

December 7, 1864 - Reconnaissance and engagement, Wilkinson's pike near Murfreesborough, a.k.a., "Battle of the Cedars"



Report of Major-General LOVELL H. ROUSSEAU, on activities December 5-8, 1864.

HDQRS. DISTRICT OF TENNESSEE, Murfreesborough, December 12, 1864.



Dispatches from Gen. Thomas of the 5th and 8th instant received last night. Railroad train to Stevenson for supplies will take this dispatch to be forwarded. Wires down between this and Stevenson. On the 8th instant I dispatched by courier by way of Gallatin reporting operations her on the 4th instant. The enemy attacked the block-house at Overall's Creek, fired seventy-four shots, doing no damage. I sent three regiments, under Gen. Milroy, to its relief. The enemy (Bates' division) were routed and driven off. We took some prisoners, near thirty, but no guns. Loss of the enemy unknown, as night closed in before the fight was over. Our troops, new and old, behaved admirably. We withdrew at night. The next evening [6th] Bate returned, skirmished with and drove in our pickets, and threatened the fortress; pretty heavy skirmishing till the 7th, when the enemy moved around on the Wilkinson pike, northwest of the fortress. He was re-enforced by Forrest with 2,500 cavalry and two division of infantry. On the evening of the 6th he made a breast-work of logs and rails on Wilkinson's pike, from which he was driven on the 7th by Gen. Milroy with seven regiments of the garrison here; a pretty severe engagement, lasting perhaps three-quarters of an hour. The rout was complete, infantry and cavalry running in every direction. The fight was well conducted by Maj.-Gen. Milroy, and the troops behaved most gallantly. We took 207 prisoners, including 18 commissioned officers, 2 pieces (12-pounder Napoleons) of artillery, which were at once placed in position in the fortifications, and 1 stand of colors belonging to the First and Third Florida. Our loss in the fight at Overall's Creek was 5 killed and 49 wounded, and on Wilkinson's pike more fully in my dispatch of the 8th, which may not have reached you. I am subsisting off the country, which I think I can do. Before the fight on the Wilkinson pike, Buford's division of cavalry took possession of about one-half of the town of Murfreesborough, shelling it vigorously and destroying many of the houses. With a section of artillery and a small force of infantry, I drove them, wounding and killing 30 and taking 25 prisoners. A captain of artillery left his boots, letters, sponges, staff buckets, on the ground. We lost one man wounded. The enemy's cavalry all around, but I think in small bodies. We forage without molestation. No enemy near here that I know of. Cheatham reported coming this way through Triune. All right here, and will endeavor to keep it so.



LOVELL H. ROUSSEAU, Maj.-Gen.

OR, Ser. I, Vol. 45, pt. I, pp. 614-615.

Report of Major-General R. H. MILROY, relative to the engagement at Wilkinson's Pike, or the "Battle of the Cedars," or, "Second Battle of Murfreesborough," December 7, 1864.



FORTRESS ROSECRANS, Murfreesborough, Tenn., December 10, 1864.

