

CHAPTER XII.

Still Going Forward-----Enemy At Fisher's Hill-----
Battle Of Fisher's Hill-----Another Charge-----List Of
Casualties-----Extracts From Reports Of Colonel
Wells, General Sheridan and General Crook, Also
General Early-----Tardy Justice Done To Captain
John Varley, Of Company E-----March To Harrisonburg
-----Death of Lieutenant Meigs-----Buildings
Ordered Burned-----Order Revoked As To Dayton.

The morning after the battle, bright and early, we started up the Valley road, over which we had before so often marched. Arriving at Cedar Creek, we found the enemy behind his entrenchments on Fisher's Hill. The army took the position it left on the 16th of August. The position of Early at Fisher's Hill was one of great natural strength. It extended from the north fork of the Shenandoah at Three Top of the Massanutten Mountains to Little North Mountain. The mountains on each flank were apparently inaccessible, and formed a perfect protection to his flanks, while the abrupt heights on which his lines were entrenched seemed to combine to make his position impregnable. But from this strong position, Sheridan made immediate preparations to drive him. After a good deal of maneuvering for position, and a good deal of night marching by our corps, the army, at noon on the 22d, lay as follows: Crook's corps in rear of the 6th corps, and the 19th corps on the left. And now, while the 6th and 19th corps made demonstrations on the left, centre and right, and while Averill drove in the rebel skirmishers and held them close up to the rebel works on the right, Crook moved out to the extreme right, out of sight, under cover of woods and ravines. Here in the woods we threw off and piled up our knapsacks, arranged canteens and bayonet scabbards so that no noise would be made by them, and in the lightest kind of marching order, started up the steep, thickly wooded side of Little North Mountain. Ascending for a half mile or more, we turned abruptly to the left, and silently moved south, along the face of the mountain, each division in two lines, side by side. About 3 P.M., we got squarely on the enemy's flank, with our left past his entrenchments. Now fronting, we started quietly down the mountain side, our division on the left, and the 2d on the right. The 116th, being in its old position, on the extreme left, and in the front line, could now see, through an occasional open space, that we were going in with our left just inside the rebel works. It gave us a fair prospect for some hard fighting, and every man nerved himself for the shock soon to come. But now we were discovered, and the enemy opened on us with shot and shell. *Too late!* The first shot was the signal to charge, and before they could make any, even the slightest, preparations to meet us, we were upon them with the bayonet. Our movement was a complete surprise to them, and they had now only to get out of our way or surrender. "Had the heavens opened," said a rebel officer, "and you been seen descending, no greater consternation would have been created." Their artillery was captured, their left turned and broken, and rushing on, we stripped them out of the works, like the bark from a tree.

Colonel Wells, in his official report of the battle, says: "The 116th Ohio charged the battery in the angle of the rebel works, received its fire when only 100 yards from it, never wavered, but rushing on, captured it in the very smoke of its discharge."---*Colonel Wells' report, September 26th, 1864.*

Thence we went, sweeping down their works like a western cyclone, every man for himself, firing whenever he saw a rebel, and always yelling and cheering to the extent of his ability. Being closest to the works, we were confronted and stopped at several points by small bodies of the enemy, but such stops were only momentary, for as soon as a little sharp firing was heard at any point, the men would of their own accord, concentrate there, and in a few moments would be rushing on again. At the moment we charged on the flank, the 6th and 19th corps moved on the rebel front, and now, when we had stripped away about a mile of the rebel line, the heavy columns of the 6th corps came on over the works by our side, to the rear and in front of us. Two Ohio regiments with the 6th corps, the 110th and 122d, with which we were once brigaded, came over the works, as the 116th and 123d were running along inside, and partaking at once of our enthusiasm, pressed on with us, after giving the well known "West Virginia yell." The rebel right broke in dire confusion, on the approach of the 19th corps, and, in great disorganization, the enemy fled from all parts of the field towards Woodstock, abandoning artillery, horses, wagons, muskets, knapsacks, canteens and clothing, which the pursuers found covering the roads and fields. Eleven hundred prisoners,

sixteen pieces of artillery, a great many caissons and artillery horses, and a large amount of small arms, were captured. The rebel loss at Opequan and Fisher's Hill could not be less than 10,000 men, while Sheridan's did not exceed 5,500. We had taken from them, besides, twenty-one pieces of artillery.

