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Wolcott, Laurens W
The battle of
Corinth

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THE BATTLE OF CORINTH.



A PAPER

READ BEFORE

THE MICHIGAN COMMANDERY

OF THE

MILITARY ORDER

OF THE

LOYAL LEGION OF THE UNITED STATES.

MAY 5, 1898.

By Companion
LAURENS W. WOLCOTT,
1st Lieut. 52nd Illinois Infantry.

split up into detachments distributed at different points in west Tennessee and northern Mississippi, extending from Memphis to the Tennessee river.

The rebel army under General Beauregard, after its retreat from Corinth, was also divided; the larger fraction under General Bragg marching eastward to Chattanooga and thence north across Tennessee and Kentucky, almost to Louisville, while the remainder, under Price and Van Dorn, remained in Mississippi, confronting the forces under General Grant.

In September General Price occupied Iuka on the Memphis and Charleston Railway, some twenty-five miles east of Corinth, and a few days later, after a sharp action between two of his brigades and General Rosecrans' head of column, he slipped away to the south and west, and at Ripley joined his forces to those of General Van Dorn, forming an army of 23,000 effective men.

With this force, in excellent condition and high spirits, Van Dorn and Price felt strong enough to assume the offensive against any post held by the Federal forces west of the Tennessee river.

Corinth was the point selected for attack. It was believed by General Van Dorn that the troops holding it were about 15,000 strong, and a considerable part of them were known to be at different outposts within a dozen miles. These outposts were mostly southerly or southeasterly from Corinth. By moving directly on Bolivar, and appearing to threaten that point, or Jackson, Van Dorn and Price expected to divert attention from their real objective, approach Corinth from the northwest and carry it by sudden attack before the outposts could be drawn in to aid in its defence. The outposts would fall an easy prey, as their only line of retreat would be cut off; and they disposed of, the remaining Federal forces west of the Tennessee could only escape destruction by hasty concentration and retreat.

The Confederate generals might well expect to either defeat

and capture these forces or drive their shattered remnants to seek safety north of the Ohio.

Though General Grant and his lieutenants were promptly informed that the rebel army was concentrated and in motion northward, the uncertainty as to the point to be attacked was not dispelled until the enemy had occupied all roads by which reinforcements might reach Corinth, and heavy fighting was in progress within two miles of the town.

On the 2d day of October Rosecrans had drawn in his outposts and had nearly his entire force sufficiently concentrated.

It consisted of the 2nd and 6th Divisions of the Army of the Tennessee, veterans who had stormed the works at Fort Donelson and held the "Hornets' Nest" at Shiloh, and the 2nd and 3rd Divisions of the Army of the Mississippi, fresh from the bloody and desperate conflict at Iuka. General Thomas A. Davies was in command of the 2nd Division and General Thomas J. McKean of the 6th Division of the Army of the Tennessee, while General David S. Stanley and General Charles S. Hamilton commanded the 2nd and 3rd Divisions of the Army of the Mississippi.

There was also present a brigade of cavalry, composed of the 7th and 11th Illinois, 2nd Iowa, 7th Kansas, 3rd Michigan and four companies of the 5th Ohio, the whole force amounting to some 20,000 effectives.

On the morning of October 3rd it was known that the enemy in some considerable force was advancing from the northwest, on the Chewalla road, driving before him the brigade of Colonel Oliver of McKean's Division, but it was not certain that this movement was more than a demonstration intended as a diversion to cover an attack from a different quarter, or to mask the enemy's columns while passing to the northward. The densely wooded character of the country and scarcity of roads and clearings made concealment easy and observation extremely difficult.

About eight o'clock General McArthur, with the 1st Brigade of McKean's Division, re-inforced Colonel Oliver, and, assuming

command of the two brigades, made a stand a short distance outside the old rebel rifle pits and about three miles from Corinth. Finding himself hard pressed by superior numbers, he slowly retreated and called for help. The 3rd Brigade of Davies' Division was sent to his aid, while the rest of this division was formed in the rebel works, some considerable distance from McArthur's right, stretching to the right as far as its line would extend and prolonging this line with skirmishers to the Mobile & Ohio Railroad.

