Of The Regiment On The Right-----Brave Conduct
Of Officers And Men-----List Of Casualties.

We felt at home, and we *were* at home, and among friends tried and true at Martinsburg, and nothing would have given us so much unalloyed happiness as to have been allowed to remain there until refreshed, clothed and rested, but this could not be, with a rebel army knocking at the gates of the capitol of the Nation, for on that very day, the 12th of July, Early's skirmishers were immediately in front of forts Stevens and De Russey, four miles north of the city of Washington, and as a historian says: "Toward evening their sharpshooters became so annoying, and their audacity so humiliating, that "General Augur dispatched a brigade of veterans, by the Seventh street road, to drive them off." So we received orders, in the evening, to be ready to march early next morning, and, as directed, we were early on the road to Harper's Ferry, which we reached on the 14th, and at once crossed over to Sandy Hook. Just as our Quarter Master was about to commence issuing rations on the 15th, we were ordered to march. Most of our men were, by this time, nearly, or entirely bare-footed, and the prospect of entering upon another long march with bare, sore feet, was not calculated to inspire them with any great degree of enthusiasm. Some we had to leave, their feet being in too terrible a condition to move further. At Berlin we forded the Potomac and pushed rapidly up the Loudon valley, camping at Hillsboro.

A strange lack of information seemed to exist on the part of everyone relative to the situation of our own troops or that of the rebels. General Wright, with parts of the Sixth and Nineteenth corps, numbering 15,000 men, arrived at Poolesville, on the evening of the 14th. That night he notified General Hunter of his presence and directed him to join him with his forces as soon as possible, at Leesburg. At 6 P.M., he telegraphed Halleck: "I have not been able to get any intelligence from General Hunter's command." Early the next morning Hunter started his troops under General Sullivan at Leesburg. When we reached Hillsboro we found ourselves on the flank of Early's army, now hastening through Leesburg and Purcellville, but we could get no word of Wright's whereabouts, and so, although we had an excellent opportunity to crush Early's army, if there had been an understanding of the situation, and cooperation between Hunter and Wright, we were obliged to halt and allow the rebel army to pass across our front almost unmolested, for Wright did not proceed to Leesburg at all in pursuit of Lee, but lay at Poolesville until the afternoon of the 16th, when he crossed the Potomac at Edwards' Ferry. "Comparison of dates and places shows that these West Virginia forces were now coming in directly and very fast upon Early's right flank, and that, had it been wise to do so, they might have been thrown exactly across his path; but the night of the 15th, while Sullivan was at Hillsboro, Wright was at Poolesville, Md., north of the Potomac. Had Wright and Sullivan possessed a common understanding for vigorous action in the best possible way, the former close on Early's heels with 15,000 men, and Ricketts and Kerby hurrying forward with several thousand more, Sullivan and Duffie would apparently have been able to use their 9,000 men with great effect against Early's line of march from Leesburg to Snicker's Gap."---*The Shenandoah Valley in 1864.*

We lay at Hillsboro until the afternoon of the 16th. General Crook came up at noon of that day, and, relieving Sullivan, assumed command. He at once set everything in motion. His cavalry was sent out to find the enemy, and hearing there was a rebel train at Waterford, our brigade was sent off, in haste, to that place. Arriving there, we found the rebels gone with their trains in the direction of Snicker's Gap. The soldiers were surprised at the Union sentiment expressed by the people here. It was very hot, and our men called for water as they marched rapidly through the place. Very soon many women and children came along the marching column with buckets and pitchers of water, which they dipped out to the men. Flags were also thickly displayed. Crook's energy soon discovered the fact that Early's columns and trains had been for several hours very close to his command. The infantry was that afternoon moved to Purcellville, where, just before our arrival, Duffie had struck the rebel trains and captured 117 mules and horses, 82 wagons, and 50 or 60 prisoners. That night the forces of Wright and Crook came together just in time to let Early, with all his plunder, slip through between them. Mulligan and Duffie were sent forward to

Snicker's Gap that night, where they met the enemy in possession of the Gap, the whole rebel army having crossed into the Shenandoah valley.

