

Impromptu Battle

A narrative of the Fight at Staunton-River Bridge

One of the Participants Gives the Details of the Engagement Thirty-One years After It Occurred

Interesting Personal Incidents

Captain James A. Hoyt, of South Carolina, contributes to the Greenville (s.c.) Mountaineer an interesting account of the impromptu battle at Staunton-River bridge, on the Richmond and Danville Railroad, which was fought June 25, 1864. From it we take the following:

The cause of this interruption was soon explained, which was simply that an officer had been sent by the commandant of the post, Colonel R.S. Withers, to enroll all the enlisted men for the purpose of taking them to some point on the railroad in the direction of Richmond, where it was expected to meet the enemy. Nearly all these men had been in the army from the start, and it did not take them long to find out that the officer designated was totally inexperienced, which caused them to inquire whether he had been at the front. His answer revealed the fact that he had never smelt powder on the battle-field, and the object of coming to me was to obtain an intercession with the commandant on their behalf. I will not enter into the particulars, but will only say that several hours were lost in convincing Colonel Withers that these men were entitled to better consideration, on account of past services, and that it was an injustice for him to place them under command of one who was evidently unfit for the position. Finally, it was decided upon my suggestion, that an officer from another State should be put in charge, and that the rest of us should go along. This arrangement was not carried out, however, as this officer relinquished command and insisted upon my taking charge.

Every train brought additions to the force while we were waiting in Danville, and an entire company of detailed men from Richmond, under command...

Pg. 2

...of Captain Riddick, arrived a short time before we left. They had been down to Andersonville with a lot of prisoners, and were anxious to reach Richmond. Captain Riddick requested that his company be joined to ours, and that was agreed to. The two companies numbered not over a hundred and fifty men, and at 4 o'clock on Friday afternoon, June 24th, we left Danville in box-cars with arms, ammunition, and rations furnished by Colonel Withers, who had become reconciled to the situation. We were directed to report to Captain Farinholt, and he was advised of our coming. Between 8 and 9 o'clock the train halted near the bridge over Staunton-River, forty-eight miles from Danville. The men were marched at once to a place for bivouac, and with the starry heavens for a canopy, they were soon asleep.

Preparing for the enemy

I held a brief conference with Captain Farinholt, and he informed me that the Federals were not expected until the next day, when it was his purpose to defend the bridge from the south side, where he had two pieces of artillery mounted in a fort overlooking the river, with which he confidently expected to repulse the enemy across the stream. He also told me that there was an officer on the other side of the bridge, who had a part of his own command and with whom he differed as to the proper defense of the bridge. This information was gladly received, for my impressions already were against the plans of the commandant, and I decided to investigate the matter without delay the next morning. Soon after daylight I started across the bridge, and as it was covered, the way was dark. I had gone only a few steps when an officer met me, and inquired after my purpose in crossing the bridge. Upon stating that my object was to meet with Colonel Coleman, he gave me a cordial grasp of the hand, and said that he was Henry E. Coleman, of the Twelfth North Carolina. I soon learned that his mother lived in the neighborhood, and that he was on a wounded furlough. His head was bandaged from a wound received at Spotsylvania, and he had tendered his services for this occasion to Captain Farinholt. He was satisfied that the Federals could reach there during...

Pg. 3

...the day and would expect to burn the bridge, which could easily be done if there were no troops on the north side to prevent it. He had taken about 150 militia, old men and boys, and had been entrenching his position during the night, but it was very slow work.

Configuration of the ground

The result of our conversation was that I agreed to take my command across the river, unless Captain Farinholt seriously objected to their going, and join with Colonel Coleman in what was the only practicable defense of the bridge. I found no difficulty in making the transfer, and when a scant breakfast was finished the two companies were marched across. The militia, under Colonel Coleman, was evidently much rejoiced to have reinforcements come to their assistance, especially when they recognized that newcomers were old soldiers. It was decided that my two companies should take position on the right of the bridge, while the militia should occupy the left of our entrenchments. Let me describe the configuration of the ground on the north side of the river, so as to give a better idea of the strength of our position, as well as its peril:

Roanoke station was within half a mile of the bridge, and the railroad track was without a curve between them. From a steep embankment at the bridge, rising eight or ten feet above the level ground, the track gradually came nearer to the level until, at the station, there was no grading at all. On the right, or east, side of the railroad, looking northwards, there was piece of meadow land, a hundred yards wide, running to the creek, which emptied here into the river. This creek ran parallel to the railroad, and kept the same distance from it, so that the meadow was 100 yards wide and 800 yards long. A ditch ran across the meadow from the railroad-culvert to the creek, not more than seventy-five yards in front of my line. On the opposite side of the railroad the ground was uneven and irregular, and the river made a bend above the bridge, so that there was very little chance to maneuver troops on that side, as they would be in a narrow defile with every advantage in...

