

## WHAT I SAW AT STONE RIVER By Col. J. B. Dodge

[To the Reader – The writer of this article wishes to say to you once for all, that he only tries to tell what he saw at Stone [sic] River, that he knows of no way in which he can do it without making the “I’s” more prominent than he would like to. You will, therefore, please charge the fault, if it is one, to the English language, as he is not responsible for the seeming egotism.]

### Background to the Battle

The Army of the Cumberland after a hard summer’s campaign in Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee and Kentucky, fighting for the battles of Shiloh and Perryville, participating in numberless skirmishes, some of which nearly approached the dignity of battles, and marching nearly or quite a thousand miles, often without food – except such as could be gathered up in a country through which we were passing – and with a very insufficient supply of clothing, arrived at Nashville, Tennessee, on the seventh of November, 1862. Gen. W. S. Rosecrans was the commander. Here the army was thoroughly reorganized and equipped.

Provisions and clothing were in abundance. Our camps were well located, and the time was actively employed in drilling, making reconnaissances [sic] of the rebel forces in our front, and in picket duty.

General Bragg, with the main part of his (rebel) army, was in camp near Murfreesboro, about twenty-five miles southeast of Nashville; but with out lying detachments nearer our lines. His force, according to his own statement, was about 64,000; ours was about 44,000. We remained in the vicinity of Nashville until the twenty-fifth of December, when the movements commenced that terminated in the battle of Stone [sic] River, an account of what I saw I now propose to give.

Perhaps in order to give those who were not there a clearer idea of battle as I saw it, it will be better to give each day’s movements from my diary, and I shall accordingly do so.

December 24, 1862. –

Gen. Kirk, my brigade commander, informed me this morning that we would move out towards Murfreesboro to-morrow, and that we would have a fight in the course of the next two days. There is one things [sic] about it, we shall never be any better prepared for it – our men are in splendid condition. Discipline is as near perfect as can be, and an indescribable elan appears to pervade the entire army, that will more than compensate for the difference in numbers between us and the rebels, which is about 20,000 men in his favor. While my experience has been that there is no difference as to fighting capacity between the rebel army and ours, providing everything is equal, I am satisfied

from what I have gathered from prisoners and deserters, that there is a feeling of despondency among the rebels owing to their being ill-fed and ill-clothed, that will work in our favor when we meet. I hope so, at any rate.

I received an invitation to eat a Christmas dinner with the field officers of the thirty-fourth Illinois. I am afraid that a pressing invitation signed, "By order of the General Commanding," will prevent any of us from participating in any other dinner than one of "hard bread". Just as I expected, I was waked up about 11 o'clock to receipt for an order to march at 7 o'clock tomorrow morning. There is business at hand now; I shall lose that dinner.

December 25th –

A dark, chilly morning, with stormy indications of rain. Reveille at 4 o'clock; at half-past six had breakfast; struck tents, loaded up all the extra baggage but what could be carried in one wagon, and started it back to Nashville. (We were in camp about five miles from there.) At exactly seven we started out on what is called the "Granny White" pike, one of the numberless turnpikes running out of Nashville, and after marching a couple of miles struck across the country through a miserable, rocky, rough piece of woods some two or three miles to the "Edmundson pike", running to Triune, about twenty miles south of Nashville. Just as we got into the worst part of the woods it commenced raining, and such a rain! It literally poured down and, to add to its disagreeableness, it was very cold and accompanied with a driving wind. Rubber blankets and overcoats were no protection for it. The wind and water together would find some entrance, and in a moment you would be soaked through.

The long column of men plunged and floundered through the mud and water, in many places knee-deep. The only thing that varied the monotony at all, was the continual falling down of both men and horses, when all in the immediate vicinity would take it up as the best joke of the season, and when four or five were all down together rolling in the mud and water, and each making frantic efforts to get on his feet again, the laughter could be heard for a long distance above the howling of the tempest. But all things have an end, even a southern rain storm. When we got to the Edmundson turnpike we received orders to halt until further orders. It soon ceased raining. The sun came out, and we stood around fires trying to get our clothes dry and the water out of our boots – about as dilapidated a set of military "roosters" as was ever got up. After we had been there about an hour a wagon came up, and the driver inquired for Colonel Bristol, of the thirty-fourth Illinois. Bristol wanted to know what he wanted, and he said that he had that dinner out, and he said that he had that dinner that he (Bristol) had ordered in Nashville; and sure enough there it was. Roast turkey and all cooked in Riddlebarger's (the Nashville Delmonico) best style, with all the accompaniments and necessaries. "There was a change come o'er the spirit of our dreams." The man had been employed by Riddlebarger to take the dinner out, and he went to our camp, arriving there, of course, after we had left and followed us up. It was now about one o'clock and we commenced

