

THE BATTLE OF PETERSBURG.

PART II.

Three Federal corps—Smith's, Hancock's, and Burnside's—aggregating about sixty-six thousand men, confronted our lines on the 16th of June. Opposed to them I had, after the arrival of Johnson's Division, at about ten o'clock A. M., an effective of not more than ten thousand men of all arms.

Through a mere sense of duty, but with no sanguine hope of succeeding in the attempt, I addressed the following telegram to General Lee :

“HEADQUARTERS, Petersburg, *June 16, 1864, 7:45 A. M.*

“Prisoner captured this A. M. reports that he belongs to Hancock's Corps (Second), and that it crossed day before yesterday and last night from Harrison's Landing. Could we not have more re-enforcements here ?”

No direct answer was received to the above. But, in reply to another dispatch of mine, relative to tugs and transports of the enemy reported to have been seen that day by Major Terrett, General Lee sent this message :

“DRURY'S BLUFF, *June 16, 1864, 4 P. M.*

“GENERAL BEAUREGARD :

“The transports you mention have probably returned Butler's troops. Has Grant been seen crossing James River ?”

This shows that General Lee was still uncertain as to his adversary's movements, and, notwithstanding the information already furnished him, could not realize that the Federal army had crossed the James, and that three of its corps were actually assaulting the Petersburg lines.

General Hancock, the ranking Federal officer present, had been instructed by General Meade not to begin operations before the arrival of Burnside's command. Hence the tardiness of the enemy's attack, which was only made after five o'clock P. M., though Burnside had reached Petersburg, according to his own report, at ten o'clock A. M.

The engagement lasted fully three hours, much vigor being displayed by the Federals, while the Confederates confronted them with fortitude, truly admirable, though they knew they were fighting against overwhelming odds, constantly increasing. Birney's Division of Hancock's corps finally broke into part of our line and effected a lodgment. The contest, with varying results, was carried on until after nightfall, with advantage to us on the left and some serious loss on the right. It then slackened and gradually came to an end. In the meantime, Warren's Corps, the Fifth, had also come up, but too late to take a part in the action of the day. Its presence before our lines swelled the enemy's aggregate to about ninety thousand, against which stood a barrier of not even ten thousand exhausted, half-starved men, who had gone through two days of constant hard fighting, and many sleepless nights in the trenches, but who were ready, nevertheless, uncomplaining and unfaltering, to again face and repel their assailants.

Hostilities began early on the morning of the 17th. I here quote from "Military Operations of General Beauregard :"

"Three times were the Federals driven back, but they as often resumed the offensive and held their ground. About dusk a portion of the Confederate lines was wholly broken, and the troops in that quarter were about to be thrown into a panic, which might have ended in irreparable disaster, when happily, as General Beauregard with his staff was endeavoring to rally and reform the troops, Gracie's Brigade, of Johnson's Division, consisting of about twelve hundred men—the return of which to his command General Beauregard had been urgently asking—came up from Chaffin's Bluff, whence, at last, the War Department had ordered it to move. It was promptly and opportunely thrown into the gap on the lines and drove back the Federals, capturing about two thousand prisoners. The conflict raged with great fury until after eleven o'clock at night." *

Anticipating the inevitable result of such a pressure upon our weak defenses, and knowing that at any moment they might be irrevocably lost to us, I had—accompanied by Colonel Harris, of the Engineers—selected the site of another and shorter line, near Taylor's Creek, at a convenient distance towards the rear. I caused it to be carefully staked out during the battle, and shown to the adjutants, quartermasters, and other staff officers of Hoke's and Johnson's divisions, and through them to all the available regimental adjutants on the field ; so that each command, at the appointed hour, even at dead of night, might easily retire upon

* Vol. II., Chap. xxxvi., p. 232.

the new line with order and precision, and unperceived by the enemy. Meanwhile, the order to "hold on at any cost" remained unchanged all down the line. There was no reason to hope for assistance of any kind. The Army of Northern Virginia was yet far distant, and I had failed to convince its distinguished commander of the fact that I was then fighting Grant's whole army with less than eleven thousand men! On the 17th, from "Clay's House," at twelve o'clock *M.*, General Lee answered as follows one of my telegrams of that morning:

"Telegram of 9 *A. M.* received. Until I can get more definite information of Grant's movements, I do not think it prudent to draw more troops to this side of the river."

