

Samuel W. North Letter and Transcription

January 26, 1863 - Camp near Fredericksburg

Introduction

On Monday, January 19, 1863, General Burnside gave the order to the Army of the Potomac to begin, what would be his final campaign, against the Confederate Army. The Confederate troops near Fredericksburg had been decreased in numbers; the men were sent south and west to support the Confederate forces in those regions. The history books would ultimately call Burnside's infamous, last campaign the "Mud March."

Sam wrote that his regiment, the 126th, was ordered to attention on Tuesday, January 20, to listen to the reading of Gen. Burnside's letter, in which he asked every man to "make one more effort for the union." "The auspicious moment having arrived," with the withdrawal of Confederate troops.

There were no Doppler weather forecasts in 1863 and the northerners in command evidently did not take into account that the milder winters of Virginia produced rain instead of snow, as compared to the northern states. In fact, at the end of Sam's letter, he asks his brother John if they've had any sleighing yet.

The New York Times imbedded one of their reporters, William Swinton, with the Army of the Potomac during the Mud March. He wrote of the Mud March, "One might fancy some new geologic cataclysm had overtaken the world; and that he saw around him the elemental wrecks left by another Deluge. An indescribable chaos of pontoons, wagons and artillery encumbered the road down to the river. Horses and mules dropped down dead, exhausted with the effort to move their loads through the hideous medium." Sam's letter of January 26, 1863 reinforces Swinton's statements. His letter is graphic and, indeed, gruesomely graphic in regard to the mules and horses.

For three days, the men of the Army of the Republic, wallowed through the mud toward the river, in one last effort for the Union, under Gen. Burnside. On January 23rd, Burnside abandoned his plan and the troops headed back to camp. Once again, Mother Nature thwarted the plans of humankind and 150 years later, she is still creating "geologic cataclysms."

On Tuesday, January 26, 1863, Gen. Joseph Hooker took command of the Army of the Potomac.

of course I should do so in a hurry
to get it ready for the mail to day
I found a letter of Signal strength would
I would be glad to see it what was
Dear Brother

Your letter of the 7th inst came duly to
hand and should have received attention in this but as
you had been preparing to move and my time has been
fully occupied by receiving orders since the 16th
I was at sea on the march for we have moved though
we did not march much it was nearly all swamps and
had the most miserable roads for about a week we were
ordered to leave for days before in our haste we were
ordered some three days before the most almost and
ridiculous manner we spent all the time we were
that we were going to embark and go to the peninsula
north that we were going to change our base of operations
and the four days' rations were to provide and a new road
could be found for supplies some thought we were going
to Washington others thought they were going and others
you could hear about a dozen before a day on Tuesday
the 25th we got orders to strike tents and leave the Army
the troops commenced moving past our camp. Battery
after Battery then the infantry one brigade after another
until at least one Army corps had passed then came
the fronton trains I think it disordered the fronton
with the way the troops we made in a few days it was
I have so much to write this time that I must omit it. In the
meantime our regt had been drawn out as we had been waiting
you turn to make off with an old road up to Fort. El. Stone and
quadrant an order "then attention is ordered" and we had been ordered
address to his own road to us I omit it as you have read it in
the papers or this suffices to say he wanted us to make one more effort
for the Union. The assistance we had given since the enemy had
been repulsed by the withdrawal of part of his force to reinforce
his main in the south and west. The day was dull cold and cloudy
at about one O'clock we moved out and after much delay and
hindrance I stopped about dusk two or two and a half miles from

old camp after we had spent first on a and second a
coffee and sugar and laid down to sleep it soon
commenced to rain and we were obliged to get up and go to find
our own camp after a good deal of searching I stumbled upon
the men lying down we got them up in a kind of a way
but the ground was loose and spongy and when it got soaked
with the rain the pins would not hold but were pulled out
all night the rain ran in under us in a perfect stream
and when I moved it would spread like a stamping through
a wet piece of parchment on the ground we were obliged to make
get a little coffee and sugar off though the men are blanket but
concent and coffee is not the best thing for you had some
times as many in consequence, cold and moving the road soon
drew north and the further we went the deeper it got raining
all the time all along the road were seen trees, shrubs and
bushes sticking in the mud whipping, yellow and disagreeable
the pits, Madras, grass and vegetation enough to erode a hill
about the middle of the day the roads got worse up and we went
to the operations of nature to the depth of water or further in
through this we were hampered as fast as we could go the roads
lined with stumps and logs had piled up the rest of the
in a word for the night the next morning the state of affairs
was very bad indeed. The road was lined with logs
and stumps the ground with their teams having taken refuge
in the woods along the road where they have made large
fires and were drying their clothes a little and soon the puddles
and ruts commenced they would hold ten or twelve mules to
one mason full track up and then go back for another
about dinner time we were ordered but without arms and
were set to making corduroy roads this was done by taking
rails poles or saplings and laying them crossways these stumps
and pieces of wood were piled up and the mud was
cut at work but it went very slow and we had made then
a mile to make for one day the spectacle was most
ridiculous the men were out in the rain wading through the
mud up to the tops of their boots first of these were done
but were very long enough on the legs to keep out the mud
but had only about an inch or two to go on you could not

