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GEORGE E. CHAMBERLIN

“A Horrid, Hellish Dream”

The fighting at Petersburg from June 15 to June 18 cost the Union about 8,000 men killed, wounded, or missing, and the Confederates about 3,000, and gave the Union control of the Norfolk & Petersburg, one of the three main railroads that converged on the city. By June 19 the Army of the Potomac was deployed to the east of the Petersburg in an arc extending from the Appomattox River to the Jerusalem Plank Road. On June 21 Grant sent the Second and Sixth Corps west to cut the Weldon & Petersburg Railroad, which connected Richmond and Lee’s army with North Carolina and the Deep South. The Confederates counterattacked on June 22, taking 1,800 prisoners from the Second Corps, and then capturing 400 prisoners from the Sixth Corps the next day. On June 24 Union troops retreated from the railroad and took up positions to the west of the Jerusalem Plank Road. George E. Chamberlin had been appointed major of the 11th Vermont Volunteers in the summer of 1862. The regiment was posted to the fortifications defending Washington, D.C., and in December 1862 was designated the 1st Vermont Heavy Artillery. After the battle of the Wilderness the 1st Vermont was one of several heavy artillery regiments sent from the capital to reinforce the Army of the Potomac. It reached Spotsylvania on May 15 and was assigned to the Second Brigade, Second Division of the Sixth Corps. The regiment came under fire for the first time on May 18, lost 119 men killed or wounded in the June 1 fighting at Cold Harbor, and arrived at Petersburg on June 18. A week later Chamberlin wrote to his father about the experience of “trench life.”

HEADQUARTERS 1ST ART’Y, 11TH VT. VOLS.,
June 27, 1864.

MY DEAR FATHER:

How often, in the midst of all these dangers and privations, my mind turns back to that delightful *home* where I once lived so joyfully, so peacefully with my father, my mother, and brother and sisters. What blessed days, when the country was

at peace; what awful days *these*, of blood, and carnage, and hate. The realities of war, you who have never been on the battlefield can never know or even imagine. To me, who have seen it, it seems more like a horrid, hellish dream, rather than a fact. There will be a fearful reckoning with those who are responsible for all this. Ours is the right side, but we have hard work before us. God will give us the victory sometime, and will surely put our wicked enemies to shame and confusion.

I wish I could write you oftener, but it has been impossible. To Delie I have written very frequently, but beyond this have done no writing, except what was required in my official capacity. I think I have written you only once before since leaving Washington. The campaign has been intensely active and laborious. The night work has been particularly severe, the greater part of the marching having been done by night. At dark, on the evening of June 12th, we left Cold Harbor, and marched all night and all the next day. At evening we rested on the right bank of the Chickahominy, and I was laying my blankets preparing for a good night's sleep, when an order came, detailing me as division officer of the day, and I was on picket line all night without sleep, and marched the greater part of next day. Fatigues, that at home would be thought terrible, entirely too much for flesh and blood to endure, are an every week's occurrence here, and we learn to bear them very naturally.

Delie has written you often, and through her you have been made acquainted with the items of news from time to time. I have been in command of the regiment for about two weeks. Lieutenant-Colonel Benton has resigned and gone home. Colonel Warner is at his home still.

On the 23d, the regiment met with a very great misfortune. We were in line of battle, facing the Garton Branch and Petersburg railroad. A report came in that a party of sharpshooters had pushed forward and taken the road, and wanted support. Two hundred men from our regiment were called for, and immediately sent under charge of Captain M., to be reported to Lieutenant-Colonel P., corps officer of the day. Soon after, I was called on for more men, and sent out Major F. with his battalion. Four hundred of our men were now out. In the afternoon the enemy moved two brigades rapidly down the railroad, formed as a skirmish line, and advanced on our

skirmish line, which, not being properly supported, was finally driven back, and a portion of it captured. In that part of the line were our noble boys, and we have lost the greater part of them. Our total loss on that day was twenty-four killed and wounded, and two hundred and seventy-five prisoners. Of these, one officer was killed (Second-Lieutenant Sherman, a fine man and officer) and eighteen captured. My old company, A, is among the unfortunate. Captain M. and Lieutenant R. will know the beauties of a Southern prison. The batteries captured are F, L, K, H and A. A and K were my Totten companies, and L was with me at Lincoln. The greater part of the Fourth Vermont was taken at the same time. The fault was with the corps commander in not ordering proper supports. Our officers and men did their whole duty.

We have had a good deal of trench life during the campaign at Cold Harbor and at Petersburg. We dig up into the very teeth of the enemy, and then watch him. It is not safe to expose one's head above the embankment, as a few sharpshooters keep up their murderous work through little loopholes in the parapet; otherwise there is not much firing. Living under ground is very dirty work, as you can imagine. One night, I remember to have been awakened by something on my neck, which I discovered to be a medium sized toad. Bugs and worms crawl over us promiscuously. What a sad sight, in this enlightened age, to see the sections of this civilized nation fighting each other with such insatiable fury. How much more congenial to our tastes, and how much more consonant with all our christian feelings and impulses, is peace, harmony, brotherly love. God deliver the nation soon from the chastisement of fire and blood which He has seen fit to send upon us.

How soon Carrie will graduate—day after to-morrow. It is probably an occasion of as much interest to her as mine was to me, nearly four years ago. Do any of you go to Troy? Delie wrote that mother would not go. I hope some of you will be there to see her take her honors. I well remember my gratification at seeing you all at Hanover. Delie, I think, has decided to go to Vermont. This I am very glad of, and have advised it all the time. How she will enjoy a visit there! You must drive away her sadness. She is very anxious for me, and I fear it is wearing upon her severely. I hope the Green Mountain air, and the

many dear friends she will find there, will cause her to rally, and be as cheerful and healthy as ever. A husband and wife who love each other as we do, have no business to be separated as we are. You will all take good, tender care of her, won't you? Cheer her up and comfort her by every means in your power. If you knew how kind, attentive and devoted she has always been to me, you could not help loving her for my sake. And you do know all about it, and you do love her for my sake, and for herself too. You have seen her, and you know that nobody has a better wife than I. How I wish I might be there with you. All will be there but the "boys." You will miss us. How happy we should be together around that home circle again. I should be happier than ever to be there with my new companion, and you would be happier to see me with her than alone, for I know you joy in my joy. God has blessed me with the kindest of friends always, and I pray for a life long enough to show them that I am grateful. We were very sorry you did not return *via* Washington with Mary. I have had an intimation that you would remove West this fall. Is it so? I want to hear all about it. By the way, why haven't I heard from any of you? I think I have not had a single letter since the campaign commenced. That isn't right. My address is 1st Artillery, 11th Vt. Vols., 2d Brig., 2d Division, 6th Corps, Washington. The weather is very hot. The army is comparatively quiet, and will remain so, probably, until after muster day, the 30th.

Much love to my dear mother and sisters, and also to Edward, when you write. How dear is each and every one to me! Let me hear soon.

Your affectionate son.