

# WAR PAPERS

READ BEFORE THE

## INDIANA COMMANDERY

MILITARY ORDER

OF THE

# LOYAL LEGION

OF THE UNITED STATES



INDIANAPOLIS:  
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1898.

## From Spottsylvania Onward.

BY CAPTAIN R. S. ROBERTSON.

The tactical movements which had kept us briskly marching, counter-marching and fighting about the intrenchments of Spottsylvania for nearly a week after the great battle of May 12, 1864, had apparently demonstrated the futility of further attempts to break the well-defended lines of our vigilant enemy.

The cost would be too great, and a new movement, by the left flank, was under contemplation.

As usual, the actual movement was foreshadowed by many rumors, by which, diversified as they were, the Second Corps came to understand that it was selected for a dangerous enterprise, the nature of which was unknown, but the rumors gave rise to much curiosity and some apprehension.

About dark of May 20, orders were received to march at 11 o'clock. Promptly at the hour specified we took the road. It was a beautiful moonlit night, and the tedium of a night march was somewhat relieved as we reflected that during the day the heat



ROBERT S. ROBERTSON was born April 16, 1839, at North Argyle, Washington County, Ind.; was educated in the common schools and Argyle Academy; admitted to the bar in New York City, November 22, 1860, and commenced the practice of law at Whitehall, N. Y., from which place he entered the service as a private in Company I, Ninety-third New York Infantry, October 22, 1861, and served in all the campaigns of the Potomac from the Peninsula campaign to that of 1864; was promoted to First Sergeant, January 24, 1862; to Second Lieutenant, April 15, 1862; to First Lieutenant, February 23, 1863; Brevetted Captain U. S. V., March 13, 1865, for "gallant and meritorious service" at

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and dust of the march would have been almost intolerable.

It was a rapid march until 2 p. m. of the following day, through a country not before disturbed by marching troops; and great was the astonishment and dismay pictured on the faces of the people as we marched with flags flying, and to the music of fife and drum, through Guinness' Station and Bowling Green, as well as upon the faces of the fowls, which, in the piping times of peace had not learned the necessity of roosting high in the stirring times of war. Reaching Milford, where the Fredericksburgh railroad crosses the Mattapony, we found the enemy's pickets on the opposite bank. The advance was pushed over the river by wading in water to their armpits, holding ammunition, haversacks and muskets over their heads.

The rebels (they were but few) "stood not upon the order of their going, but went at once," and the corps was rapidly thrown across the partially dismantled bridge, and formed upon the high bank, where we were at once set to work intrenching. Towards evening a small cavalry force reconnoitered our position and attacked our picket line, but was quickly repulsed. We now had time to discover that our corps was isolated from the remainder of the army some twenty miles in rear of Lee's position at Spottsylvania, and that there was every reason to

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Spottsylvania and Tolopatomay Creek; was detailed Aide-de-Camp to General N. A. Miles, commanding First Brigade, First Division, Second Army Corps, December 24, 1863, to September 3, 1864; was wounded May 12, 1864, in the battle of Spottsylvania, by minie ball in right knee, and was again twice severely wounded, May 31, 1864, at battle at Tolopatomay Creek, and was discharged on account of disabilities resulting from those wounds. He was breveted Colonel New York Volunteers, March 23, 1865. After leaving the service Colonel Robertson has been engaged in the law practice; he served as Lieutenant-Governor, 1887-89; was a member of the Utah Commission in 1889 and 1894, since which time he has practiced law in Fort Wayne, Ind. He has been made the recipient of one of the medals of honor for gallantry in action.

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expect that Lee would hurl his whole force against us so soon as our isolated position became known.

The following day, though Sunday, brought us no rest, for the work of intrenching was continued until formidable earthworks frowned upon the horizon in every direction, giving courage to the men who momentarily expected to be attacked. But our labors were to prove futile, for, as we rested from our work, and in the evening twilight discussed our varied and palatable bill of fare, we learned that Lee had retreated by another route towards Hanover Junction, and that the rest of our army was in rapid pursuit. Our own instructions were to be ready to move whenever ordered.

That night we slept upon our arms in marching order, but happily for the weary men, it was morning of the 23d before we started on a rapid march through heat and dust, with no more than absolutely necessary halts, towards the North Anna, which we reached at 3 p. m., to find that Lee's rear had just crossed, leaving a small force in a tete de pont, covering the turnpike bridge. The head of our column formed at once, and kept up a rapid exchange of volleys with this force until the corps closed up, about 6 p. m., when the Second Brigade of Birney's Division was formed for an assault, and after a sharp fight carried the position, one Regiment, the Ninety-third New York, following the flying rebels nearly to the other side of the river before the order for recall could reach it.

