

The Charge on Battery Robinet

Cyrus C. Carpenter

ISSN 0003-4827

Material in the public domain. No restrictions on use.



This work has been identified with a [Creative Commons Public Domain Mark 1.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/publicdomain/1.0/).

Recommended Citation

Carpenter, Cyrus C. "The Charge on Battery Robinet." *The Annals of Iowa* 1 (1893), 99-106.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.2417>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](https://www.iowaresearchonline.org/)

to dukes and earls. In America the badge of honor will be in the distant future to trace an ancestry back to a member of the Grand Army of the Union.

It is a matter deeply regretted by the friends of General Baker that there is not in existence a good oil portrait of him, painted when he was in his prime, as at the outbreak of the great civil war. The engraving which precedes this article, however, is a fairly good likeness. It was engraved from a somewhat faded photograph which has been preserved by "The Aldrich Collection" in the Historical Department.

THE CHARGE ON BATTERY ROBINET.

BY EX-GOVERNOR CYRUS C. CARPENTER.

The reminiscences of the great Rebellion are becoming more interesting as they recede into history. This fact alone could induce me to repeat the story of one of the events of the war with which I was personally familiar. Time can never efface from the memory of those who saw it, the desperate charge made by the rebels upon Battery Robinet at the battle of Corinth, October 4, 1862. And I sometimes think that the battle of Corinth has not been fully appreciated by the historian; as it was really one of the important events of the war. The little town of Corinth, Mississippi, was neither large nor attractive, but it was one of the strategic points in the territory occupied by the rebel armies. It was at the junction of the Memphis & Charleston, and the Mobile & Ohio Railroads. The one extending east and west from Memphis, Tennessee, through the heart of the rebel territory to Charleston, South Carolina; and the other running north and south from the Ohio river to Mobile and the Gulf of Mexico. To obtain possession of Corinth had cost the bloody battle of Shiloh (Pittsburg Landing) and the subsequent long campaign by regular approaches of the armies of the Tennessee, of the Ohio and of the Mississippi, under General Halleck. Prior to the battle of Corinth, the Union forces in northern Mississippi and west-

ern Tennessee were scattered at various points on, or near, the Mobile & Ohio and Memphis & Charleston Railroads. General Grant, commanding the department, was at Jackson, Tennessee; General McPherson at Bethel, Tennessee, a station between Jackson and Corinth; General Sherman was at Memphis; General Hurlbut at Bolivar; and General Rosecrans at Corinth. After Price had attacked the Union forces at Iuka, from which point he retreated precipitately to Tupelo, there was an ominous silence for some weeks. Finally the rebel forces, commanded by Van Dorn, Price, Villipigue, Lovell and Rust, began to concentrate in the vicinity of Ripley. The combined forces constituted an army of about 40,000 men. The purpose of Van Dorn, who was chief in command, was not easy to divine, but it was believed he contemplated an attack either upon Corinth, Jackson, Bolivar or Bethel. After a few days of maneuvering, in which his cavalry demonstrated against all these points, it was found that he was massing his entire command on the roads leading to Corinth. General Grant immediately began to draw forces from other points with orders to reinforce Corinth, where General Rosecrans was then in command of about 20,000 men.

On October 3, Van Dorn having driven in the outposts of Corinth, moved upon the place in force and with great determination. He, of course, knew that the moment he had fully unveiled his purpose, reinforcements would be hurried forward from Bolivar, Jackson and Bethel, and that his success depended upon his ability to overwhelm Rosecrans before these reinforcements could reach the battlefield.

The town of Corinth lies in a sort of a basin, the ground gradually rising, especially on the north, northeast and northwest, encircling the town from these points of the compass with a low but well defined ridge. Corinth had been strongly fortified by General Beauregard when occupied by the rebels. Our army had the advantage of these fortifications, and the interior line of rebel defenses had been strengthened and perfected by the Union forces. The outer line of entrenchments were comparatively impracticable of defense, as they had been planned.

and built for a much larger force than that commanded by General Rosecrans. The interior defenses, of which Batteries Williams, Robinet and Powell were salients, were not more than from six to eight hundred yards from the town. It was the plan of General Rosecrans, as the rebel forces moved upon his command, to make a demonstration of defense at the outer works, more or less obstinate, as circumstances might seem to determine as wise, but to withdraw gradually to the support of these interior batteries, thus shortening his lines and bringing into play the guns of the batteries upon the enemy.

