

LETTER FROM THE 5TH NEW HAMPSHIRE VOL.

CAMP IN REAR OF PETERSBURG, VA.,
June 20, 1864.

To the Editors of the Irish-American:

Gentlemen—You will perceive by the above date that I have “changed my base of operations” since I wrote you last from Point Lookout, Md.; and short as the time has been, let me assure you that the change produced would do justice to an age of hard toil. It is wonderful how much can be realized in a few short days. Let me give you a slight sketch of my travels with the Army of the Potomac, and at the same time request that you and your readers will make all due allowance for the very limited means which are at the disposal of a private soldier in regard to obtaining information from the “powers that be.”

We arrived at Front Royal on the 28th ult., and proceeded to Cold Harbor without delay. The march was a long and harrassing one. The weather was intensely hot, and the dust was suffocating, so that between daily and nightly marches, sun and dust, we had for five days a pretty trying time for men who had not been accustomed to active service of late. Not that my regiment is not as old in service as any in the Second Corps; but, having been badly cut up, it was sent home to be recruited, and the suffering was proportionate on the men, many of whom were young soldiers. On arriving at Cold Harbor, we faced the enemy without delay, and on the following morning attacked him, after having received orders to charge on the enemy's fortifications. We had lain in the woods all night, at the foot of a steep hill, and dug small holes for ourselves with the aid of our bayonets. So much were we annoyed by the enemy's fire, that anything was preferable to the position which we then occupied. Col. Miles, who commands our brigade (the 1st of 1st division), led the attack, and it is hardly necessary to say that the important post could not be better occupied. His gallantry and determination are subjects of general commendation among the men. He has already been wounded on more than one occasion, still the blood he has lost has not checked his patriotism or been the means of keeping him out of the service of his country. At the command “charge!” every heart bounded with enthusiasm; every nerve strung, and all past fatigue was forgotten, in the one great hope that we should now have an opportunity of avenging our hardships on the enemy who had been the cause of so much trouble to ourselves personally and to the country generally. Col. Hapgood, of my regiment, gave us the word to “fix bayonets” and “charge,” which was responded to with a hearty cheer. Up the hill we went with the speed and force of lightning, amid a galling and withering fire from the enemy. Men fell at every step, and the work of death soon became visible in our ranks. Still on—on, we went, nothing fearing, nothing heeding, save that the moment of vengeance was close at hand. On the opposite hill stood the rebel breastworks, and up that hill we ascended, cheering vociferously. Alas! it was a bloody journey. Many a brave heart ceased to beat on that path—many a man lost a limb for life. The groans of the dying and the wounded rung in our ears, and these but served to heighten the desperation of those who rushed madly on, into the jaws of death.

We gained the top of the steep hill. The enemy on the abut strove hard to repel us, but in vain. The die was cast; the moment had come for which we had burned all night long and victory or death was the watch-word of every man who rushed on to the conflict. The rebels strove with desperate strength, but in vain; the ardor of our men could not be abated—death to them was preferable to defeat. Into the breastwork they dashed sweeping everything that attempted to stay their course, and soon the disorder of a flying foe told how well they done their work. It would be folly and false to assert that the foe did not fight desperately. They fought with all the strength and energy of despair, but they were forced to succumb to the crushing force of steady and firm resolve.