GEN.: I have the honor to report that, in obedience to your order, I proceeded on the 7th instant to make a reconnaissance and feel the enemy in the vicinity of this post. I took with me, by your direction, seven regiments of infantry and a six-gun battery, under the command of Captain Bundy, of the Thirteenth New York Artillery, and a small detachment of the Fifth Tennessee Volunteer Cavalry. One hundred and seventy-seventh, One hundred and seventy-fourth, One hundred and seventy-seventh, One hundred and seventy-eighth, first Illinois volunteer Infantry, Eighth Minnesota Volunteer Infantry, and Twelfth Indiana Volunteer Cavalry (dismounted). For convenience, I divided these regiments into two brigades (pro tempore), as follows: First Brigade, Col. Thomas, of the eighth Minnesota, commanding, consisted of a six-gun battery, eighth Minnesota Volunteer Infantry, Sixty-first Illinois Volunteer Infantry, One hundred and seventy-fourth and One hundred and eighty-first Ohio Volunteer Infantry, 1,973 strong. The Second Brigade consisted of the One hundred and seventy-seventh, and One hundred and seventy-eighth Ohio Volunteer Infantry, and Twelfth Indiana Volunteer Cavalry, 1,326 strong. Total strength of my infantry, artillery, and cavalry combined, 3, 325. I started on the Salem pike about 10 a. m., and threw out the detachment of the Fifth Tennessee Cavalry in advance, who struck the rebel vedette in less than half a mile after passing our pickets. The rebel cavalry fell back rapidly before my advance. I threw out a portion of the sixty-first Illinois Volunteer Infantry as skirmishers, to assist the cavalry in driving them. Upon arriving at Stone's River, two miles out, a body of about 300 rebel cavalry were discovered across the river. I brought up a section of Capt. Bundy's battery and shelled them a few minutes, when they retreated rapidly, and I crossed the bridge and continued my march. Upon arriving at Mr. Spence's fine residence, for miles out, I learned from his accomplished lady that there were two brigades of rebel cavalry, under Gen.'s Jackson and Armstrong, at Salem a mile farther out, and that Gen.'s Forrest and Bate, with a large force of infantry, artillery, and cavalry, were north of me, on the Wilkinson pike, three miles from Fortress Rosecrans. I deemed it best to turn my attention in that direction, but before doing so I detailed a company and sent them back with a drove of sixty fine, fat hogs, belonging to Mr. Spence, that would have fallen into the hands of the rebels if left. I proceeded north till within half a mile of the Wilkinson pike. My skirmish line encountered that of the enemy, and in a few minutes afterward they opened on me with much rapidity from a six-gun battery stationed in the edge of a wood on the opposite side of a field in my front. I at once ordered forward Capt. Bundy's battery, which artillery ammunition that could be carried in the limbers of the guns, the shell and solid shot of my supply was exhausted in about thirty minutes. Finding that the enemy would not come across the field to attack me, and not being able to ascertain his strength, and the left of his line,



extending parallel with the Wilkinson pike, was as near Fortress Rosecrans as my right I deemed it prudent not to engage them with my infantry without having the fortress in my rear, and accordingly fell back through the forest until out of sight of the enemy, and then moved by the right flank in a northeasterly direction until my lines were partly across the Wilkinson pike, where I formed them to the front in two lines of battle, Col. Thomas' brigade forming the front line and Col. Anderson's the second line. The Sixty-first Illinois was deployed as skirmishers in front of the first line. In this order I advanced upon the enemy, through the brush, cedars, rocks, and logs, under a heavy fire of artillery. I had sent my artillery back to the fortress for ammunition before commencing my last advance, and consequently had no artillery. I had sent my artillery back to the fortress for ammunition before commencing my last advance, and consequently had no artillery to reply to that of the enemy. Skirmishing with small-arms began very soon after commencing my advance, but my skirmish line advanced rapidly, bravely, and in splendid order, considering the nature of the ground, driving the rebels before them for about one mile, when coming to a cotton-field I found the enemy strongly posted in a wood on the other side behind a line of works constructed of rails and logs. The enemy's fire of small-arms here became so strong that my skirmishers withdrew to the flanks of my line of battle, opened on the enemy a terrible fire, while it still advanced in good order to the middle of the field, when the line halted and the fire from both sides was most furious and destructive for about ten minutes, when I ordered an advance, and the front line moved forward into the edge of the wood, where for a few minutes the roar and fire of musketry was like the thunder of a volcano, and the line wavered as if moving against a hurricane. Fearing that my front line would fall back, I ordered the One hundred and seventy-eighth Ohio Volunteer Infantry to move on the double-quick from the left of the front line, and the balance of the rear line to advance to support and relieve the front line; but before this could be fully executed the gallant regiments composing the first line, seeing themselves supported, advanced with a yell and darted over the enemy's works, capturing many prisoners and putting the enemy to a hasty flight. A rapid pursuit of half a mile resulted in the capturing of many more prisoners, one battle-flag, and two fine pieces of artillery (12-pounder Napoleons), with their caissons. The ammunition of some of the regiments being exhausted, I ordered them to halt and replenish from the ammunition wagon that overtook us at that point.

While this was going on, I received your dispatch, general, admonishing me of the report of a large rebel infantry force from the north, and directing me to return to the fortress, if I could do so with safety. My artillery, which I had sent back for ammunition, arrived at this time, and a large body of the enemy's cavalry being in plain view I directed the artillery to open on them rapidly for a few minutes, when they rapidly disappear out of sight.

