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Who Engaged First?

COMPILED BY JAMES S. PULA

Although the Gettysburg campaign ended in July 1863, the fighting did not. It merely assumed another form. One of the vehicles for continued conflict was the *National Tribune*, a monthly newspaper that began publishing in 1877. Quite soon its pages included the reminiscences of former soldiers, both officers and men alike, especially in the “Fighting Them Over” section in which correspondents shared their own memories and promoted their own versions of history. It did not take long for verbal jousts to emerge as the memories of the participants often clashed with each other on issues both large and small. One question that brought forth considerable debate was which Federal unit claimed the honor of being first engaged. This question emerged periodically over the years, including an exchange of several letters in the summer of 1884. What prompted it is unknown since the several issues before the two letters that appeared in the March 20 issue do not appear to have mentioned it. Regardless, over the next few months several letters were exchanged by men promoting their own units. Although it was obvious that Gen. John Buford’s cavalry was the first to fire on the Rebels, most of the correspondents, like our first correspondent below, discounted the cavalry’s claims, maintaining that the battle had not truly joined until the infantry became engaged. The first was from J. William Hofmann, who had served as colonel of the Fifty-Sixth Pennsylvania Infantry.¹

My attention has been directed on a number of occasions to articles in your very interesting journal upon the subject of the opening fire at the battle of Gettysburg. The interest in the

matter appears to increase as years roll onward, owing, no doubt, largely to the now universally conceded fact that it was upon the field of Gettysburg that the crisis of resistance was passed, and the supremacy of the Union irrevocably established. The credit and the honor of the opening of the battle upon which hinged issues so momentous as those which presented themselves on that field will scarce repeat itself in an age, not at all likely in a century, much less within the life-time of any one individual. The Army of the Potomac, on that occasion, fairly symbolized the spear-head in rear of which have ever followed progress, enlightenment, and the elevation of the human race.

In regard to the claims from the other arms of the service, it is generally understood that unless a battle be one confined to the cavalry arm it is not opened until the infantry become engaged, and taking this view of it, the honor of the opening fire of the battle may fairly be claimed to belong to the officers and men of the 56th regiment, Pennsylvania volunteers,—to its officers and men,—not to any individual officer or man, as has been claimed in some instances, but to the regiment as a unit; and it was the result, in a large measure, to long, persistent, hard work, and an intelligent and cheerful concession on the part of the officers and men to all the discomforts imposed upon them to fit them to give an instantaneous response when the moment for action arrived. Their fire was “by battalion;” therefore, as stated, the honor belongs to no individual, but to the regiment as a unit.

General Cutler, who commanded the brigade,

¹ Hofmann was later brevetted brigadier general.

deemed the matter, even at that early hour, one of sufficient import to deserve historical record, and wrote, November 5, 1863, to Governor Curtin, explaining the circumstances, and requesting him to take measures to have the fact preserved in the archives of our State in a simple act of Justice to the regiment. I herewith offer you a copy of General Cutler's letter, printed at the time for the officers and men.²

Hofmann attached a copy of the document from Curtis, who recounted that the Fifty-Sixth Pennsylvania was in front of him as he used his "glass" to observe the oncoming enemy. As he watched, the regiment opened fire, and, as he wrote, the "battle on the soil of Pennsylvania was opened by her own sons, and it is just that it shall become a matter of history." But this was only the opening volley in the renewed debate. In the same issue that Hofmann's letter appeared, there was another written by Elisha R. Reed, who served in Company H, Second Wisconsin, Iron Brigade. Reed appears to refer to Hofmann's letter, which is odd since they both appeared in the same issue, one directly after the other. Nevertheless, Reed disputed Hofmann's claim.

I see you have settled the dispute as to what regiment opened the battle of Gettysburg by quoting the official reports. Now, I would like to have somebody settle it according to actual facts. It being settled that Cutler's brigade was the first into the field, I want someone of Cutler's brigade to explain how they got there. The Iron brigade was the 1st brigade, 1st division, 1st army corps, and General Cutler's brigade was the 2d brigade of the same division and corps, and, therefore, on our left, or ought to have been; and if they were not on our left that morning, will they explain where they were? When we started that morning the Iron brigade was in the advance, with the 2d Wisconsin (under Colonel Lucius Fairchild) in the advance of the brigade (the 6th Wisconsin having fallen to the rear that morning). I was in Company H, 2d Wisconsin, and Company H was at that time color company, and therefore near the center of the regiment, and not more than 200 men were in advance of me. It was a straight road and down-

grade toward Gettysburg, and I could see clearly for a mile or more, and am prepared to testify that neither the 2d brigade nor any other troops were in front of our sappers and miners. Soon after we struck the down grade I saw our sappers and miners rush for the fence and scatter a length or two of it in great haste, and we hastily filed left oblique through the opening, and continued the same left oblique through the field. Soon after entering the field we were ordered to "load," "fix bayonets," and "forward into line!" and we charged the woods without any delay. Now, General Cutler's brigade was on our *left*, passed by us in our rear, and went into the engagement far away on our right. It will now be necessary for General Cutler's brigade to explain how they got from our *left* to our *right* so quickly, where and when they passed us, and what we were doing when they passed us. If they can explain these points clearly, we shall feel relieved.³

