[1894, June 10] /

CHAPTER V.

BATTLE OF SPOTTSYLVANIA.

Thursday, May 12th, 1864.

For several days both armies had been moving toward Spottsylvania Court House- a strong strategic point- until it became a race as to who would get there first, and ~~receive~~ secure the advantage in position. Wednesday, May 11th was a day of no large military operations, tho' it meant a great loss to our Company as before related, but was spent mostly in skirmishing and changing positions on both sides, and in making every possible preparation for the great battle, which had been determined should take place the next day. Hancock's 2nd Corps,(ours) had been selected to lead the assault. Gen. Nelson A. Miles, commanded the first Brigad of three regiments, of which the 26th Michigan was one. As stated at the close of the last chapter, we had had a hard fight in the afternoon with a heavy loss to our Company, but there was no time to mourn the loss of comrades, stern duties lay before us for which we must prepare. At 11 o'clock P. M. the cry to "fall in" is heard, and we find our accustomed places in the ranks, the night is dark and rainy, and in the darkness and through the deep mud, we march, hour after hour, noting around us preparations for a terrible conflict on the morrow. Artillery and Infantry are massed in large bodies; now we saw by the dim light of lanterns a pack of artillery, the horses standing with drooping heads, the men moving quietly among them. Then came squadrons of Cavalry, while large bodies of Infantry were marching in different directions to their respective positions, while strict orders were given to make as little noise as possible. It was a long dreary night, but with the earliest dawn of day, we came to our outer line of work, and halted for a short time. It was just in front of us

that the Vital Section of the Enemy lay. A strong angle of earth works ditched in front, defended by cannon at every point, and held by Johnson's Division of Ewell's Corps.

I thought that after marching all night we would stop long enough to make some coffee and rest a few minutes, but I did not understand the situation. To rest myself a little, I took off my knapsack and laid it down by a tree, thinking I could work to better advantage, without it. I marked the spot, as I intended to get it when I came back, but I did not come back that way. After a few minutes Gen. Miles and staff appeared, and I heard him say to Col. Saviers, commanding our Regiment, "Form your Regiment in close columns by Division, and move immediately against the enemy's works." A heavy fog prevailed which enabled us to move near to the enemy's lines without being discovered. I can hardly tell how far it was between the lines, perhaps 40 to 50 rods; perhaps half a miles Little talk was indulged in as we moved along but a great deal of thinking; a strong and determined foe was just before us, protected by their works, what would be the result, as we came together with loaded muskets and fixed bayonets, but for this hour we had long been preparing, and we must not falter now, and yet our thoughts would revert to friends far away, to quiet homes in Michigan, to Father and Mothers gathered there, who would soon be watching the papers for reports from the battle fields, fearing to find our names there, perhaps a prayer for protection arose to Him who watches over the Conflicts of Life, but there is now no time for thought--hardly for prayer, but for sharp, determined action. We had covered perhaps, two-thirds of the distance, before a shot was fired, then a picket discovered us, and the report of his musket as he fired, sounded like a cannon on the damp heavy air, then another and another rang out,

and the whizzing of the bullets were heard all around us. A peculiar sound, once heard, is never forgotten. Now Comrade, George Wright, of my Company, drops out of the ranks, the first one I saw wounded that day. He stood grasping his left wrist with his right hand, while the blood ran in a stream off his fingers, Lieut. Grisson told him to hurry to the rear, when he would find the surgeons, who would care for his wound. (note. 25 years after I met this man, face to face, in a town in Northern Michigan, and he remembered me, and instantly called me by name.) A few steps further on, and Lieut. Grisson struck by a ball in the thigh, falls close to my side. I bent over him a moment as he lay quivering on the ground, but remembering what he had told the wounded man a moment ago, I hastened on with the Regiment, (Note. 25 years after, the Commissioner of Pensions wrote to me for information as to his being wounded at the Battle of Spottsylvania, I wrote him a full account of what I had personal knowledge of, and a short time after her widow's claim for pension was allowed).