I cannot speak too highly of the bravery exhibited by my troops especial by those in the front regiments, under the gallant Col. Thomas. Never did troops



fight better for the time they were engaged. Every officer and man performed his duty with the most unflinching bravery and promptness. The conduct of the Second Brigade, under Col. Anderson, also deserves much praise; for, though the regiments of the brigade did not take much part in the firing, yet their coolness and promptness in supporting the first line added greatly to its confidence and morale, and did much to discourage the enemy by the appearance of two lines of battle moving on them. I regret deeply the death of the brave men killed, and added their country. Particularly among the killed do I regret the death of Maj. Reed, of the One hundred and seventy-fourth Ohio Volunteer Infantry, who fell while gallantry leading on his regiment to victory. The history of his services and adversities in the present war is stranger than fiction.

My total loss in killed and wounded amounts (as per inclosed reports) to 208, of whom 22 were killed. I have no means of arriving at a knowledge of the loss of the enemy, but from the number of dead and wounded observed on the field it must have been greater than mine. Among their dead on the field were observed two lieutenant-colonels. We captured and brought in 1197 prisoners, among whom 21 were commissioned officers. Forty-three different regiments are represented by the prisoners. The enemy were commanded by Gen. Forrest and Bate, and about 5,000 strong.

I am much indebted to the gentleman of my staff for their prompt, gallant, and efficient assistance throughout the day; and I avail myself of this opportunity to tender to the major-general commanding kindness in affording me the two late opportunities of wiping out to some extent the foul and mortifying stigma of a most infamously unjust arrest, by which I have for near eighteen months been thrown out of the ring of active, honorable, and desirable service.

I have the honor to be, very respectfully, your most obedient servant,

R. H. MILROY, Maj.-Gen.

OR, Ser. I, Vol. 45, pt. I, pp. 617-619.

I skirmished around within two or three miles of the Fortress for several hours, when I struck their main force under the Comd of Gens. Forrest and Bates. Forrest being the senior officer had the Comd. They opened on me with a full battery at short range. My battery replied nearly an hour when my artillery was exhausted. Finding that the enemy were strongly posted and fortified and near double my strength I concluded to shift my position around and got between them and the Fort. I did this and attacked them with great rapidity and the fighting for near an hour was most terrific, but I rolled them on and drove them in confusion capturing 220 prisoners including 2 majors and 28 other Comd. officers, killing a large number among whom were two Cols. and taking 2 pieces of artillery, I drove them over two miles and returned to the Fortress after dark, bringing in all my killed and wounded. I only had 25 men killed and



187 wounded. The Rebs got more reinforcements and still kept around the country mostly in sight until the 16th when they left. . .

Papers of General Milroy, p. 400. **Note 1**

Excerpt from the Report of Major-General Nathan Bedford Forrest, C. S. Army, commanding cavalry, of Operations November 16, 1864-January 24, 1865, relative to the engagement at Wilkinson's pike (a.k.a. "Battle of the Cedars") and the shelling of Murfreesborough on December 7, 1864. General Forrest's description of Buford's actions vary considerably with the remarks of Union commanders.

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On the morning of the 7th I discovered from the position occupied by Col. Palmer the enemy moving out in strong force on the Salem pike with infantry, cavalry, and artillery. Being fully satisfied that his object was to make battle, I withdrew my forces to the Wilkinson pike, and formed a new line on a more favorable position. The enemy moved boldly forward, driving in my pickets, when the infantry, with the exception of Smith's brigade, from some cause which I cannot explain, made a shameful retreat, losing two pieces of artillery. I seized the colors of the retreating troops and endeavored to rally them, but they could not be moved by any entreaty or appeal to their patriotism. Maj.-Gen. Bate did the same thing, but was equally as unsuccessful as myself. I hurriedly sent Maj. Strange, of my staff, to Brig.-Gen.'s Armstrong and Ross, of Jackson's division, with orders to say to them that everything depended on their cavalry. They proved themselves equal to the emergency by charging on the enemy, thereby checking his farther advance. I ordered the infantry to retire to Stewart's Creek, while my cavalry encamped during the night at Overall's Creek. The enemy returning to Murfreesborough, I ordered my cavalry to resume its former position.

OR, Ser. I, Vol. 45, pt. I, p. 755.

Note 1: See also pp. 469-477, Papers of General Milroy, for another rather gasconading account from his letter to his wife of January 1, 1865.