And, acting on the desire for additional information, at 3:30 *P. M.*, on the same day, he telegraphed Major-General W. H. F. Lee, then at Malvern Hill, as follows:

"Push after the enemy, and endeavor to ascertain what has become of Grant's Army. Inform General Hill."

Later on—*i. e.*, at 4:30 *P. M.*, on the same day—he sent this message to Lieut.-Gen. A. P. Hill, at Riddle's Shop:

"General Beauregard reports large numbers of Grant's troops crossed James River, above Fort Powhatan, yesterday. If you have nothing contradictory of this, move to Chaffin's Bluff."

Just at that time, however, and upon being informed by my Inspector-General of the statements of some of the last prisoners taken, I determined to send another telegram to General Lee, reiterating my former assertions, with the addition of other particulars:

"PETERSBURG, June 17, 1864, 5 *P. M.*

"Prisoners just taken represent themselves as belonging to Second, Ninth, and Eighteen Corps. They state that Fifth and Sixth Corps are behind coming on. Those from Second and Eighteenth came here yesterday, and arrived first. Others marched night and day from Gaines Mill, and arrived yesterday evening. The Ninth crossed at Turkey Bend, where they have a pontoon bridge. They say Grant commanded on the field yesterday. All are positive that they passed him on the road seven miles from here."

Prisoners sometimes err in their statements. Very few, however, hesitate to say to what corps, division, brigade, or regiment they belong; and the greater number answer truthfully when properly interrogated. These had followed the general rule. But others also had come in later, and had been again examined

by my Inspector-General, who had reduced to writing the substance of all the information thus obtained. It confirmed me in the belief that not three only, but four Federal corps actually confronted us. And without further delay, at 6:40 P. M., I addressed this dispatch to General Lee:

“The increasing number of the enemy in my front, and inadequacy of my force to defend the already too much extended lines, will compel me to fall within a shorter one, which I will attempt to effect to-night. This I shall hold as long as practicable, but without re-enforcements I may have to evacuate the city very shortly. In that event I shall retire in the direction of Drury’s Bluff, defending the crossing at Appomattox River and Swift Creek.”

I had also sent, that day, to General Lee’s headquarters, first, Lieutenant Chisolm, one of my aids; then, later on in the evening, Colonel Roman, my chief inspector; and, after midnight, on the 18th, Major Cooke, one of the assistant inspectors of the department. Their instructions were to verbally explain, with all necessary details, what it had been impossible to express in the laconic telegraphic messages already forwarded; and to further impress upon General Lee the urgency of sending immediate assistance to me. To Colonel Roman, who had taken with him the condensed statements of more than forty prisoners examined by him on that day, I had specially enjoined to say:

“That if General Lee did not come to my assistance with his whole army in less than forty-eight hours, God Almighty alone would save Petersburg and Richmond.”

Lieutenant Chisolm saw General Lee, Colonel Roman did not. General Lee said to Chisolm, and his efficient Chief of Staff informed Roman, that General Grant’s army was still facing the Army of Northern Virginia, and that the prisoners upon whose statements we appeared so much to rely, had greatly exaggerated the danger of the situation, if they had not altogether falsified the truth. Major Cooke arrived at General Lee’s headquarters, an hour or two afterwards, on the 18th. His diary of that date contains the following:

. . . “After talking with the General (Lee) for some time, and accomplishing in part my object in seeking him, I left for Petersburg.”*

* See in “Military Operations of General Beauregard,” Vol. II., Appendix to Chap. xxxvi., p. 579, extracts from Major Cooke’s Diary. See also in same Appendix, same Vol., pp. 575-6-7-8, Colonel Roman’s letter about his mission to General Lee, at that time.