And now we are close to the works, behind which are crowded the men of the gray. In front of them they had placed branches of trees, with the points of the limbs sharpened, and pointing outward, which greatly retarded our progress at this critical time, and they created havoc in our ranks, while we were getting though. I had been delayed two minutes with Lieut. Grisson so that the most of our Company were over the breast works when I reached them. Our columnes in front had taken the enemy by surprise, and had forced a passage over at the point of the bayonet, brave Samuel Appleton, Daniel Meakin, Rufus Wines and others leap upon the breast works, a short but bloody conflict ensues, and we have possession of their works, but they cost us the life blood of some of our bravest and best. Farewell, dear Comrades, we remember

and greet you, in this year of our Lord, forty-five years after you gave yourselves a willing sacrifice for the land of your Love, even as He gave Himself an offering for the sins of the world.

For four hundred years, the student of History has held up to the gaze of the world as an object lesson in patriotism, the example of that brave Swiss soldier, who in a battle with the Austrians, gathered the spears of his countries' enemies in his side that a breach might be made in their ranks, but devotion to Country is not confined alone to the past, and no truer or braver or more patriotic was he, than my own Comrades, who on that May morning, gathered in their breasts the bayonets of their Country's foes, that a way might be made for Liberty.

The scene inside the enemy's works was one of disorder and confusion the trenches were crowded with their men, hardly aroused from their slumbers and many only partly dressed. They fired on us as we advanced toward them, and we promptly returned their fire. As we drew nearer, they threw down their arms, and cried out that they surrendered. We ordered them over the works, leaving their arms behind them, and in a few minutes the route over which we had just come, was filled with rebels, who were being hurried as prisoners of war to the rear. The Second Corps captured that morning the entire division of Gen. Edward Johnson, with their commander, about three thousand men; also. ~~altho'~~ a Brigade or two of other troops commanded by Gen. Stuart. The captured division was a part of Stonewall Jackson's famous old Corps.

When Gen. Jackson was brought into the presence of Gen. Hancock, who had known him at West Point, the latter extended his hand. The rebel was exceedingly angry at the Yankee trick that had been played on him that morning, and said that under the circumstances he could not take it. Gen. Hancock replied that under no other circumstances would

he have offered it. Some of my comrades who guarded him during the day said that he paced back and forth all day like an enraged Lion. He seemingly could not be reconciled to the situation.

From the time we struck the enemy's works there was no effort to keep up any Company or Regimental formation. We passed up their lines, every man a commander with full power to take prisoners, and shoot down all who resisted their authority. Human Life is held at a very cheap rate now. The roar of musketry was terrific, the bullets were flying in every direction, but their whizzing causes little fear now, for we are getting used to the sound, and we have learned another thing; that no one hears the whiz of the bullet that strikes him, and so we go up the lines taking large numbers of prisoners, but while 40 or 50 pieces of artillery had actually been captured, many of them had remained on debatable ground, and only eighteen actually came into our possession. As we were passing along a my eye fell on a picture which has ever been retained in my memory. At the first intimation that we were charging their works, a battery of artillery had been ordered to their support. It came into position just as we struck their lines, but had not time to fire a single gun. They saw they were too late and quickly retired to their rear, leaving the horses, and cannon to their fate. What I saw was this: Eight or ten cannons standing side by side some two rods apart with six or eight horses attached to each. Some of the horses were wounded by the fire which swept the field, while the others were rearing and plunging in a terrible way. The poor brutes seemed to understand that they had been deserted by their masters, Some of the leaders had partly turned around, some of them were shot down in their harness, and they were trampling on each other, overturning the cannon, and all together it was a scene of indescribable confusion, and under any other

circumstances would have deeply moved ones pity.

When relating what I saw at one of our Company Reunions, a comrade told me that one of the artillery-men made a desperate effort to carry off his horses and gun. He had partly turned his team around, and was in a fair way to effect his object, when my informant shot one of the horses, and the team thus crippled, were left behind while the driver made his escape.