tell how deep the mud was by the looks of the surface but there were generally marks about the deep places such as a dead horse or a mule or two who had perished in the struggle with the monsters they must all had a little foot of blood at their nostrils showing that they had burst blood vessels here would be a caisson within in the mud up to the axel their two ammunition wagons, directly and in a fair way to be engaged in the hilly road we worked till night and left the caisson there was a direct march down from each company and it was my good fortune to be one of the detail from one company it was half march the same the next day our march to this had been this day with a heavy mud and heavy ^{and} tired and stiff in almost every way on but for this there the impracticality of winter campaign had been fully demonstrated and the teams had taken the back track the artillery was reduced back to their old camp and this might be seen coming two horses in nearly every hour and falling by the wayside in some some of our best sixteen horses in one caisson and think at that about one or two caissons in the afternoon we had finished our part of the road this was on Friday I forgot to tell you that there had been orders to issue whiskey to the men but the drums on which the barrels were were stuck in the mud and the men walked them out and crushed the men in and dipped in with tin shells and canteens some had you in fire canteens full and soon there was lots of men staggering around and wallowing like hogs in the mud but was awful and still there were some relief parties sent three men were passing our regt all drunk it was hard to kill which was worst at least two of them were thought one Irishman wanted to be down but his comrad dragged him along he held his hands out to our boys and said "help" which both the poor "Pat" the third a long board shouldered fallen with a wave of the hand said as he staggered away gentlemen I cant appreciate your

company and stopped on a little way when he assumed the position of a soldier and raising himself to his full height said "I am in command of this regt" and commenced giving orders some were stationed along the road as the men passed sent first man to a field for a d-d apple of all the division never I ever saw a man get anything like this to want be executed one got four barrels rations on fieldy path one got about a gallon I did not take any as I had seen enough of the effects of the war before I was happy to be in the army and I know of our boys here drunk some were a little drunk but all behaved pretty well one rations came out on fieldy evening and our quartermaster lent us some crackers and in sacks and carried on the backs of mules and some some cattle up and killed them so we did not suffer for provisions and on Saturday we marched back to our old camp you may imagine that march I was at near finished out as I live up in my life hope I shall never have another such a one the old boys say this beats the famissala all to pieces for mud and hard times we got back to our old camp to find that our chimney pipes in tables were burnt up our camp had been confined by a gale and destroyed but we have got things pretty comfortable again though we cant move our camp to high road and make it public for the army to use it is a fine place for a camp with us and it makes our tent very comfortable while I am writing it is too warm the weather still on our side and I have not seen the pontons coming back yet I hear that they put iron sawteeth to pull it out but did not expect them to pull it out but did not get it shore and we went says they are harassing them another that they are coming from both sides and leaving them there must be a great deal of artillery stuck in the mud yet I am sure you had by all means get all the guns to water and get them out and get all the mules to get a couple of hundred from camp this my command has not got the best yet but our quartermaster has sent me for them today I am sorry they are gone these would have been as they will stop all the cavalry with us my respect to both and remain your

Transcription

Camp near Fredricksburg

Jan 26th 1863

Dear Brother,

Your letter of the 7th inst came duly to hand and should have received attention in this but we have been busy preparing to move and my time has been fully occupied. I received mothers letter dated the 16th while we were on the march. for we have moved though we did not march much it was nearly all wading. we had been under marching orders for about a week. We had orders to have four days rations in our haversacks. We never carried more than three days befor. the most abusrd and ridiculous rumors were afloat all the time one rumor was that we going to embark and go to the peninsula another that we were going to change our base of operations and the four days rations were to provide until a new rout could be opened for supplies some thought we were going to Washington others thought Harpers ferry and others Warrenton you could hear about a dozen reports a day. On tuesday the

20th we got orders to strike tents and early the morning the troops commenced moving past our camp, Battery after Battery. then the Infantry one Brigade after another until at least one Army corps Had passed then came the pontoon trains I think I described the pontoons and the way the bridges are made in a former letter. at any rate I have so much to write this time that I must omit it. In the meantime our regt had been drawn out on line and were waiting our turn to move off when an aid rode up to Lieut. Col Rowe and gave him an order then "attention to Orders" and we had Gen Burnside's address to his army read to us I omit it as you have read it in the papers ere this suffice to say he wanted us to "make one more effort for the union. the auspicious moment having arrived. the enemy having been weakened by the withdrawal of part of his forces to reinforce his armies in the south and west. the day was dull, cold and cloudy at about one o'clock we moved out and after much delay and hindrance stopped about dusk two or two and half miles from