making preparations to dispose of the dinner, when an order was received to move back to our old camping ground! Of course, we moved at once, taking the team and dinner with us. Just after we started back it commenced raining again, not so violently as before, but a steady, cold, soaking rain. When we reached camp we had no tents, nor anything else handy; but we soon got a good-sized log heap together and some one, but some process unknown to me, got it on fire and it burned finely, and then we went for that dinner.

Imagine ten or twelve men standing around a large pile of burning logs in the woods, a steady, drenching rain falling, each one with something to eat or drink in each hand, swallowing his coffee red-hot and his food without masticating it – literally bolting it – and, at the same time, tears streaming down his face, caused by getting smoke in his eyes, and you have an idea of how our dinner was eaten. Now if it had have been an ordinary army dinner while on the march, hard bread, fat meat and coffee, it would be ludicrous enough; but this was a first-class dinner, designed to be served in three or four courses. To have seen Adjutant E[illegible], of Fort Wayne, who took a great deal of pride in his dress and military appearance, standing there with his hat slouched down over his face as much as possible, with about two pounds of turkey in one hand and a giant stalk of celery in the other, bolting down his turkey before shouts of laughter from a brazen image. We had magnificent appetites and did not care much for the rain after all; but the next time reader that you are quietly sipping a glass of champagne, imagine to yourself how it would go if the neck of the bottle had been broken off with a blow from a sword, and the only way you could get a drink would be to turn the bottle up to your mouth, throwing your head back so that the full force of the hard rain storm would strike you full in the face. That was the way we took ours that Christmas. It ceased raining about dark and we did not have a very bad night after all.

December 26th. –

Morning broke clear and cold. We received marching orders during the night, and day light found us marching over the same road we had went over twice yesterday. When we reached the Edmundson pike we turned south, following closely in the rear of the other two divisions of our corps (the twentieth). The roads were bad, owing to the rain and artillery passing over them.

The advance struck the rebels about 10 o'clock. Our progress during the day was necessarily slow. The enemy at times fought stubbornly, and we were moving cautiously. The nature of the country was sure that the rebels had the advantage in position all the time. It is quite a rolling county, hilly in some places, with numerous streams passing through it, all now swollen by the rain, and, of course, the rebels, as they fall back, destroy all the bridges; but Sheridan and Davis are pushing them, and they must either get out of the way or fight. Just before dark the enemy made a stand at a stream where quite a little fight took place, which closed at dark by the enemy being forced to retreat again, with the loss of a number of prisoners, quite a number of killed and wounded, and one piece of artillery. We crossed the creek and marched about a

mile when we bivouacked for the night. We were cramped for room, and our brigade (the second brigade of the second division, twentieth army corps,) moved into a meadow that lay along the bank of the creek. It looked beautiful; but its looks were deceptive. The creekbanks were full and the meadow was covered with water, only an inch or so on a level, but as far as comfort in sleeping is concerned, it might as well have been a foot deep. Our wagon was parked with the train somewhere, just where no one knew. My cook had started in the morning with a good supply of provisions in his haversack; but there was nothing left except some coffee after a half a dozen men had eat dinner out of it, and he had been instructed to never show his woolly head in camp without something to eat. He reported that the only thing he had been able to get was a turkey that he found roosting on a tree, and that he had captured it for fear some soldier would come along and steal it! We found a small spot which was not absolutely covered with water, but was well saturated to say the least, got a fair supply of rails for a fire, rolled ourselves in our blankets and went to sleep, with instructions to the cook to wake us up when he got the turkey cooked. About midnight he waked us up, and we rolled out. Visions of boiled turkey and a cup of hot coffee dispelling any disposition to grumble at having to leave our luxurious couches. Lieutenant Colonel Hurd and Adjutant Edsall were jubilant over the prospect of some-thing [sic] to eat, and I confess to no little elation over the subject myself. The cook's fire was some distance from headquarters, and when we got to it Edsall made a dive for the camp-kettle containing the turkey. (We had no plates, nothing but our fingers to eat with, and the cook had one tin cup to drink the coffee out of.) A moment after a remark was made by Edsall sounding so much like a terrific oath as to at once attract the attention of Hurd and myself, followed by a question to the cook wanting to know "What in [blank] [a hard word I guess] do you call that?" followed up by numerous other emphatic expressions. Hurd and I were anxious to understand the matter, but we were willing to wait for Edsall's report. The first intelligible remark he made, was an inquiry of the cook as to the precise location of the feathers that came off that turkey. The cook picked up a blazing brand from the fire and silently led the way, and there were the feathers of a pea fowl! A smell of that camp-kettle would sicken a turkey buzzard. A cup of good, strong red-hot coffee reconciled us to our fate, and we laid down again and forgot our hunger.

