A Color-Sergeant's Recollections of the Battle of the Wilderness.

During the early part of the campaign of 1864, Army of the Potomac, I had the honor to be a color-sergeant of the Seventeenth Maine Infantry. Our regiment was in the Second Brigade, Third Division, Second Corps, commanded respectively by Generals Hays, Birney, and Hancock. It is my purpose, in this article, to give an account of what came under my personal observation near the intersection of the Brock road with the Orange Court House plank-road, during the three

days' contest in the Wilderness.

The plank-road runs south-westerly from Chancellorsville to Orange Court House; the Brock road begins about a mile east of the Old Wilderness Tavern, at the Orange Court House turnpike, and runs in a south-easterly direction, past Todd's Tavern, to Spottsylvania Court House. Their intersection is the south vertex of the triangle formed by the two roads and the Germanna plank-road, and is about two miles south-east of the Wilderness Tavern.

From our encampment in an open undulating field near Stevensburg, our division moved on the evening

of May 3; crossed the Rapidan on pontoons, at Ely's Ford, wondering, as we climbed the steep bank, why the enemy did not dispute our passage of the river; reached Chancellorsville soon after noon of the 4th, having marched more than twenty miles; drew up in line of battle and sent out pickets, in preparation for the enemy; and bivouacked on that memorable and disastrous field. Early on the morning of the 5th, we continued our march, through the "Cedars", past the "Furnaces", into the edge of the Wilderness. The column, well closed up, advanced cautiously; flankers were on the alert; stragglers were few

~~The circumstances connected with a log of wood lying in the road and covered with a blanket, which caused us to turn aside to avoid stepping upon an apparently dead comrade, furnished a laughable incident to relieve the monotony of the march.~~

About eleven o'clock we halted near Todd's tavern. Our trains and several brigades were occupying the field sloping toward the east, when we filed into the edge of a growth of stunted pines. I was preparing for dinner under difficulties: dry wood was scarce, and water distant. With the order, "You must not go far from the line," ringing

in our ears, we exercised the soldier's prerogative,- grumbling,- and made coffee, but did not serve up in our accustomed style our marching rations of salt pork and hard-tack. There was no time for that; more urgent duties were pressing upon us just at that hour. A glance toward the tavern, in the direction of which my attention had been called, showed that something unexpected had occurred. A general commotion was observed along the crest of the ridge near head-quarters; our forces were moving rapidly from the field; orders came in quick succession, as if an emergency, demanding

immediate action, had arisen; we, too, slung knapsacks in haste, took arms, and hurried into the Brock road. We had struck this road on our march from Chancellorsville, perhaps half a mile north-west of the tavern, and now retraced our steps with all possible dispatch. The road was narrow and well wooded on both sides, so that our progress was slow, especially when the artillery occupied it with us. The woods were less dense after we crossed an unfinished railroad. It might have been half or three quarters of a mile south of the plank-road, where our regiment halted, stacked arms, and broke ranks

Some lay down by our muskets; others strayed into the woods across the road In the light of our subsequent experience, it seems strange that we exercised so little precaution at that time and place; stranger still, that we did not hear the sound of musket or cannon, although the battle had begun on our right some time before.

A volley suddenly surprised us. "Fall in, fall in!" "take arms!" "forward!" "double-quick!" were the commands hastily given, and executed,- not with military precision, however, as on parade, but with the ease and promptness which military discipline alone

can produce. Before our comrades, a few rods away, could take their places, we were hurrying up the road on the double-quick. There were no signs of other troops, only what appeared to be a line of works begun and abandoned. The skirmishers were having lively work. "Crack, crack!" went their rifles; "crack, crack!" came the near reply. We double-quicked across the plank-road, but were soon retarded by the Fifth Corps ambulances, crowded in on the Brock road and headed toward the Germanna plank-road. Our stacking arms and breaking ranks, the absence of other forces, the position of the ambulances, seem to in-

dicate that we were ignorant of the condition of affairs, and were surprised (perhaps the surprise was mutual) to encounter the enemy at that point. He was evidently moving up the plank-road and taking possession of the ground on the left of the Fifth Corps, and would have cut us off from the rest of the army and struck the left flank of that corps, had not our timely arrival closed the gap on our right and prevented his further advance. The wounded of the Fifth Corps going to the rear pointed out its position. I make no mention of the Sixth Corps, because I have no recollections of seeing any of General Getty's

division until Friday morning, when the Vermont brigade, a set of stalwart, noble-looking men, passed us on the Brock road, marching from our right to our left.