Pg. 4

...favor of the Confederates. Just in the rear of the station there was a succession of hills, upon which we posted pickets early in the morning, and it was from these hills in the afternoon that the Federal artillery poured shot and shell in and ground the bridge, until it was anything besides comfortable to be in range. Our slender and hastily-constructed earthworks formed a semi-circle, with the bridge as the centre, and each end resting upon the river bank. There was no possible chance of being flanked in this position, but there was also no avenue of retreat. Failure meant the capture of every man, and this was impressed upon all.

Reconnoitring

Soon after the line was established and the men had been put to work in throwing up dirt with their bayonets Colonel Coleman and myself, with a few picked men, went on a reconnaissance, three or four miles up the railroad, using an engine and a passenger coach which came that morning from Danville. This was a valuable incident of the day, for we learned that the enemy was leisurely advancing, destroying the railroad track, burning trestles and depots, and looking forward to an easy victory when they reached the bridge over Staunton river, and an unmolested march on to Danville. It was further ascertained that General, W.H. F. Lee, with his division of cavalry, was only a few hours in the rear of General Wilson, and that a stubborn defense of the bridge would enable Lee to overtake him. After leaving some bogus despatches where they would likely fall into the hands of the enemy and urgent (messages), to be handed General Lee when (he happened) that way, the reconnaissance (ended) and we returned to the bridge, (with encouraging) words for our little band of 300. The hours grew slowly, the heat was intense, and the men were suffering from thirst and hunger. The creek water did not satisfy them, and the rations were growing scarce and unpalatable. They gathered under the bridge, and the old soldiers regaled the militia

with grewsome tales of war as they had seen it. Camp jokes and breezy songs followed until 4 o'clock in the afternoon, when the sharp crack of a rifle on the hills brought every...

Pg. 5

...on to his place along the line, and in a few minutes some of our videttes were seen coming in haste to join us. The enemy was almost in sight, and the first courier to arrive said they were very numerous. The advanceguard of General Wilson quickly drove in the balance of our pickets, except two or three who were out off, and who concealed themselves in the woods until the fight was over.

The Battle Begins

It was not very long until the enemy began to appear upon the hills. Their artillery was soon unlimbered, and only a few moments elapsed until shells were bursting all around us. They undertook to get the range of the bridge, and one gun was evidently trying to shoot into the end of the bridge, meeting with success now and then. The squadrons of cavalry were flying in every direction, and the whole earth seemed to be alive with horses and riders. Cavalry always did excite me with the tramping of horses and the clanging of sabres, but these things were not very destructive to life, and so I felt more serious when it was apparent that this flying around meant that the cavalymen were dismounting for a close conflict with us. The shelling was still furious, and growing more unpleasant every moment. To add to the discomfort of the situation, our own inexperienced artillery on the south side began to respond to the compliments sent forth from the opposite side, and instead of fusing shot and shell, with the expectation of reaching the enemy, the gunners put in grape and canister which fell all around us. I sent Private Fenton, of the Maryland Artillery, with a message to the commandant on the other side. He went across the bridge under fire of the enemy's guns to stop the firing of our own artillery, and I watched his red cap with a great deal of interest as he emerged from the bridge and ascended the hill to the fort. My instructions were for him to ask the privilege of directing the guns against the enemy, and in default thereof to cease firing altogether.

In the meanwhile the dismounted cavalry were getting into battle array. The lines were formed near the station, and they began to move in our direction. ...

Pg. 6

Evidently, it was the intention of the enemy to crush our small force at once with superior numbers. Column after column was mowed in the meadow and then sent forward. The ground was being

covered very rapidly by the advancing hosts, and the dead silence which prevailed along my line as they got nearer must have deceived them. My orders were for every man to keep on the ground behind the breastworks, which were only two or three feet high, and when the first line of the enemy had crossed the ditch in our front, the command would be given to fire. As already stated, this ditch was not more than seventy-five yards in our front, and when the men rose with the rebel yell and poured a volley into the ranks of the enemy there was great consternation and hasty retreat.

Desperate Charges of the Enemy

The battle was joined in desperate earnest, and when the Federals recovered from their surprise there was a rally of the scattered forces, preparatory to another charge. The troops were messed even more closely than before, and their movements seemed quicker and more determined, but the fatal ditch was an obstruction which they never passed again. Our men reserved their fire once more, but they were growing impatient, and did not wait to see whether the Federals would attempt another crossing of the ditch.

The second charge was repulsed with equal gallantry, showing a determined resistance on our side, but it required longer time and heavier firing to drive them back. Then followed a longer interval between the charges, but for the third time the effort was made by the serried ranks of the enemy to press forward to the goal of their ambition. So far as they could see, there was no impression being made on our line, and they were no nearer the capture of the bridge than when they first came in sight of it. This third charge was resisted as before, and with equal success.

The sun was going behind the hills, but as yet there was no sign that General W. H. F. Lee had reached the enemy's rear. His appearance on the scene would mean relief for our little band, as we knew that with the coming...