The charge of the Second Corps was followed by a heavy cannonading all along the line, to which the enemy replied with great vigor. Five furious charges were made to retake that position. "Ewell's Corps", driven from it in the morning came down first, and were repulsed. Gen. Hill moved down from the right joined Ewell, and threw his divisions into the struggle. Gen. Wright moved up from the right, supporting Hancock to meet the surge. Anderson came in from the extreme left of the enemy's line. Warren sent in troops from the left of ours. The lines of both armies, thus contracted, met in a continual death grapple in and to the right of the angle taken by us in the morning. The enemy's columns dashed with unflinching determination against our lines, retiring each time with great loss, at length, toward noon, they ceased their efforts to retake the position. Part of the captured cannons, remained covered by sharp shooters, so that neither party could carry them off. The only solid advantage gained was the possession of the angle surprised in the morning.

My own Company boys passed up the lines for a distance, until we met the Corps, on our left, when we crossed over to, and went inside the second line of rebel works, at this point they crossed over quite a hill, and a severe fight must have taken place here as the ground was strewn with the dying and the dead. A Union soldier, with a limb badly shattered

by a bullet asked me to assist him into the trench in the rear of the works, as the bullets were sweeping over the hill and he could not help himself, I did so, and seeing another man lying near him, I asked if I could help him. He shook his head, I looked more closely at him, he was a noble looking man, with a Captain's bars on his shoulders. His face was very calm but it was the calmness of death. His eyes had a far-away look, as if he saw through the mist and the smoke of battle, the outlines of that City whose builder and Maker was God. I knelt beside him. In a low voice he asked me to take some letters from his haversack--and if I survived the conflict to inform his friends of his fate. Among his papers was the picture of a beautiful woman. I transfefred them from his haversack to my own, gave him a drink from my canteen, shook his hand in parting, and left him. I carried his treasures near a thousand miles to Andersonville, cared for them during that long summer of 1864, took them with me back to Annapolis, after my release from prison, and when I arrived in God's Country, at my first opportunity, I informed his friends of the circumstances under which I had met him. Many letters passed between us. They wanted to know regarding every word he uttered; where in the body he was wounded; how long I thought he lived; I tried to answer all their inquiries, but the two minutes I tarried by his side, with the groans of the wounded, and the rush and roar of battle all around us, were not long enough to learn very much regarding him. Many of the men who had been on the hill, when brisk fighting was going on, had now gone away seeking their own commands, and as a heavy force of the enemy was now pressing up the Hill toward us, we got on the other side of the breast works, and as we were slowly retreating down the hill, firing as we went, a bullet from the gun of a careless rebel, struck me in the right

lung, passing through my body, and for a time, I thought my fighting days were forever over. I do not think I was unconscious more than a minute or two. It is something of a shock to the system to have a piece of lead as large as your thumb go through ones body, it was like an electric shock. The first thing I remember was trying to spit out a quantity of froth, and blood from my lung, I was wet with sweat, the action of that lung was destroyed for the time being, and I was panting for breath, and this continued for an hour or two, when I was a little easier, I was lying partly on my side with my cartridge box under me, and it hurt me, with a good deal of effort, I opened my haversack, took out my knife and cut the leather belt around me, which released the cattridge box, and I rested easier on the ground. It had rained during the night, and my clothing was damp and lying on the wet ground as I did, I soon became cold. When at White house Landing, July 4th, 1863, I was taken sick, and sent to Cousin Irving Snyder in New York City for a bottle of Radway's Ready Relief, before it reached me there, I had gone down to Pointsmouth and from there I soon went to New York City to join my regiment, and that bottle of medicine followed me around from place to place, ordered, perhaps by Providence for this special emergency, and just before the spring campaign opened, it came to me at Brandy Station, and I had it in my haversack at this time. I poured a little water out of my canteen into my tin cup, and put a teaspoonful of Relief into it, and as I drank it, it warmed me up nicely and I repeated the dose two or three times during the day, and it was worth its weight in gold. A wounded man, near me, was crying out for water, and a rebel, on the breast works, yelled, "Damn you, I would rather shoot you than bring you water." My own canteen was nearly dry by this time, but I thought, if that is the way you feel, I will not