We immediately formed in line, as well as the thick undergrowth would allow, on the west side of the road, pressed forward into the dense woods, lay down, and anxiously waited for further developments. Not long, however, for the Confederates creeping through the underbrush were close upon us, and the "up!" "forward!" of our officers carried us quickly into conflict with them. We had found the enemy before connecting

with the corps on our right. The firing at once began to be of a serious character. The thick growth concealed our foe, whose nearness we knew by the continuous sound of his musketry. Bullets whizzed over our heads,- much of the firing on both sides was too high,- struck trees near us, cut off branches, their "zip, zip," "thug, thug," being dangerously suggestive. In the heat and excitement of the battle, I was not cognizant of time, but think that we were fighting two hours, slowly driving back our foe. At length, in the darkness, I indistinctly saw the enemy, my first visible proof of his presence. I had, previously, however, enjoyed audible

and almost tangible evidence of his proximity, and needed nothing else to convince me that he was there. Our company had pushed ahead of the line, and reached a large tree fallen directly across our track. Having passed the obstruction by obliquing to the right, I was obliquing in the opposite direction, when a bullet whizzed unmistakably, and uncomfortably too, near my left ear. Upon taking off my cap, I saw that the ball had made a large hole therein, and must have grazed my head. It was my first apprehension of danger that day, and I shuddered, as I shudder now, at the thought that there had been

but a hair-breadth between me and death
I cannot describe the peculiar sensations of that moment: they were, as one of my old professors used to say, "sui generis", and, to be fully appreciated, must be experienced on the battle-field. When we saw the enemy falling back, and the wounded throwing up their hands in token of surrender and beseeching us not to fire upon them, some of us urged our part of the line forward, realizing that the contestant yielding ground should be pressed to the utmost; but, upon our right and left, the enemy held his ground, bravely and obstinately contesting every foot, so

that it was not advisable for us to push further. Darkness ended that day's conflict. Our regiment was relieved by the Thirty-second Massachusetts, and with that in front bivouacked on the battle-field, with our dead around us. The report of our loss was saddening; several of our regiment had fallen, and our gallant General Hays had been killed at the head of his brigade. Lying behind our stacks of arms, within hearing of the enemy, I had an opportunity to think of the horrors of war, and of my chances on the morrow; but my eyelids grew heavy, my bed soft, and I soon fell asleep, to enjoy as sweet and

quiet slumber as ever refreshed me in my own loved home.

May 6 The low voice of our captain awakened us at early dawn on Friday morning. "Make as little noise as possible with your canteens and dippers", "Build small fires", were the orders whispered along the line. My coffee had just boiled, over a slow fire, when the command "fall in!" was given in suppressed tones. I delayed, nor was I alone in my reluctance to lose breakfast. Because the command repeated was urgent, we hastened our footsteps, but the "Never mind your coffee" detered us not from taking that with us, and drinking it. I burnt my mouth with mine. as we

took arms. Whatever may have been the quality of that beverage as prepared by us, it certainly had a remarkable recuperative and invigorating power, and was a stimulant on the march and field of battle. A lost breakfast was almost equivalent to a lost battle, or, at least, endangered success. Our line formed - a thread of blue in a groundwork of green - stood waiting. Seconds lengthened into minutes. The suspense was broken by a signal-gun, - presumably at the intersection of the roads, where two pieces of the Sixth Maine battery were placed, the nature of the ground being such that the artillery could render but

