

The National Tribune, Washington, D.C., Thursday, December 19, 1889.

Crampton's Pass, The Start for the Maryland Campaign,
McClellan in Command, Slocum's Division Gallantly Ascends South Mountain,
Charging a Stonewall, The Enemy Routed and Driven from the Mountain.

By Joseph J. Bartlett, U.S. Vols.

The 6th of September, 1862, found the First Division of the [Sixth] Corps in camp near Fairfax Seminary, about three miles from Alexandria, Va. It was well toward the left of the line taken by the Army of the Potomac after the retreat from the disastrous series of blunders terminating with the battle of second Bull Run under Pope. It had been there since the night of the 2d, resting, after tiresome marching and inglorious struggles with all sorts of enemies, from the line of battle down to the sneaking guerrilla.

I commanded the Second Brigade of the [First] division, having succeeded Gen. Slocum at the battle of West Point, on the Peninsula. I was congratulating my quartermaster upon his success on getting his last load of shoes for the barefooted men of the four regiments of my command, when through the clear air of the bright September day came from our right a steadily-increasing volume of sound, which swept down upon us as a great wave. My own troops took it up and sent it onward to the left with their strong voices, until it died away again in the far distance. There certainly had been no victories won for which to cheer. There was no voicing of this great shout, yet, when questioned, the soldiers said: "McClellan is again in command." They did not know, for it was impossible for them to know, it as a fact. Still, they persisted in that answer. I went immediately to corps headquarters, where many of the General officers were paying their respects to our staunch and soldierly commander, Gen. Wm. B. Franklin, and they knew nothing more about it than did I. I told them what the soldiers said, and a general discussion was launched upon similar events occurring within the recollection of more than one old campaigner; but Gen. Franklin had received no order to that effect, or intimation that the army would move. It was more than an hour before he received an order that Gen. George B. McClellan had been restored to the command of the Army of the Potomac and the defenses of Washington. This was accompanied with an order from Gen. McClellan, assuming command, and for the Sixth Corps to move at 3 o'clock, by the Long Bridge, through Washington, on the road to Tennallytown. Not all the Quartermasters of divisions and brigades had been so fortunate as mine in getting the necessary outfit for their suffering commands; but the two orders were received with enthusiastic cheers along the whole line, and the camps were all bustle and cheerful excitement from that moment until the heads of our columns drew out on the road toward Long Bridge. Bands played, the men stepped out with that veteran swing which is only acquired by troops after long and continuous campaigning, and the Army of the Potomac seemed to be itself again.

It was nearly 10 o'clock at night when we passed McClellan's house on H Street, Washington, the whole command singing, as those who had preceded us had done:

"McClellan is our leader, he is gallant and strong,
For God and our country we are marching along."

The crowds upon the streets cheered us; ladies from windows and balconies waved handkerchiefs and flags. Even the despairing patriot officials of Washington seemed hopeful and buoyant once more, as they saw the old Army of the Potomac again starting to the front under its real and loved commander, throwing itself between their threatening and enterprising enemy and the spoils of office, to which they clung so fondly. While we were passing through Georgetown I encountered Maj. Nickolson, of the Marine Corps, who had been second in command of the battalion of Marines brigaded with my regiment at the first Bull Run, on the lookout for Gen. Slocum and me, to take us to his house, which was only half a block away from our route, to a supper which his charming wife had prepared for ourselves and staffs. We gladly accepted, and not only had a delicious entertainment in the way of food and drink, but met many lady friends to welcome us and bid us afterward Godspeed.

We camped that night between Georgetown and Tennallytown. Resuming the march in the morning, we soon began to find detached regiments and commands of all sorts generally resting beside the road, whose appearance indicated that they were going forth for the first time to meet the enemy, and were on the lookout for the corps, division or brigade to which they had been assigned. The colonel of one of these, a splendid New York regiment, the 121st, with full ranks, and earnest, intelligent young company officers, was looking for Gen. Slocum, to whom he finally reported, and asked to be assigned to my brigade. The poor Colonel (formerly and afterward a Member of Congress) said he was glad to get somewhere he and his regiment would be taken care of. They had just arrived in Washington, and had been started immediately to the front without being told where they were to go or to whom they should report. The Quartermaster, new to his duties, did not know how to provide for their wants, and they were in despair. They had now, however, reached their army home; for from that day until the close of the war they remained an honored part of the same brigade.