December 27th. –

At daylight, after having passed a most miserable night, we were in line again and moved out on to the road. This day our division was in advance and my regiment, the thirtieth Indiana, was in advance of the division. There was a dense fog all around us, so dense, in fact, that it was with difficulty anything could be distinguished at a distance of thirty yards. General Stanley in command of our cavalry was in our advance, and quite lively skirmishing commenced at once. After marching about a mile the road made a sharp turn around the foot of a hill, when the cavalry came to that point they met with a determined opposition. There was a very spirited fight at that place, and I was ordered to march on as rapidly as possible in order to support or relieve the cavalry as the case may be. Just as we got there and had deployed into line, the enemy broke and fell back

about half a mile to a ridge running across the road on which we were. Their position, of course, was totally unknown to us – we not being acquainted with the country – and the fog was very dense. All at once they opened up with a battery of artillery and, whether they knew it or not, landed every shot in the road along which our troops were advancing, and owing to a creek on one side and a precipitous hill on the other, could not get out of it. I was ordered to take my regiment and drive the battery away. We moved forward down a long slope rapidly, wading a creek, and found in front of us a precipitous bank, probably fifty feet high, very soft, sticky clay, and it was with the utmost difficulty that the men could climb up it. In the meanwhile, the battery spoken of was thundering away right over our heads, not more than thirty yards from the edge of the bank. We made our way up as rapidly as possible, and without waiting to form a line regularly the men sprang forward to capture the guns if possible. The enemy discovered us just in time to get away. Some of my men were within ten feet of one of the guns when it was taken off, with the horses on a run. We then moved on about a mile further onto a ridge just north of Triune – a little town of perhaps 500 inhabitants. Here we halted until one o'clock hoping the fog would disappear. The calvary had had a very sharp fight here, the evidences of which lay all around. Our calvary, up to this time, had never been very highly esteemed for its fighting qualities. Whenever anything was said about the calvary before this time, some one was sure to ask, "Who ever saw a dead cavalryman?" The last two days had changed all that. A very amusing calvary fight occurred to-day. Major Rosengarten, of the fifteenth Pennsylvania calvary, as brave an officer as ever lived, in a charge that he led found himself confronted by a rebel major. Each had a revolver in his hand, and both revolvers missed fire. Their weapons being useless, they resorted to the weapons nature provided them with – their fists. The rebel got in the first blow, and put Rosengarten's eye in mourning; he came back in splendid style, sending the rebel "to grass" and left him a prisoner under guard. I saw a federal and rebel soldier lying dead by the side of each other, each with a revolver in his hand. They were evidently dismounted and fighting from behind a tree, one on one side of it and the other on the other side. They fired at each other, both shots were fatal, and they fell dead into each other's arms. Between us and Triune the ground descended gradual for about a mile to Wilson's creek, an insignificant brook in a dry time, but now a turbulent, rapid stream only fordable in a few places. The rebels occupied a ridge in rear of the town in pretty strong force. They had destroyed the bridge as a matter of course, and were keeping up a brisk artillery fire. Finally the fog raised a little and we moved to the right and front, striking the creek half a mile below the bridge where we forded the stream. The water was running swiftly and was nearly waist deep, and was very cold; but we plunged in and waded through, under a very disagreeable fire of musketry and artillery. On the opposite side we had to cross a large field that had been sowed in wheat the fall before, and every step we took we sank in the mud ankle deep. After what seemed an interminable time, we succeeded in getting on tolerably solid ground once more, and it was astonishing to see the men, almost utterly exhausted, as they were, form into line, when ordered to charge the rebel line, as coolly as if they were on the drill ground. The rebel line gave way and we followed them up closely, a mile south of

