

Letter From Mecklin, Augustus H. written Sunday, April 6th, 1862

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Soldier: Mecklin, Augustus H.

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[Battle of Shiloh]

No day of my life has been so full of stirring terrible events as this. Never may I see such another. Even now my mind is agitated & as I think of what I have seen this day visions dark & bloody float before my eyes & sounds of death & suffering fill my eyes. After marching a short distance, we halted to rest. We were standing & sitting in this position when the sound of musketry was heard just in front of us. Judging from the frequent peals that it was the enemy, we tried our guns to ascertain if all was clear then loaded. We had gone but a short distance when we were ordered into line of battle.

I thought of the hundreds, perhaps thousands that this day must pass into eternity. I thought of the many widows & of those that must this day be made. I thought of weeping mothers & sisters & anguish river hearts of lovers & minds. I thought of my own liability to fall a victim, — perhaps in one more hour — then came up the momentous questions. Am I prepared. As often in my past history as I have made this inquiry of my heart, never before I think did I so honestly seek to know the truth. As often as I have endeavored to look into the unknown future, never before did I gaze so earnestly mentally into that dark unknown world & seek to the position I must occupy there. At this moment I trust I made a sincere, honest surrender of myself to God, the maker . . . & the preserver of my life. I told him my desire to live, if by so doing, I might honor his name & benefit my fellow creatures. I trust I was honest in this. I asked for life if that might be a useful one. Let me remember this in future years.

Shortly after we loaded our pieces we ascertained that the heavy firing in front was not a collision with the enemy, but the men of Gen. Breckenridge firing their guns to dry them. From the formation of our men into line of battle until we entered the battle in good earnest, we went through a series of movements, whose object I am unable to explain & where made I cannot now tell. Our brigade under command of Genl. Statham was composed of our Reg. with those of Col. Shellier's 22d Miss., Col. Bottle's 45th Tenn., Col. Cummings', & Col Mitchel's. Sometimes we would advance in columns of attack. Then we would march by the right flank Sometimes our move was to the right & sometimes to the left, but always forward.

From early in the morning the battle had been raging. In front of us we heard a continual roar of musketry & far above this, the deep mouthed cannon uttered uproarious thunder. Word was brought us occasionally that our men were successful in every move. That the enemy were driven & that their camps were in our possession. Our men answered these favorable reports by loud cheers, our movements became more brisk & our officers more excited. It was evident from all these indications that we were near the scene of action & must soon be into it. Our muskets were thrown aside & a guard placed over them. Just at this juncture while making a rapid march at double quick one of our Liets was shot through the hand accidentally by his own pistol & just at the same moment almost, our adjutant, the Lieut's Bro., was stabbed accidentally in the thigh. With a bayonet.

Resting for some time we went on towards the firing. We passed several wounded men & occasionally squads of wounded men & occasionally squads of wounded yankees. Soon we were on the battlefield. Here & there we saw the bodies of dead men — friends & foes lying together. Some torn to mince meat by cannon balls. Some still writhing in the agonies of death. We halted for a short time near where a poor fellow was lying leaning against a tree severely wounded. The cannon appeared to be carrying on this contest wholly among themselves. Though at some distance from us. Some of the balls reached us & while we were halted one struck a tree nearly a foot through & splitting it a sunder tore a poor fellow who was behind it into a thousand pieces. We moved on. The trees were spotted with bullet holes. Many branches & tree tops not budding into the tender leaf of spring. bowed their heads, torn partly from the forest stem by the balls of both sides.

It was very warm. The sky was clear and but for the horrible monster death who now pile high carnival, this might have been such a Sabbath morn as would have called pleasant recollections of Sabbath bells & religious enjoyment. Again we halted near the evening camp in a long level open field apparently used by them for a drill ground. There had been a hot contest; on all sides lay the dead & dying. Before us were the rifle pits dug by the Yankees, behind them lay the camp. The sight was beautiful, viewed aside from the scenes of blood that now surrounded it. The country was level. The trees were budding into the first leaf of spring.

While resting here, Genl. Beauregard, as I suppose, came charging by. Our men greeted his appearance with deafening

cheer. We were not allowed to rest long, but filing to the right we hastened on. We passed another camp & halted in the woods. We advanced from this position in line of battle. Far to the right we heard heavy firing. All was still just before us & had been the greater part of the morning. We ascended a hill & beyond it lay another encampment of the enemy & a line of men. We knew not whether they were friends or foes. Orders came to advance. We were worried that they were our friends. No sooner were we near them than orders came to advance rapidly to the assistance of our men on the left where there was a heavy firing & where we afterwards learned, there was a heavy force of the enemy. This was about the center of their lines We advanced rapidly to the point designated & taking our position on the left of the encampments were no sooner ascended the bow of the hill than we were saluted with a violent volley from the enemy.

