

Letter From Sanford, James Manley written Friday, May 22nd, 1863

Generated on October 17th, 2018 1:57 PM from SoldierStudies.org

Soldier: Sanford, James Manley

Allegiance: Union

Unit/Service Branch: 11th Infantry

Date Written: Friday, May 22nd, 1863

Location: Vicksburg

Correspondence Type: Letter

Subjects: Battlefield, Combat Description, Hospital, Suffering, Warfare, Western Theater

[see his bio for info on this short memoir written by Sanford]

I enlisted the 11th day of September 1861, in Company B, Eleventh Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry. I served with my regiment in all the early battles of the war, though in 1862 I spent some six weeks [four months ?] in the hospital. At the time of the investment of Vicksburg by Grant, I had earned my corporal's stripes.

Reconnoitering Vicksburg

When General Grant called for ten volunteers from 70,000 soldiers to reconnoiter Vicksburg, only eight responded, and they were all from the Eleventh Wisconsin, and two of them were from Company B -- myself and one other. Our orders were to go up and find out how deep the ditch was outside the rebel works, and as evidence that we had been there to bring back a piece of the dirt. We crawled through the rebel picket line but could not get to the ditch, as it was covered with soldiers working on it. We spent the whole night and had to return without accomplishing our end.

The next morning Corporal Cook of Company B and myself started out with a view of finding out what was needed by daylight. After putting in several hours creeping through brush in the draws we got very near to the rebel works. While trying to discern the depth of the ditch, the rebels fired a full volley on us, wounding Corporal Cook in the arm, and spoiling my chin whiskers by sending a ball through them so close as to draw blood.

I took Corporal Cook back to the hospital and then went and reported to General Lawler, as he was to be in command of the charging force the next day. He asked if there was any way I could find the depth of that ditch. I told him yes; he could bring out his troops and set them firing on the rebel works so as to keep the rebels down, and I would go up to a certain patch of brush about ten rods from the ditch. I told him to have the men understand not to shoot me, and I would make a charge on the works and ascertain the depth of that ditch. This I did, and found it only about three feet deep. In getting back, I made the run of my life.

When I went back and reported, General Lawler wanted me to take the troops that night, as I knew the ground better than anyone else in the command, and escort them to places of safety under cover of the banks of the various ravines. This work I had completed just at dawn of day. This was on the 22nd day of May.

When this was done I was told to lie down in the general's tent, and I slept until nearly 10 o'clock in the morning. When I awoke, General Grant, after asking a few further questions as to the lay of the land, told me I had done my share and I could go to the rear. I turned to obey but just then the signal guns were fired for a grand charge, and I turned and ran for the fighting line. Knowing the ground as I did, I was able to catch up with my regiment.

My regiment was placed well in the front of the first of the three lines of battle, which gave me a splendid view of the field. As I turned and looked to the rear, I could see 100 battle flags sweeping on for a grand charge. As I looked to the front, I could see General Pemberton's whole army, who had left their ditch and were on their way back to Vicksburg. Not ten rods from me was General Pemberton in all his splendor, calling to his retreating troops, saying: "Go back to your works! There's only one line. We can whip them."

Carried Back By Grape-Shot

Just at this moment they ran out a forty-eight pound gun about ten rods away, which was loaded with grape. It fired. One of these grape-shot struck me on the fourth rib on the right side and carried me over one hundred feet to the rear, dropping me into a canyon about fifty feet deep, thus closing my fighting capacities for the day.

Had the second and third lines charged that day, it would have ended Vicksburg right there. We had them already beaten. But the rebels were able to drive back the front line, which charged alone, and the long siege of Vicksburg, lasting until July 4th [1863], was the result.

At nightfall that day I was put on a stretcher and carried to what was called a hospital, but really was more of a dissecting ranch, where they were sawing off arms and legs and throwing them into a hole. My regimental doctor said to the boys, "Lay him out there on the ground. We can't do anything for him. He'll soon be out of his misery." But I said emphatically, "NO!"

About 10 o'clock the next day the doctor came to me and said, "Sanford, are you alive?" But I was so choked up with blood that I could not speak. He next asked, "Are you going to live?" And I motioned "YES."

They then took me under special care on account of the special service I had done the day before. I was put in a tent nearly half a mile from the rest of the troops with a special nurse for night and another for the daytime, with a little

Negro boy to keep the flies off me.

In a short time I was up and enjoying life. I had a ride on the hospital boat on July 4th to see the city after Pemberton had finally surrendered. Then I went to the New House of Refuge Hospital in St Louis, where I remained until November, during which time I got well and was allowed to go home and see my family.

Grant had promised that the man who did the most to help capture Vicksburg should have a commission, and J M Sanford was the first man recommended, but the doctor stepped up and said, "There is no use recommending him. He cannot live." So another man was given the commission.

No particular incident now occurred until the army was sent to Texas. An order then came for re-enlistment, with a promise of a silver medal to the company which would re-enlist the most men.

Company B of the Eleventh Wisconsin Volunteers was stationed at Powder Horn on Matagorda Bay. The wind blew so strong from the north that for thirteen days it had been impossible for them to get a mouthful to eat except oysters gathered from the bay. Yet just at this time this company enlisted all but two men, and won the medal. All members of the company got a thirty days' furlough to go home and see their families.

On our return we were kept at Brashear City [now Morgan City], La, for nine months to guard the mosquitoes or Negroes -- we never knew which. The following spring we went to Blakesley [Fort Blakeley] Ala, where the Eleventh Wisconsin had the honor of leading the grand charge, the last charge of the Civil War. This was on the 9th of April 1865, and Lee had surrendered his army about four hours before.

I was mustered out of the service September 8, 1865 at Madison, Wisconsin with a lot of other worn out and wounded soldiers.