

REMINISCENCES OF THE BATTLE OF GETTYSBURG

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Second Wisconsin Infantry

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I HAVE selected as my topic for this occasion the Battle of Gettysburg, not intending, by any means, to give a description of that, the greatest and most important battle of the war, for it is not within the province of any one participant to do that from actual observation, but to give something of my personal experience and recollections. That it was the great battle of the war I think there is no question, and I am proud to have been a participant in it, even in my small and unimportant way. I was at that time Orderly Sergeant of Co. I, of the Second Wisconsin Regiment, of the now famous Iron Brigade, of the 1st Division, 1st Army Corps, Army of the Potomac.

From the 28th of April, 1863, when it broke camp at Belle Plaine, Va., the Corps had been on an almost constant campaign;—was at Fitz-Hugh Crossing on the 29th of April, and Chancellorsville, May 2d, and the brigade was on an expedition to the Northern Neck, a point between the Potomac and Rappahannock Rivers, May 21st to the 26th, for the relief of the 8th Illinois Cavalry, which was reported as having been cut off by the rebels. During this time the brigade made a march of 120 miles for the five days; was up and down the Rappahannock and Rapidan; out to near Culpepper, Kelly's Ford, Brandy Station, Bealton, Fitz-Hugh Crossing again, Hartwood Church, Deep Run, Spotted Tavern, Catlett's Station, Centreville, Gum Springs, Herndon Station, Guilford Station, Franks-

ville and Edward's Ferry. There it crossed into Maryland on the 25th of June; marched through Poolesville to Barnesville, thence across Sugar Loaf Mountain and the Monocacy River at Greenfield; through Adamstown, on the Baltimore and Ohio railroad, over the Catoctin Mountains, to near Jeffersonville in Middle Valley, and to Middletown, until June 28th, when it recrossed the Catoctin Range and camped near Frederick City. On the 29th it marched north, via Lewiston, Catoctin Furnace and Mechanicsburg, and on the 30th moved out along the Emmettsburg pike towards Gettysburg, and bivouacked on Marsh Creek.

On the morning of July 1st the Second Wisconsin Regiment was mustered, showing 306 men, of whom 278 were combatants. Shortly after 7 o'clock the regiment moved out on the Emmettsburg pike at the head of the brigade, towards Gettysburg, without any particular anticipation in general of a fight on that bright morning, although we were all beginning to feel that we were getting near to Lee's army, which of course we understood was making a raid upon the North,—that we were running a race with it, and that a battle could not be far off. While I say that there was no anticipation in general of an impending battle, there were exceptions, and there came to me that morning two cases of presentiment—the only cases which came to my knowledge during my experience as a soldier. We had not been long upon the march before Sergeant Joseph O. Williams of my company, a soldier who had never missed a skirmish, a battle or a day's duty, who had done a soldier's duty at Bull Run, Gainesville, Second Bull Run, South Mountain, Antietam, Fredericksburg, Fitz-Hugh Crossing and Chancellorsville, and through skirmishes too numerous to mention, all without a scratch, came forward and fell in alongside of me at the

head of the column, and opened up a conversation by saying that he did not feel quite right, that he felt as though something was going to happen to him, and that he should not get through the day. I laughed at him and told him he was foolish to feel so blue, there seemed to be no trouble ahead for the day, but if there should be, that he would come out all right as he always had done. Poor Joe did not have much more to say and soon fell back to his place. But he was right. He fell—shot dead at the first volley we received as we made our charge that morning, not two hours later.

Soon after Sergeant Williams had left me, the Sergeant-Major of the regiment, George H. Legate, who had been promoted from a serjeantcy in my company, came forward from the rear of the column, and he, too, had a presentiment and said, "Corny, we are going to have a fight to-day, and I will not come out alive." I laughed at him also, and told him he was the second man who had been to me, and that it was all nonsense, that there was no prospect of a fight and that if he really felt that way, he had better not go in if there should be one, as he could easily avoid it—that a Sergeant-Major was not of much account in a fight, anyway. But George said "No, I will stay with the regiment whatever happens," and stay he did, and died a soldier's death. He was shot during the afternoon attack.