We lay at Purcellville during the 17th. On the morning of the 18th, we advanced through Snicker's Gap to the Ferry. About 2 o'clock, General Crook directed Colonel Thoburn to cross the Shenandoah river at Island Ford with his two brigades and the third brigade of the second division. Our brigade was the first to cross, which we did under a severe fire from some rebel skirmishers, who were under cover of bushes skirting the west bank of the river. On crossing we captured a rebel captain and fifteen men. We learned from these prisoners that Early's whole force was close by. The other two brigades soon crossed, and Thoburn forming with the 1st, our brigade, on the left; the 3d in the centre, and the 2d, with about 1,000 cavalry, on the right, moved forward to a position a short distance from the river. Companies B, C, D and K of our regiment were put out as skirmishers, and advanced under Lieutenant Colonel Wildes in search of the enemy. We did not have to search very long. Breckenridge, with two divisions, advanced against Thoburn's left and centre, and Rhodes against his right, pushing the whole line back to the cover of a stone wall along the bank of the river. The 1,000 dismounted cavalry on our right broke in confusion and retreated across the river, when our regiment, on the extreme left, was hurried to the extreme right. We found on our arrival a large body of rebels between the stone wall and the river, bearing down heavily on the right of our position and the gallant 4th West Virginia fighting to maintain its position against desperate odds. Colonel Washburn fell desperately wounded at the head of the regiment, just as he reached the right. Hurrying forward and assuming command of the regiment, Lieutenant Colonel Wildes stationed two companies under Captain Mallory between the wall and the river. They charged and drove back the rebels, who had been so closely pressing Colonel Vance. Now hastily throwing up a breastwork of stones and logs across this space, the Captain opened a deadly fire upon the rebels in his front, and drove them out. The rest of the regiment as effectually opened on those in front of the stone wall. At this juncture Sergeant Silas King, of Company F, was sent with ten men, still further to the right, to command the opposite side of a stone wall running at right angles with ours, behind which the rebels were gathering to fire on our flank. The gallant sergeant and his men, after a hot contest, cleared the rebels out from behind this wall, killing and wounding some of them almost within the length of some of their guns, the other side of the river wall. Sergeant King's splendid conduct on this occasion won him the praise of his superior officers, and the confidence of everybody in his courage and coolness. He exhibited ability to command and determination and daring bravery not often met with in the rank and file. Thus our front and flank were relieved and we were secure in our position. In a letter I wrote on the 19th of July, 1864, from Snicker's Ferry, I find the following: "Our regiment held the extreme right of the line and successfully resisted several desperate efforts of the rebels to turn it and flank us. Captain Mallory, Lieutenant Moseley, Lieutenant Bidenharn, Lieutenant Martin, and Sergeants King and Humphrey, of the regiment, fought with as much daring bravery as I ever saw. The officers and men of the regiment never behaved better." Soon the rebels returned again to the charge, but we were prepared for them. Every man in the two regiments felt that in driving that column of rebels back depended his life. The river at our back was too deep to more than walk slowly through, and so escape that way was out of the question. Run we could not, if we would. Nothing was left to do but to fight. Every officer and man *but one* met the shock manfully. In the hottest of the fight a portion of Mallory's heroes came to our assistance, and under the fresh volleys they added to ours, the rebels broke over the hill, not to return again while we lay behind that stone wall. The cheer that went up from our men, as they saw the rebels break over the hill, indicated the relief they felt and the value they placed upon the victory they had won. Colonel Thoburn was with us, urging the men to stand their ground. He was the coolest man on the field. The men needed no urging, for every man regarded he was fighting for his life. At the moment the rebels fell back this time, heavy cannonading opened from the other side of the river. Looking around now for the first time since the battle opened, we saw the long lines of the Sixth Corps drawn up on the mountain's side and in the fields at its foot. For some time the enemy had been endeavoring to plant artillery to command our stone wall. Had they succeeded in this, it would have gone hard with us. But ours on the opposite side of the river being on higher ground, soon drove off the guns of the enemy, and now began giving attention to the rebel infantry. The lines were so close to each other that some damage was done to our own men by shells from our batteries. But they kept the rebels discreetly under cover, and from this time, an hour before dark, only desultory firing took place. We dare not retreat, however, as long as that rebel line lay in our front, unless under cover of the darkness. It was long after dark, when we began to cross the river from our position on the right, and we made the crossing without being discovered, or, at least, without being followed or fired upon, while some regiments