The army made short daily marches, and was kept well in hand. Its commander could not obtain that knowledge of the enemy's movements which would justify him in any risk of misinterpreting Gen. Lee's intentions, especially when both armies were maneuvering so near Washington. On the 13th, however, an order fell into the hands of Gen. McClellan issued by Gen. Lee, which fully disclosed his plans in detail. Gen. McClellan then acted with great decision. The corps was on the morning of the 14th at the foot of the Catoctin Mountain, near Jefferson, when Gen. Franklin received an order to cross the mountain and secure and hold the pass over South Mountain near Burkittsville, about ten miles distant. Gen. Smith's Division headed the column across the Catoctin range, and as we filed down the opposite side of the mountain we could occasionally get a view of the troops in front of us—infantry, cavalry and artillery—with the morning sun shining brightly upon their arms and accoutrements, winding down and stretching far out in the beautiful valley toward the Blue Ridge. Such scenes, which look tame upon canvas, are glorious to the young and enthusiastic soldier, who feels a thrill of pride as he looks upon the magnificent and real picture of war his comrades are presenting, and recalls to his mind the many battles they have already fought together, and is touched again with admiration and love for them as he sees how willingly and eagerly they are marching to hurl themselves against their old enemy in one more struggle for victory before that glorious sun shall fall below the mountain ranges that surround them.

After crossing into the beautiful valley below, a considerable halt was made, to allow Gen. Couch's Division, which had been ordered to join the Sixth Corps, to come up. It was, however, so long in joining us, that Gen. Franklin decided to push on without it, in order to make his fight as early in the day as possible. Here the First Division, Gen. Slocum commanding, was sent to the front to lead the advance of the corps, and my brigade led the division. As we neared Burkittsville I deployed the 96th Pa., Col. Henry L. Calk commanding, as skirmishers, and soon after they engaged the skirmishers of the enemy, who retired slowly toward the town without making any serious resistance. My skirmish-line advanced steadily through the town toward the mountain Pass, which was about a half mile beyond. Here the enemy was in position and disclosed his batteries, far up on the crest, by opening up on the head of my column, which they now plainly saw filing into the fields from a little wood on our right of the road and town, and distant from it a half mile or more. Here everything was halted, and while the men were taking their midday meal the General commanding came up and established his headquarters in the edge of the little wood, at a point from which he could overlook the intervening valley, which stretched up to the base of the mountain, and had the road leading to the Pass and the Pass itself plainly in vision. After resting perhaps an hour in this position, the Adjutant-General of the Division, Maj. H.C. Rodgers, came to me with a message from Gen. Slocum, saying he would like to see me at Gen. Franklin's headquarters, where I immediately reported.

I found grouped there, resting upon the ground, in as comfortable positions as each one could assume, after lunch, smoking their cigars, Gen. Franklin, commanding the corps; Gen. Slocum and W.F. Smith (Baldy), commanding respectively the First and Second Divisions; Gen. Hancock, commanding First Brigade, Smith's Division; Gen. W.T.H. Brooks, commanding Vermont Brigade, Smith's Division, and Gen. John Newton, commanding Third Brigade, Slocum's Division.

After a little preliminary conversation, not touching upon the battle before us, Gen. Slocum suddenly asked me on which side of the road leading through and over the Pass I would attack. Without a moment's hesitation I replied, "On the right."

"Well, gentlemen, that settles it," said Gen. Franklin.

“Settles what, General,” I exclaimed.

“The point of attack.”

I was naturally indignant that I should be called upon to give even an opinion upon such an important matter without previously hearing the views of such old and experienced officers upon such an important question. Gen. Slocum then explained the situation. In discussing the question, it seems that they were equally divided in their opinions between the right and left of the road for the main attack. Gen. Franklin then asked Gen. Slocum who was going to lead the attack. Gen. Slocum replied, “Bartlett.”

“Then,” said Gen. Franklin, “send for Bartlett and let him decide; he has carefully looked over the ground from the right, and Gen. Brooks has done the same on the left, and as Bartlett is to lead the assault, let him decide.” This settled the question as to where the principal attack was to be made; and later, when we were alone together, I asked Gen. Slocum what formation he intended to make with the division. He said: “As Gen. Franklin has allowed you to decide the point of attack, on the ground that you were to lead it, it is no more than fair that I should leave to you the formation.” I suggested the formation of the three brigades in column of regiments deployed, two regiments front, at 100 paces interval between lines (that would give us six lines); that the head of the column should be directed toward a point I indicated to him, at nearly right angles to the road which crossed the mountain, and in a direction to strike the highest point the road reached at the crest, it being the shortest line; that I would deploy the 27th N.Y. (his old regiment and mine also) as skirmishers at the head of the column, and skirmish into the teeth of their line of battle, followed with the head of the column at 100 paces; that I would not halt after giving the order forward until we reached the crest of the mountain if possible. The suggestions met with the General’s approval and he based his written order upon them. I was to attack at the point and in the manner indicated, take the crest of the mountain, and throw out a picket-line for the night.

