

IN THE LOWLANDS OF LOUISIANA IN 1863

An Address Delivered By
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Of the engagement at La Fourche Crossing, we at Brashear City did not, of course, learn until some time afterward.

On the 23rd of June Lieutenant-Colonel Stickney, in pursuance of orders from headquarters, fell back with the forces under his immediate command, including the bulk of the Twenty-third Connecticut, on New Orleans, thus uncovering Brashear City.

The Twenty-Third Connecticut were encamped in New Orleans until June 26th, when they were ordered to Camp Fair, Metairie Racecourse.

Let us now return to Brashear City.

At about 8 o'clock on the morning of June 23rd the Confederates began throwing shell from Berwick City across the intervening bay into Brashear City; but every shell went clear over our regimental camp and, so far as I am now able to recall, exploded in an open field in the rear, without injury to men or camp. In retrospect, those were most significant facts.

It was great sport, as I distinctly recollect, for the boys, few of whom had ever witnessed such a sight, to watch the shells in their encircling aerial flight across the bay and as they exploded in our rear.

This almost incessant shelling, which was kept up for two hours or more, was evidently, as we learned when it was too late to profit by the knowledge, done to divert the attention of the Union troops in Brashear City; for during all this time a Confederate force was marching by a circuitous

and extremely difficult route to attack us in the rear. To reach our rear the enemy had to get through a dense swamp, which had been considered impassable by the Union troops. This probably accounts for the fact that no Union pickets had been placed at that point, and the alert enemy, taking advantage of our neglect, got into our rear “as slick as a pin.”

Major R. C. Anthony seems to have been in command at Brashear City on that fateful June Morning in 1863.

At about 8 o'clock on the morning mentioned, the Confederates, consisting of about 800 men, mostly Texans, with a yell that made one's hair stand on end “like quills upon the fretful porcupine,” came rushing in from a piece of woods just back of the village upon a thoroughly surprised Union camp.

We had not to exceed 150 effective men at Brashear City, and of those only about fifty were formed in battle line in one of our company streets, the remainder being scattered about the village, some having been firing from behind rude breastworks on the shore of the bay, across the bay, into Berwick City. Others had been loitering about the village at different points—and all totally unprepared for attack.

The few men of the Twenty-third, under the command of two of our regimental captains, Jenkins and Crofut, after making a brief but heroic stand against the overwhelming Confederate force, were compelled to surrender.

I do not hesitate to declare that the pluck exhibited by those fifty men and their officers was of the highest character.

As the Confederates moved down toward the lower part of the village, they encountered some resistance from isolated squads of Union soldiers; and in several instances individual Union soldiers stood and fired at the oncoming Confederates.

For example: While facing, in the vicinity of the local hospital, and heroically fighting two or three Confederate soldiers, Thomas C. Cornell, of Company D, fell, shot in the forehead. Later in the day, I saw the lifeless body of Comrade Cornell lying where he had fallen.

A member of Company F. Samuel Oulds, about eighteen years of age, a special chum of mine, who had just been discharged from the local hospital, was wounded in the arm while fighting single-handed, in Indian fashion, from behind a tree, as the Confederates came into the village. Comrade Oulds' arm was afterward amputated, in consequence of which he died seventeen days later, and his body now lies in Southern soil. He was a brave soldier as ever wrote the Union blue. Memorial Day never comes round but this comrade is uppermost in my thought.

I was at a considerable distance from the regimental camp when the Confederates came rushing into Brashear City with their unearthly yell. With others—I distinctly recollect “Sammy” Oulds of my company as having been one of them—I had been down on the shore of Berwick Bay, behind the rude earthworks there constructed, firing across the bay at Confederates who had climbed on the housetops, evidently for the purpose of watching the movements of the Union

troops on the Brashear City side. Among those on the housetops, as we subsequently learned, was one General Green. Our firing across the bay was not altogether ineffective, for I saw several heads duck after the discharge of our muskets among them General Green's, as I was informed by a Confederate soldier, after the fight at Brashear City.

