

THE SECOND RHODE ISLAND REGIMENT  
CHAPTER VIII - THE LOST CAUSE.

GENERAL Lee, perceiving that the affairs of the Confederacy were in a desperate state, prepared to evacuate both Petersburg and Richmond. He dispatched a messenger on the 2nd to Mr. Jefferson Davis and his government at Richmond, informing his chief, who happened at the time to be at church, that the hour had come. That night Davis and his companions fled, and the enemy's troops marched out those in Richmond setting fire to several buildings ere they left. On the morning of the 3rd, at 2 o'clock, the enemy's pickets were still out, but at 4 o'clock our pickets found no force in front of them, and the armies at once entered and took possession of the two cities. General Devens of the 3rd division, Twenty-fourth Corps, Army of the James, marched in his command and occupied Richmond. In front of the Ninth Corps a deputation from the city government was met by Colonel Ely, who sent in his brigade, and the 1st Michigan sharpshooters hoisted the flag upon the court house. In front of the Sixth Corps General Edwards was met by Mr. D. A. Paul, a member of a committee from the city council, who tendered the

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surrender of the city, whereupon the 37th Massachusetts marched in and took possession. General Willcox's division of the Ninth was left to garrison the city, and the other troops were sent out to guard the Southside railroad and to harass the rear of the retreating army. On the 4th Mr. Lincoln, who had been at City Point for a week and more, visited Richmond and was received, especially by the negroes, with a warm and touching enthusiasm of gratitude.

General Grant, leaving his garrisons to attend to the captured cities, lost no time in pursuing General Lee's retreating columns. Lee endeavored to reach the Danville railroad, hoping to escape southward. But Sheridan was on his left flank, with his cavalry trained by this time to pursue on horseback and fight on foot and was impressed with the hope of decisive and final success. "I feel confident," he sends word to Grant, "of capturing the Army of Northern Virginia if we exert ourselves." Grant was in no way behind in wishing "to end the matter." So the troops were pushed on. The roads were bad, rations scant, and the marching was hard, but the near prospect of victory and peace gave energy to the most weary and helped to still the gnawings of hunger. Besides, as an aged contraband informed Sheridan in answer to the question, "Where are the rebs?" the enemy was "siftin south, sar, siftin south,"; and there was hope of capturing a large portion of them before they could get through the meshes. Sheridan had the Fifth Corps with him, and the Second and Sixth were sent forward with all possible haste to join his command. For the Danville railroad must be secured at all hazards. Major Young was out in the advance with his scouts, and reported Lee making for Amelia Court House. Young himself, with a few picked men, was with the

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enemy's cavalry, and every now and then, at favorable opportunities, and in a very persuasive way, would induce men and even officers to transfer themselves from the rebel to the Union lines. It was a pleasant amusement to him, and did no harm to any body. The troops were stripped for the race, and on the 3rd, 4th and 5th had "hard marching all day" according to Captain Thurber. On the 5th the Second Corps reached Sheridan, then at Jetersville, and on the same night the Sixth came up. The cavalry had had some fighting every day, and Lee had now passed Amelia and might momentarily come into contact with the army on his flank. Generals Grant and Meade had also come up. General Ord had gone down toward Burkesville Junction, and the prospect was more cheering than ever.

On the 6th, bright and early, the army was astir, and pressed on westward. The cavalry and horse artillery were in the advance, and took every occasion to annoy the enemy's trains and rear-guard. The route of the army lay toward Prince Edward Court House, on the Danville turnpike. General Lee was between the road to the court house and the Appomattox. He had lost the Danville railroad that was certain. Could he gain the turnpike? There were two ways to do it to make straight for it on the south side of the river, and to cross to the north side and recross to the south side upon the turnpike and railroad bridges at Farmville. Dividing his forces, he seems to have decided to try both as it was reported to Sheridan, that part of the enemy's army was keeping the court house road and part was going toward the river. The latter was really Ewell with the rear-guard possibly making for Farmville crossing. The Second Corps pushed on to the river; the cavalry and the Sixth Corps, then coming up, made for the force

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upon the court house road. A portion of the cavalry struck the enemy's trains at or near Deatonsville, and harassed them more or less during the day. About 4 o'clock in the afternoon the two opposing columns came in contact near Sailor's Creek. The cavalry immediately attacked. General Wright at once put himself under Sheridan's orders, and Seymour's division was moved down without delay to aid Colonel Stagg's cavalry brigade, which was making attacks and demonstrations, wholly beyond proportion to its size. Of the cavalry, Custer was off on the right, Crook in the centre, and Devin on the left. Of the infantry, Seymour's and Wheaton's divisions were moved to the other side of the creek, while Getty was held in reserve. Beyond the creek was a ridge, partly wooded. Seymour on the right was to move straight on; Wheaton on the left was to bear to his right, and, closing up, come upon the enemy's flank. The crossing was made in the midst of a hot and galling fire.