We had moved out on the Emmettsburg pike at the head of the Iron Brigade, as before stated, and in the lead of the 1st Army Corps, and of General Reynolds' left wing of the Army of the Potomac. When within about a mile of Gettysburg, Buford's Cavalry was seen and heard to be engaged with the enemy off to the left or west, and about a mile distant. Almost immediately orders came from the front to our Colonel, Lucius Fair-

child, and the regiment filed off from the road into a field at the left, and across that field into another, and soon came the order "Forward, into line," followed with "Forward, double-quick." Forward we went into line and towards Buford and to his relief. As our guns were not loaded, Colonel Fairchild gave the order, and we loaded as we double-quickened. The regiment soon passed over the intervening ground and over Seminary Ridge south and west of the seminary, and met Heth's Division of A. P. Hill's Corps, which was posted on a wooded ridge about half a mile west of the seminary, receiving a volley as we advanced to the crest of the ridge, which cut down nearly one-half of the regiment, but, not daunted, it continued the charge upon the rebel line, crushed it and drove it in confusion across Willoughby Run, capturing the rebel General Archer, and some 600 of his brigade. At Willoughby Run the regiment was halted to await the results with the other regiments of the brigade; for the Second, as on the right of the marching column, had gone into line and forward on the double-quick, and it very naturally took the balance of the column some little time to get forward. After a wait of about half an hour the regiment was withdrawn from its advanced position and placed on a new line at nearly right angles with that just left, facing the north, but after a short time the line was again reformed, its location this time being near the summit of the ridge but somewhat to the right of where the battle had opened, and facing again to the west.

Lieutenant-Colonel George H. Stevens was mortally wounded, Lieutenant Winnegar was killed, Colonel Lucius Fairchild received a wound which cost him an arm, and Major-General John F. Reynolds was killed just as the charge ended at the crest of the ridge. He fell imme-

diately in the rear of the right of the Second Wisconsin, and not over 100 feet distant.

While the Iron Brigade was engaged in this charge, the Second Brigade, under Brigadier-General Lysander Cutler, had passed on to the right, and to the north of the Chambersburg pike, and became engaged in a hot fight in which it was not quite so successful as the Iron Brigade had been, but the Sixth Wisconsin having been detached from the latter just as it was going into action, went forward to the right to Cutler's assistance, captured a Mississippi regiment of several hundred men, saving the day in that part of the field.

This practically ended the fighting for the forenoon. The Second Wisconsin Regiment remained in line in the new position at the apex of something of an angle, being nearly joined on the right by the new Pennsylvania Buck-tails, the Eleventh Corps prolonging the right, the balance of the brigade and division to our left, until about three o'clock in the afternoon, when the rebels advanced to the assault along our whole line in overwhelming numbers, and from then until about half-past four o'clock it was a continuous struggle, advancing, retreating, and contesting every foot of the way. The ground was rolling, the little ridges running nearly or quite north and south, and as the rebels would drive us over a ridge we would reform on the other side and give it to them as they came to the top, and often ran them back some distance, but on the whole they were too much for us, and we could never gain quite so much ground as we had lost; and so it continued until we were forced back to the Seminary Ridge, where artillery had been posted, and there a stand was made for some time, but the Eleventh Corps having given away on the right, and the left having been turned, the position at the seminary became untenable, and what

was left of the First Corps was forced to fall back through Gettysburg in considerable disorder. That we did not fall back any too soon is manifest by the fact that about 5000 of our men were captured before they could get through Gettysburg; and I know that when I passed up the street leading to Cemetery Hill, the rebels had appeared at each end of the cross streets, and it was like running a gauntlet as the bullets came from both sides. At Cemetery Heights the artillery having a good position, our troops naturally concentrated, and a stand was made which the rebels did not seem to care to contest, and the first day's battle at Gettysburg was ended.