When I first saw the Confederates they were rushing in squads of fifteen or twenty men through the streets of the village, yelling and firing as they came. I was then entirely separated from my company comrades, and the few Union soldiers who were in sight; were unknown to me. With a few of these unknown soldiers started for the lower part of the village, our objective being, so far I can now recall, the big frame building on the shore of Berwick Bay. Here we could join a squad of the Twenty-fourth Massachusetts regiment, which had been performing special guard duty here.

It was a while on our way to this building that, for the first time in my life, I saw a Union soldier wounded. I shall never forget the scene. This soldier whoever it may have been, and I have often wondered, was hit somewhere in the lower part of the body, with a shriek that I can now almost hear, he dapped both hands over his abdomen, bending nearly double as he did so. The wound was probably fatal.

The bullets were now lying all about me; they seemed to be coming from two or three directions and it verily seemed as if every bullet was aimed at me, and that each particular bullet would hit me. This feeling, however, gradually wore off. Still, I prefer being in this place to facing Confederate bullets, as they flew about me with their "zip." "zip." On that June day forty-five years ago.

Instead of going into the big building for which, with others. I had started. I ran down the railroad track a short distance and climbed into an open freight car standing on the track.

From this car I fired for a few minutes at the on rushing Confederates. It was a strange sight to see the enemy rushing furiously around the corners of the adjacent buildings, yelling as they came. Each one seemed to mean business.

The car into which I had climbed had been fitted up with wooden railroad sleepers on the sides and ends for reconnoitering purposes along the line of the railroad. These sleepers formed an excellent protection. In the car, when I reached it, were a few Union soldiers, and also a few negroes. I do not recollect whether these negroes were armed or not, but I do distinctly recollect that the Confederate fire was soon concentrated on this car; the bullets fairly rained against the side nearest the upper part of the village—evidently because of the presence of the negroes."

Tumbling at length to this fact, I concluded it was the better part of valor to change my base, which I did by slipping from the rear side of the car and falling into line with the squad of Massachusetts soldiers which had just emerged from the big building where they had been performing guard duty. To have remained in that freight car five minutes longer, would have been certain, and brutal, death to a white soldier; of that I was satisfied.

As the squad of Union soldiers were marching parallel to and in the rear of the train of freight

cars on the track, and as the sergeant in command, a large, fine-looking fellow, was passing the opening between two of the cars, a Confederate bullet hit him in the left arm.

The squad of Massachusetts men stood for a few minutes after coming out from behind the freight cars and fired at the Confederates; but they were soon overwhelmed, and we scattered to places of safety; each one looking out for himself.

I had fired all my ammunition and, seeing that it was all up with us, I threw my musket and empty cartridge box into a deep ditch just above the railroad track and started toward camp. I was soon accosted by a Confederate major, who personally demanded my surrender; and as this seemed the only sensible thing to do under the circumstances, I readily acceded to the demand.

Seeing that I was without a musket, the officer inquired of me what had become of it, and upon being informed that I had thrown it into the water, he manifested his appreciation of my thoughtfulness for Uncle Sam by a broad, good-natured smile. As near as I can recollect, it was at about 11 o'clock in the day when the firing in the village ceased and the Confederates took possession; it may not, however, have been later than about 10 o'clock.

About 12 o'clock, the Union prisoners were marched up to a spot near where the Rhode Island battery had been stationed. Here, the Confederates gave us a few pounds of wheat flour; and this, so far as I observed, was the only food they gave us while we were in their hands, notwithstanding they had captured enough hardtack, salt-horse and other rations to supply an army for several weeks.

Of the flour dealt out to us by the enemy we made what were termed "flapjacks," which I assure you were greatly enjoyed by hungry Union soldiers. The flapjacks were supplemented by a small quantity of coffee and sugar, which we were fortunate enough to have in our haversacks.

As for our knapsacks, the Confederates had captured them and, indeed, everything else belonging to us except what we had on our backs. In my knapsack I had several letters which I had found in the garret of General "Dick" Taylor's house near the Mississippi River; some choice shells picked up on Ship Island. There must, also, have been other articles in my knapsack left in my tent, including, probably, a few love letters. Besides my extra clothing, there were in my tent several orangewood sticks for canes, which I had intended bringing home. I have often wondered what became of these articles, captured by the Confederates on that June morning.

