The Engagement at Jenkin's Ferry

William L. Nicholson
THE ENGAGEMENT AT JENKIN'S FERRY.

BY DR. WILLIAM L. NICHOLSON.¹

Federal Hospital, Princeton, Ark.

May 15, 1864.

Having found some paper, I am tempted to re-commence journalizing for the sake of passing away the dreary time. My chief source of interest in this daily jotting down of current events, namely, my old journal, is probably lost with the rest of my effects. It was no doubt destroyed when the army retreated.

I think I shall begin with the departure from Camden, which we evacuated about noon on April 26th. All baggage, tents, etc., not essential, were ordered destroyed, so that a general holocaust was offered up to the evil genius of our ill-starred expedition. All the wagons rendered superfluous by the destruction of property were temporarily disabled by cutting out a few of the spokes and were then abandoned. I was reluctantly compelled to leave behind the big sanitary chest, hitherto the companion of all our marches. The two hospital tent-flies I got into the two wagons we still had. I brought four or five men, who were unable to travel, to the general hospital where about twenty-five or thirty of the worst cases were left in charge of Dr. Finlaw. Here a general burning up of hospital property, medicine, books, etc., was taking place.

¹Dr. William L. Nicholson was born in County Tipperary, Ireland, September 25, 1832. He was educated in private schools, and graduated from Trinity College, Dublin, and the University of Glasgow. He migrated to Canada in 1853, and two years later came to Fort Dodge, Iowa. He enlisted on August 16, 1862, as a private in Company E, Thirty-second Iowa Volunteer Infantry, and in December was appointed assistant surgeon of the Twenty-ninth Iowa Volunteer Infantry. He was subsequently made chief surgeon with rank of major. At the close of the war he returned to Fort Dodge, where he continued the practice of his profession and served for some years as pension examiner. His death occurred November 11, 1890.
Having quite a supply of crackers we stored them in every vacant spot, they being our main subsistence. The men had only about two crackers each on leaving, while Engleman's brigade had nothing at all. Williamson and myself packed everything on our animals that would stick, and put the medicine trunk in the ambulance. We opened the last bottle of old bourbon which we had been carefully preserving for a great occasion, and this seemed great enough in shame and disaster if nothing else.

The regiment moved out looking fine, notwithstanding the short rations. We crossed the river late in the afternoon on the pontoon bridge, then marched three or four miles and encamped for the night.

Next morning all was in readiness early but we did not get started before eight o'clock. It was a warm day, the march was very fatiguing, the heat was excessive and the men had little to eat. They commenced dropping out about noon, and at three o'clock, when we arrived at Princeton, more than half the regiment was behind. Here a halt was made on the grounds of a widow, Mrs. Harley. The stragglers began to arrive, but no orders were received to encamp. We all entertained the idea that after resting we would have to march seven or eight miles in the cool of the evening. Lucky indeed would it have been had we done so, for in that case the Saline would have been crossed before the bottoms became impassable, and the battle and consequent loss of all our baggage, together with my present detention as a prisoner of war with my men, avoided.

The remaining regiments of the brigade came up and stacked arms parallel with ours. I tied my horse to the fence and went up to the house with Colonel Benton and the Major. Mrs. Harley was a perfect lady and treated us very politely, preparing dinner immediately. Two young ladies, intelligent and good-looking, but most enthusiastic rebels, were there also. We discussed the state of the times at some length but my fair auditors were incorrigible. Their only male relative not in the army was at home disabled by a wound received in some of the battles across the river. We placed a guard
ENGAGEMENT AT JENKIN'S FERRY

over the place and protected their property as much as possible.

About six o'clock the order arrived to encamp for the night, upon which we pitched our tent and I took my journal and wrote in it a little. I had an aching tooth which had troubled me for some days. Muster ing up sufficient courage, I applied the forceps and pulled it out myself.

Reveille was sounded about 3:30 a.m., but a delay of three or four hours occurred before we could get out of the village. This was fatal as every hour of time was now of importance. However, as we had no knowledge that a large force of the enemy was in pursuit, the delay caused no special annoyance. I improved the time by walking along by the regiment and giving each man who looked unwell or likely to give out a dose of quinine. The unusual heat of the past three days threatened to culminate in rain and the sun was obscured. I was agreeably surprised to find the men standing the march very well, none giving out at all.