further to the left, while crossing earlier, met with considerable loss by being followed and fired upon in the river. We carried over all our wounded. I never read of a battle in which so many different regiments claimed to be the “*last to leave the field*.” Lieutenant Keyes, in his history of the 123d Ohio, says: “Our regiment and the 34th Massachusetts, than which there was no braver nor more gallant regiment in service, were left to protect the rear, and, of course, were the last to effect the crossing.” Chaplain W. C. Walker, of the 18th Connecticut, is quoted in “The Military and Civil History of Connecticut in the War of 1861-65” as saying: “The Eighteenth (Conn.) held its position on the right until flanked, and was the last regiment to re-cross.” Every officer and man in our regiment and in the 4th West Virginia knows that the 18th Connecticut was *not* on that flank when we retired, and they know, further, that our regiment was on the extreme right, for over an hour, before the close of the battle, and that the 4th West Virginia was closed on our left all that time, and that when we retired no troops remained on that flank. And we all know, too, that we were *not* flanked, but held our position till we were ordered to retire, after dark. But we leave these various claimants to settle their disputes with the remark that we *all* know the 18th Connecticut was *not* on the right when we fell back across the river, and that, as to the 34th Massachusetts and the 123d Ohio, they were on, or towards, the left, and no one on our end of the line can know when they fell back, and, regarding it unimportant which is right, we pass on.

Though the fighting was very desperate, our loss was comparatively small, owing, of course, to the excellent protection afforded us by those friendly stone walls. The following is a list of our killed and wounded in the battle of Snicker’s Ferry, which should be called the battle of Island Ford:

KILLED.

Samuel L. Hayes, Company B; Joshua Farley, Company G; William Stoneman, Company I; George Lamp, Company H.-----4.

WOUNDED.

Colonel James Washburn, severely in the head; Sergeant James Hunter, Company A, severely, head; Sergeant Edgar Humphrey, Company I, severely, neck; Privates James Saxton, Company G, severely, neck; Joel B. Cummins, Company G, severely, shoulder; Samuel Dobbins, Company C, severely, side; James McElroy, Company B, severely, thigh; E. S. Clithero, Company D, severely, leg; Leander Eddy, Company A, severely, leg; and Francis M. Byers, Company I, severely, leg.-----10.

The 4th West Virginia lost one-third its number killed and wounded, mostly, before our arrival. Why the 6th and 19th corps did not come to our assistance, can only be explained on the hypothesis, that it was not thought desirable to bring on a general engagement at that place, and at that time. As we passed through the ranks of the 6th corps, after falling back, the men frequently said to us: “We wanted to go over and help you but they wouldn’t let us.” “As General Ricketts, commanding the 6th corps, did not think it prudent, under the circumstances, to cross his men, as the enemy were preparing for another attack on my line, I gave the order to fall back, which was done in good order.” *General Crook’s report, Oct. 12, 1864.*

We again lost several good men killed and wounded. All the killed were choice men. Samuel L. Hayes was a beautiful young boy, only eighteen years of age, whom everybody loved. He was killed on the skirmish line and his body carried back by his comrades. George Lamp, of Company H, was another fine boy of the same age. William Stoneman was one of the very best men of Company I, only 21 years of age. Joshua Farley, of Company G, was but 24 years of age, an excellent soldier and a fine man. His captain, H. L. Karr, writes of him: “Joshua Farley, of Silver Run, Meigs county, was as brave a soldier and as brave a patriot as ever shouldered a musket in defense of his country. His comrades carefully and tenderly laid him in a soldier’s grave, a few feet from where he fell, and Company G, officers and men, never had heavier hearts, than when they marched from the grave of that brave soldier.”

Sergeant Edgar Humphrey, so badly wounded, came near sacrificing his life, on account of a remark some one had carelessly made derogatory to his personal courage. Several times during the battle he was made to get under cover of the stone wall. He would remain so for only a few minutes, however, when he would

rise, and, standing in plain view of the rebel line, load and fire as deliberately and coolly, as if engaged in target practice. I was going to him to make him get down, when he was hit and fell. Kneeling beside him I saw he had received a terrible wound. Recovering soon from the shock he said in a whisper: "Colonel, I guess they won't call me a coward again, will they?" He was too weak then to talk more, but it was afterwards learned that some one had impugned his courage, and here the brave fellow had nearly thrown his life away in order to wipe out the cruel charge. The suffering of his terrible wound, or even death itself, had no pangs compared to what he had silently suffered, till this opportunity came to repel and refute the foul imputation, and having done it, he was content to die, which he and every one else expected was his fate. A lesson was taught, to the whole regiment, not to be too free in the use of such remarks about any soldier thereafter.