The enemy’s artillery had now opened upon everything in sight. On our extreme right one of our batteries had gone into position, but could do nothing toward silencing those of the enemy, which were posted so high above on the mountain that they could not be reached with any effect. I had prospected the ground thoroughly over which I was to lead the column of attack, and had selected a field about 1,000 yards from the base of the mountain, and where we would strike it to the right of the road through Burkittsville. I led the troops under cover of the undulations of the ground through a farmyard, little ravines and a cornfield to the field I had selected to form the column in, without discovery, the other brigades following, Gen. Newton second and Col. Torbert with Kearney’s old New Jersey Brigade, third. When we debouched into the open field and commenced forming for the attack, in full view of the enemy, they opened all their guns bearing upon us, and brought a battery from their right to ground even higher than the Pass to aid in breaking our lines. The troops, however, formed with the coolness and precision of an exhibition drill, and when the last line was in position and the skirmishers had deployed, the advance was sounded, the order was passed, and the first column of a division hurled upon a single point by the Army of the Potomac, stepped out with all the steadiness of the best veteran troops. It must have been a grand sight from the mountain Pass to see the glistening splendor of that column as the bright September sun shone on the arms and trappings of the moving force.

The skirmishers were soon engaged, the artillery from the mountain-top was firing with rapidity, but with little effect, for their shells were bursting too high above us, and we soon drew under their fire altogether. When the enemy’s skirmishers had been driven back to their line of battle and unmasked its fire, down went the 27th skirmishers upon their faces, and the first volley from the enemy’s line of battle was received. My first line was at this moment up with the skirmish-line, and passed it steadily in quick time.

I took one rapid glance to the rear, to assure myself that all was right, and gave the command “Halt! Lie down!” To my surprise and astonishment the brigade of Gen. Newton was at least 500 yards in the rear, when it should have been only 100 yards. I found the enemy securely sheltered behind a stone wall which divided a road at the base of the mountain from the field we had yet to cross. We were losing men rapidly and firing away our ammunition without doing much injury to the enemy. The first line of Newton’s Brigade, the 32nd and 18th N.Y., under command of Col. Rod Matheson, of the 32nd N.Y., came forward at the double-quick. The 5th Me. And the 16th N.Y., having nearly expended their ammunition, were relieved from the front line and formed 20 paces in rear, and their places filled by the two regiments from Gen. Newton. The 96th Pa., Col. Henry L. Cake, who had been skirmishing on the extreme left, near Burkittsville, had not joined me in time for the original formation, now came up, and I extended my line with it to the right.

The New Jersey Brigade, Col. Torbert commanding, arrived on the left and commenced firing by its first line. The two remaining regiments of Gen. Newton's Brigade were also added to the left of the line. The 121st N.Y., never having been under fire, and being commanded by inexperienced officers, I left out of the original formation. They came up, however, when the expected halt occurred, and were ordered to a position behind a stone wall to await the result of the attack.

The attacking force was now virtually in two lines of battle, the right within 100 yards of the stone wall, the distance increasing toward the left, owing to the base of the mountain curving rapidly back toward Burkittsville. The mountain-side was thickly covered with foliage, with no ledges of rock in sight. The trees were of that small growth which uniformly covers the sides of the South Mountain range. The ascent was very steep; the distance from the base to the summit over 800 yards. Gen. Slocum was in the rear trying to get artillery up to shell the stone wall, but we could hear the yells from the mountain-top as though reinforcements were arriving and there was no time to lose. I sought Col. Torbert on his line and held a hurried consultation with him to the effect that we would separate in the center, each riding down his own line, and order the men to cease firing, load, and be ready to charge at double-quick. This was done. Every regiment prepared, the men took an extra tug at their waistbelts, and at the concerted signal the entire command rose upon their feet and giving a ringing cheer rushed forward. The enemy was well prepared to receive us, and poured in our faces a terrible fire from behind the wall, the trees and rocks on the mountain, and a stone house on the right of the 96th Pa., which was the right of the line. There was not a falter in our ranks, or a shot fired from them, and comrades were falling at every step.