The rain commenced early in the afternoon and the road soon became heavy and hard to travel. The artillery was pulled up the steep hills with great difficulty by the exhausted horses. About three o'clock we passed the road leading to Benton and prior to that the one leading to Tulip, so it was evident we were not to go by either of those roads but were, as I ascertained, on the main road between Camden and Little Rock which crossed the Saline at Jenkins' Ferry.

The storm was incessant and about this time the report of artillery in the rear was heard between the claps of thunder. The artillery firing continued at intervals for some hours but excited no apprehensions as we supposed that some small force was merely hanging on our rear for the purpose of annoyance.

A little before dark we reached the Saline bottom and found the road had become much worse, being knee-deep in mud and water in many places. We proceeded for about two miles, halted for the night and encamped in the edge of a wood near a ploughed field. I had my tent erected and a good fire built at which I dried my clothes, and after receiv-
ing my share of a kettle of strong tea, felt pretty comfortable. I went to the Colonel's tent and discussed prospects there for a time. A feeling of hilarity seemed to prevail. In three days we would be in Little Rock in comfortable quarters, with plenty of provisions, etc. It seemed so much like going home that all were willing to endure the present hardships with so much comfort in prospect.

Williamson and myself had just lain down when an order arrived to pack up and be ready to leave in two hours. The fires were now extinguished and total darkness surrounded us. At the same time the rain poured down in torrents so that at the hour of starting mud and water were everywhere six inches deep and to move was impracticable. Indeed, if even an order to that effect was issued it would have been impossible to find any one in the driving rain and pitchy darkness. I stood and shivered through the long hours of that dreary night. Some few, exhausted by the toil of the past three days and rendered by fatigue insensible to the pelting storm, slept, immersed in mud and water. Others, like myself, prowled around like unquiet spirits, or sat on a log and took it patiently until cold drove us again to locomotion. The hours until daybreak were anxiously counted. The whips and voices of the wagon drivers ceased, most of the mules being hopelessly stuck in the mud.

At length came dawn, and never did the light disclose a more miserable spectacle. The Thirty-third Iowa had been on picket all night, but of course were no worse off than the rest who were equally unsheltered. At daylight General Rice came along and permitted fires to be lighted. Carter by some means hunted up some coffee and a coffee pot, so that we had a little warm fluid.

There was now a general moving out and all the regiments had passed except the Thirty-third Iowa, when the firing which had been going on at the pickets from the time that objects could be distinguished began to swell into regular volleys. We had just left camp where the boys had abandoned almost everything they had previously carried. As the blankets were all soaked their weight would have been
intolerable, and almost without an exception they were thrown on the fires in huge heaps.

We were halted and then advanced a little, and supposed that a small force was driving in the pickets which we were to support. The firing came nearer, and wounded men being carried to the rear showed something earnest was meant. We were maneuvered in various directions through the open field while the other regiments were being recalled from the river, and finally were brought back to a strip of woods about one hundred and fifty yards wide, at the edge of which the line of battle was formed.

This position was similar to the camp-ground we had vacated. The road bounded each, with the creek on the other side, and behind us was a third ploughed field. At the lower end of this field was a house which was subsequently used for a hospital. Our brigade was all together by this time, and lying down or as near a recumbent posture as the mud and water would permit. It was almost impossible to execute any movements for the same reason. All this time the rain was pouring down.

The skirmishers soon fell back, followed by a large force of the enemy. I now found myself in a bad fix,—a battle about to commence and everything I needed away. The medicine chest, etc., had been put in the ambulance and I had sent Williamson to the other side of the river with them, with instructions to get some breakfast ready, expecting of course to be over presently. I had on my saddle my haversack containing my sash, pocket case, a few rollers and a tourniquet. I put on the former and brought together the musicians who showed signs of great nervousness when the balls began to whistle thick and fast. I gave Bullard my horse to take care of, which he did so effectually that I saw no more of him.

I soon had my hands full, could scarcely find time to more than look at each man and was continually on the rush back to the house at the end of the field which we had seized for a hospital.