The loss of the 116th at the battle of Fisher's Hill, was one killed and ten wounded, as follows:

KILLED.

Sergeant Edward P. Tiffany, Company B, acting Sergeant Major of the regiment.

WOUNDED.

Corporal James M. Hartley, Company B, head, severely; Corporal James H. Stewart, Company B, arm, severe; John McElroy, Company B, arm, severe; Thomas South, Company C, severe; Sergeant James K. Drum, Company D, thigh, severe; Christian Rhines, Company F, foot, severe; Corporal Edward Lowry, Company G, hand, severe; Andrew Powell, Company H, hip, severe; Corporal Joseph Sechrist, Company H, hip, severe; Samuel H. Cramblitt, Company I, elbow, severe.

Sergeant Tiffany was killed by a stray shot at the pike, just at dark, after the battle was all over. He was acting as Sergeant Major of the regiment at the time. It saddened the heart of every man in the regiment to thus lose so fine a soldier. Tiffany was well liked by everybody, and was a very valuable officer at headquarters. He was a very worthy man in every way, well beloved at home, as well as in his regiment. His remains were decently buried where he fell, and were afterwards removed by his friends to his old home in Meigs County. A similar sad occurrence took place in the 34th Massachusetts. That regiment camped near us, and while a group of its officers were standing around a fire, talking over the events of the day, their Major, H. W. Pratt, was mortally wounded by the accidental discharge of a musket. It seemed a terrible fate. He was one of the most gallant officers and perfect gentlemen to be found in the corps, and was loved as few officers ever are by the men of his regiment. These two deaths, occurring as they did, cast a gloom over the camps of our brigade that night, which otherwise would have been so full of rejoicing.

Our regiment captured the Lieutenant Colonel of the 32d Virginia regiment. As he was being escorted to the

(Pages 184 and 185 of Wildes's book were apparently missed when this copy was made. This transcription will continue at page 186).

..... This would have been remedied, if the troops had remained steady, but a panic seized them, at the idea of being flanked, and, without being defeated, they broke, many of them fleeing shamefully. The artillery was not captured by the enemy, but abandoned by the infantry. My troops are very much shattered, the men very much exhausted, and many of them without shoes."

All day the 22d, Ricket's division of the 6th corps had been pushing up closer and closer to the rebel left. About the middle of the afternoon, it finally planted itself in a good position, within half a mile of the enemy's works. The 2d division then closed to it on its left, and the 19th corps worked its way forward to the same line, joining on the to the left of the 6th corps. The skirmish lines of both corps being strengthened, pushed the enemy's skirmishers back close up to their works on Fisher's Hill, and there they were held, while our corps was making its silent and secret flank movement. Early said in his report, that when he saw this advance in the afternoon, "orders were given for my troops to retire after dark, as I knew my force was not strong enough to resist a determined assault." But, to use Early's expressive words, he "retired in considerable confusion, an hour before dark," with a "shattered" army.

Our brigade was left to guard the prisoners, collect the captured property, and bury the dead, while the rest of the army moved next morning, in pursuit of the enemy. On the 24th, we started to rejoin the army, now at Harrisonburg, which we reached on the 26th, in charge of a large train.

Just after the battle of Halltown, on the 26th of August, Captain John Varley, company E, tendered his resignation, on account of sickness in his family. It was not accepted, but he was summarily dismissed following paper was prepared and sent to the Secretary of War:

CAMP 116TH REGIMENT OHIO VOLUNTEER INFANTRY.
NEAR HARRISONBURG, VIRGINIA.
September 26th, 1864.

Hon. E. M. Stanton, Secretary of War:

Sir:---We, the undersigned officers of the 116th Regiment, Ohio Volunteer Infantry, have the honor to submit the request that the order dishonorably dismissing Captain John Varley, of our regiment, from the service of the United States, be so mollified as to discharge him honorably. We do this in view of his gallant conduct in the recent battles of Berryville, Opequan and Fisher's Hill, and because it was not cowardice that caused him to tender his resignation before the enemy, but because of a severe family affliction.