Hamilton's Division was east of this railroad and northeast of Corinth, while Stanley with his division was west of Corinth and nearly or quite five miles distant from Hamilton.

About eleven o'clock McArthur was sharply attacked, but he firmly held his ground, repulsing every effort of the enemy to dislodge him from his position until noon, when the enemy passed through the interval between his right and the left of Davies, he was assailed in flank and front and compelled to retreat. This attack extended to Oglesby's Brigade of Davies' Division, which, weakened by its endeavor to cover too broad a space, after a desperate resistance, was forced back with a loss of two guns.

No reserves being at hand, the whole line was retired nearly a mile, position was taken about one mile from Corinth, and preparations for a renewal of the struggle were made.

It was nearly two o'clock before the enemy appeared in front of this position. The day was excessively hot and the men suffered greatly for want of water. During this interval of inaction a soldier of my company volunteered to take as many canteens as he could carry and go to a gully some distance in front of the lines in search of water. A negro hanger-on of the company took a like number and went with him. They found water and filled the canteens, but on starting to return found the rebel skirmishers advancing and much closer than was agreeable. They ran the gauntlet of their fire and reached our lines

unhurt, though the soldier fell exhausted and fainting just as he reached us. He had stuck to his canteens and brought us the much needed water. The darkey had promptly abandoned his canteens, and in reply to the abuse which the disgusted men heaped upon him for so doing, he said, "De rebels was right dar. I seed 'em a comin' up all in rows."

However fully convinced the darkey may have been that the enemy was present in force, it would appear that General Rosecrans was still in doubt. Hamilton, with his division, was far to the right and a mile or more to the front of this line. Stanley was too far to the left and rear to be within supporting distance. Davies and McKean stretched out their entire force in one line, and even then the right of Davies lacked some three hundred yards of reaching the swamp through which ran the Mobile & Ohio Railroad.

After the enemy had appeared several lines deep in the broad open field in front of Davies' right, the right regiment of his line, the 52nd Illinois, was marched by the right flank along the edge of the woods bordering this open field, in plain view of the enemy, down into the swamp until hidden from sight. Then it counter-marched, just far enough back in the woods to be concealed from view, and resumed its old position in line.

By this movement, whether merely a ruse or not, it was made to appear that the right of our line extended into the swamp, and no attempt was made to turn the unprotected flank.

About two o'clock the attack opened with great vigor, on the entire front of Davies. The repulse of one line was followed by the advance of a second, which shared the lot of the first. Again and again the attack was renewed and maintained with great obstinacy, but without success. One after another Davies lost his three brigade commanders—General Hackleman was killed, General Oglesby was desperately wounded, and Colonel Baldwin was wounded and disabled for the time, but his division main-

tained its position with unshaken firmness, though suffering heavy loss.

About four o'clock Mower's brigade of Stanley's division came to its aid, and a little later Sullivan's brigade of Hamilton's division advanced to the Mobile & Ohio Railroad, on the left and rear of the forces engaged in the attack on Davies, captured about 100 of the enemy's skirmishers and created such a scare that the effort against Davies suddenly ceased.

Davies and McKean thereupon withdrew their troops to the outskirts of Corinth, where a belt of timber had been felled for an abattis and a few lunettes had been constructed as the beginning of projected intrenchments, and the fighting of the day was over.

During the night Rosecrans concentrated and re-formed his troops preparatory for the work of the morrow.

His line fronted nearly northwest and extended from rather more than half a mile northeastward of the railroad depot, southwesterly beyond the brick college building, a distance of nearly a mile and a half.

Sullivan's brigade of Hamilton's division was on the extreme right, its left resting on a half finished lunette called Battery Powell. To the left of Battery Powell were the 1st and 3rd Brigades of Davies' Division, extending along the ridge now covered by the most attractive homes in the City of Corinth, nearly to the Mobile & Ohio Railroad.