The men, holding their cartridges above their heads, leaped in, struggled through the mud and water, and quickly gained the other side. Immediately forming the line, Seymour gallantly advanced his division and gained the ridge, pushing back the enemy in his front.

It happened, that the Second Regiment was leading the corps that day, and had furnished guards for the houses on the road, so that when it reached the creek it numbered scarcely 200 men. Deploying to the left, on emerging from a piece of woods, the Regiment was formed on the left of the third line. But on advancing it took the left of the second, and finally that of the first line. Being on the extreme left, and without cavalry to guard its flank, the crossing of the stream was a hazardous movement. But across the men went with the rest, now under Seymour, and, gaining the other bank,

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immediately reformed and pushed up the slope beyond, the enemy retiring into the woods upon the ridge. But here was a large force of the enemy, lying concealed and awaiting the approach of our troops. A scathing and murderous fire was opened, and the enemy charged down upon the command. It was a hand to hand fight, the combatants mingling together and freely using bayonets and musket butts. Here fell Captain Gleason of G and Lieutenant Perry of F, for the fighting was severe. Indeed, Seymour had nearly the entire weight of the enemy upon him, while Wheaton was moving around to his support, to strike the foe upon his flank.

Conspicuous in this contest, among the enemy's troops, was a battalion of marines from Richmond, disdainful of fear and eager for the fray. They fought with such impetuosity as to throw our lines into dire confusion, and almost before he was aware of it, Seymour and his division a part of the Second with them were tum bled back into and across the creek, the enemy following and planting his flags upon the bank. But brief was his triumph. Edwards formed his brigade upon the enemy's flank and poured in a deadly fire. A few rounds of canister, from a battery which was opportunely sent to the relief of our troops, cleared the way for their return.

The men of the Second who had been forced across the creek rushed back again. The rest of Wheaton's division now came gallantly into action. Our artillery, on the hither side of the creek, opened on the mass of the clustering enemy on the further bank. There was no escape for the daring marines, and they were actually forced across the creek to surrender themselves to Seymour and his command. General Getty was now sent across, and Wheaton turned his attention to the ridge. The Sixth Corps, in the new formation, made its advance,

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subjected to a heavy fire, but still pressing the enemy hard and gaining an advantage at every step. Down, through the woods then came our cavalry, having got into the enemy's rear, and, in a few minutes after, the battle was over.

General Ewell, with his subordinate commanders, Kershaw, Barton, Corse and others, 8000 or 10,000 prisoners there was not time to count them 14 guns, and the trains, were the prizes of that day's struggle. Colonel Rhodes, in his manuscript narrative, says, that Sergeant Cameron of the 5th Wisconsin took Ewell's horse by the bridle, and delivered his distinguished prisoner over to General Wright. General C. E. Lee and staff, Commodore Tucker and staff, and the men of their respective commands, and a wagon train with its contents, were also among the captures made by Edwards's brigade.

The loss of the Second was severe. At Petersburg it had lost Corporal Mills of E and one man killed, Lieutenant Dorrance of E, Sergeants Redding of D and Bucklin of F, and Corporals Shippee of B, Barber and C. W. Brown of D, Glancey of F, Miller of G, and 6- men wounded. Corporal Glancey died of his wounds. April 3rd. In this fight it lost 6 killed and 39 wounded of whom 4 soon after died of their injuries. Among the killed

were Captain Gleason of G, Lieutenant Perry of F, and Sergeant Seamans of E. Sergeant Coyle of A died, May 2nd, Corporal Burke of A, April 30th, Corporal Carroll of C, April 16th, and Corporal Mansell of E, April 8th. Among the wounded were Captain. Jeffrey of F, Lieutenants Tourjee of A, McKay of D., Halliday of E, winning a brevet of captain, and Peck of G, Sergeants McKay of F and Oldenburg of G, and Corporals Booth of A, Ballon of C, O Brien of D, and Fanning, Horton and Railton, of E. Colonel Rhodes,

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said he could not speak too highly of the conduct of the men, and the men gratefully reciprocated the good opinion of their commander.