As I wish to be as brief as possible, I will only say, by way of giving you an idea of the slaughter that took place, that my regiment alone lost over two hundred men and officers, although the fight only lasted about an hour. I must hasten on. On Sunday night, the 12th inst., about 10 o'clock, we abandoned our position here and took up our line of march for the James River, where we arrived on Monday evening, after a very tiresome march. Heat and long marches do more mischief among the men than anything else. The water which they were compelled to drink in most places, was bad, and this, too often, has a baneful effect. We crossed the James' on Tuesday night, at Windmill Landing; and on Wednesday started for our present position. Wednesday was the hottest day we felt this season, and it preyed heavily upon us. There was a rage amongst us for water; the burning thirst should be satisfied, and many of the men were seized with diarrhoea. But military necessity knows no obstacles save those of the enemy, and after travelling from one o'clock in the afternoon until twelve at night, we rested our weary limbs within about two miles of the doomed city of Petersburg, having marched something like twenty-one miles. After having slept about two hours, we again fell in and advanced about half a mile in the direction of the enemy. We had no breathing time allowed us, as you will see by the dates; and on this day, Thursday, we were doomed to meet the foe. We lay in the woods all day, under a deadly fire; and let me assure you it is very strange what little regard the villains evince for life or property. As an instance of this fact, just as I concluded the last sentence, with my back resting against a tree, a bullet came along and dropped right at my feet proving clearly that they care very little about hitting one. But, as I was telling you. On Thursday evening, as the sun was waning in the horizon, the heavy, hoarse crashes of artillery, and the sharp ringing of musketry growing more and more incessant each minute, told us that hot work was at hand. Generals and aids flying around on horseback—orderlies hastening hither and thither—stretcher-bearers, with the blood-stained symbols of their calling in their hands, together with the silent, speechless, but determined bearing of soldiers, bespoke the approach of a deadly struggle. Col. Hapgood, whose coolness in time of danger is in itself an inspiration to the men of this regiment, gave us the order to fall in, which was promptly obeyed; and we moved from our lurking place in the woods over a steep hill to the westward. In front of us we could see, on another hill, vast masses or lines of troops all awaiting with anxiety the moment when the struggle should begin. Our advance breastwork, in the centre attack, stood on a hill, and was separated from that of the enemy by another just as steep. Between them was a low, marshy bottom, thickly set with trees and shrubs; and on the intervening hill stood up, like living things, tall stalks of young corn, waving in the light evening zephyrs. The rebels occupied the bushy ravine up to this evening: but the withering breath of the Irish Brigade was upon them like a simoom, and they vanished in an hour. They fled, but not without bringing with them traces of Irish valor—the rule, which ever attends the charge of the Celt. The cheering charge of the Brigade is as full of hope to our men as it is of terror to the unfortunate foe. Ireland has furnished many a brigade, and the histories of many countries bear testimony to their heroic actions in the field; but never has she sent forth a band of which she may feel prouder than the one which is now fighting the battles of our adopted land. As long as America's history lasts, so long will the name of this Brigade be wedded with the name of Columbia. Ask any man here, no matter what his prejudices may be; no matter how much his jealousy for the fame of his own regiment may bias his feelings—“What troops are best on the charge?” and the answer is unhesitatingly given, “The Irish Brigade.” The Brigade having driven the enemy from the ravine, my regiment was ordered to charge them up the corn hill. We hastily obeyed; broke through the thick brush, and approached the base of the hill, on the other side of which the defeated foe took shelter in his entrenchments, and poured upon us a terrible musketry fire. We mounted the steep hill with comparative coolness; and upon reaching its summit our position, to an eye-witness, would appear hopeless. The rebel sharp shooters did their work of death upon us. Several of our men were wounded, including our Colonel, and one lieutenant killed, and we were at length forced to make a virtue of necessity and retreat to the rear side of the hill from which we had come. The same hill gave shelter to us and to our enemies. There we lay until night gave her shelter, and we saw ourselves masters of the hotly-contested position. The enemy ceased firing to a certain extent, and we took but little time to erect a breastwork. Next day Burnside's Corps made an attack on the enemy's breastworks, but owing to some mistake it was a failure, and they lost heavily. In the evening another attack was made—the defense charged and taken—and the American flag raised aloft in the sunlight, amid the cheers of thousands. My regiment again charged, and held the enemy at bay for two hours and a half. We fired volley upon volley upon them during this period, and when we were relieved every man was almost completely exhausted, though each still declared he would not be relieved until success was certain. I am, with respect, yours, very sincerely,

JAMES McDONNELL,

Co. B, 5th N. H. V.,
1st Brigade, 2d Division, 2d Army Corps,
Army near Petersburg.