

THE WAR FOR THE UNION.

FROM WASHINGTON.

Reconnaissance of Mason's Hill—The New-Jersey Brigade in the Field—The Earthworks on Mason's Hill and Edsall's Hill all a Sham—The Beginning of a Trap—Shall we be Caught Again?

WASHINGTON, Sept. 30, 1861. A reconnaissance in force was made yesterday by Gen. Kearney's brigade (consisting of the 1st, 3d, 4th and 5th New-Jersey Regiments, infantry, Major Hexamer's battery of six brass guns from Holoboken, and Company G of Col. Young's Kentucky Cavalry), and the expedition was under the immediate command of Gen. Kearney in person, and is one of the most important that has yet been made by our forces on this side of the Potomac. The direction taken was straight on to the Little River Turnpike (generally known as the "Old Fairfax Road"), to the very foot of Mason's Hill, leaving Munson's Hill about three quarters of a mile to the right. As a reconnaissance it was most valuable, as it thoroughly demonstrated the exact nature of the works on Mason's Hill, and that the works supposed to have been erected on Edsall's Hill exist as yet only in possible contemplation, and give our engineering officers such a thorough and accurate knowledge of the fact of the country as cannot fail to be of the greatest value in strategic operations hereafter. As a foraging party, it was also most successful, and the brigade brought the richer by several hundred bushels of unthreshed wheat, a most acceptable quantity of hay, and straw to be estimated only by scores of tons.

For several days the rebels have been busily engaged in drawing away from Edsall's place grain and hay, the proceeds of a bountiful harvest of one of the most extensive farms in this section. They have been plainly discernible at this work by our glasses, from our outposts, and it was rather readily resolved to put a stop to it. It was also determined to give the expedition a two-fold character, and make it a reconnoitering force, at the same time it should act as a foraging party. The 3d New-Jersey Regiment, infantry, with a train of 30 four-horse wagons, were detailed to capture, load, and draw off the forage, which consisted, for the most part, of unthreshed wheat, which had been bound and stacked together, however, a few tons of hay. The 5th New-Jersey Regiment, infantry, was immediately supported to the rear of the 3d Regiment, infantry; the cavalry had the extreme left, while the 1st and 4th Regiments of infantry were to proceed to the right, on the Edsall's Hill road; and that having the right of the column were to guard against any flanking attempt, and to take care of whatever force might be sent from the camp at Mason's or Edsall's Hill; the Battery, subdivided into sections, was advantageously posted in such positions near the forks of the roads as might give them the best facilities for immediately attending to any attacked or enemy attacking point. The column, which left Fort Detrick early in the morning, was in position in about two hours, and the forage party at once proceeded to load and draw away the grain. They were unopposed in their labors, and succeeded in transporting to the vicinity of Fort Taylor about 150 immense fowls, some wagon-loads of grain and hay. A number of rebel mounds, which had been deserted by their owners, also yielded some valuable and acceptable results in provisions and other things. The foraging feature of the trip was not more encouraging, however, than the reconnoissance.

Early in the day, Capt. Siddons, and Quartermaster Harbut of the 4th New-Jersey Regiment, with 8 men, ascended Mason's Hill, entered the intrenchments, and made a thorough and eminently satisfactory examination of the earthworks there thrown up. At that time the works appeared to be entirely deserted, but in about half an hour a regiment of Rebels appeared, before whom our men retired, not, however, till they had obtained all the information they desired. The earthwork on Mason's Hill is of the most flimsy, unsubstantial and indefensible character. It is simply a long embankment, two and a half or three feet high, thrown straight across the brow of the hill, with no bastions, angles or presence of substantiality. There is no ditch on the outside, but there is a slight ditch, so shallow that it is scarcely more than a gutter, on the inside; as if that eminent engineer, Gen. Gideon Pillow, had personally blundered over the work. There are no guns there whatever, there have been two brass pieces, if not more, but these have been removed.

A negro boy, about 20 years old, who was taken near Mason's Hill by our men, says that the Rebels had intelligence of our intended movement, which had, however, been overrated in importance by their own fears. They had got the idea that they were to be attacked by 30,000 men. The negro also says that Mason's Hill was also deserted by the Rebels, who have retired to their stronger positions, hoping, doubtless, that they will be followed. Certain it is that not only were the soldiers aware of our approach, but the inhabitants of the farm-houses all along the Fairfax road had taken the alarm, had removed their most portable property, and late last night fled to the congenial South. One woman, who occupied a pleasant little brick cottage at the junction of the Fairfax and Mason roads, last night removed some of her effects, and this morning, early, she fired her house and fled. The cottage and all that it contained were utterly destroyed.

Those families who pluck up the courage to remain and look after their property tell an interesting story of the means used by the Rebels to frighten the inhabitants. They are told that our army is coming to rob them of their property, to treat their persons with every barbarous indignity, to parcel out their farms among our own soldiers, or to leave the land a desert and a waste behind us. By these stories, cattle, horses, and other valuable articles that can be made available to the Jeff. Davis soldiers, are secured from many whose devotion to the Secession cause would render the employment of absolute force to obtain their goods unpopular with their own soldiers, and in other instances they destroy their property outright rather than have it fall into the hands of our troops.

