



PROJECT MUSE®

A Pioneer Remembers Gettysburg

Louis Fischer

Gettysburg Magazine, Number 52, January 2015, pp. 52-54 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/get.2015.0004>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/566387>

A Pioneer Remembers Gettysburg

LOUIS FISCHER

Louis Fischer was a lieutenant in the Seventy-Fourth Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry, Schimmelfennig's brigade, Schurz's division, Eleventh Corps. At Gettysburg he was detached as a member of the pioneer company that approached the town at the head of its division, arriving probably between 11:00 and 11:30 a.m. The December 12, 1869, issue of the *National Tribune* carried an article he wrote about his experiences and observations during the arrival, deployment, and subsequent engagement of the brigade north of town.

The writer of this little article does not claim for it absolute correctness in the minutest details, it being penned mostly from memory, but endeavors to bring before all comrades of the Army of the Potomac, especially the First Corps, a comprehensive sketch of the fighting of the two divisions of the Eleventh Corps pitched against [Gen. Richard] Ewell's (old Stonewall) Corps until enveloped in right flank and rear by numbers equaling two to one, according to the records of the War Department.

I was an eye-witness to the unequal struggle of the Third and Second Divisions (I name them in this order, as we marched left in front that day, and went into action in that order) of my Corps for about two hours, being detached from my regiment to headquarters of the Third Division as second officer of the division Pioneer company.

The Eleventh Corps camped during the night of June 30 to July 1 in and around Emmitsburg, near the line between Maryland and Pennsylvania. Breakfast was eaten before sunrise, and my Pioneer company, at the head of the corps, immediately behind Gen. C[arl] Schurz, was marching by the first rays of the sun toward the most remarkably open and one of the most stubbornly contested battlefields of the civil war. When within six or seven miles of Gettysburg, about 10 a.m., the distant boom of cannon informed us of an engagement going on, and not long afterward an Aid[e] of Gen. [Oliver O.] Howard brought orders to Gen. Schurz,

upon which our men were put into a double-quick, this gait being kept up to the battlefield, with only short breathing intermissions.

As soon as we had passed the Round Tops, leaving them to our right or east, part of the First Corps' fighting came into view due north, Gettysburg being visible north-northeast. For quite a distance we had heard the crackling fire of the infantry, and seeing the First Corps heavily engaged, our men struck the long-winded dog trot, and went in that style through the town, emerging on the Mummasburg road. After passing Pennsylvania College I saw the enemy's infantry outflanking the extreme right of the First Corps (the 12th Mass and 104th N.Y.) but their commanders changed their fronts from west-northwest to due north. After my Pioneers were put to work to cut down the post fences between the college and Hagy's house to let the infantry and artillery into the fields north of the road, I naturally turned my attention to the terrible but indescribably fascinating scene on the east slope of Seminary Ridge. The rebel infantry was coming down the Mummasburg road at a run, about 600 yards from me, and taking shelter on the southwest side of the road in the ditch behind the fence, fired into the exposed ranks of the 13th Mass and 104th N.Y., who stood in an open meadow. I could see every man fall as he was hit by the enemy (who lost hardly any in this unequal contest), until of the original line of blue was left only a thin line, with great gaps at that. My heart bounded with joy when

the skirmishers of the 157th and 45th N.Y. of my division, drove the enemy out of the road and took those of them prisoners that had taken shelter in McLean's red barn.

Right here I witnessed an artillery duel between Capt. [Hubert] Dilger's battery of brass Napoleons of the Third Division, Eleventh Corps, which had unlimbered its guns somewhat north of McLean's red barn on the slope of the ridge. Within eight or ten minutes from the time that Capt. Dilger's (Co. I, 1st Ohio L.A.) gunners got orders to demolish the rebel battery they blew up two or three caissons and entirely disabled one or two of the guns, without losing any of their own. Simultaneous with this work was the charge of our men to capture the rebels hiding in the red barn, and the remainder of the battery limbered up and disappeared behind the rounding of the ridge. Our line was then extended nearly due east as fast as the regiments arrived until they reached beyond the Newville road nearly to the Harrisburg road.

After my Pioneers had cut the fences for our division, I was ordered by my Captain to take them to the corner of the college, he being ordered to remain with the General. There I mounted a boxed post some eight feet in height [*sic*], and was thereby enabled to see the Newville and Harrisburg pikes, and as far as my eye could reach I saw thousands of Ewell's men come toward the rear and right flank of my corps, completely enveloping it, preparatory to the murderous assault of both Hill's and Ewell's Corps, numbering no less than 35,000 men, against the First Corps and the Third (Schurz's) and Second ([Gen. Francis] Barlow's) Divisions of the Eleventh Corps, numbering in all not over 14,500 men.