ask you to bring me any. I can hardly tell, forty-five years after this happened, how I passed through that long day. I could not tell where I was wounded exactly, though I thought it must be through the chest or upper part of the body for when I tried to move it hurt me cruelly. So I laid as still as possible. The large trees in front of the breast works had been cut down so they could use their artillery but one tree was standing not far from me, and I was quite interested in watching a black squirrel in that tree, shot and shell were passing through its branches, scattering them in ever direction, the poor frightened animal would run down the tree, near to the ground, but seeing men there he would run to the tops again, and for a time, I almost forgot my own situation in watching him. I thought of my comrade on the other side of the breast works, whose papers I had, and wondered whether my friends would ever hear from me. I thought of my comrades in Company "E", and whether there were any inquiries about me, and of how many of them would report at night at roll call; these and similar thoughts occupied my mind during the day.

I lay on the field from early morn till sun down, with the wounded, the dying and the dead all around me; shot and shell of every kind, sort and description, passed over and around me, the cries and moans of the wounded could be heard in every direction. Heavy cannonading and awful volleys of musketry could be heard in the distance, while not far away, we could hear at times, the shrill yells of the rebels, mingled with the hoarser cheers of our own men. It was a steady, constant, desperate struggle for the mastery from early morning until night without either side gaining any decided advantage. At the bloody angles, not far from where I lay, an oak tree, a foot in diameter--solid and tough, as oak could be, was literally shot down by bullets, and fell, I think, on the

rebel side, killing and injuring some their men. When Henry Ward Beecher was in England, in 1863, representing the cause of the Union, he spoke at a great meeting in Exeter Hall, the vast builing was crowded with rebel sympathizers, who tauntingly cried, "Why dont you put down the rebellion in three months, as you said you would? Why dont you whip and conquer them? I'll tell you, said Mr. Beecher, when he could make himself heard, why we do not. It is because we are fighting Americans, and not British.

General Meade began early in the afternoon contracting his line and massing troops on his left, with a view to turn the enemy's right. All the afternoon the battle raged with great fury. The enemy made corresponding movements from his left to his right, every inch of soil, muddy with gore, was fought over with desperation, and yielded only when it became impossible to hold it. Neither the rain nor the mire of the roads delayed the rapidity or intensity of the fight. The rival bayonets, often intertocked, and a bloody grapple over the intrenchment lasted for hours, the rebel battle flags now singing up side by side with our own, and anon, torn and riddled, disappearing in the woods. The dead and wounded lay thickly strewn along the ground, and fairly heaped up where the fight was deadliest.

After fourteen hours fighting, night fell on a battle unsurpassed in severity in the history of the war. For the first time in the campaign a decided success was achieved. Warren and Wright, who moved two hours after Hancock, had not advanced on the enemy's front; but this was not expected, as his position could not there be carried. On the extreme left Burnside had suffered severely, while on the left center Hancock had stormed and held an important angle of the enemy's work, despite all their efforts to repossess it. Official dispatches add

that the day's work also gave us more than three thousand prisoners two General Officers and eighteen pieces of artillery actually brought into our lines. The brilliant dash of the morning had secured a strong grasp on the enemy's left center, and an advance of a mile in our line in that direction. Five determined assaults were made during the day to expel our troops, but all were fruitless. No more gallant, desperate, or long-continued fighting on either side for the possession of intrenchments, had occurred during the War, while the severity of the wounds gave proof of something more than musketry fighting.

The Union lasses at the Wilderness, May 5-7 were, killed 3,228, wounded 9,278, missing 6, 784, total 19,290. At Spottsylvania, May 12th were killed 2, 146, wounded 7,956, missing 2,577, a total of 12,679, while other authorities make the total loss as high as 18,000 and the confederate losses were equally large.