While our advanced skirmishers were carefully feeling their way along the low undergrowth that skirts the foot of Mason's Hill, they were fired on by a small body of skirmishers or pickets of the enemy, and a brisk fire was kept up for a few minutes, but without fatal effect to any of our men. Whether the enemy suffered any could not be definitely ascertained; therefore, with wondrous self-denial, I restrain my pen from writing the universally valuable information of all our "own" correspondents, that "though we happily lost no men in this brilliant affair, the enemy suffered severely."

All the men behaved admirably, it being the first time that, as a brigade, they had been brought up to face the enemy's guns. The advance division marched steadily and squarely up to the very foot of Mason's Hill, along a country where they were not well protected, and where for the last mile and a half they were within easy shelling distance of a most formidable-looking earthwork, and one which the men all believed to be equipped with heavy guns. Though the reverse proved to be the case, the trial of the nerve and steadiness of the men was as severe, and the test of their courage as satisfactory, as though columbids and fitted cannon had frowned in scores over the low parapet of Mason's Hill.

The expedition has had a triple effect. First: It gave the brigade a day's drill, of a kind invaluable to them, and not obtainable in any other manner. Second: It procured a large supply of much-needed forage. Third: It has given us topographical information desirable, and valuable, and has given, what seems to me, a solution of much of the recent rebel maneuvering, and gives a hint which may not improbably be the key to the tactics of Davis, Beauregard & Co., with reference to the Army of the Potomac. Thus it was:

We now know that the "fortifications" on Mason's Hill, and on Edsall's Hill, are the merest and most chiffling shams, and we have good reason to believe that there is more sham than reality about the works. The speediness with which the rebels retreated yesterday, at the hint of an approaching column, would seem to point to the belief that their pretended works are to be systematically abandoned as our advance is made—either without any fight, or with a mere show of resistance, in order that our men, flushed with carrying easily battery after battery, that they have been taught to be very formidable, if not impregnable, may be led on, step by step, until they are entrapped into another Bull Run of batteries, where the venustous columns will be raked by annihilating cross-firing until they are utterly cut up and destroyed.

And while this game goes on, what desperate attempts might not be made on Washington by other divisions of an enemy eager by long delay, confident from recent victory, and hence in all the worst passions of man, which have been inflamed unscrupulously and systematically by their leaders, who have never ceased to hold out, as a lure, the wild antics consequent on the sack of a wealthy capital city.

Shall we again be tempted out of our intrenched lines?

The Deserted Rebel Posts.

WASHINGTON, Sept. 30, 1861. The way is now open between the Capital and the Rebel encampments, and such visitors as can procure permission, are passing from point to point of interest, and following the new lines of our advance to their outer limits. The barricades and battis which blocked the Leesburg and Columbia highways have all been cleared away, so that our wagons can now easily pass over the roads which on Saturday were hardly open to horsemen. Munson's Hill is at times thronged with eager inquirers into the Southern order of army encampments, their method of engineering, and so forth. The intrenchments continue to excite amusement, not because of their defensive character as observed from a distance, or on account of their singular and unprecedented costliness as works of defense. A second examination of them only reveals additional defects and weaknesses. A rapid ride yesterday, along and through the abandoned Rebel posts, afforded little opportunity for discovering more than their unconditional inefficiency, which is, perhaps, all that really needs to be known of them; but the fact that their character is made the subject of a good deal of odd speculation and inquiry here, gives them a somewhat singular interest. Everybody is wondering whether the Rebels ever meant fight behind such works, or imply meant to screen other operations from detection by temporarily offering a show of formidable preparation in this immediate neighborhood.

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There are indications, all the more noticeable because not intended to be, that Flag Officer Goldsborough has the right sort of metal in him. Yesterday the Young America took the frigate Congress (60) in tow for Newport News. Everybody knows that inging from absent the fortress to Newport News is a route less angular from one to three miles, as the navigator will tell you, from Sewall's Point, where the Rebels have their much-talked-of battery, beside one or two others not laid down on the maps. It was observed that the route of the Congress was considerably nearer than the accustomed path, indeed, somewhat out of the usual route, in order that it might be near enough for the Rebels, without glasses, to count her port-holes and take notice that they were open and her decks cleared for action, should the Rebels see fit to fire a single shot. In short, the Congress, in passing, tried to draw their fire, and was ready to reply in the most vigorous manner. At the same time, the steam of the Minnesota was up (indeed, it is seldom suffered to go entirely down), and the entire fleet in the Roads were ready to slip their cables on the first fire, while every deck was cleared for action, a fact which, however, was known to but a few only on shore. But the Rebels suffered themselves to be rubbed against without so much as firing a single shot. Had they done so, it is probable that matters would stand a little different to-day on Sewall's Point. The Congress anchored alongside the Cumberland, abreast of Newport News, and in returning, the Young America ran snudly over to Pig Point and took a look at the Rebel battery there, which, like that on Sewall's Point, kept its silence.