During this comparative lull in the battle, also mentioned by the author of the "Story of a Cannoneer" I kept asking my anxious heart, "Why does Gen. Howard not shorten or refuse the line of my corps to face the new brigades of Ewell's fresh corps, or bring up the First Division ([Gen. Adolf von] Steinwehr's) to protect the rear of the other two?"

I had seen troops come along north of the Round Tops, and was satisfied they were the First Division, all good and tried men. A comrade of the 55th Ohio has assured me they were ordered to form behind the stone walls of Cemetery Ridge, south of Gettysburg, entirely out of supporting distance

of their comrades one and one half miles north of town. I am informed they were anxious and willing to come to our assistance. But the "Why not" of the above two questions has never been publicly answered by the General commanding that terrible evening of July 1, 1863.

I understand that he went up into the cupola of the college, from where he could see every movement of two-thirds of Ewell's Corps; Iverson's and Daniel's North Carolina and O'Neal's Alabama Brigades, and Rodes's Division, being covered by Seminary Ridge.

A foreboding of the coming massacre kept me riveted to the spot, here and there artillery and musketry fire opening at intervals of a few seconds, then the volley from an entire regiment on our extreme right likely the 17th Conn., when all along the lines of the Eleventh and First Corps the demon of battle is turned loose without stint or favor.

Thus I see my comrades murdered without them having any show for their lives. What else can I call it, when they have to fight equal numbers—nay superior—in front, and equal numbers in flank and rear?

I see rebel infantry enter the town (men of Hays' Louisiana and Hoke's North Carolina Brigades), but the men of the two divisions are still grimly trying to hold their ground. I am not able to come to their assistance with my men, for they carry no arms. The wounded are coming in constant streams across the fields toward me, until every room in the large college is filled to overflowing.

The stretcher bearers are unable to get the severely wounded from the field, for the pressure of such odds is driving the boys toward the west side of town (the north is already occupied by the enemy), and getting down I join with my men the movement to the rear. South of the college grounds a stone bridge spans a brook. The arch is considerably elevated above the surrounding level. Word is passed from man to man to not go over the bridge but walk through the deep mire. Rebel infantry in the houses east of it are raking it with their fire. Lieut. [William] Roth, of my company (K, 74th Pa.) scorns the idea of any rebel hitting him, and marches over the bridge. A dull thud, and his reeling body sinks to the earth before me; but I take through the mire.

As we get into town we find rebel infan-

try drawn across some streets, and have to take through houses, yards, over fences, until at last we reach Cemetery Hill. Gen. [Alexander] Schimmelpennig (my old Colonel), commanding the First Brigade, Third Division, is with the last of his men into Gettysburg, and finds his retreat cut off by rebel infantry. He rides through the hallway of a house, and turning his horse over to the owner, hides among large ranks of cordwood, where he is supplied with food until July 4, when he joins his command.

Hundreds of the men are captured in the streets of the city, among them Capt. F[riedrich] Irsch, with about 50 men of the 45th N.Y. The Major ([Alexander von] Mitzel of my own regiment), with Lieut. [Edgar] Schroeder and several men, are forced to surrender, with both officers escaping through the celebrated tunnel of Libby Prison.

Thus did the two divisions of my corps have to fight July 1, 1863. The losses of the 16 regiments are unknown to me, but those of my own regiment I recollect approximately. The 74th Pa. went into the battle with about 145 officers and men, (nearly 200, under command of Captain [John] Zeh, not being relieved from the division picket line at Emmits-

burg when we started for Gettysburg at daylight, and were held at Cemetery Hill with the First Division), out of which it lost three officers killed, six or seven wounded and two taken prisoners, and 63 men killed, wounded and taken prisoner. My Colonel ([Adolf von] Hartung) had his leg shattered by a musket-ball early in the afternoon, and was nursed by a family of the city for three or four weeks.

The charge of the Louisiana Tigers upon Cemetery Hill that night [July 2] about 12 o'clock [probably around 8:30 to 9:00 p.m.] struck the right wing of my division, as also some troops, and Private [Conrad] Betz, of Co. I, 74th Pa. killed two rebels with his musket; Betz measuring six feet two inches in height [*sic*].

Why the First Division (Steinwehr's) was not placed north of the city, to keep open for us our line of retreat, I have never been able to learn. That a repulse was inevitable must have been apparent to the commanding General, as the enemy's regiments were plainly visible to him from the Cemetery, the northwest slope of Culp's Hill, and any public building in the city. No; my poor comrades had to be sacrificed, just as they were sacrificed at Chancellorsville two months previous.