Just as the sun was setting, there was a lull in the firing and three Johnnies (rebels) clambered over their works, in front of which, I lay, and came down to interview me. They inquired if I was wounded, I replied, that I was. Then they examined the contents of my haversack, and asked permission to take part of my little stock of coffee, hardtack, and salt pork, and one of them proposed to trade his old canteen for my new one, which I had drawn from the Quartermaster just before starting on the Campaign, I did not want to part with any of my small stock of provisions, or anything I had, but as these were three of them, and they had taken the precaution to bring their guns with them, I submitted to their demands. Then they became quite solicitous for my safety, said that perhaps our troops would charge their works in the night, and I would be in the way, and might get hurt and

they thought best for me to get over their works and go back to their rear. They wanted to be sure I did not get away in the night, and they lose a prisoner. They assisted me to my feet, but I could not stand for a time, they assisted me over their breast works, carrying my things for me. They took me back a quarter of a mile into the woods, and left me under a tree. It rained hard during the night, and with nothing over or under me, I can remember to this day how my teeth chattered the whole night through. I would gladly have given an order for six months pay, on our paymaster, in exchange for a pint of hot coffee, but neither the paymaster or the coffee were available just then, and I had to get along without. I think it was the dreariest night I ever passed on earth, but that word "dreariest" dont half express what I felt, As soon as it began to be light, I gathered myself up from the wet ground, and looked around me, there was no one in sight. A little later, a horseman approached, from his uniform, I saw that he was a surgeon of the Confederate army. I suppose he noticed that I was looking rather disconsolate and homesick, and asked what was the matter with me. I replied that I had been wounded in the charge the day before. He unslung a canteen from around his shoulder, handed it to me, and told me to take a drink. My, my, I can taste that yet. How it did warm me up. I dont know whether it was whiskey or brandy, but I do know that it greatly revived and warmed me, blessings on that Johnny Reb Doctor. I wish I knew where he was now so that I could write him a letter of thanks, before he left he told me they were going to form a rude Hospital, at some distance from where we were and he would send an ambulance for me. After a while, when

it had warmed up some, I got me a little something to eat, and stayed there all day waiting for the ambulance, we could hear at a distance of several miles, the roar of the cannon, but had no means of knowing how the conflict was going or in whose favor. I remembered at one time that it was about 2 o'clock, and I knew no more until it was near sundown, when I picked myself up from the ground, where I must have been lying, unconscious for some hours, I suppose it was loss of blood and weakness that caused it. A short time after the ambulance came and took me to the hospital. It consisted, simply, of a large tent cloth, thrown over a pole, but it shielded us from the hot rays of the sun by day, and the chilling dews by night, and we were thankful. The ambulance had gathered in quite a large number of wounded Yanks and Johnnies, and we remained here, as members of one family for several weeks. We had no surgeon or medicines, except water and lint, and hardly enough of provisions to sustain life. All feelings of enmity between the men of the blue and the gray are forgotten and we discussed the war, and the causes which led to it, and its probable outcome, with perfect good nature. There were many sad cases among the wounded men. I quote from my diary of May 14th, 1864. Our wounds are dressed and attended to by our nurse, Mr. Tripp. One man has an arm amputated; one was shot through the breast, one through both legs, and another through the thigh. All are in good spirits, but many are quite weak from loss of blood and lack of suitable food. In front of our tent, a few rods away, was an amputating table, and around it a pile of legs and arms reaching from the ground up to the edge of the table. Ghastly looking limbs caused by shot and shell, and cannon balls.

May 16th. The nights seem about 36 hours long, and are full of pain.

