

# **Last Days of the Rebellion: The Second New York Cavalry (Harris' Light) at Appomattox Station and Appomattox Court House, April 8 and 9, 1865**

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LAST DAYS OF THE REBELLION.

THE SECOND NEW YORK CAVALRY

(HARRIS' LIGHT)

AT APPOMATTOX STATION AND APPOMATTOX COURT

HOUSE, APRIL 8 and 9, 1865.

BY

ALANSON M. RANDOL

Major First U. S. Artillery (late Colonel Second New York Cavalry), Bvt. Brig-General, U. S. Vols.

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1886.

[Pg 3]

LAST DAYS OF THE REBELLION.

During the winter of 1864-5 the Second New York (Harris' Light) Cavalry was in winter quarters near Winchester, Va., on the Romney pike. Alanson M. Randol, Captain First United States Artillery, was colonel of the regiment, which, with the First Connecticut, Second Ohio, and Third New Jersey, constituted the first brigade, third division, cavalry corps. The division was commanded by General George A. Custer; the brigade by A. C. M. Pennington, Captain Second United States Artillery, Colonel Third New Jersey Cavalry. On the 27th of February, 1865, the divisions of Merritt and Custer, with the batteries of Miller (Fourth United States Artillery) and Woodruff (Second United States Artillery), all under command of General Sheridan, left their winter quarters in and around Winchester, and, after a series of splendid victories, and unsurpassed marches and fortunes, joined the Army of the Potomac in front of Petersburg on the 27th of March. The Second New York Cavalry shared largely in the glories and miseries of this great and successful raid. At Five Forks, Deep Creek, and Sailors Creek, it not only maintained its gallant and meritorious record, but added to[Pg 4] its great renown. At the gentle and joyous passage of arms at Appomattox Station, on the 8th of April, it reached the climax of its glory, and, by its deeds of daring, touched the pinnacle of fame.

On that day it performed prodigies of valor, and achieved successes as pregnant with good results as any single action of the war. By forcing a passage through the rebel lines and heading off Lee's army, it contributed largely to the result that followed the next day—the surrender of the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia.

On the night of the 7th of April we camped on Buffalo River. Moving at an early hour on the 8th, we crossed the Lynchburg Railroad at Prospect Station, and headed for Appomattox Station, where it was expected we would strike, if not intercept, Lee's retreating, disintegrating army. The trail was fresh and the chase hot. Joy beamed in every eye, for all felt that the end was drawing near, and we earnestly hoped that ours might be the glorious opportunity of striking the final blow. About noon the regiment was detached to capture a force of the enemy said to be at one of the crossings of the Appomattox. Some few hundreds, unarmed, half-starved, stragglers, with no fight in them, were found, and turned over to the Provost Marshall. Resuming its place in the column, I received orders to report with the regiment to General Custer, who was at its head. Reporting in compliance with this order, General Custer informed me that his scouts had reported three large trains of cars at Appomattox Station, loaded with supplies for the rebel army; that he [Pg 5] expected to have made a junction with Merritt's division near this point; that his orders were to wait here till Merritt joined him; that he had not heard from him since morning, and had sent an officer to communicate with him, but if he did not hear from him in half an hour, he wished me to take my regiment and capture the trains of cars, and, if possible, reach and hold the pike to Lynchburg. While talking, the whistle of the locomotive was distinctly but faintly heard, and the column was at once moved forward, the Second New York in advance. As we neared the station the whistles became more and more

