

# **THE BATTLE OF FRANKLIN**

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The battle of Franklin by John K. Shellenberger

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**JOHN K. SHELLENBERGER**

**THE BATTLE  
OF FRANKLIN**



## THE BATTLE OF FRANKLIN.

BY CAPTAIN JOHN K. SHELLENBERGER,  
64TH OHIO INFANTRY.

(Read December 9th, 1902.)

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Anything concerning the battle of Franklin coming my way has always been devoured with a greedy interest, and because of this interest, I have given fully ten times more research to this battle than to any other in which I was engaged. On account of the open character of the battle field, the limited area which was fought over, and my presence in the midst of that area, the leading features of the battle came under my personal observation, but wherever that observation was wanting for giving a clear account I have supplied the deficiency with information gathered from other reliable sources.

I was commanding Company B, Sixty-fourth Ohio regiment, Conrad's brigade, Wagner's division, Fourth corps. Wagner's division was the rear guard on the retreat to Franklin, and about mid-forenoon of November 30th, 1864, arrived on top of the Winsted Hills, two miles south of Franklin. Halting there long enough to snatch a hasty breakfast the division then hurried into battle line to delay the columns of the enemy, in close pursuit, by compelling them to deploy. The position was held as long as possible without bringing on a battle and then Wagner began to retire slowly towards Franklin. The town lies nestled in a little valley in a bend of Harpeth River. A stand was made to get the artillery and the long wagon train over the river and while our commanding general, Schofield, was giving his

personal attention to the facilities for crossing, the main body of the army, under the supervision of General Cox, was engaged in establishing our defensive line, which stretched across the river bend, in the arc of a circle, inclosing the town. As fast as the troops arrived and were placed in position they hurried to cover themselves with breastworks, and by the time the enemy was ready to attack, Cox's line was well intrenched. The train got over the river in time for the troops to have crossed before the enemy appeared, but the opportunity thus offered for securing a much stronger defensive position, with the river in front instead of in rear, was not improved.

By one o'clock Wagner had fallen back so close to Cox's line that he began a movement to withdraw his division behind that line. Conrad's brigade had been called in from the left flank and was marching in column of fours along the Columbia pike, with the head of column approaching the breastworks, when Wagner received an order from Schofield to take up a position in front of Cox's line. In obedience to this order Conrad counter-marched his brigade a short distance and then deployed it in a single line of battle, having a general direction nearly parallel with Cox's line. Five of the six regiments composing the brigade were posted on the east side and one on the west side of the pike 470 yards in advance of Cox's line, as measured along the pike. Lane's brigade, following Conrad's, was posted on Conrad's right. Lane's line trending backward on the right in general conformation with Cox's line. When General Hood assaulted, Conrad's five regiments east of the pike proved to be in the direct pathway of his assault and they were overwhelmed before the line west of the pike, which was greatly refused as to that pathway, became fully engaged. When Opdycke's brigade, the last to withdraw, came up to the position occupied by Conrad and Lane, Wagner rode forward and ordered Opdycke into line with them. Colonel Opdycke stren-

nously objected to this order. He declared that troops out in front of the breastworks were in a good position to aid the enemy and nobody else. He also pleaded that his brigade was worn out, having been marching for several hours during the morning, while covering the rear of our retreating column, in line of battle in sight of the enemy, climbing over fences and passing through woods, thickets and muddy cornfields, and was entitled to a relief. While they were discussing the matter they rode along the pike together, the brigade marching in column behind them, until they entered the gap in the breastworks left for the pike and finding the ground in that vicinity fully occupied by other troops they kept along till they came to the first clear space which was about 200 yards inside the breastworks. There Wagner turned away with the final remark, "Well, Opdycke, fight when and where you damn please; we all know you'll fight." Colonel Opdycke then had his brigade stack arms on the clear space, and his persistence in thus marching his brigade inside the breastworks about two hours later proved to be the salvation of our army.

When Conrad's brigade took up its advanced position we all supposed it would be only temporary, but soon an orderly came along the line with instructions for the company commanders and he told me that the orders were to hold the position to the last man, and to have my sergeants fix bayonets and to instruct my company that any man, not wounded, who should attempt to leave the line without orders, would be shot or bayoneted by the sergeants.

Four of Conrad's regiments, including the Sixty-fourth Ohio, had each received a large assignment of drafted men so recently that none of these men had been with their regiments more than a month and many had joined within a week. The old soldiers all believed that our harsh orders were given for effect upon these drafted men for we never before had received any such orders on going into battle.



We then began to fortify. On the retreat that morning we had passed an abandoned wagon loaded with intrenching tools, and by order each company had taken two spades from the wagon, the men relieving each other in carrying them. These spades were the only tools we had to work with. The ground we occupied had been frequently camped on by other troops who had destroyed all the fences and other materials ordinarily found so handy in building hasty breastworks, so that on this occasion our only resource was the earth thrown with the few spades we had. Under the stimulus afforded by the sight of the enemy in our front preparing for attack the men eagerly relieved each other in handling the spades. As soon as a man working showed the least sign of fatigue a comrade would grab the spade out of his hands and ply it with desperate energy, but in spite of our utmost exertions when the attack came we had only succeeded in throwing up a slight embankment which was high enough to give good protection against musket balls to the men squatting down in the ditch from which the earth had been thrown, but on the outside, where there was no ditch, it was so low that a battle line could march over it without halting. We were out in a large old cottonfield not under cultivation that year. The ground ascended with an easy grade from our position back to Cox's line, and all the intervening space, as well as a wide expanse to our left, was as bare as a floor of any obstruction. In our front was a wide valley extending to the Winsted Hills. This valley was dotted with a few farm buildings, and there were also some small areas of woodland, but much the greater portion of it consisted of cleared fields. As our line was first established the 65th Ohio was on the left of the brigade, but it was afterwards withdrawn, leaving the 64th Ohio on the left and three companies, H, K and B, were partially refused to cover the left flank. My position was at the refused angle.

About the time that we began to fortify my attention



was called to a group of mounted officers in a field on the side of the Winsted Hills, to the east of the Columbia Pike, and about a mile and a half in our front. This group undoubtedly consisted of General Hood and his staff. An officer who was present with Hood has stated that from their position they had a good view of Cox's line and that after giving this line a hasty survey through his field glass General Hood slapped the glass shut with an emphatic gesture and decisively exclaimed, "We will attack." Staff officers then began to gallop forth from the group with orders for the troops to form for assault. At the angle where I was our view of the valley directly in our front and to our right was shut off by a piece of woodland a short distance in advance of our position, so that we did not see anything of the movements of Cheatham's corps, which formed astride the Columbia pike. But looking up the valley to our left front was a wide expanse of cleared fields and in these fields we plainly saw the movements of a large part of Stewart's corps. They first came into view from behind a body of timber over towards the river, deploying from column on the right by file into line on double quick. As fast as the troops could be marched up from the rear Stewart extended his lines over towards the pike. We could see all their movements so plainly while they were adjusting their lines that there was not a particle of doubt in the mind of any man in my vicinity as to what was coming, and the opinion was just as universal that a big blunder was being committed in compelling us to fight with our flank fully exposed in the midst of a wide field, while in plain sight in our rear was a good line of breastworks with its flank protected by the river. The indignation of the men grew almost into a mutiny and the swearing of those gifted in profanity exceeded all their previous efforts in that line. Even the green drafted men could see the folly of our position, for one of them said to me, "What can our generals be thinking about in keeping

us out here. We can do no good here. We are only in the way. Why don't they take us back to the breastworks?"

The regiment contained a number of men who had not re-enlisted when the regiment had veteranized and whose time had already expired. They were to be mustered out as soon as we got back to Nashville and with home so nearly in sight after more than three years of hard service these men were especially rebellious. First Sergeant Libey of Company H, was a non-veteran, and was also a fine specimen, mentally and physically, of the best type of our volunteer soldiers. When the enemy was approaching he twice got up from the line and started for the breastworks, vehemently declaring that he would not submit to having his life thrown away, after his time was out, by such a stupid blunder. The little squad of non-veterans belonging to the company both times got up and started to go with him and both times they all returned to the line on the profane order of their captain, "God damn you, come back here." A few minutes later the sergeant was killed while we were retreating to the breastworks.

It took two hours, from two till four o'clock, for the corps of Cheatham and Stewart to come up and get into position and then they advanced to the assault in heavy lines of battle. We kept the spades flying until they had approached within range of our skirmish line, which fired a few shots and then began to retreat rapidly. Then the spades were dropped and the men taking their muskets squatted down behind the low streak of earth they had thrown out to receive the coming onset. A little later Company E, from the skirmish line, came scurrying back, the men, with a very serious look on their faces, settling down with the line like a covey of flushed birds dropping into cover.

All that has been related concerning Conrad's brigade took place in full view of that part of Cox's line extending

from the river on our left to the Columbia pike, and if there had been any previous doubt in the minds of any of these on-looking thousands as to Hood's intention, his determination to assault was as plainly advertised as it possibly could be during the intense minutes that it took his army to march in battle line from the place of its formation to our advanced position. General Cox has claimed that Wagner's division was ordered to report to him and that he was in immediate command of all the troops engaged in the battle. By his own statement he was on a knoll in rear of Stiles' brigade, on the left of his line, where he had the best view of the whole field. From this knoll he had been watching the preparations for attack, and all the time directly under his eyes was Conrad's brigade busily engaged in fortifying to resist that attack. If Wagner was disobeying his orders by remaining in front too long, as was given out a few days later when he was made a scapegoat for the blunder of his position, Cox was watching him do it and took no measures to prevent it. If it was Cox's expectation that Wagner would withdraw the two brigades at the last moment he must have known better when he saw Conrad's brigade squat down behind their half-built breastwork preparatory to giving battle. There was even then time, if prompt action had been taken, for a staff officer to gallop to the front, before the firing began, with a peremptory order for Conrad and Lane to get out of the way, but Cox, fresh from a personal conference with Schofield, to whom he had reported the situation and whose orders he then received with reference to holding the position, looked quietly on and thereby approved of Wagner's action.

It was a pleasant, hazy, Indian summer day, and so warm that I was carrying my overcoat on my arm. When the line squatted down I folded the coat into a compact bundle and placing it on the edge of the bank in rear of my company and sitting on it, with my feet in the shallow ditch,