An act of individual heroism occurred here which is deserving of mention. In returning to the north bank the color-bearer of the Ninety-Third fell wounded, and the colors were left unnoticed in the center of the bridge. When the loss was discovered Lieutenant William Ball, of Company K, braved the musketry

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fire which was centered on the bridge, and coolly brought off the colors, but paid for his devotion to the flag by receiving a ball which shattered his ankle.

Volleys were exchanged across the river until late, and a heavy picket fire was kept up far into the night, but that failed to disturb the slumbers of those who had endured the burden of the march and fighting of the day, but who were not needed for picket duty.

On the morning of the 24th the sun rose like a disc of molten brass, presaging a day of terrible heat, and making us long for shelter from its rays. But it was not long before we were to wish for shelter from something hotter yet, for our Brigade (the First) was pushed across Jericho bridge to the south bank of the river, on the right of the Richmond railroad, to seize and hold a position which would enable a pontoon bridge to be laid to facilitate the crossing of a greater force, which was soon accomplished. Three of our regiments were deployed as skirmishers on the right of the telegraph road, and advanced, skirmishing until we found the enemy strongly intrenched behind earthworks. Nothing but the inequalities of the surface furnished us any protection from the heavy fire we drew, and we were compelled to lie prone and hug the ground, under a hot sun and a hot musketry fire, until about 3 p. m., when we were withdrawn a little to the rear and to the left of the railroad, where we secured more protection from the enemy's volleys.

Gibbons' Division had been pushed to the front and was heavily engaged, and just before dark a heavy line of infantry moved from the works upon him. We were advanced to his support and were almost immediately thrown into the front, dealing and receiving heavy blows. In the thickest of the fight a heavy thunder-storm arose. The heavens seemed to open and sheets of water poured down, not only putting an

end to the fight, but completely veiling the contending forces from each other, although but a few rods apart on an open field. Before the flood ceased falling the enemy's line had disappeared, and the darkness of night had come upon us. Our drenched and wearied soldiers sought the driest spots the ground afforded, and were soon at rest. We had lost some fifty in killed and wounded from our little and rapidly waning brigade.

The day following we were busily engaged in destroying the railroad bridge and the track on both sides of the river. The rails and ties were torn up, heaps made of the ties, upon which were laid the rails and the heaps fired. The rails, when heated red, were seized by the men and twisted around trees like neckties, rendering them more ornamental than useful.

Little of interest occurred until the afternoon of the 26th, when we were attacked by a strong line issuing from the rebel earthworks, and had an hour's brisk engagement before the enemy was repulsed. Later, they made a similar attempt on Gibbons' line to our right, which was only ended by the darkness of night. Soon we were ordered to detail two regiments to throw up intrenchments on the north side of the river, to which we were to withdraw some time during the night, the remainder of our Brigade being left to hold the advanced line south of the river until all the rest had crossed. At midnight our line was abandoned, and we crossed, taking up the positions and forming in the new line, our retreat being closely followed by a heavy picket line of the enemy, which made things lively for us with their whizzing, spattering bullets, both before and after our crossing. During the morning of the 27th we destroyed nearly thirteen miles of the railroad, and at 11 a. m. started on another flank movement via Concord Church, to a point some miles

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north of Nelson's ford on the Pamunkey river, which we reached for bivouac a little after midnight, after a weary march under a hot sun, and in sultry showers.

On the 28th we made an early start, crossing the Pamunkey at noon without opposition, and taking a position near Hanover town. Later in the afternoon our Brigade received orders to move as rapidly as possible to the support of Sheridan's Cavalry, reported to be engaged with Ewell's Infantry a mile in front. Riding in advance to report our approach, I found numerous evidences of fighting having occurred at various points, and at last found Sheridan's flag in a fence corner, where a group of officers, most of them in their shirt sleeves, were discussing some boiled chicken, served in a tin pail. Asking for General Sheridan, a little man holding a chicken leg, responded: "I am your man; what is wanted?" Reporting that Miles' Infantry Brigade was on its way to support him, he jovially replied: "Glad to see you with that news. Get down and have some chicken." That impromptu dinner gave me the first glimpse of the real character of one who was already famous, and whose name is now enrolled as one of the Nation's greatest and most lamented heroes.

The cavalry had been fighting inch by inch, dismounted, had driven the enemy some miles and was now lying behind the scant shelter of a demolished rail fence on the other side of the field. When our brigade came up we relieved them, and at once commenced the work of intrenching against the heavy force known to be in our front, which consisted of Ewell's Division, at least. We were making ourselves as comfortable as possible for the night when we received orders to march back to our position on the Pamunkey.

