

Letters From the Field and Accounts from Different Perspectives

Letter of Pvt. Johannes Van Lente, I Company, 25th Michigan,
to his parents, July 11, 1863

In the course of a short time, we received orders to march forward...When we had only marched a little ways, the wounded met us. Oh, what a sight that was. There was one who was being led by 2 men with his arm torn off [George Hicks] and another who was shot through his hand, etc. Too much to mention. We went ahead until we got close to the battle and then we had to sit down right away to shoot every Rebel in sight. (like a hunter who is lying in wait to shoot a deer.)

~Civil War Letters of Johannes Van Lente, ed. Janice Van Lente Catlin



Pvt. Johannes Van Lente



Pvt. John Wilterdink

Letter of Pvt. John Wilterdink, I Company, 25th Michigan,
to his family, July 11, 1863

...A cannonball landed in our position so that two of our men were wounded. Rebel Colonel John Morgan sent a white flag and requested unconditional surrender. Our Colonel replied that the 4th of July was not a day of surrender and asked how many men there were. The enemy had 4,000 men in the battle so the Colonel asked if that was all. We can beat 8,000! Thereupon they started heavy firing and the enemy thought they could encircle us. Some of our men had to retreat from the stronghold into the woods. When the rebels were within the reach of a pistol-shot of us, we began to shoot and every shot from our men was deadly for the enemy. We lost very few.

*~The Country and Cross: Civil War Letter of Pvt. John Wilterdink,
ed. Albert H. McGeehan*

Letter of Henry G. Phillips, 25th Michigan, to his sister, July 14th, 1863

the Battle commenst about Sunrise in the Morn[ing] and lasted 3 hours and a half and it was [one of] the hardest fought Battles of the ware considring the ods in numbers the Rebel force was about Eight thousand and ours Two hundred but we had the advantage in position. they had Artilery and we had none. they drove our men out of the intrenchments the first charge and then we fought them in the Woods the rest of the time and our Boys fought like Tigars for the ground was strued with dead Rebels. it seemed as though every shot of ours toled for in tht 3 hours and a half...we killed 100 and wounded 200...of them and then thre hole Division took to there heales and Run as thou the Deval was after them.



Henry Phillips

Note: Henry Phillips, a farmer before the war, was 5'6", with light hair and blue eyes; died of illness soon after this battle. Letter donated to the Taylor County Historical Society by Phillips' descendants.

Letter of Pvt. Emmett Totten, 25th Michigan, to his parents, July 9, 1863, posted Louisville ~from John Urschel, Buchanan, Michigan WMU Archives



Pvt. Emmett Totten, left

Dear Folks,

I expect you have heard of the fight and would like to hear from me. Well, we had a fight and a hard one, too. I will tell you all about it.

Last Thursday we heard that [John Hunt] Morgan had crossed the Cumberland [River]. Col. [Orlando] Moore went across the [Green] River and picked out a good position and we made Breastworks. The river runs around about 8 miles and comes around within about a mile from the other, leaving a peninsula of about two thousand acres [Tebbs Bend]. The Breastworks were made where the river is the nearest together-[the Narrows]. On each side of the breastwork was a steep bluff. To the foot of the one and right was a strip of bottom land, back of the works was an open field for about 20 rods where it was timbered. Right in the edge of the woods we fell timber.

Friday night [July 3] as we were having skirmish drill, a courier came in saying that Morgan was a short distance ahead.

We packed up everything, ready to move across the river, and meet them. Before we commenced loading, we had orders to fall in and go across [the river] leaving a detail of men to move in the night. When we got across Cos [Companies] I and K were left in the stockade and the others went to the front [further down the ridge].

I laid in a chip pile with Jim Slater and slept sound until morning. When I waked up they were just fetching the last load of camp goods over.

It was not long before the pickets commenced firing. In a little while a cannon fired.

Then they sent in flag of truce and demanded our immediate and unconditional surrender. The Colonel sent word back that is was not the day to surrender. [July 4, 1863]. They went back and commenced in good earnest right after the flag of truce went back.