At last the stone wall was reached, the enemy's line broken, the stone house captured, with its garrison, and the enemy were in route flying up the mountain-side. Then our lines, in perfect order, opened their fire, and in pursuit passed on up the steep mountain, loading and firing as they went. Torbert with his gallant Jersey men had also carried his front, and was pressing them closely up the mountain on the left. The fiercest part of the struggle was on the right, in front of my line which is plainly shown in the losses sustained by the regiments composing it. About half way up the mountain above us a wood road ran diagonally down its side, into which reinforcements were pouring with the old rebel yell, but the line of blue kept struggling upward, firing and loading as rapidly as they could under such difficulties.

Our fire here was very effective. Each bullet must hit either tree, a rock or a man, for they could not go over the mountain. The enemy, however, were firing over us, and our loss was very little, although two of our bravest and most gallant officers were wounded when we received the first fire from the reinforcements in the wood road (Col. Rod Matheson, 32nd N.Y., and Maj. Lemon, of the same regiment; and both these noble soldiers died of their wounds). The 18th N.Y. and the 32nd N.Y. were nearly out of ammunition, but they, together with the 96th Pa., on their right, were directed in front of this newly developed strength of the enemy, and if they now faltered the victory would be lost. Maj. McGinnis, of the 18th, said to me: "Colonel, my men are out of cartridges."

I replied: "Never mind, Major; push on; we have got 'em on the run. The regiments each side of you have got ammunition, and are using it." The gallant Major, smilingly, encouraged his men and pushed vigorously onward.

The 32nd N.Y. was being cheered on by the brave Col. Matheson, as my horse struggled along the steep side in rear of his regiment. A moment after I had spoken an encouraging word of praise to him, he fell, wounded; but still smiling, he waved on his gallant men, and shouted: "You've got 'em, boys; push on." The enemy no longer had a stone wall in front of them, and our fire was telling well upon their ranks, as we could see by the numbers killed and wounded which we passed over. The wood road was their last stand. There they had thrown in fresh troops, the reinforcements we had heard yelling as they came down the road, but they were not familiar yet with the steepness of the ascent, and did us little damage. After receiving their first fire the advancing lines gave a ringing shout and poured in their reply at 30 paces. The effect was terrible; their line was broken, and each man scrambled up the steep mountain as best he could.

The route was complete; they did not stop to return our fire, but fled to the summit. There but a slight and unorganized resistance was offered, which ceased entirely when our regiments emerged from the woods. We had struck the road exactly on the divide, with a road running straight away toward Harper's Ferry, about the center of my command, which here intersected the road through the Gap. We were exactly on the summit of the mountain, with Burkittsville on our left and Rohrsersville on our right, but not in sight.

Here I cannot help giving testimony to the skill and great bravery which a section of the enemy's artillery was retired down the road mentioned. Their infantry had ceased firing, and were nowhere in sight, but as I emerged from the woods I saw the flash of a cannon, which was within 50 yards of me and trained toward us, the canister bursting in our faces. It was limbered to the rear in an instant, and at 20 paces had passed the other gun of the section, which delivered its fire, limbered up, and went scurrying down the road before any but a scattering fire could be brought against it. The last gun was, however, slightly disabled, and abandoned a little farther down the mountain upon the appearance of the two regiments of Brooks' (Vermont) Brigade, which had climbed the mountain on the left of the Burkittsville road. If the enemy had made a stubborn resistance on the crest of the mountain, Gen. Brooks would have been on their right flank and rear 10 minutes later with his magnificent Vermont Brigade, and we would have captured the whole Confederate command.

It was now late in the twilight. I threw out a picket-line, and thus carried out to the letter the written order of Gen. Slocum, commanding the division. Soon after this was done Gens. Franklin, Smith, Slocum, Brooks, Newton and Col. Torbert came riding up the road leading over the Pass. Seeing them mounted, and that I had neither staff nor Orderly with me, I realized for the first time that the colt I was riding was a powerful fellow—the only horse that managed to make the ascent with the troops. I immediately christened him "Crampton."

Congratulations were generously and feelingly exchanged all around and renewed confidence expressed in our brave fellows, who never had failed us when given a fair chance.