There I found the surgeon of the Ninth Wisconsin and made a hurried disposition of the house to contain the
wounded, and compelled the stragglers to resume their guns and follow me to their regiments again. Some who were carrying along dead men I compelled to lay down their burdens and return to the ranks.

On returning to the front after my first visit to the hospital, I found the battle was raging furiously. Our brigade as usual was doing much of the fighting. The rebels brought up fresh brigades and charged our lines several times. They tried on the right and left flanks, but every time our boys stood up like Trojans and hurled them back in confusion. It was ascertained that General Fagan was across the river with five thousand cavalry and ten pieces of artillery, intending to attack us in front. In consequence, all Thayer's force was retained on that side except the Twelfth Kansas and a negro regiment. All our cavalry had been sent forward the evening previous to reach Little Rock in time to prevent its capture. Those two regiments, with Rice's and Engleman's brigades, were all we could get together, in all about 3,500 men.

Colonel Benton proved himself as cool and brave as a lion. His roan horse was shot under him. He dismounted, cool as a cucumber, and had the saddle and bridle removed and sent to the rear. The enemy, finding our line as immovable as a rock, brought up two pieces of artillery and opened at two or three hundred yards distant. General Rice intimated that he wanted that battery. Colonel Benton waved his sword and on went the boys with a yell. The Twenty-ninth led the way, closely followed by the negroes. In this charge our men were under cross fire from each flank, with the battery in front and its supporting infantry,—in all about five thousand pieces. In ten minutes the struggle was over and the guns were hauled within our lines by about one hundred men detailed for that purpose.

After this an attack was made on our right, but by what troops I have not yet learned, and there was a grand attack on the center and left by the divisions of Parsons and Walker, respectively. The incessant roar of musketry and whiz of bullets no words can describe. The attacks were renewed again with fresh troops but our line was never broken. The
wildest enthusiasm animated the men. They forgot cold, hunger and wet. Several whose wounds I dressed and pronounced not serious returned eagerly to their places. I detected only one case of skulking.

The enemy did not bring forward any more artillery as its loss would have been certain, since, owing to the swampy nature of the ground, the horses all mired down. For this reason we trusted to our muskets. One gun was brought up and planted near the hospital and from this a few rounds were fired. But the mud preventing any recoil, the piece was rendered practically useless, so it was withdrawn. General Rice was everywhere in the midst of the fight and just before its conclusion he was struck in the foot and carried off the field.

About one o'clock the firing ceased, the enemy having fallen back. Our forces commenced an immediate retreat. I was of course not aware of the designs of the general, and remained on the field, taking advantage of the lull of battle to carry off the wounded, numbers of whom yet uncared for were lying around in all directions. On finding the men all recalled, I returned to the hospital, passing by the front of our recent lines. A few negroes yet remained who were firing occasional random shots and were rapidly being recalled from the field. I hurried through the mire and reached the hospital just as Company F, the rear guard, was passing by. It never struck me even then that the wounded were going to be unceremoniously abandoned. I thought the troops were merely falling back to some other position or were getting ready for some aggressive movement. As Company F was passing by I desired Captain Nash to leave ten or twelve men to bring in the wounded, which he immediately did. Fortunately, as appeared afterward, I desired them to lay aside their arms before going out.

The house consisting of six rooms, the porch, entry, smokehouse and stables were all filled with wounded, bleeding and dying men, shivering in their wet and bloody clothes. Twenty-five or thirty were lying in the mud of the yard in the rain which still poured down. It was a sad sight to see poor Arthur Williams, Sergeant Irwin and old man Stroud,
with others equally worthy, their lives ebbing away, without even the shelter of a tree to protect them from the storm. The house, outhouses and yard contained about one hundred and fifty men, all badly wounded, who had been carried from where they fell to this place. All whose wounds would permit them to walk I had ordered across the river during the progress of the fight. The groans and cries of the wounded were heart-rending.