The Colonel came and ordered our Company to the front. When we got there they had drove our boys back to the second row of fallen trees. We went right in to the first row and poured a volley in to them. That sent them back for while. They

soon came up again with a yell as though they was going to scare us right out. Then we had it there for a while. [Often fought hand to hand]. They would come up in solid ranks. Of course we would have to fall back or nearly all get killed. As soon as we were loaded we would charge with a yell. [A good infantrymen could get off 3 shots a minute, but often 2 shots a minute under stress was all he could manage.]

It looked comical to see their long Butternut coat tails flying as they went over the logs. [Confederates often wore butternut color uniforms rather than gray.] The fight lasted about three hours.

I forgot to say that Frank Weaver was sent the night before with ten of our men to the right down into the flat [Sublett Ford] so our company was [fighting] on the right and left. I was on the left with Lt. Tenant where the rebels made the heaviest charges and lost the most men. [Other writers thought the fighting was worse on the right flank].

Lt. Tennant [of Company K] distinguished himself. While other officers would order retreats, he would order forward and always going ahead himself swinging his sword and cheering on the boys. If it had not been for him, we should have been whipped certain. He was the bravest man on the field unless it the Col who I guess is equally as brave. His [the colonel's] horse was shot and the bullets flew around his head thicker than hail stones.

We learned after the fight that the rebs had two regiments engaged [really three] and four thousand on each of the three other sides. [He is correct that they were surrounded, but the number was between 2,500-3,000.] We had not quite 200 men stretched out from one river to the other the distance of a mile so you must know that they were not very thick.

We had to bush whack with them, whipped them at their own game. The rebel surgeon said that their loss was 100 killed and 200 wounded. [Doubtful] They left a good many dead on the field. Some [10-12] went down the river and the rest they carried off. ...Our loss was six killed and 22 wounded [really 24]. In our company James L. Slater was killed and Hiram Dunham wounded. [Slater was an attorney and an officer]. Nora [Norris Merrill] was sick and was not in the fight. He was taken prisoner and paroled. [He had to sign an oath that he would never fight again against the Confederates until he was exchanged.] ...Morgan sent his respects to the Colonel and said it was the nicest whipping he ever got. ...

Emmett Totten

Lt. Benjamin Travis, 25th Michigan, letter in *Detroit Advertiser & Tribune*, written July 16, printed July 22, 1863 newspaper:

What had been rumors in reference to the rebel advance became facts. Col. Moore prepared his force to resist their advance, although his position was an isolated one, and without any other support than the unconquerable courage of his men.....

Upon the night of July 1st, breastworks about 15 rods in length, had been thrown up extending nearly across the east end of this open field, and about 10 rods west from where the road runs around the head of the ravine. The turn of the road is in front of the center of breastworks from which the land slopes down to the road. At the time the breastworks were being built and the next day, the trees along the west side of the ravine were felled. At the time the breastworks were being built and the next day the trees along the west sides of the



Lt. Benjamin Travis

ravine were felled, so as to prevent the passage of cavalry across them to attack our right flank and also what trees stood upon a gore of half an acre, between the road and river banks at the west end of the open field, blocking up the road and any approach upon this gore of land.

On the evening of July 3, the rebels, under Gen. Morgan, encamped but three miles from us, and Col. Moore moved our camp to the South side of the river, which took until a little after daylight the [illegible] kept the wagons rumbling over the Macadamized road all night, which noise was of no little service to us, as we afterwards learned. At half past four, on the morning of the ever-memorable Fourth, the rebels fired upon our pickets who were driven in and firing immediately began from the woods, in front of our right and left, and from a log house and stables about fifty rods distant, near the road where the rebel sharpshooters were firing upon the breastworks, which was kept steadily up until half past six, when a shell was shot from a cannon near the house. The shell, after plunging through the breastworks, burst nearly severing the arm of G. W. Hicks, in Co E from his body, and wounded another by his side. A flag of truce immediately followed from the rebels, with a demand for a surrender, the following of which is a copy.

Col Moore rode out to meet the flag and in answer to the demand stated, "no such proposition could be entertained by him on the Fourth day of July, and besides, it was too early in the morning."