Late in the evening the Iron Brigade, then reduced to the size of a very small regiment, was placed in position on Culp's Hill to the right of the Baltimore pike.

The losses of the Second Wisconsin in this day's battle were 2 officers and 25 men killed, 10 officers and 144 men wounded, 5 officers and 47 men missing, leaving a regiment of 45 men under command of Captain George H. Otis. I, as First Sergeant and ranking officer, was left in command of Company I, nine men, the largest company in the regiment.

The brigade remained unengaged in its position on Culp's Hill during the succeeding days of the battle. From this position not much of the field of operations could be seen, excepting from the top of the hill in our rear occupied by the artillery, and not a very comfortable place for sight-seeing. We lay anxiously awaiting the result of the afternoon fight on the second, at the Peach Orchard and Little Round Top. Later we listened to the desperate attack made upon our extreme right on Culp's Hill, which was followed by a night attack across our front on Cemetery Hill, upon the 11th Corps, by Early, and in which the rebels succeeded in forcing our infantry

line back through the artillery, capturing Rickett's battery and spiking two of his guns, but were soon driven out again, this ending the battles of the second day.

July 3d opened with heavy artillery firing from the enemy, which after some hours gradually slackened, with no particular result. During the forenoon there was a heavy engagement just to our right on Culp's Hill, in which, after some hours of hard fighting, the rebel General Johnson was compelled to retire by Geary's and Ruger's Divisions of the 12th Corps. This fight lasted until about 11 o'clock A. M., after which came an ominous calm, and the whole army lay waiting in expectancy of the next move. About 1 o'clock the rebel batteries opened from along the whole line, to which our batteries soon began to reply, and then ensued probably the most tremendous artillery duel of the whole war, lasting for about two hours. The ground fairly shook beneath the feet of the assembled armies from the terrible concussion; the skies were clouded with smoke, and the air filled with shrieking shot and shell, the explosion of caissons, the groans of the wounded, and the yells of men, until it seemed as though hell itself had broken loose. About three o'clock the cannonading ceased, and soon after came that magnificent charge of Pickett's with his 17,000 men upon Hancock's center, in which they came on and on, never faltering or swerving, but gallantly closing up their ranks as they were swept by our batteries, until they reached the front held by the gallant Gibbon and his Division of the Second Corps, when there came a struggle, indeed to the death, and during which it seemed as if even the grand fighting veterans of the Second Corps, with Hancock and Gibbon in their midst, could not repel the charge, but they did. The gallant rebel army made its charge in vain, and had made a glorious failure—glorious for themselves for

having made one of the most magnificent and desperate charges in the history of war, and glorious for the Union because the death-knell of rebellion was sounded then and there. During the charge, and while the rebels had temporarily gained the Union line, our brigade was hastily rushed across to Hancock's support, but just as it came within helping distance, the charge had failed and the brigade returned to its position on Culp's Hill. With the failure of Pickett's charge the battle of Gettysburg was practically ended.

Of late years it has been something of a disputed point as to what infantry troops opened the battle of Gettysburg, which at the time of the battle was generally supposed to have been the work of the Iron Brigade, with the Second Wisconsin in the lead. General Doubleday, who was in command of the First Army Corps on that day, and who succeeded General Reynolds in command of the left wing at the death of the latter, and many others, have claimed that the battle was opened by Cutler's Brigade of Wadsworth's Division of the First Corps. General Doubleday, in an article on the battle of Gettysburg, published in the February number of the *North American Review*, 1891, states regarding the opening of the battle on July 1st:

"Buford's Cavalry, since early morning, had been holding on desperately to the ridge nearest the water (meaning Willoughby Run), contending with two large divisions of Hill's Corps, while the First Corps was five miles away to the south, on Marsh Creek. As it was all quiet there, and the stress of battle lay with Buford, Reynolds hastened forward with the nearest troops at hand—two small brigades of Wadsworth's Division, and directed me to bring up the remainder of the corps as soon as possible.