little effective service,- the reverberations of which must have notified the enemy that we had begun the battle as well as set our line in motion. As on the preceding day, no enemy appeared in sight, but we knew full well from the sound of musketry that a determined adversary was opposing our advance and pouring his fire into us. A fierce and deadly conflict raged as we pressed our way through the bushes, across a ravine, into the dense forest beyond. We advanced over our dead, probably of General Getty's division which had been engaged on Thursday. For some reason our brigade

was crowded to the left, so that the color-company of our regiment moved along the south side of the plank-road. There we suffered severely; for the confederates, with their artillery placed upon a slight elevation down the road, swept our ranks with a destructive fire. It was not until we had driven them nearly a mile toward Parker's store, that I saw the "gray-backs", a single file, picking their way through the low growth on the right of the road. Notwithstanding the warm reception which the "Johnnies" had given us at our early morning call, they seemed to be astonished at the persistency of our attack, and retired

in confusion. Appearances corroborated that opinion; for large numbers of Enfield rifles had been left or thrown away, and General Scales, in command of a North Carolina brigade, had abandoned his head-quarters wagon, evidently in great haste, where he had encamped the night before. A clump of small pines, almost impenetrable, was the limit of our advance, the Fourth and Seventeenth Maine reaching that point. The enemy must have reformed or been reinforced, for we were there met by a terrific fire. It was enough to make the most daring and resolute quail, and became so hot and

~~deadly~~ that we were compelled to fall back. Other regiments, not previously engaged, continued the fight. We were not relieved from duty, however, for no sooner had we halted in the rear than we commenced throwing up breast-works of logs and earth,- a prominent feature of the campaign.

I took this opportunity to go over the field. Trees scarred, branches gashed, saplings cut down, limbs hanging by shreds,- all bore witness to the fury with which the storm had burst through the forest. It was the leaden hail of the tempest that laid our soldiers low, and in its track left a sad and heart-rending

sight. Our morning advance was strewn with the dead. In one spot, of a few square rods, almost void of underbrush, more than fifty dead soldiers lay. An open Bible was lying on the breast of one, as if he, mortally wounded and conscious that life was ebbing away, had placed it there that he might be recognized by the name inscribed upon the fly-leaf. With death approaching, friends, home, and, we may hope, God was in his dying thoughts. It seemed sacrilegious to see our men going over the battlefield removing valuables from the dead, and I turned with sorrowful heart toward our breastworks.

It was reported that the Ninth Corps had come up and engaged the enemy on the left, we thought. We knew that somebody was having a hard fight, but felt secure so long as the sound of battle was afar off. The sound increased, drew nearer, receded, died away in the distance, telling of varied success. It came nearer and nearer, till at length the startling words, "we're flanked, we're flanked!" filled us with consternation. The enemy, taking advantage of the unfinished railroad and the adjacent woods, had struck our left, turned that flank, broken our line, driven

our forces in disorder, and, what was worse, was still fleeing. There was no rallying our disorganized troops. Confusion reigned. The whirlwind swept the forest. The panic was contagious. It extended to our line. Somewhat demoralized, but not unwittingly drawn into the crowd, I rushed through the woods, and did not feel safe until I was within our intrenchments along the Brock road. What a transformation! No ambulances with trembling drivers, but strong breastworks, well defended, lined the road. That flanking cost us all the ground that we had gained. An at-

tack was expected, but it did not come at once. There was a frequent change of position, as if we were preparing to receive our antagonists. When changing at one time, our way was hedged in by the chaparral through which we attempted to pass, and which we found as unyielding as our adversary. It was dense, swampy, thorny, tearing our clothes and lacerating our flesh beyond endurance.