The bearers of the flag and the Colonel returned to their respective commands, and the fight was again renewed. In fact it had hardly ceased for occasional shots were fired by rebels during the waving of the flag and they were in the meantime creeping along the woods nearer to our lines. Their artillery was again opened upon us; but there was soon such a well directed fire upon it by our Enfield rifles that it was impossible for the rebels to work it with safety. When it was withdrawn, it is said that some 18 of the rebels' artillerymen lost their lives.

The firing of musketry increased and diminished until the rebels had advanced on each of our flanks and with a yell charged like a swarm of locusts, across the ravine and up the side hill upon our right. As more than half of our men were held in reserve upon the gore of fallen trees, back near the bridge and 26 guarded the two fords below the bridge we had but few men to resist the charge of a line of rebels full 25 rods in length across the ravine and up the side hill. But the resistance was as an obstinate one upon our side and a bloody one for the rebels, as inch by inch their charge was resisted with great slaughter. They were too numerous, however, for a successful resistance at this point. Another party were at the same time advancing upon our left so that our men were obliged to fall back from the breastworks, and across the open field to the fallen timber along the sidehill. Our men fell back only as they were forced to do so, fighting desperately, as skirmishers, from tree to tree, sending many a rebel to his last accounts, until they had backed up and swung a little more to the rear than those in the fallen timber upon our left. Here a stand was made and the rebels brought to a halt, where fighting was kept up with varying success from half to three quarter of an hour. Several charges, accompanied with terrific yells, were made by the rebels across the open field and along the road upon our line, sometimes repelled by charges, and at others by well directed shots from behind the fallen trees, which seldom failed to accomplish the mission upon which they were sent--at least, so the sequel tells.

... all the reserve were brought into the line of action, and had deployed upon the right where the rebels were attempting a further flank movement around our

right. Here they met again with the same obstinate resistance, and were again beaten back. But our right had swung back considerably more than our left. I was in charge of 20 men at the ford just below the bridge, and at half past 7 o'clock we were called up to join in the battle. A few men of the 8th Michigan and 79 New York, who had been rebuilding the bridge, remained in place of the 20 men in charge of the ford. It took but a few minutes for us to ascend the hill and reach the scene of action. We immediately joined in line, which was now upon the advance. Col Moore had sounded the advance upon his bugle at the time the reserves were all called in and at the same time the shout of reinforcements was given, caught up and resounded along our lines. This shout, together with the sound of the bugle, must have discouraged the rebels, for as our left advanced cautiously from tree to tree, it was found that the rebels had fled, and the breastworks were again reached by our men. Up to this time sharp firing with occasional charges, were being made upon right....

In half an hour from the time the firing had ceased, a flourish of horsemen was seen at the farthest bend of the road in our front, which was supposed to be the prelude to another onset by the rebels. They soon disappeared, and in about 15 minutes, a flag of truce was sent in with a request for the privilege to bury the rebel dead. The privilege of receiving them outside of our lines, but nothing further was granted. Nor did they do anything further towards the burial of them.

It is difficult to estimate the loss of the rebels, as many of their dead were taken from the field during the contest and buried. We found twenty-eight of their dead within our lines, and some twenty have been seen to float down the river since. Their surgeon, who was left in charge of their wounded, said that they buried thirty. Many of them were buried during the fight and in different places. It would be safe to say that their loss could not have been less than 100 killed, seventeen of whom were commissioned officers, among whom was Col. Chenault and two or three field officers. Their wounded must have been 200. Our loss was comparatively as much smaller as our force was less than theirs. We lost eight killed & twenty-three wounded. It would seem almost impossible that the losses could be so disproportionate. But when it comes to be known that the rebels would fire and load as rapidly as they could without even taking aim, while our men would seldom fire until they had taken deliberate aim, it is in a measure accounted for. Their dead buried by us were mostly shot through the head, and a few through the breast, which attests for the correctness of aim taken by our men. [Note: Casualties magnified]

It is well known that Morgan's forces consisted of about 7,000, while our own numbered but 210 men. Upon our side taking those at the fords, the teamsters, hospital attendants and the sick, there could not have been over 170 guns (Enfield rifles) engaged. Of the rebels, they had two regiments in reserve which they tried to bring up to renew the fight after their last retreat, but without success, and another regiment upon the north side of the river, about a mile from the river, to catch us, as they should drive us, according to their plan, out of our position towards Lebanon. This result they had looked for, and to take us all prisoners. [Note: Morgan is reported to have had 2,500.]