Gen. Franklin was greatly pleased with the result, particularly as we could hear the balance of the army pounding away at Turner's Gap, six miles to the right of us. They had evidently not been so successful as we had up to that hour. It was now plainly to be seen that with Crampton's Gap in our possession, Lee would fall back from Turner's Gap if McClellan had made a strong impression upon him there; or, if not, he would send a force against Franklin and attempt to crush him between it and the corps operating at Harper's Ferry. The battle had been so vigorously fought, however, at that gap, that it was virtually carried when night put a stop to the conflict, and when McClellan at daylight sought to renew it he found nothing in front of him but a skirmish-line.

To us the victory had been complete. There was nothing in it to regret but the loss of the brave and gallant men who had fallen. From the time the column had started up the mountain to the utter route and confusion of the enemy, no part of the command was driven a step to the rear or had faltered for an instant, notwithstanding the report of Gen. Howell Cobb, commanding the Confederate troops.

The evidences of complete victory were scattered around us; knapsacks, haversacks and blankets were abandoned by the enemy in their flight.

Gen. Hancock witnessed the charge up the mountain from his position in reserve, and although he could not see the troops, he saw the smoke circling above the trees nearer and nearer the summit. As our lines ascended he exclaimed, "It is the poetry of war!"

We had captured 400 prisoners from 17 different organizations, 700 stand of arms, one piece of artillery and three stands of colors.

A soldier of the 16th N.Y. brought a flag to me which he had captured on the charge. It was fastened to a staff which had been cut in the woods—a small sapling, which a bullet had nearly cut in two. It was a banner with a streamer above it, and had evidently been presented to the Legion. It was of beautiful silk, with gold letters, but the banner was frayed out with hard usage and time, and the streamer so much whipped off at the end that only the word "Lord," in large gold letters, remained of some former motto. Below, on the banner, read "Cobb's Legion." The inscription as it appeared then read "Lord Cobb's Legion!" The soldier said, with a broad smile, "Colonel, I've got his flag, but I didn't catch his Lordship."

We buried later 150 of their dead, and our surgeons cared for more than 300 of their wounded who were left upon the field. Our losses were—in the New Jersey Brigade (Torbert's), aggregate, 172 killed and wounded; in my brigade, including the two regiments Gen. Newton sent me (32nd and 18th N.Y.), 322; without these, 217. Gen. Newton's loss in his other two regiments (95th Pa. and 31st N.Y.), 19; including three regiments sent to me, 124; in the Vermont Brigade (Gen. Brooks, Smith's Division), 19; making a total, including one loss in general staff, of 533 killed and wounded.

The loss of the Confederates cannot be given by regiments or even brigades, for many of their reports include both Crampton's Gap and Antietam, and it is impossible to separate them. Gen. Howell Cobb says, in his report of the action at Crampton's Pass, "Of the number who went into battle there are now missing and

unaccounted for over 800. The larger portion of this number is believed to be prisoners.” The importance of this pass in the South Mountains to Gen. Lee at the time the orders were given to defend it, can be shown by another extract from the report of Gen. Cobb: “I received a message from you through your assistant Adjutant-General, Maj. McIntosh, that I must hold the Gap if it cost the life of every man in my command.” To carry out this order he had Brig.-Gen. Paul J. Semmes (five regiments), and his own brigade, two regiments of dismounted cavalry (the 2nd and 12th Virginia), commanded by Col. Munford, and 11 pieces of artillery; making in all 15 regiments and 11 guns. The dismounted cavalry were armed with rifles. Col. Munford says, in his report of the battle of Crampton’s Pass, “The cavalry (2d and 12th Va.) behaved splendidly under the fire they were placed, and did good service with their rifles.” The force that charged and carried the Pass consisted of three brigades—12 regiments. The two regiments of Smith’s Division, Brooks’ Brigade, which ascended the mountain on the left of Burkittsville, only came into contact with a few of the enemy’s skirmishers at the base of the mountain, and suffered a loss of 19 killed and wounded. The attacking and attacked brigades had participated in all the battles of the Peninsular campaign and the Pope campaign near Washington, and had suffered in them great losses, so I imagine that neither had much if any advantage in point of numbers in regiments. Our brigades had not received any recruits or returned prisoners, wounded or convalescents since they left the front of Richmond, and I presume the Confederates had not received any reinforcements from these sources.

Here follows an editorial citation of casualties as stipulated in the Official Records, Volume 19, Part 1, followed by verbatim transcripts of reports filed therein by generals Franklin and Cobb.

Transcribed by T.J. Reese, Burkittsville, Maryland, October 15, 1988, from a microfilm copy of the original newspaper in the collections of the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.