The forms of mutilated men are all around us, making it very difficult to secure any sleep. I remember, especially one sad case among the wounded men. A tall young soldier from the Green Mountain state, had a bullet firmly imbedded in his skull, there were no instruments there with which it could be extracted, and for a week or ten days he was slowly dying, he was talking incessantly in his delerium, and sometimes laughing and singing, and on one occasion he seemed, in imagination, to be driving up the cows from the pasture, at home, his little sister was with him, and he would call out her name, and then the name of some of the favorite cows, who ware loitering along in the rear. He grew weaker day by day, his iron constitution yielded slowly, yet it was conquered in the end, and another name was added to the long roll of those, who gave themselves for the nation's life. As I had been busy, much of the time, in writing letters for the soldiers of both armies, the authorities of the hospital gave me his papers with his address and asked me, when I could to write to his friends. After I returned to Annapolis from Andersonville, I did so, and, as in the other case I mentioned, his friends were very anxious to learn all they could regarding him, and I did all in my power to satisfy their anxious inquiries. I remember that the soldier's name was Dean.

A confederate surgeon came in the hospital one day, and asked to see my wound. He examined it carefully, and said it was doing well, was healing from the bottom. He further said that I must have taken good care of myself the winter before, as my blood seemed to be in the best of condition, and this is exactly what I did do, took the best of care of myself. May 22nd. William Knipton, the soldier who had his arm amputated died this morning. He leaves a wife and child.

When the Confederates saw that I could write many of them wanted me to write letters for them to their wives and friends in the south land, and of all the quaint expressions I ever heard, some of these, from the poor whites of the South, were the quaintest. I took pains to give their own language, as far as I could, and they were very grateful for all I did for them. A poor fellow in the hospital, who was very weak, from wounds thought his life would be prolonged if he could only get a little chicken broth, and he gave a man, who was going out into the country on a scout, one dollar to buy him a chicken, and he brought the best he could find, a little scrawny excuse for a chicken about four months old. It shows the poverty of the country that had been over run with the soldiers of both armies. An old Virginian came into the hospital one day with a basket of biscuits on his arm, and a can of butter-milk in his hand, and he gave each of us, Johnnie and Yank alike, a biscuit and a little butter-milk. We were very grateful for his act of kindness, which probably meant much to him.

About this time, an opportunity was given us by the Confederate authorities to write to our friends at home and I sent a letter to my father as follows: 2nd Corps Hospital of the Confederate Army, May 22nd 1864. Dear Friends at Home. As you have not heard from me in some time, I improve this, my first opportunity to write you a few lines. We charged the enemy's breast works, the morning of May 12th, in which I was shot thru' the body just above the right lung. I lay on the field that day, and then next was taken to the hospital, where I am now, and doing as well as can be expected. We have the best of physicians to look after our wounds, and we are treated on equal terms with

the wounded of their own army. The weather is quite cool, which is very favorable for the wounded. Now I dont want you to give yourselves any trouble about me, but just leave me in his care. I am going to take matters as coolly as the weather will admit of. Love to all, I will write again the first opportunity. I have not seen any of the Regiment since that morning. Remember me, yours affectionatly. Newton T. Kirk. To John Kirk, Hartland, Livingston Co. Mich.

In some unaccountable way my letter was put in with that of another man, who was writing to his wife, and she sent it to my father with a kind note. Her name was Mrs. E. M. Hubbard, South Denfield, Mass. I found her letter and my own when I arrived home at the close of the War, and have them now before me.

I presume you will think that what I have written is a very tame and common place account of one of the great battles of the Civil War, indeed I think so myself, but you must remember that an enlisted man in the ranks has a very limited range of vision, his time and attention is pretty well occupied with what is going on around him, in his immediate vicinity, and especially so, if he is facing a lot of rebels with loaded muskets, or fixed bayonets, but sometimes, when not so engaged, one could see in the distance, a body of troops marching on the double quick to re-inforce some dangerous position; or the aides, on the staff of the Commanding General, carrying dispatches to different parts of the field, their horses, most always on a dead run, and white with foam; then we could often see groups of men, slowly and painfully limping back to the rear, or two men with a stretcher carrying another wounded man to the hospital where his wounds could be dressed. These things were going on around us all the time, though we did not always see them, but I must close this chapter.

Affectionately Newton T. Kirk