During the battle Col Moore blew his bugle several times for advance, etc. as circumstances required. The sound of the bugle induced the enemy to believe that there was a brigade of us, and that we fought accompanied by a band of music. These, with the fact of a stubborn resistance upon our part and a shout of "reinforcements" compelled them to believe that we had a large force in the

woods with us, and led them to think that a second attack would result in a second repulse.

Still, there was one hero of the battle the "Tebbs Bend," as it is named, and that hero is Col. O.H. Moore of the 25th Michigan. He was everywhere present in the thickest of the battle. His horse was shot and exchanged for another when he was ever present, as before. His presence made every man a hero, and he inspired confidence in his ability to do just what he planned to do. No other band of number has escaped defeat or capture, or both, when Morgan had pounced upon them. Nor had any other band of an equal number turned him off his track and compelled him to flee.

Morgan passed around us on to Lebanon where, after fighting seven hours with the 20th Kentucky, he took 350 prisoners, on Sunday, July 5th. The Kentuckians fought bravely but circumstances compelled them to yield. The *Louisville Journal*, in perfect consistency with its former course, unable to give more than a passing notice to the victory of Col. Moore, while column after column is surrendered to eulogize and almost canonize the Kentucky Colonel and soldiers, even while the same rebel Morgan has crossed the Ohio River with over [illegible] men, and is making such havoc in the States of Indiana and Ohio.

B.F.Travis,
Lieut., 25th Michigan Infantry.

General Basil Duke, Morgan's brother-in-law,
History of Morgan's Cavalry, 1867, 423:



Col. Basil Duke

When General Morgan learned that the men were falling fast, and that no impression was being made upon the enemy, he ordered their withdrawal. He had not been fully aware, when the attack commenced, of the exceeding strength of the position ...and he thought it probable that the garrison would surrender to a bold attack. It was his practice to attack and seek to capture all...and this was the only instance in which he ever failed of success in this policy. He believed that the position could have been eventually carried, but (as the defenders were resolute) at a cost of time and life which he could not afford. Colonel Moore ought to have been able to defend his position, against direct attacks, had an army been hurled against him. ...His selection of ground showed admirable judgment; and, in a brief time, he fortified it with singular skill. ...We expected to hear of his promotion—men had been promoted for beatings received from Morgan.

Sydney Smith, *Life of D. Howard Smith*, CSA, 1890, 59-60:

Though this was a small...affair, Colonel [D.Howard] Smith regarded it as one of the bloodiest and most destructive of the entire war, considering the length of the engagement and the numbers engaged on each side. Never was greater heroism and reckless daring displayed as on this occasion, both by officers and men, the men of the 5th Kentucky, led by Colonel Smith in person, going up again and again to the very guns of the enemy under a most terrific and deadly fire, and only prevented from taking the works by the impenetrable mass of fallen timber, over which it was impossible to pass.

Lt. Col. James B. McCreary, CSA, *Journal*, July 4, 1863:

It was a sad, sorrowful day, and more tears of grief rolled over my weatherbeaten cheeks on this mournful occasion than have before for years. The commencement of this raid is ominous.



Lt. Col. James B. McCreary



Pvt. Bennett Young

Quirk's Scout Bennett Young, CSA, *Confederate Wizards in the Saddle*, 374:

None of those who saw these dead brought out under the flag of truce, and the wounded carried in blankets from out of the woods and from the ravines and laid along the turnpike road from Columbia to Lebanon, will ever forget the harrowing scene. When they looked upon the dead, with their pallid faces turned heavenward, and their pale hands folded across their stilled breasts, poignant grief filled every heart.

