

October 11, 1863 - Skirmish at Rheatown

Report of Maj. Gen. Ambrose E. Burnside, U. S. Army, commanding Department of the Ohio.

KNOXVILLE, TENN., October 17, 1863-10 p. m.

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On the following morning the advance was ordered and at Blue Springs, midway between Bull's Gap and Greeneville the enemy were found, posted in heavy force and a strong position, between the wagon road and railroad to Greeneville. Our cavalry occupied him with skirmishing until late in the afternoon. Col. Foster's brigade was sent around to the rear of the enemy, with instructions to establish himself on the line over which he would be obliged to retreat, at a point near Rheatown. It was not desirable to press he enemy until Col. Foster had time to reach this point. I directed Capt. Poe (my chief engineer) to make a reconaissance of the enemy's position, with a view to making the attack at the proper time. The ground was selected upon which the attacking force was to be formed, and at half past 3 o'clock, believing sufficient time had been given to Col. Foster to reach the desired point, I ordered Gen. Potter to move up his command and endeavor to break through the center of the enemy's line. By 5 p. m. he had formed Gen. Ferrero's division for the attack. When the order to advance was given, this division moved forward in the most dashing manner, driving the enemy from his first line.

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OR, Ser. I, Vol. 30, pt. II, p. 551.

Excerpt from the October 23, 1863 Report of Brigadier-General John S. Williams, C. S. Army, commanding Cavalry Brigade, relating to the skirmish at Rheatown.

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We passed on without the loss of a wagon or a single head of beef cattle. We moved on to Rheatown, where, by some misunderstanding of orders, the artillery took the wrong road, and some time was consumed in getting it back. While waiting for its return the enemy again made his appearance, which, in the absence of our artillery, produced considerable confusion; but order was soon restored and the enemy checked. The artillery was brought back as soon as possible, and from a good position 2 miles east of Rheatown we again gave the enemy battle, which lasted for more than 3 hours, when gradually fell back to Jonesborough. Agreeably to your instructions, I moved Gen. Jackson's infantry along the line of the railroad and the cavalry toward Blountsville.

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OR, Ser. I, Vol. 30, pt. II, pp. 641-642.

A Confederate staff officer's account of the Skirmish at Rheatown

BATTLE OF RHEATOWN -(sometimes called the "Rheatown Races")



Col. Giltner had gone into Camp-Genl Jackson had diverged from the main column & was a mile off on the R. R. -Col Carter's Brig-were sitting on their horses in the road above town.



The Enemy had made another flank movement & came upon our left, and had placed their artillery in a gap of the ridge just opposite R-town, & commenced shelling our column. Witcher who was in the rear was cut off & came around South of the town & rejoined his Command.



Our artillery was by a misunderstanding all ordered down to the Rail Road with Genl. Jackson-& accidentally escaped capture by the Enemy -, and before it could be brought up the Enemy had advanced their sharp shooters within rifle shot of our mounted men & opened upon the columns standing in the road.



A portion of Col. Carter's brigade considering rather their safety than their honor-broke to the rear & caused the terrible military phenomenon of a panic resulting in a stampede. They rushed madly forward, dashing through fences, & passed right through our Head Quarters camp, where I was lying down to get a little rest.

Have rode my gray horse until his back was very sore, I was bridling Capt. Jenkins Sorrell-but had only time to put the bridle on-& mounted him bareback & joined Col Carter & some of his officers in trying to rally his men—& after appealing to their sense of patriotism & pride, & their baser sense of fear of being shot for stampeding, about 300 were stopped, dismounted & sent back to a position to hold the Enemy in check until our other troops could get in position & our wagons move[d] out of the way.

I gave my grey horse (Charley) to 'boy' Arthur to lead, but the stampeders so frightened him that he jerked away & rushed headlong with the crowd.

Col Giltner's men were soon put in position on the left, & Jimmie Schoolfield's Battery of four little William Guns served by 25 as gallant boys as ever lived;- but Col Carter's men being compelled to give way on the right compelled the withdrawal of our line to another position more defensible where we could check the advance of the Enemy until our trains could move out of the way. A heavy force of the Enemys cavalry upon our left flank also rendered a change of position necessary.

Great numbers of the men straggled to the rear, afflicted with all the "ills that flesh is heir to"-and a great deal more than its honest inheritance. We could muster about 1600 men, one fourth of whom or 400 were horseholders, leaving 1200 for action, not more than 800 or 1000 of whom could at any time be brought into battle. We had assurances that we were fighting from 3000 to 5000 mounted men.