For the first time in my life, I heard the whistle of bullets. We took shelter behind the tents & some wagons & a pile of corn & returned the fire of the enemy with spirit. The bullets whistle around my ear. I was near the front & firing. lay down to load soon men were falling on all sides. Two in Co. E just in front of me fell dead shot through the brain. On my left in our own Co., W. Wilson, W. Thompson & Ben. Stewart. Bro. Geo. & James Boskins were wounded. I fired until my gun got so foul that I could not get my ball down. Taking a short stick that lay near, I drove the ball down. Again the tube became filled up & not being able to get it off, I called to one of Co. E. to throw me the gun of a wounded man by him. I fired this until the tube became filled. Throwing it down I went to the rear & picking up my ho' gun held on until the battle was over.

We had fired but a few more rounds when we were ordered to cease firing & fall back. We did so & formed under cover of the hill. Some ordered to charge bayonet. We rushed forward. The enemy had fallen back & taken a position opposite their battery. We had some distance to go. We ran forwards as rapidly as we could. But being nearly exhausted we were unable to make but little speed. The mini balls were falling thickly around us. Capt. Aldridge fell & Capt. Gage, Maj. Boutly was wounded in the hand. We fired upon the enemy at a distance of 100 yds. & fell back to a deep valley. Many of our boys fell in this fatal charge. Never was such firing. Taking shelter in the deep recess we were sheltered from the balls & bombs of the enemy. Our men were nearly exhausted for want of water. The dead of the enemy lay thickly . . . & down in the bottom pool of clear blue water was there a dead man in one edge of it. Our boys rushed to the water with their cups drank deeply. If the water had been mixed with blood it would have been all the same. We were out of ammunition. We sent for some. We lay here some time The enemy appeared to be aware of our stopping there. They fired upon us and their bombs. No one was hurt seriously. A shell struck a rock & it struck me on the back. The blow was slight & I did not long feel it. We lay here a long time until completely rested.

Then fell back to the right of the encampment that we just occupied. when our Brigade was into action. Here we halted & formed & counted off, & lay down to rest. While here, we were shelled severely by one of the enemy's gun boats. But they were mistaken in our position & the shells all passed over us. Here we lay for some time, soon orders came to push forward & assist Leut. Jackson. We did so pushing thro the woods in line of battle until we came to a small field on the right of which a small squad of our men were sheltered. In front was heavy firing. I expected again to be into it. But before we reached the place, the enemy driven from this position & we charged up on the fragments of their forces. A few scattered prisoners were taken. Here we came in sight of the enemy's camp. We charged down a declivity & led on by Col. S — we rushed through the camp. Here a Reg. had stacked their arms. We went but a little distance beyond there when we were halted.

No demonstration was made by either side for some time. Our cannon we sent forward to feel the disposition of the enemy. After firing several rounds, the enemy opened up on us with their boats. These boats had been so placed that they commanded exactly our camp. The shell fell thickly in all parts of the camp. We being beyond it did not suffer, but some Regs. were cut up badly. We were ordered to fall back, we did so, still the shells fell fast around us. Many were killed here. Genl. Bragg sent orders to fall back from beyond the range of the gunboats. We did so & halted. It was now dark.

Long had I looked for the kind hand of darkness to lay its peace ing hand upon this savage conflict. The noise of battle had passed away except an occasional bomb sent from the enemy's boat which circling through the air fell home deeply in the ground. Our men fell upon the damp ground & were soon sound asleep. I attempted it myself but the balls would whistle & the musketry would roar around my ears. Our men many of them had lost their provisions. We were ordered to fall back to another encampment & feed upon the enemy's provisions. We did so. Throwing my blankets down or the one we had taken from the enemy, I was soon asleep.

About midnight we were awakened, with orders to fall in. The rain began to fall in torrents. The darkness was so intense that I could scarcely see my file leader. Passing on the more glomy sights and sounds I could scarcely imagine. I have said it was dark, but frequent vivid peals of flashings of lightning rent the heavens & revealed objects clearly all around. Then when the veil of night was rent & the curtain of darkness was lifted it was then sickening sights fell before my eyes. Near me at one time lay a dead man, his clothes ghastly, bloody face turned up to the pattering rain drops that fell fast upon that brow cold in death. Perhaps a brow often kissed by fond & loving sister, mother or wife, who now await for the dear objects of their love, no longer to feel their kind manifestations of love. Not far off on their rear revealed a body half covered up in a pool of water. At another flash I saw one of our men stumble over a corpse that lay in the road. Once as the light of heaven flashed across this scene of blood I saw a large piece of ground literally covered with dead heaped & piled upon each other. I shut my eyes upon the sickening sight But a loud moan came to my ears cry, "water, water" O for a little water." Another was heard uttering sad plaints of misery & suffering through the dark I heard the sound of boys. it was not unmistakable. they were quarreling over their carnival feast. Why! Shurely the ambition of man has supplied enough for all.

We passed on & halting I lay down upon the damp ground & slept until the sun once more rose on earth. The events of this day were certainly in our favor. If we hold our position a victory. If they are reinforced then the result is still doubtful. We have certainly driven the enemy back from all points & are this night in possession of the enemy's camp.