Lt. Leeland Hathaway, CSA, Hathaway Papers, King Library, wrote about their loss that day:

Here fell Col. Chenault--a man fashioned by nature in one of her lavish moments--brave, generous, noble and kind, he was the pride of his regt & the favorite of his friends. Maj. Brent, too, offered up his life upon the altar of his country on this memorable day. He was a chivalric gentleman, a brave & skillful officer, giving promise of a brilliant future. The gallant Tribble fell at the head of his company while nobly leading them in the fruitless charge... Nobly did they die and sincerely do we mourn them.

Pvt. Sam Sullivan, 7th Ky. Cavalry, CSA, to the mother of Pvt. Frank Voss, Maryland Archives

Camp Morton August 10th 1863

My dear Mrs. Voss,

I have obtained permission from Captain Hamilton to write you in regard to the death of your beloved son, and my dear friend. On July 4th we dismounted to attack a stockade on Green River. ...Frank as cheerful as I ever saw him, dismounted, tied his gun sling on his saddle, fell in and marched to the field. If he had any presentment of death it never showed itself in his countenance, or his actions, he being as calm and collected as I ever saw him on any occasion, our command being engaged for some time. A charge was ordered, Frank was on the right of me when the order was given, he then dashed ahead of officers and men, exhibiting that gallantry, of which, he was ever noted, and when about 15 feet from the stockade or breast work received the fatal shot in the forehead and was instantly killed. One of the company calling me said, "Sam, Frank is shot." I asked him where he was, he said, "a few feet back." I ran to the place and there beheld him. I called him by name,

but he never responded. It was such a terrible blow to me I seemed to lose all control of myself. I must have been with him for 20 minutes. I turned to ask some of the boys of the company to help me carry him off the field, to my astonishment they had fallen back, thinking all the time that we could carry him out, but we had to retreat leaving our killed and wounded there.

I then went to see the colonel to ask him to see General Morgan if he was going to send a flag of truce to carry our dead, if he was, I wanted to go with it, but for some reason unknown to me he would not send any, but left some of our surgeons to remain with the wounded, among them was Dr. Shepperd of our regiment. I went to see him, he knew the love existing between Frank and myself. I told him of the sad affair, told him how distressed I was in not being able to get him off the field, he then said he would do all he could for me, promised to have his name put on his headstone and attend to everything to my entire satisfaction. I have frequently heard Frank say that if he was to be killed in this war, he wanted to be shot in the head in a charge, but little did I ever dream that such would ever happen to him.

If I could only see you I could tell you so much more than I can write. I have seen so many of our boys wounded and killed until death lost its horrors, but when Frank fell, I knew I had lost more than a fellow soldier, I had lost a friend I loved with all the tenderness of a brother, a companion for 11 years, having grown from childhood to manhood together... Cruel death has separated us forever, but time can never blot out my love for him, or erase it from my memory. Please accept the consolation of a young friend who feels for a loving mother and family (who have lost such a noble son) with some degree of love which she and I only know. And as if it has pleased God to take him away from this world, I feel assured his soul rests in Heaven with God's own select. Remember me kindly to Mr. Voss and family.

I remain as ever your dear young friend, Samuel Sullivan

Letter in re to Frank Voss, Camp Douglas Dec. 31st 1863

My dear mother,

.... Frank never had a full length likeness taken, the photograph taken before he went to college is a good likeness. He had not changed much from that time, up to the time of his death, except that he wore a goatee and light moustache. He wore a gray jacket (infantry) similar to mine except the collar & cuffs were sky blue, and the cuffs were not pointed, the same size all around the sleeve. He also wore a sky blue flannel over shirt, with collar of the same material. Sometimes he wore a narrow black cravat, but had not worn it for a month or six weeks before his death, his pants gray, he usually wore a black felt hat but had on a gray one when he was killed. He was 5 feet 10 inches high and weighed 146 pounds. He always wore high boots. I can see him as plain as if he was before me now. I shall never forget him.... This will ever be the case with Frank, he will ever be fresh in the memory of his company and regiment. He was the most popular boy in the company. His pleasant manners won the love of all who came in contact with—his noble character, the esteem of all—his gallantry, the admiration of all. ...

Yours affectionately,
Sam