Recollections of Ridgeway.

[BY A PARTICIPATOR IN THE FRAY.]

THE ALARM.

About six o'clock on the morning of the first of June, 1866, I was aroused, in a most unceremonious manner, by a Sergeant of our Company, and ordered to report myself at Headquarters in Hamilton without delay. I had the honor of being a private in No. 3 Company, 13th Battalion. The order was startling, because, at that time, it was entirely unexpected. Trouble had been anticipated along the frontier for months back; a few weeks before there was no knowing what moment the Fenian hordes would cross our borders to rob and plunder the country, but a period of quiet ensued, and troops were released from duty. The order, therefore, banged informally on the morning quite unexpected. The sergeant, hurrying from place to place notifying the members of his Company, had no time for explanation; I gleaned enough, however, to entirely myself that there was work ahead, and, in all probability, the Battalion would be immediately ordered to the front. I donned my uniform, which was hanging in my room, and, after swallowing my breakfast, was at the drill shed in double quick. There were many there before me, and in the course of an hour or two almost every man (with the exception of those who were on duty at Windsor) was in his place. It was a strange scene in the drill shed that morning; how well I remember it. News had come during the night that the Fenians had secretly rallied in considerable strength and were actually crossing the frontier at Fort Erie. The city was growing wild with excitement, and no wonder, for upwards of three hundred of her sons were about leaving for the scene of action. The friends of the volunteers had gathered about the place and there was a look of peculiar earnestness on every countenance; the boys strove hard to maintain their usual lightheartedness, but a feeling of inexpressible sadness would prevail in spite of them. The orders were read and the officer in command addressed a few words to the battalion. We were to proceed to the front on active service, old. Each man was to provide himself with one day's cooked rations and be ready to march away in an hour. The preliminary arrangements were soon completed, for, unfortunately, the men were badly equipped in those days.—They were without haversacks, knapsacks, water bottle, overcoat straps and, indeed, everything appertaining to a soldier's comfort, but what heeded they the absence of such articles? They possessed patriotism, enthusiasm, courage and these attributes must carry them through.

THE DEPARTURE.

About ten o'clock the colors were unfurled, the order to move was given and the Battalion marched away amidst the best wishes of the citizens. A special train was in waiting at the G. W. R. to convey the Battalion to Paris, thence down the G. T. R. to

DUNNVILLE,

where we arrived about 2.30 p. m. Immediately after landing the men were billetted about the town (there being not sufficient hotel accommodation for all), and the people received us into their homes with all the cheerfulness the circumstances could admit of. Half a dozen comrades and myself were allotted to the house of the late Major ———, who, together with members of his family, welcomed and entertained us in a most hospitable manner. It seemed evident that we were to remain in town, at least, over night, and the boys were highly enjoying the novelty of the situation. Our squad was just beginning to feel at ease in their new quarters, and we had thanked the Gods that our lines had fallen in such pleasant places, when, oh, "Tower of Babel!" a fearful sound was heard. It was the assembly call—new orders had come. Loud and long the bugle call echoed through the evening air, warning the volunteers to prepare for immediate departure, and filling the town's people with indescribable terror. All were quickly on board the cars and the train moved off, leaving the vast crowd of excited spectators to their own reflections. We crossed the Welland Canal at Port Colborne, and at daybreak next morning our train was standing at a halting place by the wayside about six miles from Ridgeway.—At this halting place the "morning meal" was served to all hands from provisions kindly sent down from Port Colborne. Those provisions consisted of crackers and red herring, which were, of course, good enough for the occasion, if there had been a sufficient quantity of them. But, alas! for a few of us, the provision boxes were "passed around" while we were over at the little farm house, and those herrings we never saw. Here, too, much to our surprise and gratification, we discovered the Queen's Own laid up in cars not far from our own, having also run down there during the night. We were all glad to learn that the two Regiments were to proceed together. In due time the train started, and we arrived at

RIDGEWAY

about five o'clock in the morning. The village, if it could be called a village, consisted, at the time, of a small store and tavern combined, three or four houses scattered about, and a bit of a shed called the "station." After disembarking, the 13th formed column of companies, right in front, and halted in the road near the railway; the Queen's Own, forming in similar manner, halted a hundred yards or so further on. A delay of a couple of hours, or more, took place, during which time the arms were minutely examined, and ammunition to the extent of sixty rounds per man was served out. A part of the time the boys were permitted to "stand easy" and amuse themselves as best they could under the circumstances. It was generally understood that our little force was to march along the main road some twelve miles, when it would form a junction with Colonel Peacock's large Brigade, which was then somewhere in the neighborhood of Chippawa.