Stanley's Division was next in line, having Battery Robinette near its center, and McKean's Division formed the left and reached beyond the brick college.

While the results of the first day's fighting were wholly indecisive, they were so far encouraging to the enemy that he suspected Rosecrans was preparing to retreat, and to test the matter, about four o'clock in the morning he opened fire upon the town from a battery posted not over five hundred yards in front of Battery Robinette and perhaps half a mile from the railroad de-

pot. His shells struck the Tishomingo Hotel, then filled with wounded, and created somewhat of a panic among the wounded and their attendants, but this battery was soon silenced and forced to decamp by the fire of Battery Robinette and Battery Powell. It was withdrawn in such haste that one gun was left behind, to be picked up by our skirmishers and brought in after daylight. The Confederates employed the early hours of the morning in getting troops into position and making final preparations for the decisive effort.

During this period Colonel Mower was ordered to advance his skirmishers and feel the enemy. He executed the order with energy and promptness, but mistaking a detachment of Confederates for his own men, he was wounded and captured.

The fire of the skirmish lines gradually increased, but no movement in force occurred until about ten o'clock.

A sudden quickening of the skirmish fire sent our skirmishers running back to lie down with the main line, and the artillery of Davies and Sullivan opened. A moment later the rebel lines emerged from the woods a couple of hundred yards in front of Sullivan's Brigade, and in spite of the heavy fire of Sullivan's infantry, aided by the 6th Wisconsin battery, they slowly and steadily pressed forward, clambering over the abattis and showing great steadiness and spirit. Unfortunately for Sullivan, the lines of the enemy, far overlapping his right flank, turned it and forced him to retreat in haste and disorder. Buford's Brigade of Hamilton's Division was in reserve some 300 or 400 yards to the rear of Sullivan, formed in line facing to the east of north, and from its position incapable of covering his flank. Why Sullivan's flank was left exposed when ample forces to cover it were at hand, has never been explained.

The mistake was serious and narrowly escaped proving fatal.

The attack, begun by the extreme left of Hebert's Division, was taken up successively by his remaining brigades and those of Maury's Division, and speedily involved the entire front of Davies and Stanley.

The brown ranks of the Confederates emerged from the woods in front of Davies just as the caissons and limbers of Sullivan's artillery, for the most part without postillions, were racing madly to the left and rear, followed by his broken regiments of infantry. Before the enemy in front had advanced sufficiently to press Davies at all heavily, the forces which had flanked Sullivan had reached the right and rear of Davies and scourged his right regiments with a fire far more severe than that from the front.

Disconcerted by the appearance of the enemy in this unlooked-for quarter, the commanders of the regiments on Davies' right endeavored to extricate their commands from exposure to fire to which they could not reply with effect, and ordered a retreat which speedily became confused and disorderly.

The troops farther to the left in their turn were amazed by the sudden break of those on the right, without visible cause, and the enemy in their front having made their way through the abattis and, advancing just at this moment in a general charge, they, too, fell back in some confusion. Battery Powell and its eight guns, Dillon's 6th Wisconsin battery and the 3d Michigan battery fell into the hands of the enemy. His troops, now sure of victory, pressed forward into Corinth as far as the house occupied by General Rosecrans as headquarters, and some few reached the reserve artillery.

But here the flood was stayed. Davies' and Sullivan's men, who had retreated in disorder some 200 yards, suddenly stopped, faced about and with but a moment of delay charged their pursuers with a vim that nothing could withstand. The enemy were swept before them like chaff until they found a cover behind the logs and stumps of the abattis. Into this their pursuers did not follow, but halting at the edge of the felled timber they poured in a fire which at length completely crushed that of the enemy. The guns of Battery Powell had been turned by their captors, and some of them had been loaded, but they were retaken before they could be fired, and, manned at first largely by infantrymen,

they opened and added their canister to the fire of the infantry till all return fire ceased and the enemy disappeared.

