

Last North Letter

May 7, 1863

Introduction

Nine months ago this column, Soldier's Story, began by introducing Samuel W. North and George Frederick Ziegler, because letters written by them and to them had been kept by both families for generations. The letters are historically significant because of both men's service to their country during the Civil War 150 years ago. Sam and Fred both left home as very naïve, green boys. Although neither of them was ever shot, they carried the mental scars of war which were indelibly imprinted in their brains and memories, and returned as aged, young men..

This week's column brings to an end the letters written by Samuel W. North. The last letter that was kept by his family was dated May 7, 1863, written just after arriving back at camp after the ferocious Battle of Chancellorsville.

All winter the Union and Confederate armies were encamped on opposite sides of the Rappahannock River from each other. As Sam wrote in his April letter, the men, from both sides, which were camped closest to and patrolled the fords, would communicate with each other by yelling across the river or by making rafts of cornstalks and sending newspapers across the river. The Chancellorsville Campaign began in April. Sam wrote home to his brother that the Federal Cavalry had been sent toward Warrenton to cross the rivers. This was part of Hooker's strategy but the heavy rains in April halted the movement. The Union troops outnumbered the Confederate troops 134,00 to 60,000. Hooker's strategy was to march three Corps 25 miles west of camp upstream, cross the Rappahannock and Rapidan Rivers and come down behind the Confederate forces at Fredericksburg. If Hooker was successful, the Confederates would be sandwiched between Federal troops. The lack of reliable and speedy communication foiled Hooker's strategy and embroiled both armies in a multi-day battle – the Battle of Chancellorsville.

The 126th left camp on Monday, April 27th. The battle began on Friday, May 1 but the 126th was not engaged in fighting until Sunday, May 3. It seemed that if anything could go wrong, it did. Sam wrote that they ran out of ammunition and they waited for reinforcement but no one came, causing them to fallback. Sam listed, in the letter, the names of killed and wounded that he knew. The regiment suffered great losses, including soldiers being captured.

Thirteen days after writing this letter, the 126th Regiment, Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry mustered out on May 20, 1863 in Harrisburg. The regiment boarded a train

on Saturday, May 23 and they headed south to home. When the Cumberland Valley Railroad train stopped at the water station for the trains (about where 255 North Carlisle Street is today), the men in Companies B (Fulton Co. and Antrim Township), C (Mercersburg), E (Waynesboro), and K (Greencastle) disembarked to welcomed cheers for the heroes they had become. There was a parade that included veterans from the War of 1812 and the Mexican War. A small Union flag was hung on the grandstand in the diamond, from where the crowd listened to speeches. The women of the town and township had prepared a feast like the young veterans had not tasted since they left their homes in August.

Representatives from Mercersburg and Waynesboro drove wagons to Greencastle to take their honored veterans home to their families and communities to be greeted yet again by welcoming crowds, parades, and food.

Within three and a half weeks, the veterans of the 126th would be home, this time, for the second invasion of Pennsylvania, during the Gettysburg Campaign. This time they didn't feel helpless; they could help protect their families and homes, towns, and Pennsylvania. Many of them would not sit idly by; they volunteered to be scouts and messengers for the Union Army and made a difference in the Battle of Gettysburg – the turning point of the Civil War. After Gettysburg, later in 1863 and 1864, many of the men in the 126th reenlisted in other regiments and served their country honorably once again.

Bonnie A. Shockey, president
Allison-Antrim Museum, Inc.

Transcription

Camp near Falmouth Va
May 7th 1863

Dear Father

I received your letter but had neither time nor opportunity to answer it sooner as you have no doubt heard the Army of the Potomac has fought another great battle. We left our camp on Monday the 27th ult & marched up the river about 25 miles where we crossed & then marched on to the Rapidan river which We reached wensday evening the pontoon train passed ~~on before our corps ha~~ on did not lay a bridge for us consequently we had to wade it the water up to our middles & so swift we could hardly keep our feet moved down to chauncerville & took up position our corps commenced the battle the first fighting began on the 1st but

our division was not engaged until Sunday morning when the battle opened most furiously. our brigad was ordered to support another then ahead & advancing into the woods when it

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came near the enemies lines they fired a few shots & then fell back & left us to stand it our selves we were engaged about 2 hours the amunition began to run out & there was neither support nor relief coming so we had to fall back & they followed us yelling like indians I fired 30 rounds some fired more but my gun got so hot I was afraid to load any faster. We lost one killed Nick Trout Bro of lieut. Wounded W^m Starliper dangerously in the leg. Luther Zimmerman in the arm. Jas McConnell in the leg. Wm McDowell in the head, severely. Thom^s D. Metcalf in the back of head. Bryson Bruce in leg & hand. J. O Parker finger shot off George Cole in the hand & Davy Coyle from a spent ball in the shoulder. he is still with us. were all slightly wounded Starlipers is the only very dangerous, although M^cConnell, M^cDowell & Zimmerman are very severe wounds. we got home late on the evening of the tenth day, yesterday, tired and worn out it rained a great deal & the roads were in an awfull condition the resuld is a failure so

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far as I can hear though we had the heights behind Fredricksburg & did not take measures to hold them I dont know who commanded the force which crossed there We may be home before this reaches you we hope to leave this tomorrow but are not sure but they will try to keep us a few days longer. it is uncertain about leaving tomorrow Co. C,^s time is up on the evening of the 8th Jacob& I are in our usual health only a little stiff & sore from the fatigue & exposure it rained most every other day I lost my knapsack in the fight & had nothing to sleep in but the clothes I had on & a piece of tent excuse this poor letter as I lost my writing material. as I have just come from the battle field you need not fear that I will enlist again. there was five days fighting. We were all disappointed in Seigles dutch 11th Corps they did not stand up to the work well

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our Brigade was complimented by gen. Meade, for our Bravery. the battle will probably be called the Battle of Chaucerville. there was a battle going on at ~~the~~ ~~city~~ Fredrickburg at the same time our men drove them from the heights but they returned with over whelming force & retook them you have no doubt heard from the papers so-I more correctly than I can tell you as Ive no way but hearsay to find out any news

Your affectionate son

S. W. North