It was a glorious summer morning; the sun had now ascended some distance above the horizon and had dissipated the damp and chill of early morn; not a vestige of a cloud be seen anywhere before the clear blue sky; the soft grass was still moist with dew, and the big drops on the leaves of some trees near by glistened sparkled in the sun like jewels of richest hue. Little birds were flitting about chirping gaily, and some pretty flowers in a little garden, in front of a solitary looking house, sent forth sweet fragrance which perfumed the air. It was serenely calm; no sound could be heard save our own subdued voices and the music of the birds. It was a charming scene; bright, lovely, peaceful. Suddenly, a well-known voice sang out the order: "13th, attention; with ball cartridge load." Awful words; they are freighted with a terrible meaning. The command was quickly executed, the change being sent home with as much apparent unconcern as though it had been blank cartridge. Soon after, the band of the Queen's Own struck up a lively air and led off down the road at the head of its regiment; then came the 13th, followed by one Company of the "York Rangers," and the extra ammunition waggon brought up the rear. One company of the Queen's Own and the company of "Rangers" were thrown out to the right and left to act as scouts. They were to proceed a mile or so in advance to feel the way for the main body.

Such was the order of march adopted by our little brigade, and, although the men were not quite as fresh and lively as they would have been had they just tumbled out of their beds at home, still everybody was in excellent spirits and the force marched gaily along.

The road was smooth, tolerably straight and ran through a level patch of country, with farm houses a mile or two apart. The fields on either side were green with young wheat and other grain. A strip of bush extended along about a mile to the left of the road, and a couple of miles from Ridgeway, a much denser bush commenced about a quarter of a mile to the right. These woods extended along, nearly parallel to the road for five or six miles, to a short distance beyond Lime Ridge, when they gradually circle together, forming a dense woods through which the road runs.—We had tramped merrily along in the order above described for an hour, or perhaps an hour and a half. The sun began to grow intensely hot, and to make it all the worse; the only way we had of carrying our overcoats was to wear them. The heat began to tell on the men, and two or three cases of sunstroke had already occurred along the road. Suddenly our meditations were cut short by the report of shots ahead. The firing was repeated a few times; it was the signal from the scouts. The latter returned soon after, when, to our surprise, we learned that, instead of meeting our friends under Col. Peacock, we had actually come upon the enemy.

There was no time for hesitation, but

INTO ACTION

at once. The right wing of the Queen's Own was immediately thrown out in skirmishing line. This line extended out to the right and left of the road, and presented a front about two hundred yards in length. The left wing of the same corps was to act as supports, and formed a short distance in rear of the line, while the 13th stood in close column, in reserve, half a mile still further back. These movements were but the work of but a few minutes. Directly after their execution the order was given to the line, by a bugler, to "Fire and advance!" and then the fight began. The line opened independent fire in a lively manner, and the enemy, as soon as he had collected his senses, returned the compliment with a vengeance. The firing was kept up pretty steadily for fifteen or twenty minutes, our line having advanced across a couple of fields. The air began to fill with smoke. The smell of powder, the whizzing of the enemy's bullets and a sight of the bleeding dead body of an officer of the Queen's Own, as it was borne to the rear, together with the intense excitement, almost made the heart stand still and awakened a new and strange series of thought in the minds of those young participators.

Our line continued to advance over the fields, keeping up the fire, and the enemy was forced to fall back towards the woods on the right of the road. Assistance was asked for from the right of the line, when the Highland company of the Queen's Own was despatched to take up position on the extreme right. The companies in support and the reserve, of course, kept following up at their proper distance in rear of the skirmishers, to be ready for any emergency. It was plainly to be seen from the start that the enemy by far outnumbered us, was disciplined in the kind of warfare he was engaged in and was composed of a hardened and desperate class of men. It was well known that the Fenian army consisted, chiefly, of old soldiers collected together out of recently disbanded regiments of the U. S. Army, and, although it was looked upon over there as a rabble, yet there were ont just the pleasantest sort of people to meet on an occasion of this kind they were well armed, had plenty of ammunition and evidently had the benefit of a substantial breakfast that morning, for, as we advanced over the ground from which they had been driven and upon which they had camped the night before, we found the ashes of their camp fires still hot and the ground strewed about with cooked and uncooked provision. A number of rifles, a few officers' swords and various other articles of a like nature were also left scattered about. The fighting had now continued half an hour or more; we had lost three or four dead and wounded and had advanced about a mile under fire, when the report "ammunition expended" came from the front. One company of the Queen's Own had been armed with repeating rifles, which were capable of discharging twelve shots per minute, and it was this one company which had sent back the report. The reserve was immediately ordered to the relief. The 13th doubled up in splendid style and quickly took up the ground occupied by the Queen's Own, the right wing, comprising companies Nos. 1, 2 and 3, relieving the skirmishers, and the left wing—companies Nos. 4, 5 and 6—the supports. The Queen's Own doubled into close column, fell back and took up position in reserve half-a-mile in rear, where the party in charge of our colors was located. No. 1 was now on the right, No. 2 in the centre, and No. 3 on the left of the skirmishing line. The company of "Rangers" doubled out to the extreme left, while the Highland Company was peppering away on the extreme right. These changes were, of course, executed without interrupting the fire, and the new line went to work like men. The smoke became so dense at times that nothing could be seen anywhere about. Field after field was crossed, and the only available shelter our boys could have against the enemy's bullets was an occasion rail fence. The main body of the Fenians had by this time gained the woods, which were now but a short distance to the right of the road, and continued to fire and fall back under cover of the trees, having left some of their dead in the fields behind. Luckily for us, we advanced so rapidly as to keep under the enemy's range, and the bullets went whizzing through the air, mostly over our heads.

