

154th Regiment N. Y. S. Vol.  
Old Camp near Stafford C. H. Va.  
May 7, 1863

# 12

My dearest Liz,

Back again to an old camp fresh from the bloody field of Chancellorville where we have left 2/5 of our Regiment (dead or prisoners) or brought them back with us wounded. We are a sorrowing and stricken band. We went to a place named Wilderness on the map of Virginia which you have, on the night of the 30th with 500 efficient men--we now have 33 wounded in Hospital and left 169 wounded, dead and missing on the field--among latter Col. Jones our Adjutant Noyes and Capt. Vedder and Griswold. Among the privates of your acquaintance are "Jimmy" Copeland, Marvin G. Day, Henry Hill and John O. Fitch. Col. Jones is known to be wounded and is probably a prisoner as he has not been seen since the night of the fight. Noyes and Vedder are supposed to be killed--Jimmy Copeland, Day, Hill and Fitch I think are prisoners as they were seen in the woods after our boys left the rifle pits.

The battle commenced on Saturday about 6 o'clock P.M. by the enemy falling with overwhelming numbers on a portion of the 11th Army Corps which was posted on the extreme right--this battle is the old story of Fair Oaks repeated. Our folks were expecting an attack yet when it did come it was really a surprise and they were totally unprepared to meet it and were routed and driven about 1/2 mile before they could be rallied to make a stand again. Our folks were looking for the attack to be made either from the direction of Fredericksburg or Gordonsville but when it was made it came from the Culpepper Road and the "rebs" fell upon us like an avalanche.

Within 30 minutes after the Pickets fired the first guns the 11th Corps was used up and you can judge somewhat of the severity of this struggle when I say that our Regiment was not in the contest to exceed 20 minutes and 202 of our men were killed, wounded or prisoners and the entire 11th Corps was swept away like chaff and the rebs were in possession of the field. Our folks fell back hastily to General Hookers headquarters where they formed a second line of battle and maintained their position in spite of the super-human efforts of the enemy to drive them back. Here the battle raged with terrific fury from a little after 7 to 12 o'clock at night when they retired from the contact--to renew it again at daylight the next morning with the same energy and determination as before and with the same results.

I never had a vivid conception of hell until I saw that night's battle. Our folks had the crest of a hill extending full a mile in a large field planted with cannon as close as they could be worked and supported by more than 20,000 muskets yet notwithstanding the enemy came right up in solid mass in front of the deadly array. Every discharge from the cannon would mow down great roads thru the living mass and hundreds would be shot down every moment by the musketry without checking them apparently in the least.

The living mass would move up to our front like an ocean wave with great furrows ploughed through it with gaps, canister and shells, which

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would immediately close up like parted water and move on until close up to our guns within short musket range, when it would be checked, falter, fall back a little and then advance again to the deadly front. Then a bayonet charge would be made with the desperation and fury of fiends which was met and repelled by our boys. This struggle lasted for more than four hours when they withdrew for the night.

The sight was awfully terrific and grand! The field showed in the night one mass of flaming leaping from the mouths of these great guns and the thousands of muskets lighting up the faces of the combatants with a horrid glare that made them look more like fiends than human beings. The sound of the musketry was one constant roar and the discharge of the heavy guns appeared to make great seams in the sound which otherwise would have been constant and uniform--mingled with the fierce yell of the embattlement when a bayonet charge was being made. I had a fair view of the contest for more than an hour before I retired to the hollow in the woods back of the battlefield to attend to the poor fellows who had fallen in the fight. Here the sight was sad and melancholy in the extreme--too sickening to tell. Suffice to say that more than 500 wounded in every way and place that man could endure and fire army inflict--have applied to me for help.

The battle was renewed on Sunday morning at daylight and pushed with unabated energy until 1 o'clock when the enemy gradually withdrew and the firing ceased.

The enemy failed to drive one man from the fight but we did not pursue them when they retired. The news of the battle will carry desolation, mourning and sorrow to thousands of homes at the north and yet what availeth it? The Rappahannock was crossed successfully without loss and the enemy was taken somewhat by surprise and we chose the place of battle but we failed to achieve a successful victory when the battle was fought. We were not beaten--yet we were not successful. We held a large portion of our chosen ground but did not drive the enemy from our front. After the storm of battle ceased on Sunday everything was quiet along our lines until dark when our folks commenced a very extensive strong fortification and entrenchment reaching from General Hooker's Headquarters to the U. S. Ford a distance of 5 miles. These works were completed by Tuesday evening. Everybody thought on Monday that the battle would be renewed again perhaps on that very day--certainly not later than Tuesday but it seems that "strategy" demands our return to this side of the Rappahannock and "strategy" prevailed. Early Tuesday morning the supply and ammunition trains commenced a retrograde movement. Still we thought the Army would surely not go back but at noon of that day I became satisfied that this movement meant withdrawal of our forces for I saw the droves of beef cattle that were to supply the Army with meat were being driven away.

I never felt so depressed in my life as I did when that unwelcome conclusion was forced upon me. There were these Pontoon Bridges across the river at the U. S. Ford and as soon as darkness covered the movements of our troops the passage of the river was commenced and those bridges creaked and

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bent beneath the tread of the "Grand Armee" as it flowed in ceaseless stream all night long over them. Our Regiment crossed about daylight at which time 2/3 were already across--up to that time the enemy had not dreamt of our evacuation and I doubt whether they did at all until the passage of the river was entirely effected as we heard no firing in that direction. The evacuation was conducted quietly and skillfully as at Fredericksburg last winter. What the necessity was that impelled withdrawal I am not able to see. We were certainly not beaten although we met with heavy losses--but the enemy must have lost 2 to 1 as they were the attacking party and came right up in front of our heavy guns. We were on our chosen ground and well fortified and entrenched at the time of the withdrawal. The whole thing is a mystery to me. I do not speak of the operations of the Army at Fredericksburg and Banks Ford because I know nothing about them. We have not seen a paper in the last two weeks or more.

The 11th Army Corps shamefully fell back--a few regiments fruitlessly trying to stay the panic and skedaddle, among them stands out conspicuously the heroic 154th. There is not a coward in the regiment--every man is a hero and possesses the fortitude of a veteran. Jimmy Copeland, our boys say, is the bravest of the brave.

That they tried to do their duty thru thinner ranks and melancholy losses will stand as a perpetual witness. Nearly four weeks ago we left this camp with high hopes of a successful campaign--and here we are again not having suffered defeat--yet certainly not successful. I have lived a sad and eventful age in that short time which I pray I may never experience again. For these last two weeks we have been almost constantly at work scarcely sleeping at all--the wonder is that any of us are alive and so well as we are. Will write again tomorrow or next day. With kisses and undying love.

Yours;

Henry