

**FROM THE WILDERNESS TO
SPOTTSYLVANIA: A PAPER READ BEFORE
THE OHIO COMMANDERY
OF THE MILITARY ORDER OF THE LOYAL
LEGION OF THE UNITED STATES,
DECEMBER 3, 1884**

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From the Wilderness to Spottsylvania: A Paper Read Before the Ohio Commandery of the Military order of the Loyal Legion of the United States, December 3, 1884 by Robert Stoddart Robertson

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ROBERT STODDART ROBERTSON

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SPOTTSYLVANIA: A PAPER READ BEFORE
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FROM THE
Wilderness to Spottsylvania,

—A PAPER—

READ BEFORE THE

OHIO COMMANDERY,

—OF THE—

MILITARY ORDER

—OF THE—

Loyal Legion of the United States,

—BY COMPANION—

ROBERT STODDART ROBERTSON,

Late 1st Lieut. 93rd New York Vol. Infantry,
Brevet Captain U. S. Vols.
Brevet Col. N.Y. Vols.

DECEMBER 3, 1884.

CINCINNATI:

HENRY C. SHERICK,
1884.

From the Wilderness to Spottsylvania.

At the beginning of the Wilderness Campaign, it was my fortune to be serving as Aide-de-camp to a gallant and successful Brigade Commander, who, in the bloody days which followed, won the stars of a Major-General, has since become famous for his brilliant and successful Indian campaigns, and is now a Brigadier in the Regular Army—General Nelson A. Miles.

Our Brigade, composed of the 61st New York, the 81st, 140th, and 183rd Pennsylvania, and the 26th Michigan Volunteers, was the first of the First Division, (under General Francis C. Barlow) of the grand old Second Army Corps, commanded by Hancock—"the Superb."

It was a corps whose record was equal to that of any other, and the proud historic boast of our Division was, that it had never lost a gun or a color, although its colors had gleamed and flashed, and its guns had thundered in the very front, on every battlefield of the Army of the Potomac.

No other Division or Corps in the Armies of the Union had this proud distinction, and it seems to me to be worth all the privations, all the dangers and all the wounds of those awful, eventful, historic days, to be able to say now, "I was a member of the grand old Second Corps."

Our badge was the far-famed "Trefoil," the boys called it "the ace of clubs," and in all our campaigns, clubs were trumps.

After the battle of Mine Run, which was fought in the last of November, the winter of 1863-4 was spent by the

Army of the Potomac north of the Rapidan, the Second Corps lying near Stevensburg, in the usual routine of winter-quarters, 'except that we infused some of the pleasures of civilization into our humdrum camp life. A winter in tents, engaged in daily drills, guard-mountings and parades, is monotonous; and even card-playing, horse-racing, and kindred intellectual amusements become "stale and unprofitable" when made a steady occupation.

Visits to friends in distant camps, and long rides along the picket lines, leaping fences and ditches to try the mettle of our horses; or down to the fords to have a chat with the Johnnies on their outposts, failed to be exciting after awhile.

We had dinners and suppers in the officers' quarters, where by a rule as inflexible as the laws of the Medes and Persians, each guest must sing a song, tell a story, or dance around a hat, to keep up a "feast of reason, and a flow of soul."

Games of ball and foot-ball were played until all interest was lost in them. Beans were won on all sorts of games of chance, until beans palled on the sight, as they had long before, on the soldiers' taste.

We found a means of making ourselves quite comfortable for the winter, and for a time amused, as well as busied ourselves with work. We found a dilapidated saw-mill on Mountain Run, without saws, and almost without wheels and machinery. We purchased saws and the necessary running gear from Baltimore, and, with skilful volunteer workmen, soon had our mill in full blast, sawing lumber with which to improve our tents, and build cabins.

We became quite aristocratic and resolved to celebrate Washington's birthday by a grand ball. So we built a hall 90x30 feet in extent, with a "lean to," running the whole length, properly divided for dressing and cloak-rooms, and a spacious supper room.

This was roofed with canvass, and, when decorated with battle flags and wreaths of evergreens, with stacks of arms, and a couple of brass Napoleons, it excelled in artistic beauty any ball room I have ever seen.

The tickets of admission were ten dollars each, and were in great demand.

Many of the officers' wives and daughters enlivened the camp by their presence, and hundreds more came expressly for the occasion. The Vice-President and a number of senators were there with their wives, and Governor Curtin and wife acted as a convoy for a bevy of beauties from Philadelphia, Washington, Baltimore and New York.

Gens. Meade, Hancock, Warren, Pleasonton, Kilpatrick and Gregg were there, and so was one-legged Dahlgren, whose sad fate it was a few days later to be killed in his raid on Richmond. It was a scene of beauty, gallantry and chivalry, and the dawn paled the thousand tapers which lighted the hall, before the dance was ended. It was the vision of a night, and seemed altogether unreal—as if it were some fairy palace risen in a night, whose revelling occupants, after tripping gaily in the fairy dance, fled with the ushering in of day.

Then we of the First Division resolved to organize a lecture bureau, and erected a hall of ample dimensions at our headquarters. It was inaugurated early in March by a grand concert for the benefit of the Division band. Admission, one dollar.