Just then up came Dr. Stuckslager, surgeon of the Twelfth Kansas, one of the last regiments ordered in, who came from the pontoon bridge to look after his men. He immediately went to work, but like myself, had nothing to work with. I heard shots fired in the vicinity and picking my way to the door I saw the rebel cavalry at the upper end of the field. At this moment Dan Johnson came riding up on Williamson's mule, leading my horse and shouting for me to mount in a hurry and escape. I debated for a moment. Being taken prisoner was a blue outlook to be sure, but a glance at the bleeding, dying crowd so cruelly left to their fate decided me. I told Dan to make the best of his way back if he could. I also told Hanks to get on the mule. I do not know whether they were successful or not, or whether my horse escaped. I felt rather despondent, wet, weary and hungry, and surrounded by a number who were wounded, in addition.

Some mounted men rode up and commenced pillaging the dead and wounded. One, dressed as an officer, drew his revolver and shot three wounded "niggers" who lay in the yard. I felt very indignant at this brutal violation of the hospital flag and loudly denounced it as a cowardly murder. Some were for shooting me, but others felt rather ashamed and prohibited any more violence. A fellow untied Dr. Stuckslager's horse and took him off. Another helped himself to the Doctor's overcoat. One Major Hathaway came up and took possession of the hospital. He was a gentleman and protected us from further insult while he remained. "Doctor," "Doctor," resounded everywhere, but I could do little more than look at each, having exhausted what little I had,—one-half bottle of morphine and a canteen of whisky, given by Dr. Cornell and Dr. Sawyer, respectively.
I managed to get a fire lit in the fireplace, and seated on a portion of a chair, the rest of which was occupied by a wounded soldier, I was so worn out as to fall asleep and slept at intervals through the woeful night. During the night, my spurs, which were about all I had left, were stolen off my feet.

The rebel surgeons and officers who came along assured us that just as soon as their supply trains came up we would be cared for, but from the condition of the roads and the rapid advance of their army in pursuit of ours, the train was a long way behind.

On the following morning we found several of the men had died. We hunted up sufficient rags to make a covering for each wound and kept them wet from such canteens as had been left to us. We found some corn in one of the rooms and shelled and boiled a quantity. This was our only subsistence for two days more, when rations were furnished us.

When the Confederate surgeons had completed their own work they came and gave us every assistance in their power, and furnished instruments, medicine, dressings and chloroform. As three or four days had elapsed since the injuries were received, the inflamed condition of the limbs rendered amputation of doubtful utility. In consequence many required operations much higher than otherwise would have been necessary, and many we did not try to operate on at all. We amputated twenty-one limbs, leaving an equal number untouched. I operated on seven of my own regiment, of which there are now living (May 29th) three, Smith of Company C, Powell of Company B and Schooling of Company D. Schooling will die I fear, and Powell will have hard scratching to get through. The great trouble has been lack of stimulants and nutriment. It is too much to expect capital operations to succeed with no better diet than corn bread and bacon. Two or three days ago I took off a leg of Reuben Madden's, after trying in vain to save it. He, too, I fear, will sink from the same causes.

The old lady who owned the house came and made a fuss about the summary occupation of her property, and as she
could not perceive the military necessity of the step, just told
her to go to h——l. On the second day we buried those who
had died in and around the hospital, twenty-one white men
and three negroes. I placed poor Beans and Tom Irwin side
by side on top of the pile, all in one grave, and the negroes
in another. We went on the field and buried a number where
we found them. Almost without exception our men had been
stripped to their shirts, and in some cases even this was re-
moved. The negroes were stripped as impartially as the rest.
General Parsons sent a fatigue-party who completed the job
on the following morning. The weather having become warm,
the offal incident to this place made it intolerable and as
soon as the Confederate wounded were all removed to Tulip
they commenced hauling ours to Princeton. As the supply of
ambulances was limited the transportation occupied about ten
days.

I arrived in this town on the 14th, with the balance of the
wounded and attendants. The post quartermaster, Captain
Faust, furnished a quantity of cotton which was filled into
clean bed sacks procured from the post surgeon. The condi-
tion of our boys was much improved by the change from the
hard and muddy boards to the soft cotton which felt very
grateful to their excoriated backs and sides.

