

The Hornet's Nest

The sun was just peaking over the horizon as Union Army Sergeant Louis Krohling reluctantly crawled from his tent. It was Sunday, April 5, 1862, and he, like the other members of the 58th Illinois Volunteer Infantry Regiment, was dog-tired. It had been after midnight before they had completed the previous day's 20-mile forced march and set up camp at Pittsburg Landing in Hardin County, Tennessee.

His weary body begged him to return to his tent for more sleep, but as D Company's ranking non-commissioned officer, he had duties. Pulling on his boots, he made his way to the cook tent where he quickly downed a cup of coffee and then carried a second cup and a plate of ham and eggs to a quiet spot in a nearby glade of trees.

"Coffee's better than usual this morning," he thought as he sat down with his back against one of the trees and his legs stretched out in front of him.

It was a beautiful morning. Spring had come early to Tennessee. Looking around, Louis could see buds bursting forth on the limbs of trees, white dogwood blossoms cascading like confetti in the forest, and wildflowers adding traces of color to the forest floor.

"I hope we are able to get some rest today," he said to himself. "The men need it. I need it."

While eating his breakfast, he reflected on all that had transpired over the past four months. It had been a busy time. Early in December, despite being 39 years old with a wife and three children to support, he had traveled from his home in Galena, Illinois, to Chicago to enlist in the Union Army. He had been assigned to the 58th Illinois which, after a month of training, became part of General Ulysses Grant's Army of Tennessee.

Louis thought this ironic. As a shoemaker in Galena, he had purchased the leather he used to make and repair shoes and boots from Ulysses Grant who worked in his father's leather store before the start of the Civil War. Now Louis was a soldier in Grant's army.

During the past month, the 58th Illinois and other elements of the Army of Tennessee had captured two Confederate Army forts along the Tennessee River. That was the first combat most of the men in his company had experienced, and Louis was pleased with how well they had performed under fire.

Those battles, however, were not Louis' first military action. Prior to immigrating to the United States in 1850 with his wife, Christiane, he had undergone three years of compulsory military service in Germany and had fought in that country's 1848 Revolution. This previous battlefield experience was the reason he now wore sergeant stripes.

The previous day's grueling march had put the 49,000-man Army of Tennessee in position to attack and capture a key railhead at Corinth, Mississippi, thereby severing supply lines essential to the Confederate war effort.

Louis brought his thoughts back to the present as he noticed members of his company exiting their tents and lining up for the morning meal. Knowing they soon would be wondering, as he was now, what lay in store for them that day, he headed toward D Company's command tent.

His path took him across a slight rise that provided a panoramic view of the surrounding countryside. A short distance to the east was the Tennessee River that they had crossed the day before. To the south, as far as

he could see, were tents with soldiers milling about. A similar sight stretched west to Shiloh Meeting House, a small, rural Methodist church that would lend its name to one of the bloodiest and most crucial battles of the Civil War.

When Louis entered the command tent, both Captain Gustof Kothe, D Company's commander, and Lieutenant Samuel Johnson had smiles on their faces. "Sergeant," Kothe almost shouted. "We get a day off. Orders just came down from headquarters; no maneuvers or training are to be scheduled today."

"That's great news, captain," Louis replied. "The men need a rest. They're tired and this will give them some quiet time to relax and maybe write letters home. I can't wait to see their faces when I give them the news."

In just minutes, however, that elation and expectation vanished. Before he could walk the few yards back to his tent, the stillness of that idyllic Sunday morning was abruptly interrupted as volley after volley of cannon and rifle fire rumbled like thunder across the countryside.

Louis and others who had risen early immediately looked to the south. Those still asleep hurried out of their tents in varying stages of dress.

What's going on, Louis wondered. Was one of the units on the southern edge of the bivouac area doing some early morning training? It couldn't be an attack, he reasoned. Just yesterday Union patrols had reported Confederate General Sidney Johnson's 40,000-man Army of Mississippi far to the south, guarding the all-important Corinth railhead. That was why, following yesterday's long march, D Company and other units had been allowed to bed down like Boy Scouts without fortifying their positions.

That intelligence, however, was wrong. Somehow General Johnson had avoided mounted Union patrols and covertly moved a major portion of his army into a forested area south of the unsuspecting Army of Tennessee. The gunfire that shattered the morning stillness announced the onset of a surprise Confederate attack.

As Louis hastened back to the command tent for orders, in the south regiment after regiment of soldiers, dressed in Confederate gray or butternut brown, emerged from the woods in three successive waves, each some two miles long. Banners were flying; bugles were blaring; officers on horseback were waving their sabers and shouting orders. As the Confederate soldiers charged out of the forest, bone-chilling Rebel yells rose from thousands of throats.

Barely-awake, Union troops were caught completely by surprise. The most southern regiments were overrun in minutes. Hundreds were killed by gunfire or bayoneted, and hundreds more surrendered as Rebel soldiers swept forward, easily overwhelming small pockets of resistance by the handful of units that attempted to put up a fight.

