

## THE BATTLE OF FAIR OAKS.

### A Faithful and Graphic Description.

*G. Grant*

Fair Oaks Station, Va., June 5, 1862.

I take the first opportunity to give you an account of one of the bloodiest battles ever fought on this continent, of which I was both participant and witness, enabling me to give you some particulars with accuracy. Some memoranda which give a view of the more enlarged operations than our own immediate force, I shall use freely. These may appear at another time, and for them I will account to you in the future.

Fair Oaks Station is a strategic point on the York River and Richmond Railroad, being necessary for the transmission of supplies to our army on its way to Richmond.

On the 31st. of May, Gen. Casey occupied with his Division an entrenched camp consisting of an advanced lunette and an abattis supporting it, about a quarter of a mile in advance of this Station. Casey had some 20 pieces with him, and Couch's Division in the rear for support. Further down the railroad was Heintzelman; and next in line of support was the corps of Sumner, containing the Divisions of Sedgwick and Richardson. The latter corps, and the corps of Fitz Jno. Porter and Franklin, distant about 6 or 7 miles, were, before the battle, on the other side of the Chickahominy.

On Friday night this river was greatly swollen by a heavy rain falling that night. On Saturday the enemy attacked Casey, without even throwing out skirmishers; he threw his main body upon Casey with terrific fierceness, and completely routed him. Wagons, ammunition, private baggage, everything was captured, the men were either captured or scattered like chaff; many were shot before they could get out of their shelter camps. The enemy had a column of 30,000 of their best troops, with the daring corps of G.W. Smith and Longstreet at their head. The attack was made upon the entrenched camp of Casey. Couch's Division fought well, but would have soon been a prey to the eager assault which was sweeping down upon them. Sumner's corps had been telegraphed to, and just one and a half hours before sunset Sedgwick with his Division came into the action, and not only stayed the driving columns, but repulsed the enemy and drove him back, though not to the position lost by Casey.

The arrival and engagement of this force was most miraculously opportune. Richardson's Division crossing the Chickahominy at the military bridge was delayed by excessively swollen streams so long that it reached the battle field after a check had been given. We passed over the dead and dying in heaps all around us to within 500 yards of the enemy, who were lying on their arms in the woods. The fight had been desperate, and the soldiers of either side, friend and foe, within sight of each other, slept upon the literally red field together.

I have now come to June 1st, (Sunday). The enemy, the 5th Texas, 2nd Mississippi and 2nd Texas were within half musket shot of our line. I heard them during the night talk quite plainly. Our scouts, by a walk of a few minutes, discovered two brigades of the enemy waiting eagerly to fall upon us and devour us as he did Casey. We all knew that we should have in the morning a most desperate fight; that our enemy outnumbered us seven to one; that



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the main body of the army had not yet crossed the river; and that we would be reinforced only by Heintzelman on our left. About three o'clock in the morning our whole line "stood to arms", and before light the enemy drew in all his pickets. The line of railroad is bordered by woods on both sides except in a few open spaces; there was a large field, three fourths of a mile in extent, on the right front line of Gen. Richardson. Gen. French's Brigade with one regiment of Gen. Howard, constituting the front. And at this point Gen. Richardson posted a battery of ten pounder rifle Parrot guns, directed by Capt. Hazzard (4th. Artillery). The remaining regiments of Howard, formed a second line, with Gen. Thomas Francis Meagher's Brigade with the remaining eighteen pieces of artillery, as a third line.

The early part of the morning was quiet. Not a word was spoken much above a whisper. There was a slight shower, the sun came out, and the birds sang sweetly and tenderly, as if in mockery, over the field where death had, and, that morning, would continue his carnival.

The enemy made his first appearance on the other side of the large field, his skirmishers forming line across it and advancing. A body of cavalry was also seen in the woods on the other side, drawn up in column, as if to head a mass of infantry in column of attack for the assault. This appearance of the enemy drew the fire of a Parrot gun; their line of skirmishers fell back, the cavalry broke and the plan of attack was changed by him for the head of the column turned at once down the railroad. It was now half past six o'clock. All at once the enemy poured down upon our Brigade a most murderous fire. The fight began at 5 1/2 o'clock, and continued to about 9 1/2 o'clock in the morning, and though the enemy made several ineffectual attempts to renew the fight, but, as before he was driven back.

Gen. French has again covered himself with glory. He discovered, at an early hour in the morning, a gap in the line of battle fronting the enemy, of about half a mile, by which the left of his Brigade did not reach the right of Gen. Birney. He immediately communicated the fact to Gen. Richardson, who gave the order for him to close; when Gen. French changed the position of the 53rd. Penn. Vol., Col. Brooks, and hardly had they reached it, when suddenly a very large body of infantry sprang from the bushes, not 30 yards distant, and poured in the deadly missiles upon the unsuspecting soldiers. But though the dead fell in heaps, the ranks closed up, and they replied with most terrible effect. The 52nd. N.Y., Col. Frank, on the right of this regiment, lost in killed, wounded and missing, nearly half of his command. Gen. French stood in the thickest of the fight, with his aids about him, his son, Lieut. French, and Capt. Fisk, his gallant Adjutant General, who fell at his side desperately wounded.