distinct, and a scout reported the trains rapidly unloading, and that the advance of the rebel army was passing through Appomattox Court House. Although Custer's orders were to make a junction with Merritt before coming in contact with the enemy, here was a chance to strike a decisive blow, which, if successful, would add to his renown and glory, and if not, Merritt would soon be up to help him out of the scrape. Our excitement was intense, but subdued. All saw the vital importance of heading off the enemy. Another whistle, nearer and clearer, and another scout decided the question. I was ordered to move rapidly to Appomattox Station, seize the trains there, and, if possible, get possession of the Lynchburg pike. General Custer rode up alongside of me and, laying his hand on my shoulder, said, "Go in, old fellow, don't let anything stop you; now is the chance for your stars. Whoop 'em up; I'll be after you." The regiment left the column at a slow trot, which became faster and faster until we caught sight of the cars, which were preparing to move away, when, with a cheer, we charged down on the station, capturing in an instant the [Pg 6] three trains of cars, with the force guarding them. I called for engineers and firemen to take charge of the trains, when at least a dozen of my men around me offered their services. I chose the number required, and ordered the trains to be run to the rear, where I afterwards learned they were claimed as captures by General Ord's corps. The cars were loaded with commissary stores, a portion of which had been unloaded, on which the rebel advance were regaling themselves when we pounced so unexpectedly down on them.

While the regiment was rallying after the charge, the enemy opened on it a fierce fire from all kinds of guns—field and siege—which, however, did but little damage, as the regiment was screened from the enemy's sight by a dense woods. I at once sent notification to General Custer and Colonel

Pennington of my success, moved forward—my advance busily skirmishing—and followed with the regiment in line of battle, mounted. The advance was soon checked by the enemy formed behind hastily constructed intrenchments in a dense wood of the second growth of pine. Flushed with success and eager to gain the Lynchburg pike, along which immense wagon and siege trains were rapidly moving, the regiment was ordered to charge. Three times did it try to break through the enemy's lines, but failed. Colonel Pennington arrived on the field with the rest of the brigade, when, altogether, a rush was made, but it failed. Then Custer, with the whole division, tried it, but he, too, failed. Charge and charge again, was now the order, but it was done in driblets, without organization and in great disorder. General Custer was here, there, and everywhere, urging the men forward with cheers and oaths.[Pg 7] The great prize was so nearly in his grasp that it seemed a pity to lose it; but the rebel infantry held on hard and fast, while his artillery belched out death and destruction on every side of us. Merritt and night were fast coming on, so as soon as a force, however small, was organized, it was hurled forward, only to recoil in confusion and loss. Confident that this mode of fighting would not bring us success, and fearful lest the enemy should assume the offensive, which, in our disorganized state, must result in disaster, I went to General Custer soon after dark, and said to him that if he would let me get my regiment together, I could break through the rebel line. He excitedly replied, "Never mind your regiment; take anything and everything you can find, horse-holders and all, and break through: we must get hold of the pike to-night." Acting on this order, a force was soon organized by me, composed chiefly of the Second New York, but in part of other regiments, undistinguishable in the darkness. With this I made a charge down a narrow lane, which led to an open field where the rebel artillery

was posted. As the charging column debouched from the woods, six bright lights suddenly flashed directly before us. A toronado of canister-shot swept over our heads, and the next instant we were in the battery. The line was broken, and the enemy routed. Custer, with the whole division, now pressed through the gap pell-mell, in hot pursuit, halting for neither prisoners nor guns, until the road to Lynchburg, crowded with wagons and artillery, was in our possession. We then turned short to the right and headed for the Appomattox Court House; but just before reaching it we discovered the thousands of camp fires of the rebel army, and the pursuit was checked. The enemy[Pg 8] had gone into camp, in fancied security that his route to Lynchburg was still open before him; and he little dreamed that our cavalry had planted itself directly across his path, until some of our men dashed into Appomattox Court House, where, unfortunately, Lieutenant Colonel Root, of the Fifteenth New York Cavalry, was instantly killed by a picket guard. After we had seized the road, we were joined by other divisions of the cavalry corps which came to our assistance, but too late to take part in the fight.

Owing to the night attack, our regiments were so mixed up that it took hours to reorganize them. When this was effected, we marched near to the railroad station and bivouacked.

