



Hagerstown, Maryland

September 20, 1862

Saturday evening in camp

E. A. Benedict, Esq.

Editor of The Advance

Dear Sir,

Agreeably to my promise to keep you advised of the whereabouts and doings of the "Wurtz Guards" and matters connected with our present campaign, I sit down in my tent this eve to arrange the hurried notes I have taken of affairs up to this date. I write with the sound of cannon in the distance, and by going outside the tent I can see the flashes of guns towards the Potomac. We think a brisk engagement is going on at no great distance and it is not improbable that within the next twenty-four hours, our regiment may be called on to participate in it.

Gen. [John R.] Kenly's Brigade of Maryland troops marched through town this morning on their way to the Potomac, and I think it probable they have come up with the rebels and engaged them. This brigade came in early this morning from Baltimore via Harrisburg. But what is now going on in front is mere conjecture and I will proceed to give an account of the stern realities of war, which I have already met with.

You have probably learned about our arrival at Harrisburg and being sent to this place, so that it will be unnecessary for me to refer to the circumstances attending our trip hither. I will therefore confine myself chiefly to a brief narrative of scenes which none of our company but myself have yet witnessed, and describe what I saw on the battlefield of Antietam.

Wednesday last was the day of the great battle. On Thursday morning when we reached this place, everything was quiet though we heard from the people about town that a great battle had been fought the day before within eleven miles of this place (Hagerstown) and the Mayor has issued a proclamation requiring all places of business to be closed and all able-bodied men to go down to the battlefield to assist in taking care of the wounded.

During the forenoon news came that Jackson's army had surrendered which occasioned great excitement, but it has not been conformed. Yesterday morning, not feeling well enough for camp duty, Capt. Nicol, with the kindness and consideration which he has ever shown to me and to the men under his command, granted me "leave of absence" for the day, and I determined to improve the opportunity by making a visit to the battlefield. I had been sick at Harrisburg but determined to keep up with the company as long as possible, and that I have been able to do so is owing, in a great measure, to the generous assistance of my mess mate, W[illiam] W. Lathrop, and Hon. J. M. Poor, our popular ex-Mayor. Mr. Poore, with the energy that characterized him in everything placed himself under forty-five [years old], and taking my place in the ranks, with knapsack slung and musket shouldered, acted well the part of a soldier.

The rebel army, before evacuating Hagerstown, took all the provisions available, even to the last loaf of bread at the Washington Hotel, where Mayor Poor and myself took breakfast the following morning. The proprietor told us they cleaned us out of most everything. In settlement of our bill of \$2.00, I offered them "Troy City" money worth par which he refused and I gave him a \$5.00 bill of Northwestern money worth twenty cents on the dollar, he paying the change in silver.

Early yesterday morning I took a seat in an ambulance and started for the field. The ambulance also contained five citizens who went down for curiosity rather than a desire to render assistance. We were told, however, that the pickets would not let us pass the lines. When we came to the guard stationed a short distance from the field, we were stopped and the question asked of all except myself and a surgeon who had joined us, "Did you come to render assistance or from curiosity?"

All were obliged to confess to the latter motive, and sure enough, they were not allowed to proceed further. I was surprised at being allowed to pass on unquestioned when others were stopped, and did not, at first, quite understand what it meant. Presently I found myself addressed as “surgeon” and soon perceived that my blue army clothing, which closely resembled the uniform of our surgeon, had led our men to take me for one of the profession, and this mistake procured for me liberty to go pretty much where I pleased.

The first sight that greeted my eyes after entering our lines was the camp ground of Sumner’s division and a portion of Banks’ corps, I should judge, in line of battle, laying upon their whiskey, are said to be the cause, and certainly their frightful appearance corroborated the statement. Dead horses, too, were scattered in numbers about the field blackened and putrefying. All kinds of wounds were visible on both men and horses: heads, arms and legs shot off, bodies and limbs torn by shells or shattered by bullets. Altogether the appearance of the field was, indeed, revolting. Close beside a dead rebel I observed a rifle and bayonet, and asked an officer who stood near me if it was probable that this weapon had been carried by the rebel before us.

He replied that he should judge that it had, and picking it up and examining it, we soon found a Springfield rifle on the breech of which was the mark of the "3d Regiment, Alabama" ¹ which satisfied us that it had surely come from Rebel hands. We found that it contained a load with a Minié bullet about two-thirds of the way in the barrel. It was supposed that the rebel who used the rifle, after pouring the powder and dropping the bullet into the barrel was shot before drawing the ramrod to force the ball home. He lay with his breastbone shattered by a Minié bullet, and had apparently been instantly killed. He was dressed in a coarse white flannel shirt, very dirty, and destitute of buttons; pantaloons of Kentucky jean, badly soiled, and much the worse for wear; one shoe quite good, the other in a very imperfect state of preservation. This comprised his entire wardrobe. In the front part of his cartridge box was a slice of raw pork, some four inches square and half an inch thick. His equipments were so dirty that I had no desire to bring them away as trophies, but took from another rebel nearby a cartridge box which appeared to be in better condition and after buckling it around me, filled it with cartridges from the box of a third close at hand.

Another gruesome sight never to be forgotten on the cornfield were the trenches of half-buried rebels and union soldiers owing to a hasty retreat. Also at a stone wall where a desperate charge had been made and the dead of each army lay side by side and over each other awaiting burial.