The first day of the battle (October 3) the Second Division of the Army of West Tennessee, commanded by Brigadier General Thomas A. Davies, held a position across the Chewalla road and in the northwest angle of the two railroads. In the First Brigade of this division, commanded by Brigadier General Hackleman, were five Iowa regiments, the 2d, 7th, 8th, 12th and 14th Infantry. In the Sixth Division of the Army of West Tennessee, commanded by General T. J. McKean, there were four Iowa regiments, the 11th, 12th, 15th and 16th Infantry, brigaded together and called the Iowa Brigade, commanded by Colonel Marcellus M. Crocker. In the Second Division of the Army of the Mississippi, commanded by General David S. Stanley, was the 2d Battery of Iowa Light Artillery, commanded by Captain Nelson T. Spoor, which received honorable mention by Colonel Joseph Mower, commanding the brigade to which it was attached, and also by General Stanley, commanding the division, for its splendid work during the battle. In the Third Division of the Army of the Mississippi, commanded by General Charles S. Hamilton, were the 5th, 10th and 17th Regiments of Iowa Infantry, and in the cavalry, commanded by Colonel Mizner, was the 2d Regiment Iowa Cavalry.

The brunt of the battle during the 3d, fell upon the Second Division of the Army of West Tennessee, commanded by General Thomas A. Davies. It held a position in the northwest angle of the Memphis & Charleston and Mobile & Ohio railroads, and across the Chewalla wagon road, upon which

General Lovell's division of the rebel army was advancing. Although, as has been said, it was not the purpose of General Rosecrans to risk the results of the day by making a final and decisive stand at the outer defenses, as he knew it would too greatly lengthen his lines for the number of men he had as compared to the enemy, and that it would be beyond the reach of aid from the forts near the town. But this splendid division clung to its position at these outer defenses with great tenacity, and when finally obliged to fall back, did so obstinately and in good order. Night found it between a half and three-quarters of a mile from Corinth, in line, between and in front of Batteries Williams and Robinet. The division had suffered serious losses—especially in officers—General Hackleman, commanding a brigade, had fallen mortally wounded, and died during the night; General Oglesby was also severely wounded; Colonel Baker and Lieutenant-Colonel Mills, of the 2d Iowa Infantry, were wounded, both of whom died a few days later.

During the night this division, being greatly exhausted, was moved farther to the right, and the line which they had held was occupied by the division of General Stanley. In this rearrangement of forces, the so-called Ohio Brigade, commanded by Colonel John W. Fuller, of the 27th Ohio, occupied the line to the right and left of Battery Robinet.

In order that the disposition of General Stanley's division in relation to the rebel forces may be fully understood, the ground they occupied should be described. As I have said, Battery Robinet was but little, if any, more than a half mile from the town. It was between the Mobile & Ohio and the Memphis & Charleston railroads—not more than 200 yards east of the latter, and within a few yards of the Chewalla wagon road. It was perhaps two-thirds of the distance from the foot of the gradual slope, which rose north and northeast of the town to the crest of the ridge. Beyond the crest of the ridge was a forest. Originally the timber had extended considerably south of the ridge between the Chewalla road and the Mobile & Ohio railroad, coming down nearly to Fort Rob-

inet. But the trees had been felled with the tops outwardly from the fort up to the crest of the ridge, many of the limbs had been sharpened, and as the ground was thickly strewn with brush and logs, they formed a tolerably effective abattis. The railroads in crossing this ridge passed through deep cuts, both cuts being quite deep at their nearest approach to Battery Robinet.

The afternoon of the 3d had been exceedingly warm, and as there was no living water in any part of the field covered by the operations of the army during the day, the men were nearly famished for water. The Quarter Master, Captain J. K. Wing, was putting forth every effort possible to have water hauled out to the front by teams, but it was a slow and difficult process. I knew that there was a switch engine lying just behind one of the warehouses near the junction of the railroads, with steam up and manned by an engineer and fireman. It occurred to me that it might be used to get water out to our lines. When the attention of General Rosecrans was called to it, he ordered it sent immediately. I went to the engineer and told him what was required of him. "Well," said he, "it is a pretty dangerous experiment, but here goes." As I had been somewhat instrumental in securing an order for this business, I determined to go with him and take the chances of the experiment. I will never forget the expression of face with which he turned to me and said: "You better stand on the rear end of the flat car; if the Johnnies should happen to shoot a hole into the boiler, there is no use in all of us being scalded to death!" The water tank was about three-quarters of a mile south of Corinth. Taking a flat car and a number of empty pork barrels, he ran down to the tank, filled the engine tank and the barrels, then ran back up through the town and up the track into one of the deep cuts of the railroad just in the rear of our lines. The news ran along the lines of thirsty soldiers, who were lying flat on the ground, that there was water in the railroad cut to their rear. Immediately they began to crawl down over the embankment to fill their canteens. Each soldier who left the lines would bring about a

dozen canteens—his own and those of several of his comrades—and when he had filled them, crouching and hugging the ground, would crawl back to his place in the lines.