“Having withdrawn the pickets and put the two other divisions enroute, I galloped ahead and reached the field just as the contest began between Cutler’s Brigade on the right, against Davis’ Confederate Brigade. Meredith’s Brigade (the Iron Brigade) was still on its way a quarter of a mile to the rear. In the meantime I had sent an aide to ask for orders, and received this message from General Reynolds in reply—‘Tell Doubleday I will hold on to this road and he must hold on to that one.’ This was the last order he ever issued.

“Archer’s Confederate Brigade, however, which formed the right of the attacking column, did not advance by the town road, but attempted to take possession of a piece of woods between the two roads. Reynolds imprudently rode in there, almost unattended, to reconnoitre. As he turned his head to the rear to see how near we were, one of the enemy’s sharpshooters must have seen him, and put a bullet through his neck, killing him instantly. As Meredith’s men came on, I made a short address to them, telling them that this was the decisive battle of the war, and that the result would decide whether the Confederate President or Abraham Lincoln was to rule the country. I urged them to take the wood and hold it at all hazards. Full of the memory of their past achievements, they replied, ‘If we can’t hold it, where will you find the men who can?’ They went forward enthusiastically, entered the grove, and not only overpowered Archer’s brigade, but captured him and the greater portion of his men.”

In his article on Gettysburg, in “Campaigns of the Civil War,” page 128, General Doubleday says: “While this fighting (referring to Buford’s Cavalry) was going on, and Reynolds and Wadsworth were pressing to the front, I was engaged in withdrawing the pickets and assembling the other two divisions, together with the

corps artillery. As soon as I saw that my orders were in process of execution *I galloped to the front, leaving the troops to follow, and caught up with Meredith's Brigade of Wadsworth's Division, commonly known as the Iron Brigade, just as it was going into action.*"

This was the same brigade which was a "quarter of a mile to the rear "when the General galloped to the front, and to which he subsequently made a short address as "it came on," as stated in the article in the North American Review. Surely, this little bit of history has gotten somewhat mixed.

At the time General Doubleday overtook "the Iron Brigade, just as it was going into action," if he did so, it was after it had marched across from the Emmettsburg road, which had been its route from Marsh Creek to within about a mile of Gettysburg, with the Second Wisconsin leading the brigade, and to Seminary or Oak Ridge in front of the seminary, when it went into line and forward on the double-quick to the second or wooded ridge, about half a mile west of the seminary, when it encountered Archer's Brigade of Heth's Division, routed it from its position, driving it across Willoughby Run, and capturing General Archer and the greater part of his brigade.

We gather from General Doubleday's various statements that Cutler's Brigade had engaged Davis' Confederate Brigade on the right, or to the north of the Chambersburg or Cashtown road, and that it had been repulsed and nearly overpowered before the Iron Brigade (Meredith's) went into action, and that General Reynolds was with it, for General Doubleday says (Campaigns of the Civil War, page 130):

"I reached the field just as the attack on Cutler's Brigade was going on, and at once sent my Adjutant-General,

Major Halstead, to General Reynolds to ask instructions. Under the impression that the enemy's columns were approaching on both sides, Reynolds said, 'Tell Doubleday I will hold on to this road (referring to the Chambersburg road) and he must hold on to that one,' meaning the road to Fairfield or Hagerstown."

History has it that General Reynolds was killed at the opening of the battle, which is quite true, and he was killed directly in the rear of the right of the Second Wisconsin Regiment, and not more than 100 feet distant. He was struck by a stray ball immediately after the volley the Second Wisconsin received as it charged over the top of the ridge where Archer's Brigade was lying. The writer was at that time on the right of the regiment, and as the line came to a temporary halt when it reached the top of the ridge, he turned to look for those of his company who had fallen, and glancing down the slope to the rear saw General Reynolds fall from his horse. This was on the ridge "nearest the water" (in General Doubleday's words), "which Buford's Cavalry had been desperately holding on to."