Could the anecdotes of the camp be collected in a volume, the volume of the publisher would be made; it is, so far as a single table book could do it. Here is one that might find a place: It should be known that the 20th Indiana Regiment arrived a few days since. The story goes that not many hours after they had pitched their tents in Camp Hamilton, preparatory to departing for Hatteras, one of the Hoosiers was accosted by an individual who professed to be, or was really, a Secessionist: "What did you come down here for? I guess you got too much at Bull Run. Thought you were going to Richmond." "Well, we are," replied the Hoosier; "we are on our way now, via Hatteras." The conversation ended there.

There was a fine brigade review by Gen. Wool and staff at Newport News yesterday. The General inspected everything minutely, the men, their equipments, camps, culinary appointments and sanitary condition, thus making himself familiar with the camp in every respect. The Five Zouaves have not as yet particularly distinguished themselves, though their general good conduct is the subject of remark.

Letters from officers of the army to their friends, give a better side-view of affairs on the Potomac than can be obtained from any other source. The country has no correct notion of the vastness of the great Union army that lies stretched out on both sides of the Potomac, or of the extensiveness and completeness of its appointments. At the battle of Bull Run, the artillery was confined to something like half a dozen light batteries. Now there are more than one hundred, beside the guns in the fortifications; so that in case the rebels advance upon us in the face of from fifteen hundred to two thousand cannon, many of them the best the world has yet seen. An officer writes that there are nine batteries in the single division to which he belongs. They are all in the hands of regulars to whom the business is not new. I presume that it is no secret now, that the recent withdrawal of our companies of regulars from the Fortress was to create as many new batteries, which now occupy an advanced position. An officer who now occupies Munson's Hill, writing before the movement was made, says: "Major H. has just come in and ordered us to advance at a moment's warning. The rebels have withdrawn their pickets preparatory to falling back, and McClellan is determined to pursue and occupy their advanced positions." An hour after the writer, with his battery, was on Munson's Hill. There is much reason for believing that McClellan will not wait much longer before taking the offensive. He has had the good sense and power to wait till he was ready. He is now ready. The country will be astonished at the success with which the numbers of Gen. McClellan's army has been kept secret; how it has been daily augmented, and how to-day it is one of the largest armies that has been brought together in modern times. Probably history does not furnish an instance of so large an army being collected in so short a time. And yet, not a man has been drafted, or in any manner pressed into the service. Every one has come of his own free will—and tens and hundreds of thousands more will follow in the same way.

It is a significant fact that they who can speak most understandingly and without restraint, in their private letters to brother-officers, express the greatest confidence in the preparations of Gen. McClellan to receive the Rebels, should they advance, and of complete success whenever he chooses to advance on them. There has been no moment during the last two weeks that he has not desired them to attack him. During that time his army has grown nearly one-fifth, and is increasing in numbers, discipline, courage, and confidence every day, and hence to-day he is ready for anything.

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THE PRISONERS OF WAR.

THE PRISONERS OF WAR. CHARLESTON JAIL. FROM THE CHARLESTON (S. C.) MORNING OF SEPT. 16. Yesterday the Yankee prisoners of war, who had been confined in the city at the city at an hour when most of our citizens were probably still slumbering in their beds. The arrangements for their reception, which had been made by Col. Branch, commanding the military, were carried out quietly, and in the most satisfactory manner. The detail for this service was the 1st Regiment of Cavalry, to which was attached a squadron of cavalry. Owing to the fact that the train was expected at midnight, the detail was larger than it would have otherwise been. The several companies were under arms all night. At 11.15 p. m., the order to form was given—the train having been signalled. The Zouave Cavalry, Capt. Chickester, were specially detailed to receive the prisoners from the cars. This was done by forming in two ranks—intervals of two paces—faced inwards—making a width of twelve paces. On the right of the Zouaves the 1st platoon of the Louisiana "Volunteers" were posted—on the left the second platoon—leaving an opening for the prisoners to march into the square, the officers entering first, followed by the soldiers. As soon as this was completed, the prisoners, with their guard, were marched into another hollow square, formed of the Washington Light Infantry on the right, the German Riflemen on the left, the Benning Light Infantry and Meade's Guard on the right flank, and the Palmetto Rifleman, Carolina Light Infantry, and Janison Rifles on the left flank. In this order, accompanied by the Charleston Light Dragoons in front, and the German Hussars in the rear, both under command of Maj. Ryan, the corps being under command of Col. J. L. Branch, proceeded through Washington, Calhoun, Cunningham, Beaufain, Maycock, and Magazine streets, to the jail, where proper arrangements had previously been made for their reception by Capt. Theodore G. Bang, specially detailed for the duty.

They were forced to follow the pen, who had decided to