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Document: *Letter to Annie Welsh, from Thomas Welsh, Antietam Creek, September 23, 1862*

Transcription:

Antietam Creek Md. Sept 23rd 1862

My Dear Wife;

We have received orders to march this morning to Harpers Ferry, the distance is only nine miles. I do not know if we are to have a fight on the road or not, but I presume the Rebels will not dare to attack us now. I was quite unwell yesterday but this morning I feel all right and in good trim. I had been under such tremendous excitement for several days, that when it passed off the reaction made me quite feverish.

Everything seems quiet. And no doubt the army will remain quiet for some days perhaps weeks.

I have just heard that Capt. Grove is dead—he had his leg amputated by reason of a severe wound at South Mountain. I have not heard from Budding or George Stape—Budding was shot in the foot—Stape was shot in the shoulder neither of them were dangerous. I believe our wounded men are doing well. You no doubt recollect Capt. Grove and Lieut. Smith—Grove had his arm in a sling when you were here, he was a single man—his parents live in Howard, Centre County. Smith was married but I think leaves no children, he was well acquainted with our neighbors “Barbers.” We did not lose a great many men in the last battle, yet it was wonderful that a single one of us escaped. The General told me in the morning that we were to stay in position as a reserve and would not likely be engaged. Yet after the terrible fight at the Bridge so many of our Troops being killed or wounded, Genl. Burnside thought best to send over fresh Troops and of course I was ordered across. I was hardly across the Bridge until the Bullets began to fly thick, the Troops who had crossed before us, were ordered to lay down and let us march over them. This compelled me to let Jerry go and take it on foot. My orders were to charge straight at the Rebels and we did so, the 45th ahead. My boys yelled like Indians and charged Bayonet at double quick, they followed the Rebels so fast that I could not begin to keep up. They went over fences and stone walls through Corn fields & orchards, with great crowds of Rebels running still more rapid. The other Regiments of my Brigade could not keep up with the 45th, when near the Edge of Sharpsburg I overtook them—having run fully one mile—during all this time and in fact during the entire afternoon we were opposed to a terrible storm of Bullets, Shell, grape & canister yet strange to say the 45th had but one man killed & 38 wounded. I feel much chagrined at the manner in which my Brigade and particularly my Regiment is treated, or rather neglected by the News paper Reporters. The most desperate fighting at South Mountain was by the 45th. Officers & soldiers of other Regiments said so—and praised us very much. General Burnside, Reno & Wilcox thought I and my Regiment had been mainly instrumental in gaining a great Victory, but lo; when the papers are received we are not even mentioned. Regiments that were in Washington (40 miles from the Battle) received the credit due us. The only place we have been mentioned is a short paragraph in the Philadelphia Inquirer, which says after several Ohio Regiments under Genl. Cox had



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been fighting the Enemy a long time—the 45th and 100th Pennsylvania marched up the Hill and assisted them to whip the Rebels—this is the only paper in which we are mentioned. Yet even this is a lie throughout. Genl. Cox men had an engagement in the morning—but instead of us helping them—during the fight the Ohio Regiments were laying in a hollow and I went myself and tried to get one of them to support the 45th but as the bullets were flying very thick they would not budge. Indeed it seems too bad that after we had done so much and suffered so terribly that people would be so mean as to steal the credit from us.

Generals and officers who were not within four or five miles of the fighting have managed to get their names in the paper as being wounded or as having fought bravely &c.— I even see a Philadelphia Regt. (one of the new Regiments) praised for its part in the battle and the Colonel reported as wounded while gallantly leading his men.—I know the Regt. was not near the battle field during the fighting—but only arrived 24 hours after it was all over—for the purpose of relieving my Regiment which was nearly starved waiting for them—even then that was after the Rebel army Retreated. I could not induce the Colonel of the Regiment to walk with me to the front so that I could show him where to post his pickets & Skirmishers. During both the battles of the 14th & 17th I was the only officer commanding a Brigade that went to the front with his men and personally directed the movements - yet I find I am the only officer not praised by the papers at home—For all this I do not care much on my own account—my boys—my neighbors—and my wife & children will know that I have done my duty to my country—and that is enough—yet I hate it on account of my boys who after their splendid feat of courage expected to be praised a little—

I am so thoroughly disgusted with the management of this army that it really makes me sick to contemplate the result. The whole Rebel Army—could have been captured or destroyed easily before it could have crossed the Potomac—but indeed it seems to me that McClellan let them escape purposely.

I will write soon again

Yours affectionately

Thomas Welsh

Love to the children

Analysis:

This contains a wonderful first-hand description of Welsh's portion of the Battle of Antietam, along with a very interesting tirade against his treatment by the press and his disgust for McClellan's lack of follow-up after the battle. The tirade is interesting because I have found nothing like it in any of his other correspondence. He seems otherwise not to have engaged in carping, despite the fact that he was clearly a no-nonsense officer. Has he simply let his guard down because of his fatigue? Or had he really reached his boiling point?



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Welsh's forces had skirmish experience, had seen action (peripherally) at Successionville, and had conducted successful rear-guard operations in the evacuation of Acquia Creek, but South Mountain and Antietam were the first major battles in which they played major roles.

*Serg. Eugene Beauge, of Company G offers an interesting postscript:*¹

“Colonel Welsh was not mistaken when he said that of the three regiments in his brigade the Forty-fifth Pennsylvania bore the brunt of the battle [*South Mountain*] on that portion of the line. Even then we didn't get all the credit that belonged to us.

“The Correspondent of the New York Tribune, in one case at least in his report of the battle, inadvertently or otherwise, substituted the Forty-fifth New York for the Forty-fifth Pennsylvania, giving the New Yorkers credit that belonged to us. The story goes that Colonel Welsh met the reporter a couple of days later and kicked him out of camp. We may well believe it, or that he gave the reckless quill-driver a tongue lashing that must have hurt worse than a kick.”

A transcribed version of this letter is in the Antietam National Battlefield Library, 45th Pennsylvania Regimental File. Transcription provided by Elizabeth Reinhart; edited by RCW.

Location of the original is unknown. It was offered for sale on the website of Museum Quality Americana, [http://www.mqamericana.com/45th Pa Col Thomas Welsh.html](http://www.mqamericana.com/45th_Pa_Col_Thomas_Welsh.html), run by Cal Packard, apparently (identified by Area Code) in Toledo Ohio, in September 2010, for \$3,495. The following images (including the transcription) are from the website.

The envelope shows a Point of Rocks, MD postmark. It also contains the file notation, “South Mountain & Antietam BCW” in Blanton's handwriting, indicating that it was in his possession probably into the 1930s. Whether he gave or lent it to someone and it never came back (as he did with TW's Lieutenant's commission to Rutgers), or perhaps sold it before he died is unknown, but not probable. More likely, it was among the items (notably, TW's General's commission) sold after Lala died in 1967(?).

Scope and Content Note:

Handwritten letter from Thomas Welsh to his wife, Annie. From Antietam Creek, Maryland. Letter details the battles of South Mountain and Antietam, and his frustration with the credit he feels his brigade deserves going to other units. He expresses thorough disgust with the management of the army and the way the battle was conducted (evidently a reference to General McClellan).

¹ Beauge, Eugene, “The Forty-fifth at South Mountain,” in Albert, Allen D., ed., *History of the Forty-Fifth Regiment Pennsylvania Veteran Volunteer Infantry 1861-1865*, Williamsport, PA: Grit Publishing Co., 1912, pp. 55-56.