A rout was on. Hundreds of Union soldiers leaped from their tents, abandoned their weapons, and ran away from the Rebel onslaught. Their panic added to the overall chaos and caused disarray and alarm among Union units farther to the north, frustrating attempts by officers to organize a defense.

As Confederate battle lines moved steadily northward, Union defenders, fighting without adequate defenses, were forced to give ground. Hundreds of dead and wounded soldiers from both sides lay strewn across the battlefield.

Bivouacked near the northern-most edge of the army's encampment, the 58th Illinois had time to get organized, and Captain Kothe and Sergeant Krohling positioned their men behind hastily-erected breastworks.

Louis went from man to man to offer words of encouragement and to confirm that each had a loaded rifle, bayonet and plenty of ammunition. "Johnny Reb will be coming our way soon," he warned. "When he does, hold your position. Don't waste ammunition. Don't fire until they get into range. Remember, we whipped the Rebels at Fort Donelson and Fort Henry, and we can do the same here today."

While making his rounds, Louis also made certain that each man had filled his canteen with water and his knapsack with rations a patrol he had dispatched earlier had confiscated from the regiment's supply unit. He knew in battle no one could predict when or from where the next meal might come.

From experience Kothe and Krohling knew they could not hold their present position against a sustained attack and, eventually would be forced to fall back. So, Louis took two men and headed north to find an escape route. He had barely returned when orders for an immediate withdrawal were received. Leaving behind their tents and all other equipment except six cases of ammunition, the men shouldered their weapons and knapsacks, formed ranks and began to march along the route Louis had scouted.

They were soon joined by other units of the 58th Illinois and remnants of other regiments that were also in retreat. D Company was in the lead, and Louis made certain his men stayed together. In battle it was reassuring to have familiar faces around you.

The column continued to grow as it moved northward and soon merged with elements of the Second Division led by General William Wallace, who assumed command of the retreating force.

The route Louis had scouted passed through a scrub wood forest that was bisected by an old wagon trail that, over the years, had been worn down into a sunken road. General Wallace quickly recognized it as a strong defensive position. The two-foot-high bank on the south side of the road and surrounding trees provided natural shelter for defenders while the Confederates would be forced to attack across open fields.

Being the lead units in the withdrawal column, D Company and other elements of the 58th Illinois were assigned positions near the center of the Union defense line, flanked on either side by two Iowa regiments. As other withdrawing units arrived they were directed to the left and right and told to dig in along the road and prepare for an attack. Louis had his men scour the nearby area to collect large tree branches and stones to better fortify their position.

By mid-morning, several thousand Yankee soldiers from dozens of different units were in position, almost shoulder to shoulder, for more than a mile along the sunken road. Word was sent to General Grant of their position, and a message came back to hold at all cost. Grant needed time to reorganize his remaining forces and to be reinforced by General Don Carlos Buell's 14,000-man Army of Ohio expected to arrive later that day.

Louis moved up and down the sunken road reassuring his men, none of whom, despite the day's carnage, had fired a shot.

It was not long before a Confederate patrol came into view and then quickly retreated to report the Union Army's position. Louis once again calmly moved among his men cautioning: "Ok. Stay alert. The Rebs will be attacking soon." He then pushed his way between two of his men and readied his rifle.

The anticipated Confederate attack was not long in coming. Shortly after nine o'clock they formed battle lines and launched a frontal assault, fully expecting this Yankee defense to melt away as rapidly as those they had encountered earlier in the morning. But they were mistaken. Having had time to organize and in a strong

defensive position, the Union soldiers stood their ground and punished the charging Confederates with withering rifle fire supported by grapeshot from cannon that General Grant had sent to bolster their defense.

Cheers erupted all along the Union line as the initial Rebel attack wavered, then broke and fell back.

"Keep your heads down and stay ready," Louis warned his men. "It's not over. They'll be comin' again." As he looked around, he was pleased to see that, despite intense Confederate gunfire, none of his men had been killed or even wounded. I pray that continues the remainder of the day, he thought. But from experience he knew it would not.

The Rebs did come again ... and again ... and again. But each assault was met with concentrated Union gunfire forcing the Confederate lines to falter and then fall back, each time leaving an ever-growing number of their dead and wounded behind on the battlefield. Union casualties were also mounting. Moving along the road after the fourth assault, Louis was distressed to find four more members of his company dead and another six wounded. This brought the total number of casualties to 9 dead and 16 wounded, several seriously. Among the dead that morning was Captain Kothe, who had been killed by a Confederate minnie ball during the third assault. Since Lieutenant Johnson had been seriously wounded and evacuated following the second attack, Sergeant Krohling was now in command of D Company.

Between assaults, Rebel sharpshooters continually peppered the Union soldiers with musket and rifle fire forcing defenders to keep their heads down. The constant sound of hundreds of Rebel bullets humming as they passed above and around D Company prompted one soldier, huddled against the road's bank, to call out: "Sarge, those bullets sound like a swarm of angry hornets buzzing around their nest."