Between three and four o'clock on the morning of the 4th, the rebels, having moved a battery into position under cover of the woods, some four hundred yards in front of our lines, began to shell the town. This was kept up with more or less spirit until daylight, when the officers of our batteries, being able to see the position and get the range of this daring intruder, soon silenced and drove him away. The morning was occupied in skirmishing and more or less desultory fighting along our entire lines. About ten o'clock I had gone with the engineer up into the cut in the rear of the Ohio Brigade, with another car load of water. For some time there had been an ominous silence, indicating that the enemy in the woods beyond the ridge were preparing for some new and desperate move. The engine remained in the cut until the entire command in the vicinity seemed to have been supplied with water, when it slowly moved back to the railroad junction and ran behind one of the warehouses. On arriving at the warehouse, I started up the railroad track with the view of crossing over towards the right to the headquarters of General Rosecrans. I had gone but a short distance when there seemed to be a fierce engagement on our right and east of the town. I heard at the same time an unusual commotion on the street which ran parallel with the railroad. Running to the top of the railroad embankment, I saw what seemed, for a moment, to be a panic. Men, wagons, ambulances and two or three pieces of artillery, were flying pell mell down the street. Several officers, among them conspicuously General Rosecrans himself, were trying to stop the wild rush. I had not fully taken in the situation, when a regiment, in perfect order, swung into the street and swept everything before it on a double quick to the front. This slight reverse was the result of a sudden onset of the enemy on our right, in which they had captured a part of one of our batteries, and in the attempt of the company manning it to get away with a part of the guns, they had run through a regiment, throwing it into confusion, leaving the

flanks of two other regiments unprotected and making a break in our lines. Through this break a part of a rebel regiment had penetrated under the impression that they had captured the town. They were met by the 5th Minnesota Regiment, as I have described, whilst General Davies' division soon recovered the lost ground, reformed his lines and made a counter charge, supported by General Hamilton's division, by which they recaptured the battery and drove the enemy in confusion back into the woods on our right and east of the town. In all this the 5th Minnesota Infantry and the 17th Iowa were conspicuously gallant.

Almost simultaneously with this movement the guns in Batteries Williams and Robinet began to pour forth volley after volley in startling and deafening chorus. At first I thought they were shelling the rebel lines on our right to aid the movement just described, but on looking to the crest of the ridge north of the town and beyond Fort Robinet, I saw four columns of the rebel army emerging from the woods and coming over the ridge. At first they seemed to be in line, forming almost a solid front from the column on the right to that on the left. The column advancing in the road, however, moved faster and was soon considerably in advance of the others, as the two columns on the right of the road, especially, were impeded by the fallen trees and brush. The batteries were pouring into these approaching columns a terrific fire with deadly aim. But aside from the men manning the guns of the batteries, and here and there an officer walking back and forth on the flanks and in the rear of Robinet, not a man could be seen to confront and repel this portending charge. In face of the fearful slaughter of the batteries, the rebel columns had approached within less than one hundred yards of Robinet, when, with the common impulse of the veteran soldier, the entire Ohio Brigade and the 11th Missouri Infantry sprang to their feet and in quick succession poured volley after volley into the oncoming columns. Where but a moment before no living man was to be seen, there seemed to come up out of the earth a swarm of men extending nearly across the angle from one railroad to the other, and for a few moments the incessant

fire from their muskets had the appearance of one unbroken flame of fire, covering the whole field with an impenetrable cloud of smoke. It was more than human courage could withstand, the rebel columns wavered and recoiled, and then a retreat began, and when the 11th Missouri and 27th and 63d Ohio rushed forward with fixed bayonets, it became a rout. Many threw down their arms and surrendered rather than take the chances of a retreat, exposed to the fearful fire in passing over the open space back to the cover of the timber. Some of the officers, however, even after the first recoil from the blaze of musketry, were conspicuous in an attempt to rally their broken lines and renew the charge. In this last vain endeavor Colonel Rogers, of the 2d Texas Infantry, commanding a brigade, fell mortally wounded, after having absolutely reached the ditch in front of the battery. This was the final death struggle of the battle of Corinth.

The writer of this article disclaims any attempt to give a full account of the battle of Corinth. It was begun with the single purpose of relating some of the incidents connected with the charge on Battery Robinet. In order to do this it seemed necessary to describe some of the movements which led to this final supreme effort of the rebels, and incidentally to relate how the writer happened to be in position to have a full view of this heroic charge and no less heroic defense.

(Conclusion in next number.)

LOST IN A SNOW STORM.

BY EX-GOVERNOR WILLIAM LARRABEE.

The winter of 1856-7 was unusually severe in the northwest—in fact, none ever equalled it in the memory of the oldest settler. Snow fell to an enormous depth, and the mercury not infrequently ranged from 20° to 40° below zero for several days in succession. A series of great storms—now called “blizzards”—from the boreal regions—swept the prairies, whirling the dust of the powdery snow in a wild dance and piling up

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.