But the most lamentable casualty the regiment met with was the wounding of Colonel Washburn. Just as the regiment reached the right, and before it had been put in position, he was shot in the head, the ball entering the left eye and passing backward and downward through the head, coming out back of and below the right ear. He was struck by a minnie ball at very close range, and the wound was a frightful one. No one expected him to live but a few minutes. He was conveyed across the river during the battle, as we thought, dying. We scarcely hoped to find him alive when we crossed in the evening, but he was, and what was more, fully conscious and able to talk. He inquired anxiously how the regiment had fared, and how it had acquitted itself. And then, after expressing the belief that he could not live, gave his sword and belt, watch, pocket-book, papers, letters, and other small articles, to Lieutenant Colonel Wildes, with the request that they be sent to his family. The surgeons could give no hope of his recovery. The officers and men of the regiment passed by and took his hand gently in theirs, many kissing it and shedding tears as they left his side, for few officers were more sincerely loved by their men than Colonel Washburn was by his. All that night his tent was surrounded by the men, who refused to rest or sleep, while their Colonel, as they supposed, lay dying. Whispered inquiries were made by them of surgeons and attendants as they passed in and out, and as the morning approached, some encouragement was given out of his ultimate recovery. The surgeons claimed to have ascertained that no vital spot had been struck, and in the morning a detail of strong men was made to carefully carry him to Harper's Ferry. There he recovered rapidly, and on the 26th of October he visited the regiment at Cedar Creek, when he was given a royal reception. He had reported by letter to General Crook for duty some time before this: had, in fact, reported for duty within sixty days after he was wounded! He remained several days with the regiment, but did not assume command, having been assigned by General Sheridan as commandant of the Post at Wheeling, West Virginia. During his visit, which was alike pleasant to himself and regiment, the following circular was issued and read upon the first dress parade the regiment had indulged in since May, and which was held wholly in his honor:

HEADQUARTERS 116TH OHIO VOLUNTEER INFANTRY,
CEDAR CREEK, VA., Oct. 30, 1864

(Circular.)

The Colonel of the regiment embraces this opportunity of tendering his thanks to, and expressing his pride in, the brave officers and men of the 116th regiment. On account of a severe wound he received at Snicker's Ferry in July last, he has not been with you throughout the entire campaign, but he feels proud to say that he belongs to a regiment which has bravely withstood, in the memorable campaign just closed, all the hardships, privations and perils of the march, the bivouac and the battle field. While it was his honored privilege to lead you, he ever found you ready to obey orders; since he has been separated from you he has anxiously and proudly watched your movements. In three of the most stubbornly fought battles of the summer, he has found you always where duty called you, and where good soldiers ought to be, and he has heard only unstinted praise of your conduct. You have made for your regiment a name and a fame that will outlive you all, and to which your children, and your children's children will point with pride in the years of the future.

JAMES WASHBURN, Colonel

Officers and men of the 116th:

In your behalf I know I may say that our Colonel's very flattering opinion of his Command is reciprocated; that no expression of his esteem for you is too strong to resent your regard for him, and when I assure him that you are as proud of his brave leadership as he is of your prowess, I know I express the honest sentiment of every member of the regiment. He is esteemed by us all as well worthy to be the leader of such men as his pardonable partiality pronounce you to be. It is with sore regret that I have to announce to you that his surgeons and superior officers regard his fearful wound as having unfitted him for active duty with you in the field, and that he is soon to leave us to engage in other less severe and hazardous, though equally honorable and responsible duties. To these duties let us one and all assure him that he carries our love and best wishes, and that he is followed with the earnest hope of a speedy return to his beloved regiment.

WILBERT B. TETERS, Captain Commanding Regiment.

Colonel Washburn never sufficiently recovered to join his regiment, and, of course, he could never entirely recover from such a wound. Its lasting effects are seen in the loss of his left eye, partial paralysis of one side of his face, partial loss of speech, and a general breaking down of his constitution. Doubtless it has shortened his life, which it has made a suffering one, until the end comes. Colonel Washburn possessed great personal courage. He was a leader of men and not a follower. He was bluff, frank and determined, but too kind-hearted to be a good disciplinarian. If an officer or man did anything calling down upon him the penalties of the "Rules and Articles of War," he hardly ever held out until punishment followed, but, as the boys used to say, "the old Colonel would let up." He was a man whom patriotism had made a soldier. His principles were the outgrowth of deep-seated convictions, and his whole army life was alike honorable and creditable to himself and his country. He was in the army, not for the glory or renown of war, but from a sense of duty to this country, and he fought as bravely and suffered as heroically for it as any man ever did.