But though the troops of our column were unused to the iron hail of missiles, they stood like a wall of fire as seven thousand to thirty thousand - with twenty thousand as reserve, of the best troops of the rebel army hurled upon them. And after a most terrible conflict, in which almost every man was baptised with the blood of his comrade, they were, as Gen. French quietly yet proudly expressed it, as he looked upon his brave men, "unbroken and exultant".



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During the fight 60 rounds of cartridges were expended, when Gen. Richardson sent up two regiments of Gen. Howard to reinforce them. The Irish regiments of Gen. Meagher were much shattered in the conflict, and nobly sustained a reputation for gallantry and courage.

The enemy made a most precipitate retreat, and to complete the rout, the Parrot guns were opened upon them, and the rout became general, and they left upon the field their dead and wounded.

During the fight Gen. Howard fell, having been shot twice - at first wounded in the wrist; unable to hold his sword, and his horse killed, he refused to leave the field until a rifle ball struck his elbow, shattering his arm. Oh, how glad I was to be near to help him, the good, the gentle, brave Howard. He refused to allow me, after I had bound his arm, to have him carried from the field. He was anxious, not about himself, but about his brother, Lieut. Howard, aid de camp upon his staff, who limped up to the spot where I was standing with the General, his thigh desperately wounded with a musket ball.

Gen. Richardson's force brought into action was seven thousand men. The enemy had fifty thousand. Every mounted officer of the Division who took his charger into the field had his horse shot under him.

To show the habitual treachery of our enemy, let me tell you a circumstance. The first Regiment of the enemy which came into action wore blue clothes like our men; and they came into action opposite the 81st Pennsylvania Volunteers, (Col. Miller). Owen's Regiment is a regiment of Birney's brigade on the left of Richardson's Division. On the approach of Miller's regiment the enemy said, "Don't fire, we're Owen's men". Col. Miller, who had his regiment at an aim, now gave the order to "recover arms". The enemy immediately poured in a deadly volley, by which Col. Miller was instantly killed. The 81st Pennsylvania, infuriated by this treachery, poured in a fire by which the enemy's regiment lost its Colonel, Lieut. Colonel, Major and Adjutant, and the rest of the regiment broke and fled in utter confusion.

Losses. - This Division has by the action lost as available men for fighting, near 1,700 men, but 890 were killed, wounded and missing. Howard lost 500, French 300, and Meagher 90; 3,400 from all the forces engaged on Saturday and Sunday have already been shipped from White House as patients to general hospitals. Some idea of the rebel loss may be conveyed from the fact that 400 of their dead, including two colonels and two captains, have been buried within our lines. I saw 100 buried in one grave.

I cannot give you anything of an idea of the battle field after the action, it more than realized all that I have ever read. The wounds were generally in the abdomen and lower extremities. It is impossible for me to give you particulars of the hospital scenes. We had two hospital buildings, each of which was capable of holding about 40 or 50 patients, yet at each were 500. All operations were performed out of doors. Of those which came under my observation, those of the Union soldiers who were wounded, of two hundred and twenty-three - 20 were wounded in the head, 23 in the chest, 35 in arms, 101 in legs, 23 in abdomen, 2 in the back, 2 in head and neck, 4 in arms and thighs, 1 in arms and legs, 1 in abdomen and chest, 1 in abdomen and scrotum, 1 in head and chest, 1 in head, neck and thigh, 2 in arms and chest, 1 in arms and face, 2 in legs and thigh,



During the fight 50 rounds of cartridges were expended, when Gen. Richardson sent up two regiments of Gen. Howard to reinforce them. The Irish regiments of Gen. Massey were much shattered in the conflict, and nobly sustained a reputation for gallantry and courage. The enemy made a most precipitate retreat, and to complete the rout, the Parrot guns were opened upon them, and the rout became general, and they left upon the field their dead and wounded.

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1 in legs and chest, 1 in abdomen and arm, 1 in abdomen and back. Of eighty-four Rebel wounded, 10 were wounded in the head, 6 in the chest, 13 in the arms, 40 in the legs, 6 in the abdomen, 1 in chest and thigh, 1 in arms and chest, 2 in legs and abdomen, 1 in arms and legs, 1 in the arms twice, fracturing and in face, ball entering left eye destroying it and passing through the face driving the other eye out of the face. This latter was a young man of a beautiful physical appearance, three days after the fight he was living, though in convulsions. These facts refer only to the wounded and not to the dead. I mention these facts not to excite any horror, but to give an idea of the character and direction of the shots, as far as came under my notice.

I cannot withhold my feeble tribute of admiration of the gallant conduct of the Rev. J. H. Dwight, son of the distinguished missionary of that name, and Chaplain of the 66th. N.Y. Volunteers. Unconscious of peril he was unremitting in his attention to the wounded and dying. I wish I could tell you about his tenderness and kindness.