That night was passed in great anxiety. We threw ourselves on the ground to rest, but not to sleep. We knew that the infantry was hastening to our assistance, but unless they joined us before sunrise, our cavalry line would be brushed away, and the rebels would escape after all our hard work to head them off from Lynchburg. About daybreak I was aroused by loud hurrahs, and was told that Ord's corps was coming up rapidly, and forming in rear of our cavalry. Soon after we were in the saddle and moving towards the Appomattox Court House road, where the firing was growing

lively; but suddenly our direction was changed, and the whole cavalry corps rode at a gallop to the right of our line, passing between the position of the rebels and the rapidly forming masses of our infantry, who greeted us with cheers and shouts of joy as we galloped along their front. At several places we had to "run the gauntlet" of fire from the enemy's guns posted around the [Pg 9] Court House, but this only added to the interest of the scene, for we felt it to be the last expiring effort of the enemy to put on a bold front; we knew that we had them this time, and that at last Lee's proud army of Northern Virginia was at our mercy. While moving at almost a charging gait we were suddenly brought to a halt by reports of a surrender. General Sheridan and his staff rode up, and left in hot haste for the Court House; but just after leaving us, they were fired into by a party of rebel cavalry, who also opened fire on us, to which we promptly replied, and soon put them to flight. Our lines were then formed for a charge on the rebel infantry; but while the bugles were sounding the charge, an officer with a white flag rode out from the rebel lines, and we halted. It was fortunate for us that we halted when we did, for had we charged we would have been swept into eternity, as directly in our front was a creek, on the other side of which was a rebel brigade, entrenched, with batteries in position, the guns double shotted with canister. To have charged this formidable array, mounted, would have resulted in almost total annihilation. After we had halted, we were informed that preliminaries were being arranged for the surrender of Lee's whole army. At this news, cheer after cheer rent the air for a few moments, when soon all became as quiet as if nothing unusual had occurred. I rode forward between the lines with Custer and Pennington, and met several old friends among the rebels, who came out to see us. Among them, I remember Lee (Gimlet), of Virginia, and Cowan, of North Carolina. I saw General Cadmus

Wilcox just across the creek, walking to and fro with his eyes on the ground, just as was his wont when he was instructor at West Point.[Pg 10] I called to him, but he paid no attention, except to glance at me in a hostile manner.

While we were thus discussing the probable terms of the surrender, General Lee, in full uniform, accompanied by one of his staff, and General Babcock, of General Grant's staff, rode from the Court House towards our lines. As he passed us, we all raised our caps in salute, which he gracefully returned.

Later in the day loud and continuous cheering was heard among the rebels, which was taken up and echoed by our lines until the air was rent with cheers, when all as suddenly subsided. The surrender was a fixed fact, and the rebels were overjoyed at the very liberal terms they had received. Our men, without arms, approached the rebel lines, and divided their rations with the half-starved foe, and engaged in quiet, friendly conversation.

There was no bluster nor braggadocia,—nothing but quiet contentment that the rebellion was crushed, and the war ended. In fact, many of the rebels seemed as much pleased as we were. Now and then one would meet a surly, dissatisfied look; but, as a general thing, we met smiling faces and hands eager and ready to grasp our own, especially if they contained anything to eat or drink. After the surrender, I rode over to the Court House with Colonel Pennington and others and visited the house in which the surrender had taken place, in search of some memento of the occasion. We found that everything had been appropriated before our arrival. Mr. Wilmer McLean, in whose house the surrender took place, informed us that on his farm at Manassas the first battle of Bull Run was fought. I asked him to write his name in my diary, for which, much to his[Pg 11] surprise. I gave him a dollar. Others did the same, and I was told that he thus received quite a golden

harvest.

While all of the regiments of the division shared largely in the glories of these two days, none excelled the Second New York Cavalry in its record of great and glorious deeds. Well might its officers and men carry their heads high, and feel elated with pride as they received the congratulations and commendations showered on them from all sides. They felt they had done their duty, and given the “tottering giant” a blow that laid him prostrate at their feet, never, it is to be hoped, to rise again.

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