Triune, to the Little Harpeth river, at this time quite a stream. We followed them up so closely that they did not have time to destroy the bridge across it, and here we received an order to halt and go into camp, if lying down on the wet ground without tents can be so called. Just as the rebels gave way it commenced raining again, and such a rain! It absolutely poured down, and while it was doing its best I was taken with the hardest ague chill imaginable. I shook so that I could not sit on my horse, so I got off and plunged through the rain and mud and water on foot, and after we halted, to vary the exercises, stood up against a fence and shook until it seemed to me that I was running a small earthquake on my own hook.

My regiment being in advance, it was detailed for picket duty. That was interesting; but there was no use in grumbling, as the rebels were on the other side of the river from us. How large their force was no one knew. The only place they could attack us was at the bridge; but it was necessary to guard along the stream in order to detect any movement they might undertake. The line was posted before dark, and I got what the soldiers call a "square meal" – some hard bread and a cup of hot coffee – and, having got over my shaking, felt better. The rain ceased about dark, but the night was as dark as Erebus, not one single ray of light was visible anywhere away from camp fires that blazed brilliantly. It was a weird sight to see the bright light from the large fires burning in the woods and the soldiers moving around them, some of them preparing their suppers and others standing around drying their steaming clothing, and the strangest thing about it is, that every few moments the woods will ring with laughter at some joke that some irrepressible wag will perpetrate, or some yarn that somebody spins out, he having just been "put in mind of it." It shows that there is game in them that will tell when the time comes. I think the best fighting men I have known were cheerful, light-hearted fellows that no trouble could "get down." Feeling uneasy in some way about my picket line which I knew was all right, I concluded to examine it so that if anything should happen I would know where the responsibility laid. All of my officers that were not on the line were as tired as I was, and I went alone.

The ground on our side of the stream was a level piece of meadow, the water not more than three feet below the top of the bank. On the opposite side a high hill run along for quite a distance parallel with and with a few rods of it. There was a line of rebel pickets on their side, and the stream was from fifty to seventy-five feet wide. I started at the bridge and felt my way cautiously along, trying to keep just in rear of my line. I had went in this way probably eighty yards when, in the darkness, I failed to detect a sudden bend in the stream, and I stepped off the bank and into the water. I had on a heavy overcoat which, with my other clothes, was saturated already with water, and my sword, and was not well fixed for swimming, to say the least of it. I struck out instinctively and was surprised to find that – owing to the swiftness of the current, I had no doubt – it was easier to keep from sinking than I supposed it would be. I thought the whole matter over between the time I found I was falling and the time that I came up to the surface of the water – thoughts crowd the mind under such circumstances – I was carried along the way, as I ascertained the next day, about one hundred yards when I struck what I

thought some brush which I caught hold of – as a drowning man catches at a straw – and found that it was the top of a tree that had stood close to the bank; but that had been undermined by the water and had fallen into the stream, the roots still retaining their hold in the soil. I held on and drew myself up on to its trunk, and crawled to the shore. I was uncertain as to which side I was coming out on, having most effectually “lost my reckoning” during my involuntary voyage down stream. Just as I stepped on the solid ground I was sharply challenged by a sentinel only a few feet distant, the challenge being accompanied by the “pict” [sic] of a bullet that whistled close by us. I was so nearly exhausted that I could hardly speak; but the matter was urgent, and the officer of the guard came running up to ascertain what the firing was for, when I succeeded in making him understand. Fortunately I was with my own men on the right side of the river, and with his assistance I got back to the camp of Captain Edgerton, Battery E, First Ohio Artillery. The Captain had managed to carry a Sibley tent on one of his caissons, and had it pitched and had a good fire in it. (I think it was the only tent in the entire army.) I got in there and Edgerton took charge of me. In a short time he had concocted a mysterious preparation, the principal ingredient of which was poured out of a black bottle, and administered red hot, which he, assuming the role of physician, ordered me to drink instantly. I got off my overcoat, and by the united efforts of two or three got my boots off and rolled myself in a dry blanket, (what a luxury it was though!) laid down by the fire and went to sleep.