The letters from Hofmann and Reed provoked more responses from other units who chimed in to present their own claims to the distinction of firing the first shot at Gettysburg. Reacting to Hofmann's discounting of the cavalry, Joel B. Swett, Company B, Eighth New York Cavalry, weighed into the fray to stick up for the honor of his branch of the service and his regiment.

There has been so much controversy of late regarding the opening of the battle of Gettysburg that I desire to add my testimony to that of those who know the 8th New York cavalry received the first fire of the enemy at the opening of the battle. While we may take it for granted that Colonel J. W. Hofmann's statement regarding the first infantry engagement is true, I must except to his assertion that "it is generally understood that unless a battle be one confined to the cavalry arm it is not opened until the infantry becomes engaged." As to facts, I have simply to refer to my diary, which shows that on Tuesday, June 30, 1863, our cavalry marched to Gettysburg and drove a small force of rebels out of the place. We went into camp just in the edge of the village and established a picket-line. The next morning our pickets were driven in, and, although in our

² J. William Hofmann, "The 56th Pennsylvania at Gettysburg," *National Tribune*, March 20, 1884, 7.

³ Elisha R. Reed, "The Second Wisconsin Sticks to Its Claim," *National Tribune*, March 20, 1884, 7.

face were the advancing lines of Lee's infantry, we fought for hours (most of the time dismounted) through the cemetery and over the seminary grounds, stubbornly contesting every inch of ground until the arrival of the 1st army corps. As the first shots of the enemy were directed to our little line of cavalry, and as for a long time afterwards we stubbornly resisted the enemy's advance, losing men and horses, before the arrival of the 1st army corps, it seems as though our regiment ought to retain, without question or dispute, the honor of opening the battle of Gettysburg. There was a sense of relief on my own part which I shall never forget when we saw the grand old 1st corps coming to our relief at a double-quick, and they deserve credit for being the first infantry engaged in the struggle.⁴

Among the infantry veterans, J. V. Pierce, Company D, 147th New York, wrote to answer the challenge posed in Reed's letter when he asked for someone from Cutler's brigade to explain various questions he raised. In the process, he supported Hofmann's claim that the Pennsylvania regiment fired first.

Comrade Reed, of the 2d Wisconsin infantry, in his article published March 20th, in which the question of what regiment of infantry first opened fire on the enemy at Gettysburg, July 1, 1863, is discussed, says: "It being settled that Cutler's brigade was the first in the fight, I want some one of Cutler's brigade to explain how they got there," I will explain.

On the march up to Emmitsburgh [*sic*] the 1st brigade led, with our brigade in the rear, and our regiment brought up the tail end of the division, in guarding the wagon train. On the morning of July 1, we drew one day's ration of commissary stores and sixty rounds of ammunition. It could not have been later than 7:30 o'clock when we had orders to "fall in," and headed for Gettysburg up the pike.

It was our turn to lead that morning, which brought us at the head of the corps. So the 2d brigade led the Army of the Potomac that morning, and the brigade was formed as follows, if we

remember rightly: 76th New York, 56th Pennsylvania, 147th New York, 14th New York (Brooklyn), and 95th New York.

Before we had been long on the march that morning sounds of artillery were heard in our left and front, and circular wreaths of smoke whirled and expanded in the air as shells exploded in the distance. Our pace was quickened, and, when about half a mile from Gettysburg, there was a call for the "pioneers to the front." We filed left, directing our march toward the seminary, and as soon as the fences had been thrown, the order was given: "Forward! Double-quick!" "Load at will!" was the next, and the pioneers could hardly throw the fences quick enough for us. The most troublesome fence was a strong post-and-board fence on both sides of the Fairfield road, near the seminary grounds. Hall's battery (2d Maine) dashed past us as we crossed the dry bed of Willowby's [*sic*] Run. We entered the seminary grounds to the left and front of the building and passed close to the south end. The rebels were shelling the cavalry, and we got some of their compliments. . . . The 14th and 95th New York were then formed to the left of and in support of Hall's battery, and the balance of the brigade on the right. . . . The enemy were on the ground before we were, and we lost several men, who were killed while advancing in line of battle, before we had fired a shot. The position of the 56th Pennsylvania gave Colonel Hofman [*sic*] a view of the advance of Davis' Confederate brigade, and he opened fire on them at once. The 1st brigade was in our rear, and consequently on our left, when thrown forward into line of battle.⁵