The firing lasted, on the 17th, until a little after eleven o'clock P.M. Just before that time, I had ordered all the camp fires to be brightly lighted, with sentinels well thrown forward and as near as possible to the enemy's. Then, at about 12.30 A.M., on the 18th began the retrograde movement, which, notwithstanding the exhaustion of our troops and their sore disappointment at receiving no further re-enforcements, was safely and silently executed, with uncommonly good order and precision, though the greatest caution had to be used in order to retire unnoticed from so close a contact with so strong an adversary.

The digging of trenches was begun by the men as soon as they reached their new position. Axes, as well as spades; bayonets and knives, as well as axes; in fact, all and every utensil that could be found was used to accelerate the termination of the perilous work undertaken, and successfully carried through, that night, amid untold difficulties and dangers. And when all was over, or nearly so, with much anxiety still, but with comparative relief, nevertheless, I hurried off this telegram to General Lee:

“PETERSBURG, June 18, 1864, 12:40 A. M.

“All quiet at present. I expect renewal of attack in morning. My troops are becoming much exhausted. Without immediate and strong re-enforcements, results may be unfavorable. Prisoners report Grant on the field with his whole army.”

But General Lee, although not wholly convinced even at that hour that the Army of the Potomac had operated a change of base, and was already on the south side of the James, long before the dawn of day, on the 18th, and immediately after his conference with Major Cooke, sent me this message:

“Am not yet satisfied as to General Grant's movements; but upon your representations will move at once to Petersburg.”

And, in fact, even previous to that hour, on the same night, he had concluded to send Kershaw's Division to my assistance. His dispatch to that effect read thus:

“GENERAL G. T. BEAUREGARD, Petersburg, Va.

“General Kershaw's division, which will camp to-night on Redwater Creek, is ordered to continue its march to-morrow to Petersburg.”

Those of my staff who were near me when this unexpected good news was received remember, no doubt, what inexpressible

relief it afforded me at the time. And in order that my troops should share in the comforting prospect ahead I caused the following to be immediately forwarded to General Hoke and, through him, to General Bushrod Johnson :

“HEADQUARTERS DEPARTMENT N. C. AND SO. Va.,

“June 18, 1864, 2:30 A. M.

“MAJOR-GENERAL B. F. HOKE, Commanding Division.

“GENERAL: The Commanding General directs me to inform you that the division of Major-General Kershaw is on its way to this point as re-enforcement, as also the whole of the army corps commanded by Lieutenant-General A. P. Hill.

“General Lee will himself be here in person some time to-day. This should be published to the troops at once.

“You will send to Major-General Johnson a copy of this for his information and action.

Respectfully, your obedient servant,

“JNO. M. OTEY, A. A. G.”

The next step taken by General Lee was to endeavor to procure sufficient means for the immediate transportation of his troops, as is shown by this telegram :

“DRURY’S BLUFF, June 18, 3:30 A. M.

“SUPERINTENDENT RICHMOND & PETERSBURG RAILROAD, Richmond :

“Can trains run to Petersburg? If so, send all cars available to Rice’s Turn-out. If they cannot run through, can any be sent from Petersburg to the point where the road is broken? It is important to get troops to Petersburg without delay.”

The same morning he communicated with General Early, who had not yet returned from his Shenandoah campaign. He said to him :

“HEADQUARTERS ARMY OF NORTHERN VIRGINIA, June 18, 1864.

“GENERAL J. A. EARLY, Lynchburg, Va.

“Grant is in front of Petersburg. Will be opposed there. Strike as quick as you can, and if circumstances authorize, carry out the original plan, or move upon Petersburg without delay.”