The wounded officers, six in number, were located in an
empty house, situated close by the hospital. They consisted
of Lieutenant Colonel Hayes, Twelfth Kansas, thigh ampu-
tated; Captains Bacon, Franz and Comstock; Lieutenants
McHenry and Harper. Lieutenant McHenry is dead. The
rest are permanently disabled except Captain Comstock. In
the last cargo of wounded which I accompanied in person
were six wounded negroes, three of them mortally. I felt
bound to do my best for them while they were suffering. I
placed them by themselves in a small storehouse adjacent to
one that contained other wounded soldiers and fixed them up
temporarily with a nurse. They had not been long deposited
when I heard shooting, and some one remarked “The niggers
are catching it.” I was discussing matters with an illiterate,
vulgar specimen of a rebel officer on the opposite sidewalk,
when I saw a fellow emerge from the building with a revolver in each hand. I went over at once and found all the poor negroes brutally shot through the head. I appealed at once to the post commander, Captain Forest, who did not seem much affected by the atrocious murder, but remarked that they had brought it on themselves. In fact, all the bystanders considered it rather a meritorious action than otherwise. The Confederate surgeons and one or two others regarded it in its true light as a cold-blooded murder, and reported the fact to General Parsons who expressed his horror at the massacre, arrested the perpetrator, and sent him to Camden to be dealt with for a violation of their own hospital flag.

*Princeton, May 31, 1864.*

I have written the preceding pages at intervals, a sort of summary of our experience at Jenkins' Ferry and the events immediately following. There is but little to chronicle since. I have applied for a release, but was informed by General Parsons that I must consider myself a prisoner of war, surgeons being no longer exempt from capture. My prospect of exchange is very indefinite. I have thought a great deal of trying to escape and make my way through the woods at night by aid of stars. I may yet attempt to reach Little Rock in that way, but will wait and see what the prospects of exchange are, as Major Cabdell went to arrange with General Steele for that purpose and is expected to return very soon.

*June 1, 1864.*

Major Cabdell returned with the flag of truce about noon today. The tidings did not offer much comfort. General Steele would not negotiate any exchange. Sokalski, who has been promoted to lieutenant colonel, treated the Major very coolly, and in fact they did not seem to be much interested in our fate. Six Confederate surgeons also returned. They had been confined in the penitentiary for the past two months without any apparent reason for being thus treated as felons except that something might be going on at the city which was to be kept concealed.
I cannot expect but that this conduct will be retaliated upon Dr. Stuckslager and myself. The surgeons seemed very indignant and no doubt will represent the thing very unfavorable to General Price. They were captured at the taking of General Dockery's train about the time we left Little Rock.

The news from Virginia was not so bad as the reports first received indicated. Grant, although repulsed with fearful loss after ten days' fighting was not routed, but had only fallen back five miles where he was re-forming for a new attack on Lee.

We have not a vestige of medicine left, and deaths occur daily. Even the convalescents improve very slowly owing to the poor quality of their diet. I wrote a response to the "Secesh" song sung by the ladies, to the same air and with the same refrain. There is considerable growling among our men about the quantity of their rations. However this cannot be remedied. The weather has been quite prone to showers. A train of wagons is coming into town which may possibly be destined for our removal to Camden.

Camden, Ark., June 6, 1864.

My conjecture as to the wagons at my last writing was verified. On the following morning at daylight an order arrived for one hundred men to be placed in wagons and proceed to Camden. The rain was pouring down violently and it was a most unfavorable time for a change, but the orders were peremptory. About noon the men and attendants were all started,—seventy-six wounded and twenty-six attendants. The patients consisted of the convalescents and the slightest wounded. We got some meal and meat for provisions on the way. It continued to rain heavily. We were very wet and from the inundated state of the roads had to wade over our knees in many places.

The train was guarded by a detachment of cavalry commanded by a lieutenant who seemed very much concerned lest any one of the boys should escape. The little runs which crossed the road were very deep, and about eight miles from Princeton a creek was so deep that it became necessary to
wait before attempting to cross. So we stopped for the night at a deserted house where we were carefully watched and kept inside the fence.

The next day was fine. Our wet clothes dried out and we felt better. I hung out my only pair of socks to dry, but while I was walking along the roadside in search of flowers, one got shaken off and lost—a serious loss under the circumstances. The remaining one has now to do duty on alternate feet.