The next day (29th) being Sunday, one of our chaplains proposed the novelty of holding Divine service, and the brigade was assembled for that purpose. Hardly had the first prayer ended when marching orders came, and the beat of the drum took the place of a hymn of praise as we quickly formed. Instead of a march by the flank, the whole brigade, with the exception of the color companies of each regiment, was deployed in a skirmish line nearly a mile in length, with its center on the road leading to Atlee's Station, which is only a few miles from Richmond. The color companies formed a short line of battle in the rear, also preserving its center on the road, and thus we pressed forward.

At a fork in the road some mounted videttes were seen, but they seemed not to desire our acquaintance and disappeared. On reaching the Shelton House, a fine Southern mansion situated on and overlooking Totopotomoy creek, our skirmish line came under fire from the enemy's skirmish line posted on the opposite bank, and was halted. Several of us dismounted and passed through the spacious hall to the rear of the house to discover, if possible, the position and strength of the enemy. We found a long line of infantry resting, with arms stacked, in front of the woods, and in full view.

Our approach put an end to the resting spell, and the line was quickly formed and retired into the woods, leaving a picket, or skirmish line in rifle pits along the bank in their front. While we were taking in the situation our attention was attracted by the wails of women and children of the family whose house we had invaded, consisting of the matronly Mrs. Shelton, her three daughters, one of whom was married, and some children and servants, all of whom had fled for refuge to the basement, and were now

grouped, terror-stricken, in the area way below the porch we occupied.

It was a scene which compelled sympathy and awakened all the humanity in our natures. The young mother, with eyes filled with tears, held out a bright and smiling babe, saying: "You will not harm my little darling, will you?" I took the baby, kissed and fondled it for a moment and handed it carefully to the somewhat reassured, but still doubting mother, and with the assurance that we made no war on women and children, urged them to go back out of danger, as occasional shots were spattering against the side of the house. From them we learned that Breckenridge's Division was in our front; that Mr. Shelton, who knew the General, had gone to ask protection for his family shortly before our arrival on the scene, and, of course, was unable to return and rejoin his wife, daughters and grandchild, who were now filled with the liveliest apprehensions, but refused, peremptorily, to accept our offer to escort them to some place of safety in our rear.

We carried beds and other necessaries for their comfort into the basement, and barricaded the windows with logs, completing a fair extempore fortification for the beleaguered family, which now began to look upon us as friends and defenders, instead of enemies. Soon batteries were unmasked in the edge of the woods, and a few shells were thrown, but without much damage to us, and a continuous firing was kept up between the picket lines and intrenching parties till darkness put an end to it. Some darkies, not realizing the danger, attempted to drive up the cows from the bottom lands at milking time, and their bewilderment as they listened to the singing of the minies and their abject fright and hasty flight when the fact dawned upon them that they were being fired at,

would have been comical had it not been so pathetic.

On going to the basement to look after the welfare of our new-found friends, Mrs. Shelton, with true Southern hospitality, offered to prepare supper for our staff if we were content to accept what she had, and expressed regret for the absence of tea, coffee and sugar. Sincere was her pleasure when we accepted the invitation and produced from our haversacks a supply of these luxuries. The garden had not suffered much as yet, and we gathered strawberries, the cows which had come up from the bottoms were milked and we enjoyed heartily a dinner *en famille*, prepared by fair hands and graced by the presence of cultivated ladies, the table covered with snowy linen and other garnishments to which we had long been unaccustomed. It was a bright bit of green in the desert of war, and memory will long linger over and often revert to an occasion in which real pleasure and real apprehensions were so equally proportioned. The dinner and after visit being over, we saw the family placed as comfortably as possible and withdrew to the shelter of the trees for the night.

We were out at daylight of the 30th, and discovered a line of intrenchments which had been thrown up in the night in the margin of the woods in front of us, not 500 yards away. We could almost look into the mouths of several field pieces, in position and protected by lunates. Having but a thin skirmish line on our side, we had thrown up but light intrenchments, but this looked as if serious work was before us, and we now commenced intrenching in earnest. The remainder of the Corps was brought up and formed in two lines a short distance in our rear, and several Cohorn mortars quickly placed in position some distance to the left of the house, with Arnold's Battery, which was brought up on the run. A rapid

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fire was kept up from the enemy's picket line, annoy-  
ing and endangering the intrenching parties, and  
soon we were further annoyed by shots from the bat-  
teries, but our little Cohorns did effective work in  
temporarily silencing the guns, and the work was rap-  
idly proceeded with.

