The Hoosier Yell

By STEPHEN E. TOWNE

Monday, May 25, 1863, broke hot and thick over the southern end of the Mississippi Delta. As Union artillery units began a day of shelling the rebel stronghold at Vicksburg, Maj. Edward J. Wood of the 48th Indiana Volunteer Infantry regiment sat down in his tent to write a long letter to his wife. His previous letter was dated May 8, and in the intervening weeks he and his regiment had fought four sharp battles. With his colonel sick and his lieutenant colonel’s having resigned, he was now its effective commander. He had much to write about.

Wood was both an uncommon man and a typical Union officer. He was born in Florida in 1834 to a Connecticut steamboat captain and a local 14-year-old girl from a slaveholding family. When his father died, his mother sent him to New York to live with his paternal grandmother and extended family, who raised him to become an abolitionist. Educated at Dartmouth College, upon graduation he went west to build railroads in northern Indiana; he stayed and started a law practice in Goshen, where he joined the fledgling Republican Party and won local office.

Soon after, he married Jane Augusta Williams a young woman from western New York. When the war came, he did not immediately enlist, as Jane was pregnant; however, after she safely delivered a girl, Wood quickly raised a company and obtained a commission as its captain in the 48th Indiana. The regiment fought in the battles of Iuka and Corinth in Mississippi in 1862, where Wood experienced both the thrill and horrors of combat. Above all, he learned to command men.

During the winter of 1862-3, Maj. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, commander of the federal Army of the Tennessee, had pondered how to attack the strategically important rebel stronghold of Vicksburg, which controlled the Mississippi River. Several attempts had failed to breach its defenses. Then, on a dark night in April, naval gunboats escorting transport steamboats dashed south and eluded Confederate artillery fire from the city that blockaded the river. Grant’s troops marched south on the Louisiana side of the river to a point south of Vicksburg, where on April 30 the vessels began to ferry them to the Mississippi side. The federals drove back rebel troops at Port Gibson the next day.

The 48th Indiana crossed on May 1 with a majority of Maj. Gen. James B. McPherson’s corps and drove eastward, meeting ineffectual resistance. Once over the river, cut off...
from supply bases and wagons, Grant’s army marched rapidly “without an ounce of baggage or rations, except what the men have carried on their backs,” along with 100 rounds of ammunition for each man, Wood informed his wife. Soldiers subsisted on the country around them and slept “in the furrow of a corn field” after hard marching. Their supply wagons only caught up with them later.

From the river, Wood and much of Grant’s army pushed northeast to position themselves between the rebel army hemmed in at Vicksburg and Confederate forces gathering near Jackson, the state capital, under Gen. Joseph E. Johnston, who hoped to break the tightening noose. On May 12, McPherson’s troops encountered stiff rebel opposition at Raymond, and Wood’s regiment and others arrived at an “extremely opportune” moment in the battle to force a rebel retreat. The historian Michael B. Ballard notes that while the fight at Raymond was inconclusive, it showed Grant the strategic importance of dealing with Johnston to his east before turning toward Vicksburg.

Continuing east toward Jackson, Indiana troops in the vanguard of McPherson’s column expected a “severe struggle.” On May 14, troops pushed back Confederate skirmishers to the edge of the town, Wood recalled, in “the most drenching thunder storms I ever saw.” Union infantry deployed in a line stretching three-quarters of a mile over the undulating farm fields. As the weather lightened and they neared the rebel batteries, officers ordered their men to “fix bayonets” and charge “double quick.” The Indiana regiments on the far right started a roar that ripped down the line. “You should have heard the Hoosier yell,” Wood reported. The “unbroken front of glittering steel” scattered the rebel defenders and captured the town, along with valuable artillery batteries.

Resting in Jackson for just one night, the next morning Wood’s men turned westward, where the rebel army at Vicksburg under Gen. John C. Pemberton ventured out of their fortifications to strike at Grant’s rear. The armies met at Champion Hill on May 16. Wood’s brigade shifted from the Union right to reinforce the federal line in the center that was giving way under vicious assaults, fighting until they expended all their ammunition. Along with heavy battle casualties, men collapsed under the midday sun. As more Union troops reached the scene, the tide turned and the Confederates fell back and raced for the protection afforded by Vicksburg’s battlements. Wood recorded that the memory of the battlefield carnage — the hills and ravines “thickly strewn with dead & dying” — will “send a chill thro’ me to my latest day.”

Having decisively defeated Pemberton, Grant sent fresh Union divisions after the retreating rebels over the Big Black River. Wood’s regiment helped build a bridge made of cotton bales, and guarded it from an expected attack by Johnston to the east that never came. They rejoined McPherson in the ring of Union forces now stretched around fortress Vicksburg.

On May 22, Grant ordered a general assault on the imposing rebel works. Following a heavy artillery bombardment, including from Navy vessels in the Mississippi River,
federal troops attempted to climb the steep earthen walls and storm the forts that guarded the city. In the morning, the 48th Indiana supported a fruitless attack that collapsed after "great slaughter," but in the midafternoon they received orders to shift to their left to assist troops under Maj. Gen. John A. McClernand, who had reported to Grant that his troops had secured a foothold on the works.

Wood led his men up a steep ravine to reinforce "a few brave fellows, clinging to the edge of the parapet ... the little band themselves saved from complete annihilation by the steady stream of fire which they poured over the top of the fort." Together, they fired on the fort. "We were only separated from the rebs. by a distance of thirty feet, & they under cover of their works," Wood wrote.

Totally exposed, they stayed for an hour and a half until a rebel sally on their right threatened to cut off retreat. "I was ordered to withdraw the line, and then the danger of retreat seemed greater than the danger of remaining," he wrote. "I knew that if we ceased firing at once, & undertook to go down the ravine as we came up, that the rebels would pour up over the fort and open a murderous fire upon us." Thinking quickly, he ordered his companies to fall back one by one while the rest of his command continued firing on the foe. When down to the last two companies, Wood ordered them to cease fire and told his men to scramble for cover "as best they could," leaving his dead and some of his wounded to fall into rebel hands.

Grant's general assault was a failure, and he and his army settled down to a siege. His troops were greatly relieved. "I do not think another attempt will be made to carry their works by storm, & if not, we shall be comparatively safe," Wood opined. The month of marching and fighting had taken a toll. "We left the river 420 strong, and have lost 141 & besides these some 50 are worn out & sick, so we have really only about 230 men fit for duty." Still, he marveled at the army's accomplishment and reassured his wife that he thrived on the rigors of the march. They had completely surrounded Vicksburg, and Union guns barraged the city continuously. Though the rebels were "a plucky set of fellows," he said, "I do not think they can stand it much longer."

Wood had grown into command in the course of 18 months of campaigning. His experience matched that of many other volunteer officers who learned to lead their troops under harrowing conditions. His letter recounting four hard fights during the decisive campaign of the war exemplifies the determination of many Union commanders to defeat the rebellion and restore the Union.

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