There is at last an apparently definite prospect of our being exchanged. We have a promise of going out with the flag of truce on Tuesday, but there have been so many delays that I cannot rely with certainty on anything I hear. I anxiously count the hours to the time when I may be a free man again. Lieutenant Wood expects to be sent with us. Colonel Shields is to command the escort.

Dockery's brigade passed through here last night en route to Monticello. I was told there was quite a movement of troops in that quarter. A rumor arrived here today that Sherman had been defeated by the combined forces of Johnson, Forrest and Polk. I don't credit it until better informed. McKissic escaped last night. He cannot possibly go far as he is weak with dysentery and has a sore foot; besides, the guards are after him now with dogs.

June 30, 1864.

The days still drag their weary length along without any sign of a change. The flag of truce is mentioned no more, I think on account of some movement either making or to be made. All kinds of rumors and stories continue to come in. As usual defeats and victories are so intimately blended that nothing can be told with certainty. The summing up I arrive at is that there is something on hand, but of what nature I cannot say.

Little Rock, July 4, 1864.

Back again, safe and sound. Left Camden on Tuesday under a flag of truce in charge of Captain Lewis. Nothing of consequence happened on the road. We met Mrs. Hayes going down to see the Colonel, also Lieutenant Fackler going
down to be exchanged for Wood. I am clean once more and feel like a new man. Dr. Stuckslager has gone back with supplies. Colonel Benton is home and several other officers are also absent. Lieutenant Colonel Patterson is in command of the regiment. All seemed tickled to death to see me.

Field Hospital, Jenkins Ferry, Ark.
May 3, 1864.

Operated on by W. L. Nicholson.
Jason Powell, Co. B., recovered, thigh.
Reuben Madden, Co. H, recovered, leg.
Wm. Graham, Co. K, recovered, arm.
J. Smith, Co. C, recovered, thigh.
J. Jackson (colored), 2nd Kan., dead, leg.
T. Burton (colored), 2nd Kan., recovered, shoulder.
J. Schooling, Co. D, dead, leg.
Jno. Miller, 33rd Ia., thigh, recovered.
Sergt. Kyoni, 9th Wis., thigh, recovered.
W. B. Gibson, 33rd Ia., leg, recovered.
Lieut. Harper, 43rd Ind., arm, recovered.
Capt. Franz, 9th Wis., arm, recovered.

Jno. Schooling, Co. D, 29th Ia., amp. leg, May 3rd, died May 21.
Anton Weber, Co. I, 9th Wis., amp. leg, May 3rd, died May 7.
W. B. Gibson, Co. F, 33rd Ia., amp. leg, May 3rd.
F. A. Fingerle, Co. H, 9th Wis., amp. thigh, May 2nd, died May 9th.

On the back of the diary appears a "hospital list." Nothing explains it and perhaps it was not intended for the use of any but its writer. Be that as it may, the time and care taken in its preparation justifies its publication with the rest of the record. It at least uniquely illustrates a part of the labor of one of the patriotic servants of the Union.—Editor.
Peter Butler, Co. H, 9th Wis., amp. thigh, May 3rd, re-operated 24th.
Geo. Brown, colored regt., leg, May 3rd, died May 21st, shot subsequently through the mouth.
L. Foster, Co. G, 50th Ind., thigh, May 3rd, died May 10th.
G. F. Reeves, Co. E, 29th Ia., thigh, May 3rd, died May 5th.
Sergt. Corad Kuoni, Co. D, 9th Wis., thigh, May 10th.
W. M. Rodman, Co. H, 33rd Ia., arm, May 2nd, died June 2nd.
Lieut. W. Harper, 43rd Ind., arm, May 2nd.
J. H. Miller, Co. E, 33rd Ia., thigh, May 3rd.
J. D. Compton, Co. H, 33rd Ia., leg, May 3rd, died May 14th.
Geo. Legler, Co. K, 9th Wis., thigh, May 25th, died June 3rd.
M. J. Crotty, Co. G, 50th Ind., leg, May 25th, died June 1st.
James Gordon (colored), 1st Kan., shoulder, May 25th.
Capt. Chas. Franz, Co. G, 9th Wis., arm, May 27th.
Lt. Col. J. E. Hayes, 12th Kan., thigh, April 30th.