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old camp after we had built fires and cooked coffee we ate our suppers and laid down to sleep it soon commenced to rain and we concluded to get up and try to put up our tents after a good lot of blundering and stumbling over the men lying down we got them up in a kind of way but the ground was loose and spongy and when it got soaked with the rain the pins would not hold but were pulling out all night the rain ran in under me in a perfect stream and when I moved it would squash like tramping through a wet piece of ground. in the morning we were called into line and got a little coffee and moved off through the mud our Blankets tents overcoats and clothes all ~~were~~ thoroughly soaked and our load about twice as heavy in consequence, commenced moving the mud over shoe mouth and the farther we went the deeper it got – raining all the time – all along the road were seen teams, ambulances, & batteries sticking in the mud, whipping, yelling, and swearing all together making noise and confusion enough to craze a bedlamite about the middle of the day the roads got mixed up and worked to the consistency of mortar to the depth of twelve or fourteen inches through this we were hurried as fast as we could go the road lined with stragglers and boys who had played out the regt stopped in a woods for the night the next morning the state of affairs was anything but consoling. the road was lined with wagons and artillery the drivers with their teams having taken refuge in the woods along the road where they had made large fires and were drying their clothes a little. and soon the pulling out commenced they would hitch ten or twelve mules to one wagon pull them up and then go back for another about dinner time we were ordered out without arms and were set to making corderoy roads. this was done by taking rails poles or saplins and laying them crossways three deep and covering them with pine brush our whole division was out at work but it went very slow and we had more than a mile to make for our share the spectacle was most

ridiculous the men were out in the rain wading through the mud up to the tops of their boots that is those who had boots. mine were long enough in the legs to keep out the mud but had only about an inch or two to go on you could not

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tell how deep the mud was by the looks of the surface but there were generally marks about the deep places such as a dead horse or a mule or two who had perished in the struggle with the monster they most all had a little pool of blood at their nostrils showing that they had burst blood vessels. here would be a caisson sticking in the mud up to the axle there an ammunition wagon deserted and in a fair way to be engulfed in the bottomless road we worked till night and next morning there was a detail made eleven men from each company and it was my good fortune to be one of the detail from our company it was pretty much the same the next day only ("more so") the men had been three days in the rain and mud and weary wet tired and stiff in all our bones we worked on but by this time the impracticability of winter campaigning had been fully demonstrated and the teams had taken the back track the artillery was ordered back to their old camp and they might be seen coming ten horses in nearly every team and twelve or fourteen in some. some of our boys saw sixteen horses in one caisson and stuck at that about one or two o'clock in the afternoon we had finished our part of the road this was on Friday. I forgot to tell you that there had been orders to issue whisky to the men but the teams on which the barrels were, were stuck in the mud and the men rolled them out and knocked the head in and dipped in with tins kettles and canteens. some had four or five canteens full and soon there was lots of men staggering around and wallowing like hogs in the mud it was awful and still there were some rich scenes enacted. three men were passing our regiment all drunk it was hard to tell which was worst at least two of them were tight one Irishman wanted to lie down but his comrade dragged him along he held his hands out to our boys and said "help help the poor Pat" the third a large broad shouldered fellow with a wave of the hand said as he staggered away gentlemen I can't appreciate your

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company and staggered on a little ways when he assumed the position of a soldier and raising himself to his full height said "I am in command of the regiment" and commenced giving orders some were stationed along the road saying as the men passed "don't fight men" "don't fight for the d----d nigger of all the drunken men I ever saw I never saw anything like this. it can't be described. our boys got whisky rations on Friday each one got about a gill I did not take any as I had seen enough of the effects of it the day before I am happy to be able to say that none of our boys were drunk some were a little lively but all behaved pretty well. our rations run out on

friday evening but our quartermaster sent us some crackers tied up in sacks and carried on the backs of mules. and drove some cattle up and killed them so we did not suffer for provisions. and on Saturday we marched back to our old camp you may imagine that march I was as near played out as I ever was in my life hope I shall never have another such a one. the old troops say this beats the peninsula all to pieces for mud and hard times we got back to our old camp to find that our chimneys, boxes and tables were burnt up our camp had been occupied by wagoners and straglers but we have got things pretty comfortable again though we intent moving our camp to where wood and water is plentier. we have a little sheet iron stove which we can cary along with us and it makes our tent very comfortable while I am writing it is too warm. the weather still continues dull and cloudy. I have not seen the pontoons coming back yet I hear that they put eighteen horses to one to pull it out but did not succeed then tried to float it but did not het it along and one report says they are burning them another that they are covering them with brush and leaving them there must be a great deal of artillery sticking in the mud yet. have you had any sleighing yet. tell the girls to write and you write soon and give me all the news I got a couple of papers from home they are welcome Jacob has not got his box yet but our quartermaster has gone for them today I am sorry they put things that would spoil in as they will spoil all the eatables.

Write soon my respects to Orth and Governor. S.W. North

(A PS written in pencil, instead of pen, across the top of page one.) excuse Blunders as I am in a hurry to get it ready for the mail today I send a piece of signal telegraph wire I sent a testament did you get it what was the postage on it