Two miles from the enemy's camp. Mon. 7th. April 1862

By daylight we were in line of battle being commanded to "order arms" & "rest". We got a good supply of Yankee crackers & meat. Eating our breakfast & examining our guns, we were ready for the conflict again, which we felt was upon us. While our Reg. still rested I walked across the branch near by. Dead men were all around. One sitting against a bank & leaning his head upon his hands & knees. The position was as natural as if he had fallen asleep, yet he was dead. Near us where we lay in line of battle was a dead body. Some of our men very coolly examined his wounds & took his cartridges. Another boy not far off with his hat over his face. In vain I attempted to close my eyes to these shocking spectacles: wherever I turned I saw men pail in death. Saw pale faces upturned & besmirred with mud & water — hair matted with gore & hair. O it was too shocking too horrible. God grant that I may never be the partaker in such scenes again. My resolution is set. When released from this I shall ever be an advocate of peace.

Once more we are ordered to "forward march." We advanced our lines beyond the enemy's camp. Here we halted & receiving new orders we "right flanked" & "filing right" went farther up the river, where even now we heard the roar of cannon. Here I began to have my doubts as to the issues of this contest. I knew that the enemy were reinforced & stoutly. I knew that we had received no reinforcement. Halting near the place where we first met the enemy, we formed a line of battle behind a fence. Stanford's battery was on our right.

We lay here for some time & I saw some of the boys of my acquaintance in the battery. Bro. Robt. had been with them but had left that morning being somewhat unwell. Soon they began & I knew that our time would soon begin. sure enough. we were ordered to advance. Going across a field we halted for the cannon to play a while. Lying down upon the ground the cannon of the enemy began to play upon us. Their shot came near us — uncomfortably near — the battery near us could not find the right kind of ammunition of any kind. I think this was a misfortune at this juncture. Here we were ordered to charge. We did so. Running two hundred yds. We began to fire upon those who were in our front. The fire was not returned for some time & our officers began to think that we were firing upon our friends & ordered our men to "cease firing." but we saw their blue coats & knew too well that they were foes. Soon they opened a most furious fire upon us. Never was any force exposed to such a shower of balls. They must have been ten to one. Our men fell behind trees & logs & returned the fire with spirit. The balls came swarming like bees. I was behind a tree & I think a dozen or more balls struck that tree nearly on a level with my body. I fired several rounds when my gun was again choked I made several attempts before I succeeded. Soon it became evident that we could not long stand such heavy fire. I saw our men falling back one by one. then I saw whole squads retreating. Soon the whole Reg. was in a full retreat. The retreat was a perfect rout. The men scattered in every direction.. Our reg. never again formed itself that day. Many of them made no halt.

This was a most disastrous charge. Some of our men fell dead here. Two Reg. were fighting against a most tremendous force. We fell back across the hill & the officers succeeded in getting the stragglers together. Here we were reinforced & advancing again we forced the enemy back. They had taken one of our batteries. We drove them back & took it again. We reached first position & here was the most tremendous firing I ever heard. We drove the enemy back & the firing appeared to bear to the left. I was ordered to set fire to some houses near by. Soon they were wrapped in flames. I was completely exhausted & falling back with Cap't. Collins rested a while. The firing continued towards the left. It was evident that our men were falling back. I saw the enemy filing rapidly by & then I knew that we must fall back. I walked slowly to the rear & halted. Capt. Ferrill's Co. where I had been sent put on skirmish & came up after the charge. This Co. formed a nucleus after which to form the stragglers of our Reg. The firing by this time had pretty well ceased & the straggling men came thick & fast & were halted as they went by. It was evident that we had been repulsed & that we must now leave the field to the foe.

We turned & marched slowly away, gathering men as we went. I was completely exhausted & felt that if the march continued forward, I could not last long. We halted about 2 miles from the scene of action. Our company was counted off, only ten present out of 48 that came to action . . . Some companies were not represented. We halted on a little gravelly knoll & made us a fire and ate something. Soon we were ordered to march & fell back a short distance & halted. I built a little fire & lay down & was soon asleep. But again I was disturbed & we were marched back & chose a new camp ground. We understood this as being our resting place for the night.

I had no blanket. It had been raining & the ground was damp & muddy I lay down having only my gun under me to keep me out mud & my cartirdges dry. I did not lie long before I was sound asleep and lay there until I was aroused by the rain which began to fall. I covered my face & slept on for sometime. At last after getting thoroughly soaked, I arose & attempted to enter the tent of Leut. Breckenridge. He did not wish anyone to enter his tent as he would have some business to attend to during the night. We might be in the way. But the tent was already crowded and I concluded that I had as good a right as any of them and accordingly took my position. I scarcely had space to stand but after stamping around for sometime, I found room to sit down & finally got a place to lay my head. It was in a puddle of water but I slept finely. We were not allowed to have any fire. Some of the boys attempted to make fires, but they were put out. I struggled through the night in this way. soon the light so long & ardently wished for came we forced ourselves into line were anxious to go. Thus ended the 2d day. Every thing this day was against us. We were fighting fresh troops & our scattered & disorganized troops were not able to contend against them. I do not think our loss. was great though not as great as that of enemy. We left the enemy in the possession of the field. Our men destroyed several of their camp

grounds. All things compared we have gain a dear fought victory.

[Augustus Henry Mecklin Papers; Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson]