

Extract of a letter from a member of Co. E, 27th Mass. Vols., 1st Brigade, 2d Division, dated

IN THE TRENCHES, NEAR PETERSBURG, Va., }
August 4, 1864. }

We had heard for a long time that our forces were undermining the rebel works, and had even seen working parties going to and fro—but we could not locate the mine. The first regular intimation we had that things were approaching a crisis, was last Friday, the 29th, when our Corps (the 18th,) were put under light marching orders with two days rations—though as usual not knowing where we were going. At dark we took up the line of march towards the Weldon Railroad, and camped in line to the rear of the 9th Corps (Burnside.) The 2d Corps (Hancock's,) were massed still farther on our right. We knew this meant business and awaited with anxious hearts the first glimmer of morn. At about five o'clock we heard a heavy, rumbling, earthquake sound, followed by a severe concussion, and looking towards the rebel lines, we saw their largest fort going skyward, presenting the appearance for a moment of an inverted cone, its apex resting on the centres of the fort, while its base was a mass of timber, earth and men, going skyward—this was quickly transformed into a huge cloud of dust, and settled slowly back, showing an unsightly pile of ruins where once was a splendid fort. As soon as the explosion took place our batteries opened upon the city and lines with the most terrific cannonade I ever heard. It was nearly an hour before the rebs replied a shot, and when they did, they were scattered and uncertain, showing that they were completely surprised. An hour after the explosion, the 9th and part of the 18th Corps, charged the rebel lines with yells, carrying the first and second lines and capturing many prisoners. Our centre here was held by a Negro Division, who per previous arrangement were to continue the charge beyond the first line. The rebels recognized them and poured a terrible fire into their approaching column, which wavered, and finally halted. Their officers and men were falling like leaves around them—they fought desperately for a short time when they turned and fled! this broke our centre of course and the rebs charged en-masse upon our weakened lines, driving us back to our first captured lines. There we met them with a withering fire of musketry and cannon, hurling them back again and again, only to return yet more fierce and enraged upon us. Their enfilading and cross fire raked the ditch in every direction and their mortar shells dropped among our troops every instant, but they held the line against every odds for nearly an hour, when orders came to fall back to the original position, which was done with severe loss. We captured several cannon and five banners, but our loss was fearful in this terrible hand to hand encounter, and the field of battle was completely covered with dead and wounded.

"Rider and horse, friend, foe, in one red burial blent."

The fault of the whole failure seems to come back upon the nigger, and many conflicting reports concerning the conflict gain circulation, but at this early day I can give preference or credit to neither. Certain it is our forces sustained a signal defeat—gaining nothing at all, but putting five thousand men "*hors de combat*." The rebel loss though severe will not approach ours.

Monday, (1st of August,) we had a flag of truce and buried our dead together in huge trenches, and talked with the Johnnies when their officers would permit. — They were defiant and brave, of course, and rallied us some, telling us they had "threshed us from Spottsylvania to Petersburg," but the end of defeat was ours to chew, and we swallowed this railing as best we could and closed our labors rapidly, and by noon the crack of musketry was heard again along our line, and everything settled back again into the same old routine of duties, with our forces resting and watching behind the same old lines, only a little more watchful perhaps, and now this fierce conflict seems like a dream to look back upon.

When will these things end? I am sure it would cure any one of all desire to fight to go once over such a battle field after the smoke and dust have settled away, and view the wounded and torn forms of lifeless clay scattered so thickly around. One's heart will sicken at the bare recital of such horrors, however callous and indifferent it may become by frequent association, but half its terrors are not realized by recital for half cannot be told, but come with me and we will wander over the Aeldema and see for ourselves a few of its horrors. First we come to a row of men piled up in tiers, with unclosed eyes and bloody forms awaiting burial in a trench that is fast being sunk by their side. Coarse jests and idle words are the *burial service* of the dead here, and if you ask any question you will get some coarse return, often that will shock your better sense. Yonder, just before you, is a man's leg, still further a head, close by the torn and mangled body still bleeding but pulseless; another near by with a ghastly wound in his head, from which his brain protrudes, is still alive and calling for mother or wife to help him in his dying agony. Here is a wounded man who has lain on the field forty-eight hours, and 'tis awful to hear him cry water! water! and then to have him die while drinking from your canteen. Another wounded man being carried off on a stretcher suffering terrible agony from his wound and begging in piteous tones for some one to kill him, and thus I might, but will not, multiply my account. You can imagine the worst possible sight and you will find realities that will surpass it.

F. A. R.