
THE BATTLE OF GETTYSBURG

Extracts from the Diary of Colonel Fremantle

Colonel Fremantle, a member of the Cold Stream Guards, was a guest of the Army of Northern Virginia during the Gettysburg campaign. After the battle of Gettysburg, he returned to England and published "Three Months in the Southern States." The following is a vivid extract, describing a part of the battle from the Confederate lines.

"July 1st (Wednesday). At 4.30 P.M. we came in sight of Gettysburg, and joined General Lee and General Hill, who were on the top of one of the ridges which form a peculiar feature of the country round Gettysburg. We could see the enemy retreating up one of the opposite ridges, pursued by the Confederates with loud yells. The position into which the enemy had been driven was evidently a strong one. His right appeared to rest on a cemetery, on the top of a high ridge to the right of Gettysburg, as we looked at it.

"General Hill now came up and told me he had been very unwell all day, and in fact he looks very delicate. He said he had two divisions engaged, and had driven the enemy four miles into the present position, capturing a great many prisoners, some cannon, and some colors. He said, however, that the Yankees had fought with a determination unusual to them.

"July 2nd (Thursday). At 2 P.M. General Longstreet advised me, if I wished to have a good view of the battle, to return to my tree of yesterday. I did so and remained there with Lawley and Captain Schreiber during the rest of the afternoon. But until 4.45 P.M. all was profoundly quiet, and we began to doubt whether a fight was coming off today at all. At that time, however, Longstreet suddenly commenced a heavy cannonade on the right. Ewell immediately took it up on the left. The enemy replied with equal fury, and in a few moments the firing along the whole line was as heavy as it is possible to conceive. A dense smoke arose for six miles; there was little wind to drive it away, and the air seemed full of shells—each of which appeared to have a different style of going, and made a different noise from the others. The ordnance on both sides is of a very varied description. Every now and then a caisson would blow up—if a Federal one, a Confederate yell would immediately follow. The Southern troops, when charging, or to express their delight, always yell in a manner peculiar to themselves. The Yankee cheer is much like ours, but the Confederate officers declare that the Rebel yell has a particular merit, and always produces a salutary effect upon their adversaries. A corps is sometimes spoken of as 'a good yelling regiment.'

"As soon as the firing began, General Lee joined Hill just below our tree, and he remained there nearly all the time, looking through his field-glasses, sometimes talking to Hill and sometimes to Colonel Long of his staff. But generally he sat quite alone on the stump of a tree. What I remarked especially was, that during the whole time the firing continued, he sent only one message, and received only one report. It evidently is his system to arrange the plan thoroughly with the three commanders, and then leave to them the duty of modifying and carrying it out to the best of their abilities.

"When the cannonade was at its height, a Confederate band of music, between the cemetery and ourselves, began to play polkas and waltzes, which sounded very curious, accompanied by the hissing and bursting of the shells.

"At 5.45 all became comparatively quiet on our left and in the cemetery; but volleys of musketry on the right told us that Longstreet's infantry were advancing, and the onward progress of the smoke showed that he was progressing favorably; but about 6.30 there seemed to be a check, and even a slight retrograde movement. . . . A little before dark the firing dropped off in every direction, and soon ceased altogether. We then received intelligence that Longstreet had carried everything before him for some time, capturing several batteries and driving the enemy from his positions; but when Hill's Florida brigade and some other troops gave way, he was forced to abandon a small portion of the ground he had won, together with all the captured guns, except three. His troops, however, bivouacked during the night on ground occupied by the enemy in the morning.

“July 3rd (Friday). At 2.30 P.M., after passing General Lee and his staff, I rode on through the woods in the direction in which I had left Longstreet. I soon began to meet many wounded men returning from the front; many of them asked in piteous tones the way to a doctor or an ambulance. The further I got, the greater became the number of the wounded. At last I came to a perfect stream of them flocking through the woods in numbers as great as the crowd in Oxford Street in the middle of the day. Some were walking alone on crutches composed of two rifles, others were supported by men less badly wounded than themselves, and others carried on stretchers by the ambulance corps, but in no case did I see a sound man helping the wounded to the rear unless he carried the red badge of the ambulance corps. They were still under heavy fire, the shells bringing down great limbs of trees, and carrying further destruction amongst this melancholy procession. I saw all this in much less time than it takes to write it, and although astonished to meet such vast numbers of wounded, I had not seen enough to give me any idea of the real extent of the mischief.

“When I got close up to General Longstreet, I saw one of his regiments advancing through the woods in good order; so, thinking I was just in time to see the attack, I remarked to the General that ‘I wouldn’t have missed this for anything.’ Longstreet was seated at the top of a snake fence at the edge of the woods (Spangler Woods), and looking perfectly calm and imperturbed. He replied, laughing, ‘The devil you wouldn’t! I would like to have missed it very much; we’ve attacked and been repulsed: look there!’

“For the first time I then had a view of the open space between the two positions, and saw it covered with Confederates slowly and sulkily returning towards us in small broken parties, under a heavy fire of artillery. But the fire where we were was not so bad as further to the rear; for although the air seemed alive with shells, yet the greater number burst behind us. The General told me that Pickett’s Division had succeeded in carrying the enemy’s position and captured his guns, but after remaining there twenty minutes, it had been forced to retire on the retreat of Heth and Pettigrew on his left. . . .

“Major Walton was the only officer with him (Longstreet) when I came up—all the rest had been put in the charge. In a few minutes Major Latrobe arrived on foot, carrying his saddle, having just had his horse killed. Colonel Sorrell was also in the same predicament, and Captain Goree’s horse was wounded in the mouth. . . .

“Soon after I joined General Lee, who had in the meanwhile come to that part of the field on becoming aware of the disaster. If Longstreet’s conduct was admirable, that of General Lee was perfectly sublime. He was engaged in rallying and in encouraging the broken troops, and was riding about a little in front of the woods, quite alone—the whole of his staff being engaged in a similar manner further to the rear. His face, which is always placid and cheerful, did not show signs of the slightest disappointment, or annoyance; and he was addressing to every soldier he met a few words of encouragement, such as, ‘All this will come right in the end: we’ll talk it over afterwards; but, in the meantime, all good men must rally. We want all good and true men just now.’ He spoke to all the wounded men that passed him, and the slightly wounded he exhorted ‘to bind up their hurts and take up a musket’ in this emergency. Very few failed to answer his appeal, and I saw many badly wounded men take off their hats and cheer him. He said to me, ‘This has been a sad day for us, Colonel—a sad day; but we can’t expect always to gain victories.’ He was also kind enough to advise me to get into some more sheltered position as the shells were bursting round us with considerable frequency. . . .

“I saw General Wilcox come up to him, and explain, almost crying, the state of his brigade. General Lee immediately shook hands with him and said cheerfully, ‘Never mind, General, all this has been *my* fault—it is I that have lost this fight, and you must help me out of it in the best way you can.’ In this manner I saw General Lee encourage and reanimate his somewhat dispirited troops, and magnanimously take upon his own shoulders the whole weight of the repulse.”

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BY

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