"Yeah," shouted another who had a bloody bandage wrapped around his upper arm, "But their sting is a lot worse."

The name stuck and today that portion of the Shiloh battlefield is known as the Hornet's Nest. Men who went through the area the next day found trees so riddled with bullet holes that they were amazed that anyone could have survived.

In early afternoon, after a sixth Rebel assault had been repelled, there was an extended pause in the fighting, and soldiers on both sides welcomed the respite. Members of D Company reached for their canteens and the rations that forward-thinking Sergeant Krohling had made certain they packed. Many had enough to share with soldiers from nearby units that were not as well prepared.

The lull stretched for more than an hour and Louis found a quiet place to sit and reflect on how different his anticipated day of rest had turned out to be. Taking a small notebook and pencil from his jacket pocket, he sadly began to list the names of the men who had been killed or wounded. As he did so, he thought of his wife and children back in Galena and wondered how they were getting along. Because the 58th had been on the move, he had not received a letter from Christiane for more than a month. "Will I ever see my wife and family again?" he wondered. "Or will someone soon be adding my name to the others on this list?"

Louis' thoughts of home and family were interrupted as one of his men shouted: "Here they come again." Everyone, including wounded who could still pull a trigger, grabbed their rifles and began firing at the approaching enemy while, at the same time, marveling at the bravery of the southern soldiers who time after time charged into concentrated rifle and cannon fire across a field already littered with hundreds of their dead and wounded.

That day, however, bravery and determination were not limited to one side. Despite seeing comrades die on either side of them, the outnumbered Union soldiers, some wounded more than once, stood their ground under intense gunfire and turned back the Rebels for a seventh and later for an eighth time.

Despite their success in repelling the Rebel attacks, Sergeant Krohling and other commanders along the sunken road recognized their situation was growing desperate. In addition to mounting casualties, they were running low on ammunition and large numbers of the defenders, unlike D Company, had had nothing to eat and little to drink since early morning. They also could see cannon being moved into position to support the next Confederate assault.

Thus, the arrival of a message from Grant's headquarters authorizing a withdrawal was welcome news

The retreat was orderly, beginning with the units located on the extreme ends of the defense line and then moving progressively inward. It was almost complete when, at six o'clock, the Confederates launched their ninth attack, preceded by sixty cannon firing volley after volley at point blank range into what was by that time mostly-abandoned Union defenses.

As they attacked the Union flanks, the Rebel troops met no resistance and swept unhindered behind the Union lines, cutting off the retreat of several units. Having anchored the center of the Union defense throughout the day, the 58th Illinois and the two Iowa regiments were the last to pull back and did not get far before they found themselves surrounded by Confederate soldiers.

'Lay down your weapons,' Sergeant Krohling shouted to his men. 'The battle is over. Don't resist. There's been enough dying today.'

'Damn Johnny Rebs,' one soldier, his face blackened by gun power, yelled. Similar shouts resounded from other Union soldiers who had lost comrades. They did not want to surrender.

Louis calmed his men. He did not want more bloodshed. There had been too much already. Almost half of D Company, including both its officers, had been killed or wounded at the Hornet's Nest.

Louis and his remaining men were tired and disheartened. They had been captured and did not relish the taste of defeat. It would be several months before they would learn how the tenacity and bravery they and others had demonstrated in withstanding eight Confederate assaults at the Hornet's Nest would transform what early Sunday seemed a certain victory for the South into a Union triumph on Monday.

The Rebels had paid a terrible price to conquer the Hornet's Nest. What remained of their troops were exhausted and incapable of pursuing an attack that could easily have trapped Grant's disorganized army against the Tennessee River, forcing its surrender. Confident the Army of Tennessee was beaten and could be overcome the next day, the Confederate generals allowed their army to stand down. That night they slept in the same tents the Union soldiers had abandoned hours earlier.

But Grant was far from beaten. He had made good use of the nine precious hours the defenders of the Hornet's Nest had bought him. His reorganized troops, reinforced by the Army of Ohio, launched a surprise attack of their own early Monday morning, that forced a Confederate retreat. Later the Army of Tennessee would capture the Corinth railhead.

The second day's action, of course, did not involve Sergeant Krohling and the other surviving members of the 58th Illinois. They were among 2,200 captured Union soldiers who that day were on their way to a prisoner of

war camp in Mobile, Alabama. It would be six months before Louis and his comrades, after being paroled during a prisoner exchange, would learn the significance of their heroic stand at the Hornet's Nest. Had Grant been forced to surrender, there would have been nothing standing in the way of a major Confederate invasion of the North. Also border state Kentucky and quite possibly Missouri would probably have joined the Confederacy.

Following his parole, Louis was granted a two-month furlough which he spent with his family in Galena. Returning to active duty, he sustained serious injuries in a battle with Rebel guerrillas in Kentucky that led to a medical discharge March 7, 1864.

William Chaddock

Prose, Fiction

Willow Brook at Delaware Run

The Hornet's Nest

3rd Place
Fiction

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