Generals Hancock and Barlow, with several mem-  
bers of their respective staffs, came up to inspect the  
position, and with us proceeded to the spot where the  
Cohorns were being operated, and, standing a little in  
rear of them, presented a tempting target to the ene-  
my's artillery men, who suddenly opened fire. One of  
the shells struck the top of the embankment and  
exploded, the fragments and contents whizzing  
amidst the group, covering all with dirt, but fortu-  
nately and strangely injuring no one, though it put an  
end to our curiosity in that direction.

Now several guns of the other side were turned  
upon the house, and shells and solid shot went tearing  
through it, but fortunately for the family, the range  
was above the floor, and none struck as low as the  
basement where they were sheltered.

One shell exploded in the "best room," shattering  
everything breakable and tearing into shreds the silk  
curtains of an old-fashioned canopied bed, but  
without setting it on fire. The women and children  
downstairs were completely unnerved by fright, and  
were alternately shrieking and praying. Their posi-  
tion was indeed a trying one, entitling them to the  
warmest sympathy and to our protection, as far as we  
could give it. We made occasional visits to the base-  
ment windows, and attempted to reassure them, while  
we ourselves were filled with the keenest apprehen-  
sions for their safety, and vainly urged them to  
remove under escort to a place of security in the rear,  
for a slight depression of the enemy's guns would

perhaps cause an explosion in their midst, as had happened in the room overhead.

Towards evening Ames' Battery came dashing up, was quickly unlimbered and thrown into position some distance to the left of Arnold's, and a furious cannonade from both soon drew the fire from the house, relieving the situation a little of its horrors, and a brisk artillery duel was kept up until most of the enemy's guns were silenced. In this engagement Lieutenant Hunt, of Ames' Battery, had his heel torn off by a fragment of shell and was carried to the portico of the Shelton house, where he narrowly escaped being crushed by a falling pillar, knocked out by one of the enemy's shots.\*

Our intrenched line ran along the edge of the bank of the ravine, and a row of slave cabins stood in rear of it and to the left of the house. Some of the artillery caissons were placed by the cabins to be convenient to the guns and yet concealed from the enemy by the cabins, from which it was supposed that all the negroes had fled. In the very midst of the cannonading an old black granny came out of a cabin, and innocently emptied a pan of hot ashes close to a caisson. Coals from the ash-pan must have fallen into the scattered powder or into a cartridge bag, for an explosion followed, demolishing caisson and cabin and killing and wounding several of the artillerists and infantrymen near it. Will some one ask what became of the

\*The writer visited the Shelton family in the autumn of 1865, and was received most kindly and hospitably. We had wondered, at the time of the battle, why the fire of the enemy's guns was so savagely centered upon the house. Mr. Shelton stated that when we occupied the bank of the creek, he wished to return to his family, but was not permitted to do so, and was detained at General Breckenridge's headquarters; that when the shelling commenced, he begged that the guns might not be turned upon the house, but Breckenridge assured him that the family must have gone to the rear; that we were using the house for an observation tower, and also for a shelter behind which to mass troops, and that we must be shelled out of that position. Thus he was compelled to witness the bombardment his family endured by the guns of his friends, while he was helpless to stay it.

old woman? We never learned. She disappeared with the cabin.\*

All day long we were compelled to endure the danger of exploding shells and the short-range fire of the skirmish line, and just before dark were ordered to move forward to attack the enemy, and were forming for the charge when Hancock, who had come to the front in person, countermanded the order.

That evening the Second New York Heavy Artillery (lately from the defenses at Washington), commanded by Colonel J. N. G. Whistler, was assigned to our Brigade and placed in position on its left. Its line was longer than that of the five regiments we already had, and it was divided into three battalions to make it more nearly correspond with them in our future maneuvers. To myself fell the duty of seeing that it properly intrenched itself, which, with other duties, occupied most of the night and gave little opportunity for rest, something we much desired, not only because we were nearly worn out, but because we felt that hot work awaited us in the morning.

When the first streaks of dawn appeared we were put to work still further to strengthen our defenses by an abatis of felled trees, and many a shot whizzed uncomfortably near us as we went from place to place along the line superintending the work. A heavy mail, the first we had received since leaving the lines at Spottsylvania, made glad the hearts of many. To some it brought messages of love from anxious hearts at home; to Miles his Brigadier's commission, and we read and discussed the letters and papers amidst a continuous fire of the sharpshooters.