From our position near Rheatown, we withdrew about 1 1/2 or 2 miles to a commanding eminence called Pugh's Hill-where we fought another engagement we will call by that name.

Battle of Pugh's Hill.



The third time we have delivered battle today,-and this is Sunday. Nobody knew it. It's sweet & once peaceful features were so disfigured in blood, and its heavenly rest & quiet was broken with the roar of cannon & musketry. Alas! how changed!

It was a beautiful & pleasant day, as well I remember: though we had no time to make observations on the weather. Every soul. With all its energies was bent on blood & battle, & saving ourselves, our artillery & transpiration from the enemy.



Our position at Pughs Hill was a good one, commanding all approached on the centre but liable to be flanked on the right: and this flanking way off fighting is peculiarly in favor with the Yankees. Our dismounted cavalry—withdrew from their former position to this new one in splendid style, and before the Enemy made their appearance we had our dispositions made to meet them. Genl. Jackson was cut off from us & it was difficult & dangerous to communicate with him at all.



In this engagement the artillery was well handled upon both sides—one of their shells killing and wounding several of our artillerists & artillery horses; and our fire driving back in confusion both their cavalry & Infantry. After quite a severe engagement, in which bombshells & minnie balls played quite a *serious* part, Col Giltner comdg. (*the Genl. was sick*) ordered the men to fall back to their horses, which were held in the rear of the position.

The enemy pressed so closely on the rear that the "double quick" movement became the popular one, which very soon ended in a disgraceful stampede—one of the most fearful things I ever witnessed. Hundreds & hundreds of men & horses came rushing past, and no effort of officers could stay the impetuous tide. Officer & men of every corps & company, all mingled & crowded together came a headlong speed down the road, through the fields, over fences, across hills & everywhere:-Horses riderless and riders horseless all came in the swelling, seething tornado of human flesh and human fear.

At one time I gave up all for lost-and with Capt Stanton & Capt Jenkins made arrangement to save ourselves from capture, if possible, or being ridden down by the tornado of stampeders. The Gen'l, all his officer of the line, & staff officers used every exertion in human power to stop the men, but in vain. The horse holders ran away & left our men to their fate who were on foot. Giltner's fine regiment was in danger of being sacrificed. The Enemy were pressing closely upon them in superior numbers & many of their horses had been run off by the stampeders. I suppose there were 500 men rushing headlong towards the rear perfectly panic stricken & demoralized. I am satisfied that if the Yankees had charged out brigade with 200 good cavalry they would have routed it, & almost destroyed it, & taken artillery & all.

But fortunately they did not have the pluck or the sagacity to take advantage of our disorganized state, & so by luck we were saved. They did endeavor a

charge upon our dismounted men as they were falling back to their horses, but a volley sent them charging back.

Col Giltner's reg't being on the extreme right, & furthest away from the horses, experienced the greatest difficulty in getting out, & indeed three of his Captains and 40 or 50 of his men did not succeed in getting to their horses at all, but were cut off from the Enemy, & those not captured were dispersed in the woods.

The Col. ordered his horse holder to stand by their charge until his men came up, or the Yankees captured them. He would not leave his men on foot to be rode down or captured by the enemy. Jim Schoolfields battery unlimbered on the roadside & sent a broadside into the Yankee column which checked their advance, & saved many a brave, footsore fellow from capture. The battery & its gallant boys deserve immortal honor.

At intervals of every half mile guards were placed to stop all men going to the front, & with drawn pistols threatened to shoot any man who dared to pass. By this means the pace of the fugitives was reduced to a moderate travelling gate, from the '240' style at which they had started, & in this way we pursued our march on through Leesburg to Jonesboro. I came forward to Leesburg to find my horse, that had gotten away, and overtook Arthur leading him just at Leesburg. Since yesterday our men & horses have gone without food or rest - night & day & fought four times.

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Our losses in this last fight a Pugh's hill was more serious than at any time today. Giltner alone lost about 50 killed, wounded & missing out of his reg't - most of whom it is hoped will come up. Three of his captains. . . were lost.

The loss of the Enemy must have been severe, as our men fired deliberately, & sometimes at 50 paces. We learned from a prisoner that they lost 60 this morning at Henderson's mill. They must have lost more both at Rheatown & Pugh's Hill.

So, without food or rest, we marched 35 miles and fought *four times* since yesterday morning I never was so exhausted . . .

Diary of Edward O. Guerrant, September 11, 1863.