The battle of Sailor s Creek with its brilliant results decided the question of Lee s reaching the Danville turn pike. He was on the north side of the Appomattox now, whither his main body had been forced by the Second and Fifth Corps while Sheridan had been operating around Sailor s Creek. General Ord, too, had some share in the victory, having brought up his command from Burke s to Farmville and detained the head of Lee s column at that point. The next day the Sixth Corps went up to Farmville and crossed to support the Second Corps, which was following Lee, despairing of Danville and making for Lynchburg. Sheridan, with two cavalry divisions, moved rapidly to the westward on the south side of the Appomattox, followed by the Fifth Corps and General Ord s command. That night the troops on the south went into camp near Buffalo creek. General Grant, at Farmville, proposed to General Lee that he should now surrender the Army of Northern Virginia. General Lee replied, that he did not entertain Grant s “opinion on the hopelessness of further resistance.” Still he asked for terms, to which General Grant responded, that his condition of peace was, that “the men and officers surrendered shall be disqualified for taking up arms again against the United States.”

No immediate reply was received, and so the pursuit continued on the 8th. Sheridan, now more eager than ever, pushed his cavalry along the roads parallel to the railroad leading to Appomattox Station. At Prospect Station, or a short distance beyond, one of Major Young s scouts came in and reported, "that there were already four trains of cars at Appomattox depot awaiting

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General Lee" Forward the cavalry! Hurry on the infantry for the game was now almost in sight and sure to be run down. An uneventful march for the country was quiet and peaceful, and no signs of the enemy appeared. Not far from 5 o clock in the afternoon Ouster in advance saw the smoke of the locomotives and the standing trains. Circling out through the woods and passing beyond the depot, he galloped down the rail road, captured the engineers and trainmen, secured the trains and started them back toward Prospect Station.

Sheridan soon afterwards came up, and, dismounting his horsemen, made dispositions for battle. He was just in time. For the head of Lee s column, mostly artillery the rear detained by Meade was coming down to the depot, and had already opened fire upon Ouster. Not expecting a fight at that place, the enemy was somewhat, disturbed and demoralized by the appearance of our forces, and especially indignant at the loss of his supplies, upon which he had almost laid his hand. But, between the dismounted cavalry in front and Ouster in the rear, the artillery could not do better than give up their guns,, twenty-five in number. Sheridan immediately reported the day s success to Grant, and thought, that “we would perhaps finish the job in the morning.” The Fifth Corps and General Ord s command, appreciating the situation, marched all night, and before daylight the; welcome tramp of their columns was heard at the cavalry headquarters.

General Grant, about midnight, on his side of the river now dwindled to a mere brook received a reply to his note of the morning. General Lee frankly did “not think the emergency had arisen to call for the surrender” of his army. He was willing to treat for peace, and proposed an interview the next morning at 10

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o'clock. Grant thought, that an interview “would lead to no good,”; as he had no authority to treat for peace. But peace could be secured "by the South laying down their arms" which was sufficiently clear to the loyal mind. Meanwhile, Sheridan, on that same morning, was pressing upon General Lee s mind the fact that "the emergency had arisen." For the cavalry and infantry confronted the advance of the Army of Northern Virginia, stopped the road to Danville, Lynchburg and every where else and presented a barrier which the enemy would not believe to be impassable, till he had tried in desperation to break through, and had failed. A white flag came out to Sheridan, and hostilities were at an end.

General Lee sent to Grant that he would meet him and arrange the terms of the surrender. Officers were to parole themselves and their respective commands; arms, artillery and public property were to be turned over to

the Army of the Potomac; officers side arms, private horses and baggage were to be retained; and then the officers and men could return to their homes, "not to be disturbed by United States authority, so long as they observe their paroles and the laws in force where they may reside" These were generous terms. Lee accepted them, not without a natural feeling of sorrow that the cause for which he had battled so long, so well and so persistently, was lost. Preliminaries were signed, as the two generals met in the house of a Mr. McLean, near the court house, and before the sun set on the 9th of April every body in both armies knew, that the protracted and bloody strife was at an end." Then we went to bed, says General Sheridan's staff officer," and had good night's rest, and tried to appreciate the great blessing of peace that had suddenly descended upon us."

From:

The Second Rhode Island Regiment; A Narrative of Military Operations, by Augustus Woodbury, Valpey, Angell & Co., Providence, Rhode Island, 1875, pp. 347-355