Gen. Richardson has achieved one of the most important victories of the war, and has given on this memorable 1st of June, by his presence and skill in sending up reserves at the seasonable moment, the opportunity, to many brave soldiers to distinguish themselves and to know in him, as their leader, the qualities of a great military chieftain.

The Hampton Legion, composed, as is the 7th Regiment of N.Y., of the crack troops of South Carolina, at Richmond, on Sunday was addressed by Jeff. Davis, and told that there was but one division of Union troops on this side of the Chickahominy and that the Legion would return the same day covered with glory.

The ladies gave them an entertainment in which cakes and all the etc. abounded in profusion. Trains of carriages followed them out to witness their triumphant return with any quantity of defeated Yankees as prisoners. But you know how they were disappointed. Some of those crack young men were made to bite the dust, and one of the omnibuses with a few passengers in it was captured. This last was told me in the camp, the other was from the wounded Hampton Legion persons themselves.

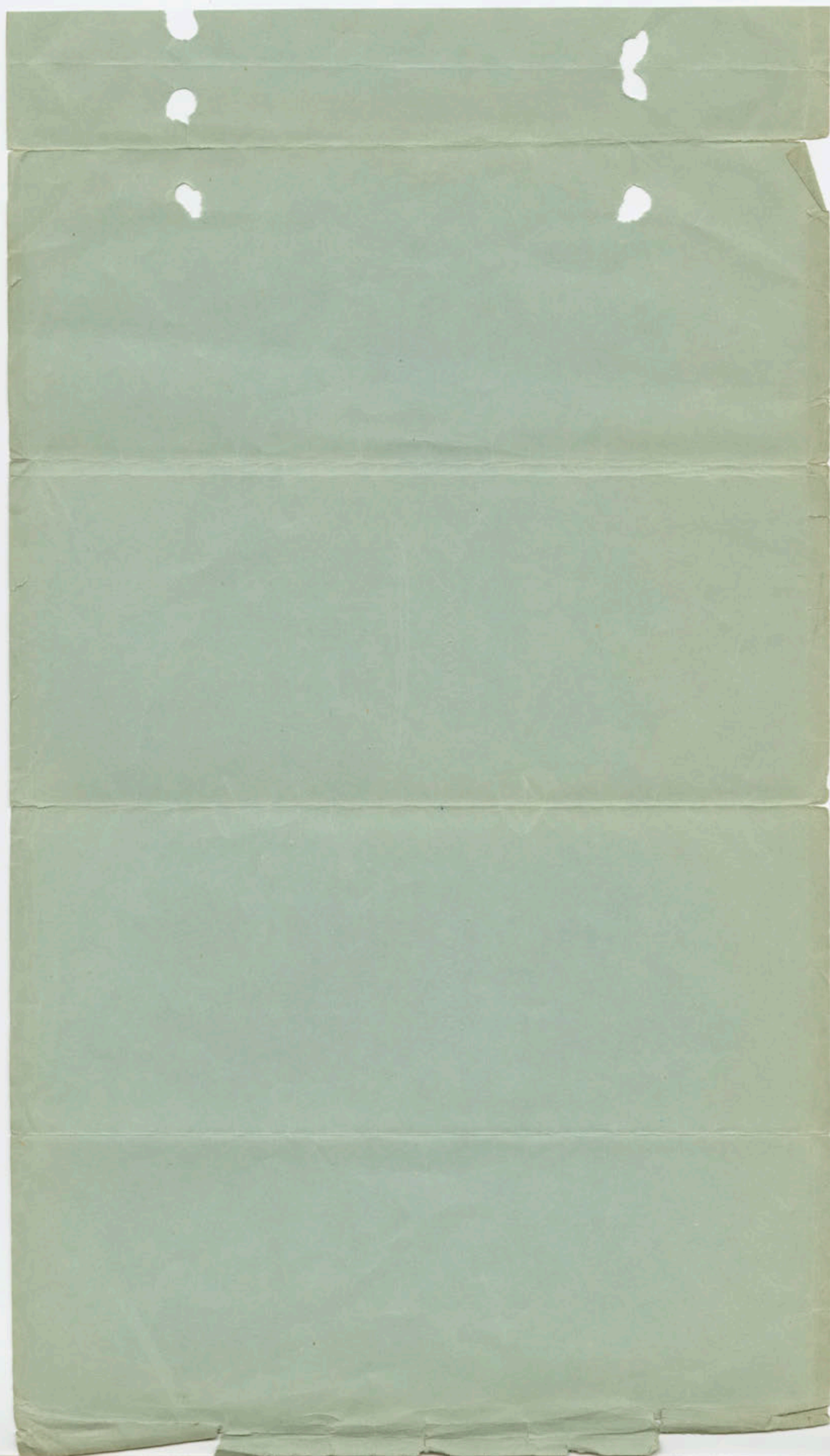


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