Not to be outdone, Frederick L. Phillips of Company A, Second Wisconsin, replied with a letter that included quotations from the Wisconsin Adjutant General's report and the history of his regiment penned by George H. Otis, who was a captain in the regiment during the battle and later rose to colonel. Eliminating the lengthy quotations, which, after all, both came from Wisconsin sources that were naturally inclined to promote the interests of their home state regiment, Phillips's argument read as follows.

⁴ Joel B. Swett, "The 8th New York Cavalry at Gettysburg," *National Tribune*, April 3, 1884, 7.

⁵ J. V. Pierce, "Last Words as to What Regiment Opened the Battle," *National Tribune*, April 3, 1884, 7.

To us of the 2d Wisconsin infantry it looks very much as though the 56th Pennsylvania had no foundation on which to base their claim of having begun the infantry fighting at Gettysburg. . . .

Colonel D[ennis] B. Daily, of Council Bluffs, Iowa, who, in the battle, was a lieutenant in Company B, of the 2d, writes under date of March 31, 1884: "I know, as well as I know that I am living, that there was not a shot fired from a musket in the hands of an infantryman until our regiment took the place of Buford's cavalry, and we engaged General Archer's brigade of Heth's division. It is conceded, I think, by all the Confederate accounts I have read of the commencement of the battle, that General Archer was first engaged."

. . . Hon. G[ilbert] M. Woodward, a member of Congress from Wisconsin, was at that time an aid on the staff of General Meredith, our brigade commander. He wrote me a year ago as follows: "I rode at the head of the brigade with General Meredith. I am now prepared to swear that, unless I am insane and have forgotten everything I ever knew, there were no troops ahead of us. The infantry fighting at Gettysburg commenced, and commenced only, when the 2d Wisconsin swung in on the double-quick, between the battery (Buford's light artillery) and Heth's division of the rebels. I would like to know how the devil any of the other troops—those of Cutler's brigade for instance—could have become engaged before we did, when they were behind us all the way and had to go nearly, if not quite, a half mile further than we did—off to our right—to visit our battlefield. I am entirely satisfied that no infantry was engaged on that day sooner than, or as soon as, the 2d Wisconsin. Such evidence, coming from a staff officer, ought to be considered convincing."

. . . All we ask is our just dues, and when shown by good proof that we are in the wrong, we will submit with good grace, but the evidence must be something more substantial than any yet offered.⁶

Seemingly assailed from all sides, Colonel Hofmann was not long in replying, aiming his volley specifically at F. L. Phillips who had produced the most impressive array of evidence.

⁶ Frederick L. Phillips, "The 2d Wisconsin at Gettysburg," *National Tribune*, May 29, 1884, 7.

Your correspondent F. C. [sic] Phillips . . . proves nothing [by quoting from several officers] but the simple matter that Cutler's brigade was not seen by these officers on the morning of July 1, 1863. These officers, if correctly reported, are willing to swear, and to risk their reputation for sanity upon the point, that General Cutler was in error when he wrote to General Curtin and stated that "It was my fortune to have been in the advance on the morning of July 1st." Thus indorsed, your correspondent claims that the 56th Pennsylvania rest their claim to the opening fire solely upon this letter. Sir, that is correct, they did do so, and they never would have offered any other evidence than that letter, for they never dreamt that within less than a decade after the general had been laid to rest, there would rise up such a body of honorable men in the State of Wisconsin and attempt to rob the 56th Pennsylvania of the honors that it had received at his hands. The 56th is challenged to produce other evidence! Well, sir, they will furnish it! For where there is truth there is usually also some corroborating evidence to be had.

The trouble with those representing the 2d Wisconsin in your columns in this matter is simply this: they have been laboring under the delusion that Meredith's brigade led the column that morning, and with no other ground (shown) for this erroneous supposition than the fact that they did not see Cutler's brigade nor know where it was when they looked up the road towards Gettysburg. They have repeated the statement that they could see the road in front of them for over a mile, and for that distance there were no troops on the road. This is no doubt true, but what does it prove? This simple fact only: that there was that much distance between the two brigades, or rather between the rear of Hall's battery and the head of Meredith's brigade. It will be shown presently where the battery marched and why it is mentioned here. Its survivors are no doubt fully competent to take care of it.