From "The Twenty-third Regiment Connecticut Volunteer Infantry in the War of the Rebellion," I quote the following:

"The enemy, after the repulse at La Fourche, retreated down the railroad to Brashear, capturing small detachments guarding the different stations. Captain Julius Sandford, Company C, at Bayou Boeuf, finding it impossible to hold the place, fired the large sugar house in which was stored a large quantity of officers' baggage and regimental stores belonging to the troops engaged before Port Hudson, to prevent them from falling into the hands of the enemy."

On the 25th and 26th of June the Union soldiers captured at Brashear City and at Bayou Boeuf

were paroled. I have with me a duplicate of my parole. I prize it highly. I will read it:
“Headquarters C. S. Forces, South of Red River.
“Brashear City, LA, June 25th, 1863

“I private A. M. Sherman, Co. F 23d Regt, C, Vols., do solemnly swear and pledge this, my Parole of Honor, that I will not take up arms against the Confederate States, or their allies, nor in any manner whatsoever aid, assist, or abet the Government of the United States, during the existing war, until regularly and duly exchanged.

“A. M. Sherman

“Attest; A. J. Watt, A. D. C.,

“C. S. A.”

Across this parole duplicate are written the words: “Attest, R. C. Anthony, Maj. U. S. A., Cmdg,” in the major’s handwriting.

The parole also bears the signature of the Confederate aide-de-camp, as well as my own.

The commissioned officers captured at Brashear City and at Bayou Boeuf, were taken to Tyler, Texas, where they were kept as prisoners of war until July, 1864, a period of thirteen months.

It was a sad sight to see the officers—particularly of our own regiment—turn toward Texas and a Confederate prison; but they departed themselves like men. The scene of the parting of the officers and privates on this occasion is ineffaceably impressed upon my memory. Of the faces of our officers about to start for Texas those of Captain Hopkins and Lieutenant Hurlburt (“Charlie” Hurlburt, as he was called when off duty) alone linger in my visual memory.

At the end of three days the captured Union soldiers started, under Confederate guard, for the Union lines, then at Algiers. When I tell you that fully nine-tenths of the Union prisoners were convalescents, but recently discharged from the hospital at Brashear City, you will not be surprised to hear that we were seven days in marching a distance of about one hundred miles; and that on that march, so enfeebled were most of the boys from recent illness that the line was several miles in length.

So far as I was able to observe, the Confederate guard were very considerate in their treatment of their prisoners; which is accounted for as I have always thought, by the fact that the guard was composed of Texans, whose ancestors were from the North and West.

I conversed very freely with several Confederate officers on the march toward the Union lines, about the war, its causes its progress and its probable outcome. One officer, in particular, seemed to enjoy the boyish enthusiasm with which I conducted my side of the discussion.

Many incidents of great interest occurred on our march; of these. I can now relate only a few.

For at least one-half the distance from Brashear City to Algiers we marched on the railroad, the general course of which was east and west. With the southern sun beating directly down upon us, and with dense forest on either side of the track, which shut out any air that may have been

stirring the heat on those June days was almost unbearable to men so recently out of the hospital.

I recall that on one afternoon during the march on the railroad I became so thoroughly exhausted from the heat and fatigue that, staggering down the embankment, and finding a comparatively dry spot. I lay down, with the feeling that I should not rise again; indeed, I did not care whether I ever rose again or not. I fell asleep. After an hour or more I was awakened by the Confederate rear guard, and, very much refreshed from my sleep. I resumed the march toward the Union lines.

On either side of the railroad on which we marched it was decidedly swampy, and there was an abundance of stagnant water, covered with a thick, green scum. This water the boys were sometimes obliged to drink to relieve their extreme thirst. Kneeling down on the ground, we would push aside the off times heavy scum and drink water, every mouthful of which contained poisonous matter.