My printed programme recalls the fact that few concerts of to-day can show a more brilliant repertoire, and few performances have been more heartily applauded.

We found difficulty in procuring lecturers to educate the mind; so we filled up the time with frequent hops to educate the feet, and at these—the male persuasion so far outnumbered the female—the ladies got their fill of dancing, and many a sham fight was engaged in to determine who should secure the fair partners for a quadrille.

At last, "Grace Greenwood" consented to visit us for a course of two lectures. The first was "The Silver Lining to the War Cloud," the second, "Washington, London and Rome," both delivered with the charming grace and tender pathos for which she was famous.

She says of it in her "Records of Five Years," "an audience so illustrious, I had surely never confronted before. Groups of young officers sparkled around their generals like planets around their central orbs. In front was a starry sprinkling of ladies, and here and there through the hall were scattered civilians looking remote, dim and nebulous."

She learned in the hop that followed, that her heroes could "wheel in the waltz, change base in the quadrille, deploy in the lancers, charge in the polka, and execute flank movements in the Virginia reel."

The next day was "St. Patrick's day in the morning," and the gallant Irish Brigade under Meagher (our second brigade) had made great preparations for a proper observance of the day. First there was a hurdle race, where hurdles three and four feet high and ditches four and six feet wide, must be cleared by the bold riders, and several horses and riders rolled together as a penalty for testing their leaping capacity too far. Then, climbing the well soaped pole, or chasing the greased and shaven pig, which must be caught and held by a four inch tail; racing in sacks, racing in wheelbarrows, and kindred sports, enlivened and closed the amusements of the day. It was a scene to remind one of the jousts and tournaments of the days of chivalry; and now, as then, fair hands crowned the victor, not disdaining to deliver the trophies of valor to the winner, whether he be the bold hurdle rider or the captor of the pig.

Think not, however, that all was given up to wild, unthinking revelry. Such moments as these were the moments of relaxation from severe and unrelenting discipline. There was reveille at day break, and roll-call, then breakfast, after which, came guard mounting, and squad and company drills until noon. Then brigade and division drills occupied the afternoon, and dress parade at sundown finished the day. Intersperse this with details for picket duty, policing the camps, and building miles of corduroy roads, and you have the ordinary routine of our winter camp.

All this was preparing us for the work of the coming campaign, rumors and premonitions of which were in the air, and which all believed would prove a bloody and terrific one.

We were seeing the silver lining, but were soon to see the reverse of the war cloud, when rollicking pleasure must give place for visions of desolation and blood, and our winter carnival be supplemented by the wild carnival of death.

At last the rumors of a contemplated advance took definite form in the enforced disappearance from camp of all visitors, including those gentlemen in silk hats and patent leathers who visited us from time to time to find out why the Army of the Potomac did not move.

Marching orders were received on the morning of May 3d.

We were to be ready to march at 11 P. M. with five days cooked rations, and sixty rounds of ammunition. Baggage and tents to be sent to the rear. It was many a weary day before we saw either again.

My duty for the day was to detail and mount a brigade picket guard of five hundred men, ready for marching, and with them to relieve the old guard on the outposts extending five miles from Kelly's Ford on the Rappahannock to the Rapidan, so that these could prepare for the march. Returning with them to camp in the evening, how changed we found the scene we had learned to look upon as home. Where thousands of tents had covered the hills and plains in the morning sun, now all was bare and desolate, except for the rapidly shifting lines of blue, and the glistening and flashing of the bright muskets, as the army formed for its march. A brief time for preparation and supper, and promptly at 11, our part of the great coil began to unwind, and we were on our march to Ely's ford, on the Rapidan, beyond which lay the confederate hosts ready to welcome us "with hospitable hands to bloody graves." We had tried their temper on

many a well fought field, and knew them to be a brave, skillful, and determined foe.

The night was mild, and the men in good spirits; and soon the woods through which we marched resounded with the melody of ten thousand voices, singing—

“John Brown’s body lies mouldering in the grave,
His soul goes marching on.”

The wild, weird music of that night seems still resounding in my ears, and a feeling of sadness comes over me, when I think of the many voices which rang out on the balmy air of that night, but which never sang again unless in the angel choir of the vast unknown.

Arriving at the river shortly after midnight, we found that our picket guard, which was to meet us there had not arrived. We could not leave them to uncertainty, with a probable enemy in our rear, so it fell to me to find and bring them in. Back to the camp we had left was five miles, thence across the country by the usual route to Kelly’s ford was seven miles more; the road back was blocked with troops, artillery and wagons, so the only way open for speed was across an unknown country with only the stars for a guide.

It was four in the morning ere that lonely ride through the pine woods and over bare fields was ended, and my weary horse stopped at the camp fire of the reserve guard. The order had miscarried and we had to relieve the picket as we marched, starting in the grey streak of dawn.

It was noon when we reached the river. The men crossed on pontoon bridges, while the mounted officers took the ford to water their horses. Mine was tired, and found the temptation to bathe too strong to resist, and laid down to roll in the water. Of course I got off in haste, and in water up to my neck, to be heartily quizzed by those who saw it, some asking if I always took a bath on horseback.

Slowly we toiled on, taking the fields in order to pass the slowly-moving column to our proper place, and at 4 P. M. were rejoiced to find our Corps in bivouac on the old battle