Very respectfully your obedient servants,

JOHN HULL, Captain Co. K
WILLIAM BIDDENHARN, Lieut. Co. C
W. S. MARTIN, Lieut. Co. F
R. T. CHANEY, Captain Co. D
JOHN C. H. COBB, Lieut. Co. G
SAMUEL D. KNIGHT, Lieut. Co. D

PETER DILLON, Lieut. Co. D
H. L. KARR, Captain Co. G, and
A. I. G. 1st Brigade
THOMAS J. SHANNON, Surgeon
W. B. TETERS, Captain Co. H
JAMES P. MANN, Captain Co. C

Captain Varley was reinstated and honorably discharged, some time after the war, upon all the field officers uniting in a recommendation for this honorable discharge, and afterwards he represented Washington County in the Ohio Legislature. It is unquestionable that his conduct in the battles named, was of the most gallant and daring possible. Some suspicion of bad conduct was raised against him in the battle of Halltown, but that was afterwards clearly and satisfactorily explained, but not in time to prevent the action which resulted in his dishonorable dismissal. It was unfortunate, and very much regretted by all, for no officer had more friends in the regiment than Captain John Varley. But it was a dangerous experiment for an officer to tender his resignation in that army in the summer of 1864, no matter what the reasons were. But justice was finally done him, tardy thought it was, and he owed his reinstatement and honorable discharge, mainly to the good opinion of the brave company officers who had served beside him through the most trying period of the regiment's history. It is but just to say of Captain Varley, in view of this unfortunate circumstance in this military history, that he was always accounted a brave and efficient officer. On the 26th of August, he had been sent with his company on the skirmish line. The regiment advanced to the attack through a field of growing corn. Captain Varley mistook the direction in some way, being unable to see the regiment after entering the corn, and did not cover the regiment with his skirmishers. The result was, that the regiment struck the rebel line without warning, on emerging from the corn field, which might have proven very serious, had it been strong. Inasmuch, however, as it broke at our first fire, there was no harm done that time. It mortified him greatly though to be criticized for the error he had committed, and in a hasty moment he tendered his resignation. Tendering it in the face of the enemy was construed to mean cowardice, while nothing could be farther from the real truth. Under other circumstances he would have been at home with his family some time before that, on account of the severe illness of some member of it. That he and his company were selected for the skirmish line, was a sufficient voucher to attest his bravery and skill as an officer, and every comrade rejoiced when the stain put upon him was wiped out in an honorable discharge.

While at Harrisonburg, we were very short of rations much of the time. Officers, especially, had great difficulty in getting provisions. Walker, who had been acting as Sergeant Major since Lee was wounded at Halltown, undertook to provide for headquarters. Foraging trains were sent out daily, and with these Walker and Orderly Webster were sure to go. He writes in his diary:

“SEPTEMBER 27TH---Got among Dunkards to-day. They universally seemed scared almost to death when they saw us coming. One woman begged us not to take her cow or sheep. After we had promised her time and again that we would pay her for everything we got, she would still say: ‘Yes, take everything you want, but leave some for the others, or they will be mad, and threaten to shoot us.’ Webster and I each got three large loaves of bread, two heads of cabbage, beets, tomatoes, onions, etc. Were near a little village called Dayton. After returning, we learned there had been a skirmish there during the afternoon.

SEPTEMBER 29TH---Orderly Webster and I went out with a forage train this P.M., intending to go the same place as on Tuesday, but learned after passing the pickets that a squad of our men had been attacked there, so went off toward the mountains, but got nothing. This evening there is a great light toward Staunton. The 6th and 19th corps went up there this morning, or rather to Mount Crawford.

SEPTEMBER 30TH---Orderly Webster and I went with the forage train to-day. After passing the pickets we ‘struck out.’ It is amusing to hear some of the people talk. One old lady said: ‘Are you not going to have a great deal of trouble at your elections this fall?’ I told her no, we were going to have the most unanimous and harmonious election ever held in the country. We discussed the respective merits of the United States and Confederate currency, the latter being almost worthless. She seemed sorry I had said anything about it. We returned about 1 P.M. with a bucketfull of honey, one of apple butter, bread, sweet potatoes, cabbage and chickens, a pretty good haul for one day. A great many citizens are preparing to return with us when we go back. The 6th and 19th corps have come back from Mount Crawford.”

The general results show that Walker and Webster were good foragers.