Late as had been the credence given by General Lee to my representations of Grant’s movements, it was, fortunately, not yet too late, by prompt and energetic action, to save Petersburg—and, therefore, Richmond—from the inevitable fate otherwise awaiting both. With such an army as the Army of Northern Virginia, and with such a commander to lead it, time lost was but rarely, if ever, irretrievably lost.

General Kershaw’s Division, which proved to be, on this occa-

sion, the van-guard of General Lee's army, reached Petersburg early Saturday morning, June 18th ; it numbered about five thousand men, and was placed, by my orders, on the new line already occupied by our forces, with its "right on or near the Jerusalem plank road, extending across the open field and bending back towards the front of the cemetery."* General Field's Division, of about equal strength, came in some two hours after Kershaw's. It had not yet been assigned to its place on the line when General Lee, in person, arrived at 11:30 o'clock A. M., on that day.

My telegram to General Bragg, informing him of these recent events, so important to the success of our future operations, read thus :

"HEADQUARTERS, PETERSBURG, *June 18, 1864—11:30 A. M.*

"GENERAL BRAXTON BRAGG, Richmond, Va.

"Occupied last night my new lines without impediment. Kershaw's Division arrived about half-past seven, and Field's about half-past nine o'clock. They are being placed in position. All comparatively quiet this morning. General Lee has just arrived."

The comparative quiet referred to was due to the fact that when, early in the morning, the enemy was pushed forward to make the "grand attack ordered by the Major-General commanding the Army of the Potomac, for four A. M., on the 18th,"† the retirement of our forces, on the previous night, from their first positions to the new line of defenses selected by me, as already explained, had so much surprised the assaulting columns, as to induce their immediate commanders to additional prudence in their advance and to a complete halt in their operations. The absence of the Confederates from positions in which they were expected to be found disconcerted the Federals in the extreme. They knew not what might be in store for them.

On that morning, the troops arrayed against us consisted of Hancock's, Burnside's, and Warren's Corps, with the larger portion of Smith's under General Martindale, and finally, with Neill's Division, from Wright's Corps (the Sixth), strengthened by its whole artillery. This gave the enemy an aggregate of over ninety thousand effectives. We had on our side, from and after Kershaw's arrival, but fifteen thousand men ; no deduction being made for the casualties of the three preceding days. It was only later on, somewhere between twelve M. and one P. M., that Field's

* General Kershaw's letter to me from Camden, S. C., July 23d, 1876.

† General Meade's Report, dated November 1st, 1864.

command was put in position on the line ; and from that moment to the end of the day, our grand total amounted to about twenty thousand men. At noon—or thereabouts—the predetermined “grand attack” was renewed, although partial, disconnected assaults had been made before that hour, on several parts of our line, but with no tangible result of any kind. This renewed attack had been mainly led by Gibbon’s Division, of Hancock’s Corps. It proved to be entirely ineffectual ; and General Meade, in his report, acknowledges it to have been so when he says : “An unsuccessful assault by Gibbon’s Division was made about noon on that day.” And still another grand attempt was made at four p. m., with at least three full Federal Corps co-operating ; Hancock’s on the right, Burnside’s in the centre, and Warren’s on the left. General Meade, in his report, says it was “without success.” And he adds these words : “Later in the day, attacks were made by the Fifth and Ninth Corps with no better results.” The truth is that, despite the overwhelming odds against us, every Federal assault, on the 18th, was met with most signal defeat, “attended,” says Mr. Swinton, the Federal Historian, “with another mournful loss of life.” This was, in fact, very heavy, and exceeded ours in the proportion of nine to one. “Indeed, it amounted to more than the number of men we had in action.”*

My welcome to General Lee was most cordial. He was at last where I had, for the past three days, so anxiously hoped to see him,—within the limits of Petersburg ! Two of his divisions had preceded him there ; and his whole army, or whatever of it was with him at the time, would be in by evening of the next day, namely, the 19th of June. I felt sure, therefore, that for the present at least, Petersburg and Richmond were safe ; not that our forces would be numerically equal to those of the enemy, even after the arrival of the last regiment of the Army of Northern Virginia. We were not accustomed to such advantages, which in act had very seldom, if ever, been ours during the entire war. But I was aware that our defensive line would now count more than one man per every four and a half yards of its length ; and I felt relieved to know that, at last, the whole of our line,—not portions of it only as heretofore,—would be guarded by veteran troops

* “Military Operations of General Beauregard,” Vol. II., Chap. xxxvii., p. 249.

alike,—if not superior,—in mettle, to the veteran troops opposing them.