Alligators were numerous all along the railroad, and some were of such dimensions that we did not care, in our defenseless condition, to disturb them.

My chum, during most of the march, was "Pep" Short, a member of my company. On the march, the Confederates did not give us one morsel of food to eat; hence it was forage, or go hungry, and the latter we were disinclined to do. We had brought a little coffee in the familiar and indispensable tin can. A few ears of sweet corn plucked from an adjacent field and roasted over our coffee fire were considered a great treat by two hungry Union soldiers. That we had good teeth for eating sweet corn "off the cob" goes without saying.

As for blankets, neither "Pep" nor I had one; henceforth the Confederates would sleep under our gray blankets. I recall that on one night in particular our only coverings were the railings of the rule southern fence under which we bunked. The bare ground was, of course, our only bed. These things I mention, not as examples of the hardships we endured, but because of the ludicrous aspect of these incidents as I now look back on them from the standpoint of present comforts.

Tired from the long march, and almost famished after a prolonged fast, my chum and I came one evening to a plantation which had been abandoned by everyone except a few negroes. Entering a hut, we requested the occupants, a somewhat aged negro couple, to furnish us with some hoecake and sweet potatoes, which they willingly did. The potatoes were baked in the ashes of the big fireplace and the hoecake was cooked in the typical southern iron frying pan. That late supper, so far as our relish of it was concerned, could not be surpassed by the best course dinner ever served at Delmonoco's.

In payment for that appetizing plantation supper I gave the negroes a five-dollar Confederate bill, which I had been sacredly keeping to bring home as a souvenir, and I received as change a two-dollar Confederate bill. This two-dollar bill I brought home and I have it among my modest collection of Civil War souvenirs. Inasmuch as the Confederates were so soon to reoccupy that portion of the State, their money was readily accepted by the negroes who fed us.

On reaching Boutte Station my Chum and I struck off into the country about half a mile, our objective being a house which had frequently visited during our four month's sojourn at that place. The family, we discovered on reaching the house, were all gone and the doors were fastened.

We were two hungry soldiers; we knew this family during our stay at Boutte Station to have been in sympathy with the Southern cause, hence our scruples were easily overcome. We broke open one of the doors, and entered and ransacked the house from cellar to garret in the hope of finding something to eat. All we found were two or three loaves of dry bread, covered with green mold; we were not hungry enough to eat such rations. Continuing our search, we came across an old wooden chest, painted red. It took us but a few moments to go through that chest, and our search was rewarded by the discovery of what upon due examination proved to be two bottles of good whiskey. "Pep" Short confiscated one bottle, and, more for the mischief of it than otherwise, I appropriated the other. We then resumed the march toward the Union lines.

Although I was not addicted to the use of strong drink in any form while in the army, I did, after our arrival at Algiers, use some of the confiscated Confederate whiskey; sharing it, however, with my old tent chum, whom I had not seen since the morning the bulk of Company F and the regiment went to Lafourche Crossing, where they helped to whip the Confederates so nicely. The bottle I brought home, and it was its use for several years before it was accidentally broken.

The first turtle soup I ever ate was in Algiers, during my short stay there; and for that soup I paid, in greenbacks, two dollars per plate, and I was so hungry, after having boarded with the Confederates for about ten days, that I think I would have been willing to pay double that sum.

The paroled prisoners of the Twenty-third Connecticut were soon started for Ship Island, there to await exchange.

Concerning the regimental organization, the following extract from "The Twenty-third Regiment Connecticut Volunteer Infantry in the War of the Rebellion" will give us some information: "July 1st, the regiment was in camp at Congo Square, New Orleans. July 4th, as an attempt to recapture the city of New Orleans was expected, the regiment, together with all the troops quartered there, was on duty patrolling the city. July 25th, the regiment was ordered to camp at Bonnet Carre."

I thank you, Mr. President and Comrades, for the opportunity of reviewing, with you, a portion of our experiences in the Lowlands of Louisiana in 1863.

ERRATA

Page 15 (top line). For "Captain Alfred Mills." Read Captain Alfred Wells.