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W. H. BURRIS

AN OLD LETTER

Written from the Front in 1861
Description of Battle by Participant and Eye Witness.

Aug. 8th, 1861
Camp at Viena, Va.

Dear Pap, I received yours and Sallie's welcome letters with a thankful heart on yesterday. It always affords me great pleasure to hear from home, and what grieves me is that I don't hear often enough. You stated that you wished me to give you a detailed account of the late battles. I shall proceed to do so in a brief manner, although no doubt you have heard as much or more concerning the battles as I have. Yet what I have to say is certainly true; and may be relied on as being authentic.

On the morning of the 17th of July I arose from my tent (after having enjoyed a good night's sleep) surprised to see a wagon and horses standing in our street ready to receive our baggage, upon making proper inquiries, I found that we were expecting an attack from the enemy, which information did not seem to me to feel anyway uneasy from the fact that we had had several false alarms before, and we had slept on our arms a good many nights previous in expectation of an attack.

Time wore along, the sun had risen about two hours high when suddenly the report of a volley of musket fell on my ear. I was the advanced guard of the enemy which had fired on Kershaw's pickets who were stationed on the Falls Church road. The firing was for a twofold purpose. It was done to kill the pickets; and also to let the enemy know their position who were advancing on the Alexandria Road. Everything was in a stir as soon as the firing was heard. All our tents were struck immediately, and put in the wagon together with all our camp equipage; and started off with the rest of the wagons, (for each company had one apiece) to Bull Run which we thought was done in order to have our baggage a safe distance from the enemy in case we were defeated for we expected to have a fight in a few minutes, as the Yankees were not more than a mile off at this time. So soon as our wagons were all started off, we were formed as though we were going on dress parade with the exception of it being done in a more hurried manner. As soon as the marching began, let us remember what we have come here to do; let us remember where we are from; let "victory or death" be our motto.

The above was all he said; and when he had finished, we raised our hats; and gave such a shout, as no doubt it was heard in the enemy's ranks,—we were marched off in double quick turn to take our place in line of battle which was already being formed some two hundred yards from and west of the court house building; and in front of the long extended lines of the Yankee troops which could be distinctly seen about a half mile off with their bright bayonets glittering in the morning sun. We stood in front of the Yankees about 15 minutes, when for some reason or other which I never could understand our position was changed. A Virginia regiment was marched out from behind a breastwork, and made to take its place in the open field, while we were marched from the open field; and made to occupy the breastwork. We hadn't more than stationed ourselves behind the works and I had laid my musket down on top of breastwork for a rest, and took sight along the barrel to see if my place was a good one for bringing a Yankee every shoot, for I was determined to take aim and make my shots tell when in looking around me I saw a courier coming with a horse all covered with foam and sweat in the direction of where Gen. Bonham stood, he delivered our general an order from Beauregard, as soon as Bonham read it, he extended the order to the boys of his command; and in a few minutes we were going towards Centerville in double quick time. Here permit me to digress in order to give you the position of the opposing armies.

The enemy's army consisted of forty-five thousand (45,000) men who were disposed of in three different columns of fifteen thousand men, the first was to attack us on the east or front; the second was to attack us on the north or left flank; the third was to fall in our rear and cut off our retreat. All these columns were under the command of General McDowell. Our troops which were the only ones to oppose the Federal forces at Fairfax, consisted of two brigades, viz: Gen. Bonham's which was made up of Kershaw's, Williams, Bacus and Cash's regiments of South Carolina Volunteers, Gen. Boone's two Alabama, one Louisiana, and one Virginia regiment, making in all seven thousand men.

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Gen. Beauregard's intention for us to engage the enemy at Fairfax but his keen perceptive eye finding out the superior generalship they displayed; and the overwhelming numbers they were bringing against us thought it prudent not to ask an engagement, for fear of being cut off and made prisoners. Hence retreat to Centerville, which afforded us, not knowing the cause from home, and what grieves me is that I don't hear often enough. You stated that you wished me to give you a detailed account of the late battles. I shall proceed to do so in a brief manner, although no doubt you have heard as much or more concerning the battles as I have. Yet what I have to say is certainly true; and may be relied on as being authentic.

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(Continued on page 8.)

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