Lying at Harrisonburg a couple of days, the 116th was sent out to Dayton to guard some mills engaged in grinding grain for the army. Here we were on the *qui vive* day and night, the rebel cavalry being in strong force in the vicinity, with which our cavalry was constantly engaged. Bushwhackers also infested the roads between there and Harrisonburg, and frequently fired on small parties passing to and fro. But the people of Dayton were as fine and loyal a people as we had met anywhere in the South. They were very kind to our men, and their kindness was reciprocated by them. But neither they nor we knew in what good part these friendly relations were to stand them in a short time.

On the evening of the 3d of October, as Lieutenant Meigs, of General Sheridan’s staff, was returning to Harrisonburg from Dayton, he was ambushed by a party of bushwhackers, about midway between the places, and killed. One of his escort galloped back to our camp and notified us of the attack, but he was not aware of the killing of the Lieutenant. A strong detachment of our regiment was sent out on the double quick to the place, where his body was found by the roadside. Shortly afterwards a large body of cavalry came out from Sheridan’s headquarters, and placing his body in an ambulance, carried it back to Harrisonburg. The murderers of Lieutenant Meigs were instantly hunted far and wide. He was a son of Quartermaster General Meigs, was a young officer of great merit and high attainments, giving promise of a brilliant career in the army. At the time of his murder he belonged to the engineer corps of the regular army, and occupied the position of chief of engineers on Sheridan’s staff. He was greatly loved by Sheridan, and he determined to wreak a terrible vengeance on the country round about in retaliation for his murder. He accordingly issued an order, which was sent to the cavalry about 2 o’clock on the morning of the 5th, and also to us, directing that every house be burned within five miles of the spot where he was murdered. This included the village of Dayton, and the burning of it devolved upon Lieutenant Colonel Wildes. He at once wrote a statement to General Sheridan of the character of the people of the place, and urged and begged him to revoke the order in so far as Dayton was concerned. This he sent in at once by a messenger, with strict injunctions to hand it at once to General Sheridan *in person*. The messenger followed his instructions strictly, though he had hard work at headquarters to pass by staff officers and guards to General Sheridan’s private quarters, and probably would not have succeeded, had not the General overheard the wrangle his persistency created. The General read the note and swore, read it again and swore, examined and cross examined the messenger. He was in great grief over the death of his valued

staff officer, and terribly determined that the people of the vicinity should suffer for his murder, for he well knew, as we all did, that these bushwhacking murderers were not men of the rebel army, but cowardly citizens who, remaining within our lines, assembled together to commit such dastardly deeds as this at unguarded spots. In the meantime, the citizens of Dayton were notified of the order, and given permission to remove their effects from their houses. Such weeping and wailing as went up from the poor women and children of that town we hope never to hear again. The burning of the place was put off as long as it was possible to do so under the order, and so was fixed for noon. Finally General Sheridan yielded and gave the messenger an order to carry back, revoking his former order as to the village of Dayton. The soldiers had helped the people carry out their goods, which were mostly conveyed to a slight eminence overlooking the town. Every house was now emptied, and the poor people sat among their little piles of household effects, the very picture of despair, awaiting the hour when their houses should be given up to the flames. In the country all about them, the sense smoke now arising in all directions showed them that the vengeful order was being executed. But the messenger finally came with the revoking order. Officers and men went out among the people to announce the good news to them and to help them carry back their goods. When they saw them coming, they thought it was to apply the torch, and the screams of women and children were perfectly heart rending. But the joy that succeeded as soon as their mission was understood, was so sudden and overcoming that many of the poor women fainted, and the clapping of hands and shouts of gladness of the little children over the good news was too much for even the grim and sturdy old soldiers. The sleeve of many a blouse was wet with their tears. All hands turned to and helped to carry everything back to the houses, and the people of Dayton anyhow, if of no other place in the South, believed there were at least some Yankees who had *some* humanity in them. There was not a man in the regiment who would not have faced death in a dozen battles rather than to have burned that village in the presence of those weeping, imploring and helpless women and children. Hearing during the day that we were to move in the morning, a great quantity of provisions and delicacies were prepared by the people and distributed among the officers and men. If a 116th Ohio man ever happens in Dayton, he may depend upon a warm reception. At least he ought to have one.

NOTE---I observe in Pond's "Shenandoah Valley" that it was ascertained after the War that Lieutenant Meigs was killed by an enlisted Confederate soldier of Wickham's brigade engaged in scouting, but the belief at the time was that he was murdered by bushwhackers. This but adds importance to the intercession made by the 116th in behalf of Dayton at the time of Lieutenant Meigs' death.

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