In this splendid rally and counter-charge every regiment of Davies' Division and of Sullivan's Brigade took part, and were efficiently supported by the prompt advance of Hamilton's reserve brigade.

About the time of the grand rally Chapman's Battery opened fire from a low hill to the east of the town upon the enemy in possession of our lines near Battery Powell, and, failing to notice the advance of our troops, continued to direct its fire to the same ground after they had driven the enemy back and retaken the position. A number of Davies' men were killed by the fire of this battery. Some of the infantry, also, who had failed to join in the charge, kept up a fire in the rear which did some damage. As one instance, a soldier at the front, and so close to me that I could at the moment have laid my hand on his shoulder, was struck in the back by a rifle ball from the rear and severely wounded.

But the troops were too intent on the work before them to pay much attention to the misdirected efforts of their friends in the rear. The enemy, though forced back in disorder into the abattis, was still making a desperate fight to maintain his ground, and until this fight was ended no attention could be spared for minor matters.

Nearly simultaneously with the beginning of the repulse of the attack on Davies; Phifer's and Moore's Brigades of Maury's Division advanced most gallantly to the assault of Stanley.

The position of Stanley was upon the comparatively high ground between the Mobile & Ohio and the Memphis & Charleston railroads, some 400 or 500 yards north of Corinth. Viewed from Davies' line it appeared like a boldly salient angle, his right wing facing northeasterly, Battery Robinette near the center, and his left facing nearly northwest.

Battery Robinette was a small lunette, open at the rear and

wholly without rifle pits or intrenchments on either flank. Its guns looked directly up the Chewalla road until it disappeared in the forest some 250 yards distant. This space, except for the narrow roadway, was covered with a dense abattis of felled trees, through which it was a work of time and difficulty to force a way. On the evening of the previous day my company was sent out as skirmishers in front of Battery Robinette, and it took nearly or quite ten minutes to advance 200 yards through the tangled tree-tops. Farther to the left the obstruction was less, but at every point it was sufficient to greatly impede advancing troops.

Over this ground and over these obstructions Maury's brigades advanced with dauntless energy; swept by storms of canister and withered by deadly musketry, the heavy columns steadily closed up and pushed forward, led by Colonel Rogers of the 2nd Texas, bearing the colors of his regiment, to the summit of the parapet of Battery Robinette. The gunners could no longer work their pieces, but with hastily snatched muskets and even with swabsticks they fought hand to hand with the few of the enemy who had mounted the works and were entering the embrasures.

Fuller's Brigade of Stanley's Division, from the first appearance of the enemy's columns, had met them with a steady and murderous fire, which grew more and more deadly as the advance of the enemy brought him closer to Fuller's line. At last a portion of this line, thinned by its losses, was forced to give ground, but the 11th Missouri, which had been in reserve, came to its relief, delivered a destructive volley and charging with the 27th and 63rd Ohio, broke the enemy's desperate advance and forced him to retreat. The fire of the infantry had, in the meantime, cleared Battery Robinette of its bold assailants, and its guns opened fire upon the fleeing remnants of the Confederate columns until they disappeared in the woods, leaving in Stanley's hands some 300 prisoners and a stand of colors.

Colonel Rogers, who had planted the colors upon the parapet

of Battery Robinette, was among the dead who covered its front and filled its ditch.

Along the front of Davies and Sullivan, immediately after firing had ceased, a curious scene was enacted. No pursuit of the enemy was allowed; not even a skirmish line was suffered to follow, but a few soldiers were permitted to advance from each regiment into the abattis on its front. They soon returned each with a longer or shorter string of prisoners behind him. One man would have half a dozen, another ten or a dozen, and one, by actual count, had twenty-two.