A portion of the Fenians had entrenched themselves behind a farm-house, a barn, a pig-sty, and a stone fence, and were making a desperate stand to maintain their ground. The firing now became hotter than ever, and the excitement for a time was awful. Several of our men were wounded here, among others, Lieut. R———, of the left wing, and Private S———, of No. 3 Company, who were shot in the breast and neck respectively. A few, my near rank man included, actually fell down through excessive fatigue, and had to be carried to the rear.

The Fenians were finally driven from their stronghold, and, amid a loud hurrah from our side, rushed off to join their friends in the bush. Meantime, the left of the line had swung round over the stone fence behind the barn, through an orchard and down a slightly sloping hill, while the right remained stationary near the house. This movement slightly changed our front to the right, and gave a better range in the enemy. The Fenians were falling well back into the woods, and many were getting out of the way as fast as their legs would carry them. Two or three mounted officers could be seen moving about in the bush, and some of our boys amused themselves by sending the leaden messages towards them, but there were too many trees between for direct communication. The Fenians kept up the fire, and their bullets came whacking against our apple trees and among the limbs, dropping the leaves like autumn frost. The day had grown insufferably hot, and not a drop of water could be had to quench the burning thirst. Wet with perspiration, covered with dust, and faces and hands blackened by powder and smoke, our boys presented a ghastly appearance. The fighting continued, and the woods in front and on the right was live with Fenians. From the enemy's fire we discovered that we had advanced too rapidly, and although the Highland Company had been working like Trojans all the morning, still the woods on the right had not been thoroughly cleaned out as the line advanced. This was about the position of things when, about noon, that fatal order was given, "Retire, form square, and prepare for cavalry." The order sounded a third time before the left of the line acted upon it, when No. 3 Company doubled together, formed square on its own ground, fixed bayonets and awaited the approach of cavalry. We had been standing about five or six minutes when a terrible volley was heard behind, in the direction of the reserve. Soon after, No. 3 doubled through the orchard, up the hill and around in front of the house, when—oh, horror of horrors!—we were struck dumb with amazement. The wildest excitement prevailed. Far down the road, in the fields, everywhere, we could see our boys falling back in the utmost disorder. The reserve had formed a solid square, in obedience to orders, and the enemy in the woods near by, having understood our bugle call, immediately rallied and fired a volley of bullets into our solid body. Four or five brave fellows of the Queen's Own dropped dead at the feet of their comrades. There was no cavalry; but the mistake was discovered too late. Another movement and another volley of deadly bullets, more terrible than the first might be expected. The only safety was in separation, and the quickest way to separate was to break the ranks, and then that band of brave volunteers—which had fought so nobly all the morning, which had advanced so steadily under fire, which had driven the enemy before it, and put him completely to flight—dissolved and fell back. A panic set in which soon became universal. A few minutes later the whole force was scattered and moving back towards Ridgeway. I lingered a few minutes about the place looking for friends, some of whom I had not seen since the engagement began, but meeting with poor luck in this respect I finally concluded to follow the crowd and sauntered along in the tail end of the retreat. The enemy following up for a short distance continued the fire. A little way down I fell in with a few members of the Highland company, one of whom had a Fenian rifle which he was carrying back as a trophy. We were all examining the weapon and I had just taken it into my hands when a Fenian bullet from the rear struck the poor fellow who had handed it to me, and he fell prostrate at our feet. His friends carried his body along with them. A little further on Private P——of No. 3 Co., 13th, was shot in the leg, and in many a fence corner along the road, a poor fellow might be seen stretched out completely used up. The farm houses along the road had all been deserted and nothing in the shape of eatables could be had at Ridgeway, so that the only alternative left was to go on to Port Colborne, some twelve or fourteen miles distant. I had now met with several of my acquaintances, and, after expressions of mutual disgust with the termination of the day's struggle, we decided to take the railway track, and jogged along together. Being in an almost exhausted condition our progress was slow. About half way down we were met by a locomotive and a baggage car, and when the man in charge learned the state of things he determined to take our party on board, and backed down to Port Colborne, where we arrived late in the afternoon. A large number of the volunteers had reached there before us and hundreds of people had collected about the station. Wrapping my overcoat about myself and rifle, I laid down upon the front platform and, amid all the tumultuous excitement, fell asleep. A couple of hours after I was awakened by one of my comrades, who had discovered a hotel where refreshments could be procured. Later in the evening all the companies reformed, and the 13th was once more in shape. The school house at Port Colborne was given up as a barracks, and the 13th immediately took possession. At twelve o'clock the same night the Battalion was ordered out, and paraded on the bank beside the canal. Shortly after citizens arrived from Hamilton with provisions for the men. It was then generally understood that the Battalion was to leave at once to join the main brigade under Col. Peacock, and that a battle was to take place that (Sunday) morning. After waiting several hours, the Senior Major, who was now in command, received orders which resulted in the battalion being ordered back to barracks, where it remained for the next twenty days guarding the mouth of the canal.

W. F. McM.

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