Pg. 7

...of night the Federals would have the advantage, for they could easily make approaches to our line by digging rifle-pits, and by this means hem us in on three sides. Daylight was important for the solution of the problem, and when the Federals gathered for the fourth charge there were misgivings as to the result. On they came, however, and they were met with a galling fire of musketry, which grew even more furious as their lines came nearer. It was during this charge that Lee and his division struck the rear-guard of the Federals, and they were given an opportunity of fighting in opposite directions. Only one result could ensue from this state of things, which was their hasty and immediate withdrawal from our front, and preparation began for a sudden retreat.

In Full Retreat

The road leading down to the river was in their possession, and it was soon filled with a moving caravan of wagons, ambulances, and troops. Their artillery on the hills were turned in the other way to prevent the advance of Lee, and under the cover of a rapid fire from their guns and the retreat was speedily entered upon. It was a time of suspense and anxiety with us, for we did not know with certainty that Lee's command was in reality on hand, or whether it was only a small detachment, which had caused the enemy to forsake our front. The sun had gone down, and the shadows were thick with the smoke of battle. When it grew dusk there was positive and unequivocal relief, because one of our videttes came with the welcome tidings that the Federals were gone, and that Lee was occupying the ground around the station. The long day was ended, and the victory was ours.

Incidents of the Fight

This account might be extended indefinitely with personal incidents and reminiscence. Only a few will be given, however. Colonel Henry E. Coleman, to whom the credit of the engagement is chiefly due, exhibited the highest qualities of a soldier. He was self-reliant, admirably poised in manner, and quick to take advantage of circumstances. I was wounded rather early in the...

Pg. 8

...fight, and was carried under the bridge, protected by the abutment. Colonel Coleman at once suggested that he would take immediate command of my end of the line, while he would pass the word along the trenches that I was in charge of the left wing and this was done. He came and stood in front of me where I was lying on the ground and was receiving such attention as the surgeon could give me, when I saw that he was incurring great risk in remaining there any longer; as the minie balls were whistling by every moment, and he appeared unconscious of the fact. I cautioned him to step back on or two paces, but his reply showed that he did not appreciate the danger, and in another minute he was brought up to the ground within a few feet of me. A ball had gone through the knee, and he was disabled, like myself.

His strategies had ended as far as the exchange of commands was concerned, and we had to find another expedient, which was to direct the fight jointly was Lieutenant D. D. Humphreys, of the First Florida Battalion, and he had been detailed from my company. After Colonel Coleman was wounded, Lieutenant Humphreys most gallantly met the responsibility upon him, and in connection with the other officers faithfully executed every order issued from the disabled headquarters under the bridge. My first lieutenant was J.G. Moom, Company F. Thirteenth Mississippi, and he was detailed to act as commissary while Lieutenant Hall of the Fifty-first Virginia, insisted upon using musket. Captain Riddick showed splendid nerve in the fight, and received a severe flesh wound before the engagement was over. The three

principal officers being wounded, it is high praise that the men deserve for their unflinching fidelity to the end of the fight. Gathered from every quarter of the Confederacy, and belonging to all arms of the service, strangers to each other, and serving under officers who they had never met before, this heterogeneous command did not quail for an instant, and displayed rare intrepidity and steadfast courage. Each man was actuated by a feeling of his own responsibility for the successful termination of the fight, and no...

Pg. 9

...army that ever trod the earth has produced a braver band than the 300 who saved the day at Staunton River.

The Losses

The estimated strength of the Federals was 2,000 men, but General Wilson reported a much smaller number as being actually engaged. Their loss in killed and wounded was not less than 300, equal to our whole number, as our men buried 75 of their dead the next day. Not a prisoner was taken on either side. Our total loss was 35 officers and men, and five out of eight officers were wounded. Six men were killed, one of them an Episcopal minister of the neighborhood, who had volunteered for the fight under Colonel Coleman. He was a brother-in-law of Coleman's, a country physician, who acted as surgeon of the command, but I cannot recall his name.

A Daring Deed

Private W. J. Sims, Company N, Thirteenth Mississippi, was severely wounded in the chest while performing a daring act under my immediate orders. He was a tall, handsome, young fellow, not more than 19 years old, and I had been attracted toward him from the outset. He came to me after I was wounded and said that there were two men crawling through the bushes along the railroad embankment, and asked me what to do. His belief was that they were trying to reach the bridge for the purpose of setting fire to it, as he saw that each one in his hand had a package. My answer was to shoot them, and he quickly stepped back to the position from which he had seen them, then raised his gun and fired, but did not step down. Throwing his gun in proper position to reload, and keeping his eye upon the Federals, Sims was about to ram the charge when a ball entered his chest, and he fell backwards but was caught by a comrade. He came at once to my side and said, "I have done what you told me, but I am a dead man." As he lay there, growing more pallid every moment, he begged me to write his mother, and say to her that he was shot while obeying my order in the discharge of his duty as a Confederate soldier. The youth who was acting as my orderly wrote down his words and took his...

...mother's address for me. The surgeon said that Sims was mortally wounded, but I insisted that he give every attention to him, sharing with him the slender supply of stimulants on hand. The next morning Sims was taken to Danville along with the rest of us, and in a few weeks he was give a furlough to visit his mother and tell the story for himself.