General Doubleday and General Wadsworth in their official reports place the time of General Reynolds' death at about 10:15 A. M., at the beginning of the attack. Lieutenant-Colonel Mansfield of the Second Wisconsin, and Colonel W. W. Robinson of the Seventh Wisconsin, in their reports, fix the time of leaving the Emmettsburg pike and advancing to the attack as about 10 A. M. General John Buford, commanding cavalry, says in his report, "A portion of the 3d Indiana found horse-holders, borrowed muskets and fought with the *Wisconsin* regiment which came to relieve them."

In the reports of the action of Cutler's Brigade, Captain James A. Hall, 2d Maine Battery, says—"We opened

with shot and shell at 10:45 A. M. In 25 minutes from the time we opened fire, a column of the enemy's infantry charged up the ravine on our right flank." Colonel William Hoffman, 56th Pennsylvania, says—"We reached Gettysburg and engaged the enemy at 11 A. M." Captain John E. Cook, 76th New York, says—"At about 10:30, being the extreme advanced regiment of the First Corps, we reached the battlefield near the seminary at Gettysburg."

From the reports of Confederate officers in the official records, Lieutenant-Colonel S. G. Shepard, 7th Tennessee, Archer's Brigade, says—"We had advanced (from Cash-town) about three miles when we came upon the enemy's pickets, who gradually fell back before us for about three miles, which brought us in sight of the enemy upon a slight eminence in our front and *to the right of the road*. General Archer halted for a short time while a section of artillery opened fire upon them. He then deployed the brigade in line and advanced directly upon the enemy." General John R. Davis, commanding a brigade of Heth's Division, says: "I moved in rear of Archer's Brigade with three regiments of my command. When within about two miles of town, our artillery was put in position and opened fire. I was ordered to take position on the left of the turnpike (Cashtown), and with the right resting on it. press forward to the town. At about 10:30 a line of battle was formed. The line of skirmishers advanced and moved forward about *one mile*, driving in the enemy's skirmishers, and came within range of his line of battle which was drawn up on a hill in a field a short distance in front of a railroad cut. The engagement soon became very warm."

So, from the records it appears that the engagement between the Iron Brigade and Archer's Brigade took place between the roads and at an earlier hour than is claimed

in any of the reports, Union or Confederate, for the engagement between Cutler's and Davis' Brigades on the north of the Cashtown road.

General Doubleday has always given Cutler's Brigade credit for the infantry opening of the battle. General Cutler having once been in command of the Iron Brigade, during which time it was sometimes referred to as "Cutler's Brgade," it is possible that General Doubleday may have been misled in his opinion as to *which* of Cutler's Brigades was in the lead and opened the battle. The Iron Brigade made no halt from the time it left the Emmettsburg road until it became engaged; it listened to no speech from General Doubleday; it heard no musketry firing at the right, as it must have done had there been any; it went into the fight on the double-quick and fought in advance of General Reynolds, and at the time when he was killed at the opening of the battle.

In addition I have the testimony of a gentleman, Mr. H. J. Fahnestock, at that time a resident of Gettysburg, now of Watertown, South Dakota, who in a letter to me says:

"Buford's Cavalry came into Gettysburg on the evening of the 30th of June, and they opened the fight on the morning or forenoon of the 1st of July, dismounted. I could not see the opening of the fight by Buford's men, nor by the First Army Corps from my residence, as the Seminary Hill and the grove to the west of the hill and the buildings intervened to prevent it. What I did see was the First Army Corps going on the field of battle, which I saw from the upper porch or balcony of my house. The First Army Corps came in on the Emmettsburg road on the forenoon of the 1st, passing as I saw them along the base of Seminary Hill, and crossed over the hill at a point south of the Chambersburg turnpike, and along the hill

south as far as, and beyond, the Fairfield road. There is no question that the opening fight was between the two roads (the Fairfield and Chambersburg pikes) and spread later in the fight to the north, beyond the Chambersburg pike. The spot where Reynolds is reported to have received his death-wound was at a copse of trees almost due west from the main seminary building, and about equidistant between the Fairfield road and the Chambersburg pike."

This was where the Iron Brigade, the Second Wisconsin in advance, opened the battle of Gettysburg.