When the resistance of the Confederates had ceased, the unwounded survivors lying under cover of the logs and stumps were in a bad position for escape. The effort to retreat would expose them to the deliberate fire of a thousand rifles at close range as they laboriously climbed over or crawled through the broad abattis. Hence many decided to lie close until a better way out could be perceived. When the few Federal soldiers went down among them they made all haste to surrender and gain a position of safety.

The Confederate forces engaged had not been merely repulsed and defeated, but almost destroyed. Of the twenty-four regiments participating in the attack on Davies and Sullivan, eleven left their colors on the ground. Davies' division secured ten of these colors and 1,362 prisoners, of whom 693 were wounded. Sullivan's brigade captured one stand of colors and a considerable number of prisoners.

It is interesting to note how this action appeared, as viewed from the Confederate side.

An officer of General Maury's staff, writing General Beauregard just after the battle, said: "We scarcely got in when we met and were overwhelmed by the enemy's massive reserves. Our lines melted under their fire like snow in a thaw. The fragments who escaped formed again before we got beyond the fire of their batteries, and Lovell came over and became the rear

guard, and we fell back nine miles that night. Our division did not number 800 men." (Maury's division went into action 3,900 strong.)

"The enemy's force I do not know, but he swallowed up seven brigades of as good troops as I ever saw in twenty minutes."

As the heavy fighting began about ten o'clock and ended about twelve, the swallowing up process occupied some two hours, instead of twenty minutes. Most men who have participated in severe battle are aware that time slips by unnoticed, and the duration of an engagement is usually far greater than it seems.

It was now noon. Seven brigades of the Confederate forces had been substantially destroyed. Only four remained in serviceable condition. At least an equal number of Rosecrans' troops had not been engaged at all, or but slightly, and every regiment which had been engaged was ready and eager to follow up and complete the work so auspiciously begun. Not a regiment had marched a mile that day, and the elation of victory more than made up for the fatigue of fighting.

It was apparent that a prompt advance must result in completing the destruction of Van Dorn's army, but no advance was made.

The troops were kept standing in line as if awaiting another attack, for some hours, then they stacked arms and bivouacked on the field that night, affording the enemy ample time to retreat unmolested.

Early next morning pursuit was begun, but the golden opportunity had been neglected, and the results of the pursuit, though continued some fifty miles, were but trifling.

There were no roads parallel to the one upon which the rebel column was retreating. A small rear guard, well handled, so delayed Rosecrans' advance that not even the loss of several hours, occasioned by the action at Hatchie Bridge, where Ord and Hurlburt met and defeated the fleeing forces and forced them

to retrace their way some three or four miles and take a cross road leading west, was sufficient to seriously embarrass the retreat, much less endanger it.

Much camp equipage was abandoned; some arms were destroyed and thrown away; some caissons lightened by strewing ammunition along the road and by cutting off and leaving the spare wheels; but beyond this and the loss of 200 or 300 stragglers, the retreat of the shattered Confederate forces was accomplished without danger from the pursuing army.

The lost opportunity could not be regained. The blow which, promptly repeated, might have crushed, had only crippled and stunned.

General Rosecrans reported his losses in killed, wounded and missing as 2,520; also that he captured fourteen stands of colors and 2,268 prisoners, and that 1,423 Confederate dead were buried by his burial parties.

General Van Dorn reported his losses at 505 killed, 2,150 wounded and 2,183 missing, a total of 4,838. While there were doubtless many of the Confederate killed and wounded included in the number reported by General Van Dorn as missing, it is certain that there is a mistake in the number of Confederate killed reported by General Rosecrans. Probably the returns of some of the burial parties were counted more than once, and the actual number of Confederate killed would fall not far from midway between the number given by General Rosecrans and that given by General Van Dorn, or from 900 to 1,000.

The Confederates never recovered from the effects of this defeat. From this time forward to the close of the war they were never again able seriously to assume the offensive in Mississippi or West Tennessee, while for the Federal forces the victory at Corinth opened the door for the campaign which resulted so gloriously in the capture of Vicksburg on the 4th of July next following.