Cutler's Brigade Pass Meredith

Cutler's brigade bivouacked on the 30th of June on the south bank of Marsh Creek, but Meredith's brigade crossed the creek and biv-

ouacked on the north bank (not two miles beyond, as alleged—two hundred yards, perhaps). On the morning of July 1 Cutler's brigade moved out first. General Cutler was one of those officers who always had his troops ready, and in the morning moved out at the designated time, breakfast or no breakfast. His brigade crossed Marsh Creek by the bridge on the Emmitsburg–Gettysburg road (pike), and, mark sir! passed Meredith's brigade still in their bivouac! *There* is where Cutler's brigade passed Meredith's and marched on over the pike, until within about a mile of Gettysburg, then crossed Seminary Ridge at the seminary, moved into the low ground in front of it, and there the column changed direction to the right. The three regiments—76th New York, 56th Pennsylvania and 147th New York—were then moved northward, but the two rear regiments—14th Brooklyn and 95th New York—were moved westward until in front of McPherson's barn. When the rear of the 147th New York had crossed the railroad bed, General Cutler immediately formed his line of battle and moved westward, but had gone but a few yards when the line became heavily engaged, not with an enemy in his immediate front, but at that time seen only to the right and front; the fire was to the right oblique. It is an error to suppose that the ground occupied by Cutler's line at that time is at a greater distance from the seminary than the point where Meredith's brigade afterwards became engaged; therefore, had Meredith's brigade been immediately in rear of Hall's battery on the road, they could not have become engaged as soon as Cutler's regiments; as evidence of this is the fact that Cutler's two rear regiments—14th and 95th—moved as far west as the point where Meredith's troops afterwards attacked, *and did not become engaged at that point*. When the 56th opened the fire the 2d Wisconsin could not have been on the ground, nor near it. Had they marched immediately in rear of the battery on the road, the depth of the battery column, and that of the three regiments in rear of the 56th would have given ample time for the 56th to have delivered their fire before the 2d Wisconsin; but, by *their own statements, Meredith's*

brigade was over a mile in rear of the battery which marched in rear of Cutler's brigade. The 2d Wisconsin may have been the first regiment to open fire in Meredith's brigade, but not the first regiment on the field; that honor belongs to the 56th Pennsylvania.

Who Ought to be the Best Authority?

It ought to be conceded that a general officer, commanding a brigade in a column moving in momentary expectation of meeting an enemy, and riding at the head of his brigade, and in company with his division commander, (on this occasion General Reynolds, the commander of the wing of the army, was also, for a time, immediately in front,) as was General Cutler on that morning, is better authority than a staff officer or a line officer marching in a brigade over a mile in rear, as to whether his brigade is, or is not, the leading brigade on such an occasion! But it seems not!—not in the opinion of those representing the 2d Wisconsin in this matter.

In relating events that took place in campaigning, errors may occur if one attempts to narrate what transpired out of sight, or relies upon reports of others; but that the point should be raised and left unsettled by any historian after an interval of nearly twenty years as to which of two brigades that constituted a division was in the advance on a certain day, both moving on the same road, is certainly a novel one. The 56th would willingly believe that the officers named are not correctly reported . . .

What the Records Show

Well, sir, as stated before, and it will bear repeating, where there is truth there is usually some accessible corroborating evidence; there is so in this case. In his official report on file in the War Department, and under date of July 9, 1863, General Cutler says: "The brigade, except the 7th Indiana, which was on duty in the rear, moved from camp early on the morning of the 1st (being the leading brigade in the corps) on Gettysburg." This is four months earlier than his letter which these officers discredit, about seventeen years earlier than Colonel Otis' chapters [in the history of his regiment], and twenty years in advance of

colonel Daily's letter quoted. . . . [Inserted here is an extract from the division report of Gen. Wadsworth.]

Mr. Editor, if the officers and men representing the 2d Wisconsin in this matter, after reading the foregoing extracts from the official reports, still insist that Meredith's brigade led the column that morning—and it is only on that erroneous supposition that they have based their claim to the opening fire—if they still think that they were in a better position than General Cutler

or General Wadsworth to know whether Cutler's brigade did or did not lead the column from Marsh Creek to the battlefield of Gettysburg, the 56th Pennsylvania volunteers will have to allow them to enjoy their error.⁷

And so it went, with one dispute after another until the last of the Boys in Blue had passed from the scene.

⁷ J. William Hofmann, "General Hofmann Replies to the 2d Wisconsin's Claim," *National Tribune*, June 19, 1884, 7.