Thus equipped I made my way from the field and returned to Hagerstown in the ambulance which I had left waiting for me. I was joined at the ambulance by several who were carrying home relics similar to my own. On reaching our pickets, however, these persons were deprived by the guard of all they had brought from the field; but the blue clothes and army buttons of the "surgeon" proved a sufficient protection to me and I passed one with my relics unmolested and reached Hagerstown about eight o'clock p. m. nearly exhausted.

On my arrival I found that our regiment had left during my absence, but by a lucky chance I met Lieut. [James] Hosie who informed me that the regiment had moved forward to within arms, very much fatigued. The line of infantry, within sight, extended about a mile, with artillery in front, and I was told that our whole line extended about three miles.

Here I saw Gen. Sumner and staff and Generals Gorman, French and Williams. The latter was in command of the portion of Banks' corps then on the field. I learned from them that Gen. McClellan had very lately been on the field, and the men were hoarse from cheering him. All had the utmost confidence in him. One remark made to me was, "If McClellan is not sharp enough for Stonewall Jackson, they did not make men who are," and this seemed to be the feeling generally.

I learned from some officers here the route to those portions of the field which I most desired to visit and was shown the spot where Gen. Mansfield received his death wound. It was about fifty feet from a piece of woods held by the rebels at the commencement of the battle.

I was also shown the spot where Gen. Crawford fell founded at the head of his brigade. I was told on coming from the field, that the body of Gen. Mansfield then lay in a white house which I could see in the distance, being embalmed.

In conversing with the various officers I learned many particulars of the battle. The Major of the 59th New York Regiment told me that he went into battle with 372 men and 24 officers and came out with 146 men and 12 officers. A captain in the same regiment told me that on going into battle his company numbered 42 men, and when the firing ceased he found but 10 of them on their feet.

While conversing with these officers, a lieutenant informed me that he saw Stonewall Jackson on the battlefield before Sharpsburg on Wednesday and that Longstreet had been taken prisoner. I fear, however, that this latter piece of intelligence will prove of the same character as the news we received Thursday morning of the surrender of Jackson's army.

The officer also told me that Lieut. Col. [John L.] Stetson of his regiment [59th New York] was killed and his body robbed of sword, pistols, watch and money and stripped of all his clothes excepting shirt. A major informed me that the 107th New York and 13th New Jersey coming on the field fresh, “skedaddled.”

Leaving these troops, I went further forward, and soon came upon the [Miller] cornfield where the battle had raged most fiercely. Here the 28th, 109th and 11th Pennsylvania, 3rd Maryland, 102nd New York, under Gen. Hooker, opened the fight early on Wednesday morning. Twice they were repulsed, but after receiving reinforcements, made a third attack and was successful. Standing on this field I could count the still unburied rebels by scores, and their blackened and swollen bodies presented a most sickening sight. I was told that they turned black within an hour after death; excitement, gunpowder, [portion missing; the editor of the original article—or the reprint—failed to recognize that a portion of the letter was skipped]

...and four or five miles of Williamsport. Immediately hastening to join it, and passed the night in camp. A little after two o'clock in the morning, we were aroused by orders to strike tents and to prepare to march at once. Soon after we made ready, however, the order was countermanded and we put our tents and again lay down until morning without further disturbance.

This afternoon about three o'clock we returned to Hagerstown and tonight were ordered to cook two days' rations and be prepared to marcher we knew not where.

I learned this morning that several thousand rebels approached to within three miles of Hagerstown, and after skirmishing with some of Anderson's cavalry, retreated with a loss of four or five prisoners who were brought into town this morning.

In company with John S. Law, Esq., this morning, we met a cousin of O. C. Moore who told us that at half past eight last evening a body of rebel cavalry came up to Jones Crossroads, some miles from Hagerstown on the Sharpsburg pike. I had passed that spot on my return a little more than an hour previous, and I therefore must have run a close chance of being captured.

Mr. Moore is a member of the Anderson Cavalry and was stationed at the crossroads with a portion of his regiment. He said he and his comrades were driven in by a rebel cavalry after some little skirmishing with them.

Tattoo is now beating and all lights must be put out. I therefore close, hoping to see you soon and exhibit to you my relics of the fight, if I can succeed in getting them home.

Respectfully, etc., — J. E. Richmond

Bio of John Egbert Richmond

Born in 1836, at the time of the 1860 US Census, John was a 26 year-old clerk who worked for his uncle, William Henry Richmond (1821-1922), the operator of the Richmond & Co. coal mine. John was the son of Nelson Clark Richmond (a Moodus, Ct., shoe manufacturer) and Mary Ann Cone. He married Lucina Chapman Reed (1832-1915) in 1870 and became a Honesdale merchant. John passed away in 1921.

The Wurts Guards were actually Co. C of the 13th Pennsylvania Infantry Militia which was organized in mid-September 1862 to meet the threat of the Rebel invasion of the North by Lee's army. They were discharged in late September after essentially only about two weeks service.

¹ The 3rd Alabama fought at Antietam with the 5th, 6th, 12th, and 26th Alabama in the brigade commanded by Brig. Gen. Robert E. Rhodes. They fought in the Bloody Lane where for more than three hours the two armies blazed away at each other at point-blank range until the Confederates were finally overrun and fell back to the Piper Farm.