A group of officers was gathered at the Shelton house awaiting the baskets containing our breakfast, wondering what the day would bring forth. The

\*General Walker, in his history of the Second Corps, p. 50, says she escaped unhurt, and adds: "In the army, it always was the fool doing the mischief who got off safe."

breakfast arrived and was uncovered, but at an unfortunate moment, for the rebel batteries again opened with a furious cannonade, and shot and shell again came tearing through the house, one shell with seeming malice coming through the wall and casing of a window, almost burying our breakfast in lime, bricks and shattered glass.

A few minutes later Captain McCullough, commanding the Eighty-First Pennsylvania, was mortally wounded by a sharp-shooter. The mail had just brought him his commission as Major, and we had hardly ceased our congratulations when his call came. At the same time it was reported that the enemy had left his works, and we had orders to fall in for an assault. To me fell the lot of directing the movement of our new Regiment, the Second New York Heavy Artillery. This Regiment, with the One Hundred and Eighty-Third Pennsylvania, was to charge its direct front, while the rest of the Brigade was to charge obliquely to the right, making thus two lines of assault diverging from each other. The two regiments, one full and the other a skeleton, moved finely down the slope to the creek bottom, but there found itself floundering in a bushy marsh of some width, while on the sharp bluff on the other side was plainly visible a well-manned breastwork. The marsh and stream were between us and the enemy's position, and while the men, sinking to their middles in oozy mud, were doing their best to push through it, a galling and plunging fire was directed upon them from the rebel line. It was more than new troops could stand—probably more than older troops could be expected to stand. Their Colonel ordered them to lie down and conceal themselves as best they could under shelter of the bushes, and begged me to report to Miles that it was utterly impossible to continue the charge in such a morass, under such a murderous fire.

Remounting, I rode safely up the hill, and found Miles and Barlow together, closely watching the movement. Delivering Colonel Whistler's message, Barlow replied, "Go back to Colonel Whistler and tell him there must be no impossibilities; that his Regiment must charge the works in his front at once, and to do it with a yell." I was about to state my own opinion of the situation, but he cut me off by saying, "You are losing valuable time; they must push forward at once." I turned and rode rapidly down the bullet-swept slope. Whiz-zip, sang the minies in my ears, but one gave a different note. I reeled, had consciousness enough to slip my feet from the stirrups, and then went flying through air. That message was never delivered. That charge was never made. It is a strange sensation one has when he feels himself flying, and knows not whether towards earth or towards worlds beyond. When consciousness began to return it seemed as if the most delicious music filled the air, but its symphonies gradually dissolved into the rattle of musketry, the crashing booms of cannon, and the yells of contending men, mingled with the groans of the wounded and dying. My faithful horse stood over me, mournfully whinnying and licking my face.

Men, singly and in groups, were rushing by me up the slope, hoping to gain a place of safety, numbers of them falling, until the slope was dotted with their writhing or silent forms. Several stopped and tried to rescue me, but every such attempt brought a vengeful volley, and the attempt would be abandoned. At last one of our guns was brought to bear upon that part of the lines, and during the consequent lull in the enemy's volleys, I was rolled into a blanket and borne to the breastworks thence on stretchers and in ambulance to the field hospital. That part of the line was not carried. It was proven to be impossible.

The next day a long procession of ambulances and army wagons started for White House Landing, to enable the army to march without such impediments, towards its new lines at Cold Harbor.

It is difficult to describe the torture of two-days' ambulance ride under a hot Virginia sun, over rough corduroy roads and cornfields, with suffering on every side, with death as a constant companion, and often looked at as a welcome relief. It must be experienced to be fully realized.

At last comes the happy end of the journey, when kind hearts greet the survivor with every solace they can offer; when soft-voiced women whisper words of hope, while with loving hands they tenderly wash the dust and blood from the festering wounds until the desponding spirits begin to revive, and hope dawns again; when, placed upon steamers and quietly steaming down the river, the senses, which have been strained almost to the numbness of death by long and acute suffering, begin again to realize the sweetness of life, and lulled to peaceful slumbers, revel in dreams, and wake again to enjoy perfect rest and infinite peace; all this brings hope and content to the heart of the worn-out, wounded soldier, whose face is now set towards the haven of the fireside and the tender care of the loving hearts which await his coming.

Can any one who has partaken of this sacrament of the bloody days of the war neglect to pay a heartfelt tribute to those angels of the battle-field and the hospital, that noble band of heroines who, without hope of rank or fame, hovered close upon the edge of battle to staunch the wounds of the living, and whisper consolation to the dying?

The army nurse! Heaven's choicest blessing rest upon her everywhere, and evermore.