From the noble Colonel Washburn we recur for a moment to an officer of the regiment who behaved in a most cowardly manner in the battle of Snicker's Ferry. This is the same officer whose misconduct caused the capture of fifty men and a forage train, while we were stationed at Romney. He had acted badly at Piedmont and Lynchburg, and now his peremptory dismissal from the service was recommended by his regimental, brigade, division, corps and army commanders, and on the 9th of August, the order of the War Department arrived dismissing Captain Mathew F. Brown from the service. We had no time for court-martial in those days, especially when an officer was guilty of cowardice. The captain, himself, explained his dismissal by saying it was because he "couldn't swallow the nigger without grease." The example of such men was intolerably demoralizing, and Secretary Stanton made short work of them, by arbitrarily and peremptorily dismissing them from the service. Captain Brown's dismissal placed company F in command of Lieutenant Wilson F. Martin, a brave and efficient officer, who it ought to be said for the credit of the company, never faltered himself, nor allowed the company to falter in the presence of the enemy.

A word, before passing on, regarding the characteristic injustice of General Halleck. General Hunter had scarcely returned to the Valley from Lynchburg, before Halleck began a system of persecution and ill-usage toward him, which finally culminated, on the 14th, in Hunter's asking to be relieved from command. Hearing nothing from this request, the next day he wrote to President Lincoln, renewing his request to be relieved, and adding: "When an officer is selected as the scape goat to cover up the blunders of others, the best interests of the country require that he should at once be relieved from command." There had been a disposition at the War Office to cast the whole blame, for all the mischief done by Early, on Hunter. The case was a bad one, and Halleck's instinct for shirking responsibility, and capacity to do any one he did not like an injury, soon selected Hunter as a "scape goat." But the crowd who were bearing down on Hunter, received a most deserving rebuke from General Grant, in a letter he wrote to the War Office on the 15th. Its strong language is unusual for Grant, and for that reason shows the more forcibly the injustice he felt was being done to Hunter, and the directness with which he aimed his rebuke at the authors of the injustice,

left no conjecture as to what he meant. He wrote: I am sorry to see such a disposition to condemn as brave an old soldier as Hunter is known to be, without a hearing. He is known to have advanced into the enemy's country toward their main army, inflicting much greater damage upon them than they have upon us, with double his force, and moving directly away from our main army. Hunter acted, too, in a country where he had no friends. * * * Even the enemy gives him credit for courage, and congratulate themselves that he will yet give them a chance of getting even with him." President Lincoln wrote a conciliatory letter to Hunter, saying, among other things: "General Grant wishes you to remain in command of the Department, and I do not wish to order otherwise." It was a most unfortunate and inopportune time for Halleck to inaugurate one of his quarrels, but it was fortunate that Grant's strong sense of justice was at hand to at once rebuke and stop it. But now Halleck sulked, and it was announced by Dana to Grant: "General Halleck will not give orders, except as he receives them." The result was seen in the blundering and blind pursuit of Early, by Wright from Washington, and Hunter from Harper's Ferry. With the two armies of Wright and Hunter within fifteen miles of each other, the one in Early's rear at Poolesville, and the other on his flank at Hillsboro, neither knew of the other's position during a whole day, and neither would move on the enemy, because Halleck received no orders to move from Grant at City Point. Thus that campaign, ending at Island Ford, was managed. The evil genius of Halleck hovered over it, with an eye single to the defeat and discomfiture of Hunter, whose success would have been his defeat and chagrin, and hence the worst handled and most fruitless campaign of the war.

But still another blunder is to be added to this chapter of blunders. Thinking the 6th, 19th and our corps were in possession of the vicinity of Snicker's Ferry, General Hunter started Colonel R. B. Hayes, with his brigade and two guns, on the 19th, to escort a provision train from Harper's Ferry to the army. Hayes was met at Kabletown with a large body of the enemy, and it was due more to his skill and good management that his train was not delivered to Early, than it was to the knowledge, of any one then in command, of the strength, or whereabouts of either the enemy or our own troops. As it was, Hayes was moving his train in the presence of Early's whole army.

On the next day, the 20th, General Averill and Colonel Duvall met with a victory at Carter's Farm, near Stephenson's Depot, which, according to rebel accounts, was wholly owing to a "blunder" on their part. If it was, it compensated somewhat for the blunders on our side during the past few days. The rebel accounts say that three miles north of Winchester, on Carter's Farm, Ramseur was encountered moving by the flank, intent on capturing Averill. Ramseur supposed, from Vaughn's reconnaissance of the day before, that there were but or three regiments in his front, which caused him to advance with too little precaution, and thrown into confusion, the troops could not be "rallied." The result was a splendid victory for Averill and Duvall, in which they captured 250 prisoners and four pieces of artillery, besides killing and wounding over 200 of the enemy.

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