That afternoon an ominous silence, disturbed by an occasional volley, prevailed, and foreboded evil. No prophetic knowledge was needed to interpret the signs of the hour. Ex-

pectancy was of short duration;
reality not far separated from anticipation. About four o'clock our
pickets were driven in, and reported the enemy charging in full force.
The on-coming of the host was heard.
It was Longstreet's corps, against which
we had aforetime been pitted. It vigorously assaulted our works, but was
held in check under our fire. With
impetuosity it renewed the assault,
carried our first line, and, with flying colors and victorious shouts, stood
triumphant upon our breastworks. Our
men driven from their defences
rushed to the rear, carrying the most

of the supporting line with them; but a few, chagrined at the repulse, and disgusted at the ignominious flight, remained and watched the movements of the victor. Protected by a small oak, I viewed the situation. On both right and left, as far as eye could reach, were the jubilant and defiant rebels; confronting them, eight or ten rods distant, behind our second line of works, stood our ranks, reduced by flight, hesitating what to do, and fearful of another attack and repulse. In a few minutes our right, encouraged and inspired to charge, began to advance, and

immediately the whole line, like an ocean wave, swept over the intervening space, charged the enemy, drove him from the works, started in pursuit, but was recalled. His was a fearful loss, attesting the desperation of the assault no less than the valor and discipline of his troops. Cheer upon cheer resounded, and returned our fugitives. It was indeed wonderful how the score which stood by the colors increased to a hundred, every one of whom participated in that gallant charge. "Both the attack and counter-attack", says General Hancock, "were of the handsomest kind".

Saturday morning a reconnoissance was ordered. In close column, our brigade slowly, not always carefully, felt its way through the woods on the left of the plank-road. The sharp-shooters skirmishing in front knew what was opposing them, and refused to advance as fast as our officers wished, but leisurely and stealthily crept up to within six or eight rods of the enemy, aiming and firing deliberately, yet without drawing his fire. Stooping and peering through the branches and undergrowth, I saw the "Johnnies" rise behind their earthworks, just discerned through the

foliage, and level their muskets at us. We hugged the ground, they fired over our prostrate bodies, or that place would have been a veritable slaughter-house. Both officers and privates huddled together, like frightened sheep, where the trees and the nature of the ground afforded protection. It was an ugly place into which to send men in close array, and from which it was no disgrace to escape, when we had ascertained that the enemy had not withdrawn. We turned our backs to him, received his fire, and put several lines of support between him and ourselves. Marching and counter-

marching, we spent the day strengthening our lines. Late that afternoon we made a move, which discouraged and depressed us, and which, to this hour, I cannot understand. We marched directly from the battle-field, some three miles toward Chancellorsville. Filing along the plank-road, we had, as on former occasions, every indication that a retreat was in progress,- across the Rapidan, we feared. We had crossed it with too high hopes to return the first work defeated. Supply trains and pontoons were moving to the rear; batteries were massing in the fields in the direction of the Mi-

dernes tavern; aids-de-camp were riding at full speed from head-quarters. Our courage dropped to zero. A counter-march was ordered. With light heart and quick step, we obeyed. Our return was greeted with long-continued cheers, by our comrades who had apparently been left as a rear guard. When their echoes ceased, the Confederates answered with a tremendous shout all along their line. "The woods were full of them".

We lay down behind our second line of intrenchments, hoping to get a comfortable night's rest; but, long before midnight, were aroused, ordered into

line, and moved to the Brock road, to be in readiness to follow the Fifth Corps, then marching toward Todd's Tavern. Hour after hour passed. It was nearly eight o'clock Sunday morning, when we took up our line of march. Meanwhile we slept in the sand and dirt; for, as soon as we halted, nearly every man dropped upon the ground and was soon sound asleep. An occasional "fall in!" brought us to our feet, only to drag ourselves along a short distance and drop again. A stampede, caused by a horse or mule getting loose near us, proved almost disastrous. Men lost their wits, ran hither and thither, like

so many possessed, trampled upon their comrades, and created the wildest confusion. Order was restord when it became evident that the enemy had not attacked us. Under the scorching rays of a southern sun, we marched to Todd's Lawn again, near which we encamped behind our breastworks.

My eyes and ears had been open during that carnival of Death; and yet, I did not see my comrades fall, with one exception, or hear the shrieks and groans of the wounded and dying. They fell, nevertheless; for, of the four hundred and sixty-five

men and officers of the Seventeenth who left Stevensburg, only two hundred and seventy remained for duty. Twenty-eight were killed, one hundred and fifty-four wounded, and thirteen missing.

Edwin Emery.