Scarcely two hours after General Lee's arrival, I rode with him to what was known as the "City Reservoir," on a commanding elevation, towards the right of our line. A good view of the surrounding country could be had from that point, and the whole field was there spread out before us like a map. I explained to General Lee and showed him the relative positions of our troops and of those of the enemy. I also pointed out to him the new and shorter line then occupied by us, and gave my reasons for its location there. They were these :

"First. That it kept the enemy's batteries at a greater distance from the besieged town.

"Second. That it would act as a covered way (as the phrase is in regular fortifications) should we deem it advisable to construct better works on the higher ground in the rear. In the meantime we could construct a series of batteries to protect our front line by flanking and over-shooting fires ; and we could throw up infantry parapets for our reserves, whenever we should have additional troops.

"Third. That the new line gave a close infantry and artillery fire on the reverse slope of Taylor's Creek and ravine, which would prevent the construction of *boyaux* of approaches and parallels for a regular attack."*

General Lee, whose capacity as a military engineer was universally acknowledged,—and none appreciated it more than I did,—was entirely of my opinion. Thus the new defensive line selected by me, which my own troops had been holding for twelve hours before the arrival of General Lee, at Petersburg, and which his troops occupied as they came in, were maintained, unchanged as to location—though much strengthened and improved thereafter—until the end of the war.

After those explanations to General Lee, and while still examining the field, I proposed to him that, as soon as Hill's and Anderson's corps should arrive, our entire disposable force be thrown upon the left and rear of the Federal army before it began to fortify its position.† General Lee, after some hesitation, pronounced himself against this plan. He thought it was wiser, under the circumstances, to allow some rest to his troops after the long march all would have gone through

* "Military Operations of General Beauregard," Vol. II., Chap. xxxvii., p. 255-6.

† "Military Operations of Gen. G. Beauregard," Vol. II., Chap. xxxvii., p. 254.

with, those present as well as those still coming up ; and he stated as a further reason for his objection, that our best policy—one, he said, which had thus far proved successful to him—would be to maintain the defensive as heretofore. I urged that the Federal troops were at least as much exhausted as ours, and that their ignorance of the locality would give us a marked advantage over them ; that their spirits were jaded and ours brightened just then by the fact of the junction of his army with my forces ; and that the enemy was not yet entrenched. But I was then only second in command, and my views did not prevail.

The evening of the 18th was quiet. There was no further attempt on the part of General Meade to assault our lines. He was “satisfied” there was “nothing more to be gained by direct attacks.”* The spade took the place of the musket, and the regular siege of Petersburg was begun. It was only raised April 2d, 1865.

No event of our war was more remarkable than the almost incredible resistance of the handful of men who served under me at Petersburg, on the 15th, 16th, 17th, and 18th of June, before the arrival of General Lee. They knew they were fighting more than seven times their number. In fact, the disproportion of the first day had been much greater ; and opposed to them were some of the finest and best disciplined Federal corps. They (my troops) had had no regular sleep, and had hardly had a scanty meal once in twenty-four hours. And yet the courage, the endurance, and spirit of these men never quailed. They fought unremittingly until the end—until their opponents ceased to fight. Not one of them had left his post, except, perhaps, to remove the dead body of a fallen comrade, or to have bandaged his own wound. I am proud to think that I was the leader of such troops. My only regret is that the name of each of them is not inscribed on the memorial tablets of history.

G. T. BEAUREGARD.

* See his report.



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