

MEMORIES OF APPOMATTOX BY GEORGE McCULLY LAUGHLIN

Edited by CHARLES A. McCLINTOCK

SOME years after the Civil War, Major George McCully Laughlin, in the comfort of his own fireside on Woodland Road, Pittsburgh, wrote the following article, detailing graphically the events leading to the surrender of General Lee's Army and the meeting between General Lee and General Grant for that purpose at Appomattox.

It was Major Laughlin's privilege to be present on that historic occasion as aide-de-camp to General Charles Griffin, Commander of the Fifth Army Corps, who was one of the three officers assigned by General Grant to arrange the details of the surrender of Lee's Army.

Major Laughlin left Washington and Jefferson College in his Junior year to join the Union Army, and from August 1862 until the last shot was fired, played an heroic and useful part as an officer in the War between the States. He enlisted as a private and won succeeding promotions through efficiency and courage on the field of battle; he was brevetted Major for distinguished service in the Battle of Quaker Road, Virginia.

In the article which follows Major Laughlin evidences delightful descriptive ability and it is interesting to note that his account of Lee's surrender coincides in every respect with the report of the same episode in General Grant's memoirs.

MAJOR LAUGHLIN'S "LETTER"

"During the final campaign of the Army of the Potomac after the victory of Five Forks and in the pursuit of General Lee's forces from Petersburg to Appomattox, the writer was serving as aid de camp on the staff of General Charles Griffin who had been placed in command of the 5th army corps during the progress of the battle

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of Five Forks. The pursuit of Lee during its whole progress was incessant and dogged, entailing long weary marches beginning early in the morning and lasting long into the nights with constant expectancy of battle, and at times anxious periods of isolation, as at Jetersville where for twenty-four hours the 5th corps was alone, standing sentinel before Lee's army blocking his way south from Amelia Court House and compelling his course still on to the west.

"Never perhaps in any army or campaign did troops perform such feats of rapid and persistent marches and display such enduring stamina as did the foot soldiers of the 5th corps in following closely the cavalry of Sheridan in the flank movements of those last days, always standing in the way of Lee's escape south, and finally bringing up with the Cavalry between the Confederate columns in the position of their last stand and their promised supply trains, at Appomattox. Hard and wearing as these days and nights were, there was yet that pleasurable and sustaining excitement always present in all the ranks, incident to the consciousness of successful accomplishment. Cut off most of the time from immediate contact with other parts of the grand army, with only occasional glimpses of converging columns, and the sound of guns in hostile contact with rear guards and forlorn hopes of the fleeing enemy, yet as with veteran soldiers always, with instincts quick to read battle signs, clouds in the sky, ever advancing guns, these valiant men of the 5th corps plodded on, ever doggedly on, with hungry and determined and confident hearts, as the hound follows the scent growing warmer, and with the vision before them of the last ditch, the end of that long three years of clash and recoil, of stroke and counter stroke with this same kindred foe, now to be brought to bay.

"Even though the 5th Army Corps had not through four long years of almost constant hardship and battle, of devoted service, filled with brilliant deeds; proved its discipline, its devotion and undaunted heroism—these marches, this fight against nature's limitations, would have made its history glorious, for the end of its accomplishment was the beginning of peace. And of this corps the 155 Regt. of Pennsylvania Volunteers was an important part. I am sure that all those still living of that devoted regiment will recall those days of pursuit with enthusiasm, and remember that last day's jog trot far into the night of April 8th 1865 when the tired troops were permitted to fall down to coveted sleep, only to be called to march again after two hours, in response to Sheridan's appeal for

aid of infantry, having with his cavalry brought Lee's Army to stand on their only line of escape. And of the hurried march in the early hours of that historic morning of the 9th of April 1865, spurred on by the sound of the cavalry in contact with Lee's advance, until the column was halted behind the hills commanding Appomattox. General Griffin with his staff and escort immediately rode forward to the hill top to reconnoiter.

"And what a panorama was disclosed on that fair Sunday morning under a brilliant rising sun, the "Sun of Austerlitz" for us. In front a gradually declining slope carpeted on that spring day as with green velvet, of wide expanse in the right, the open ground reaching to the town, the court house rising in the center. About 1000 yards in front was a road entering the main street of the village and behind the fences the confederate line was posted in advance of their main body, in the effort to drive back Sheridan's troopers. As this situation came into view, instantly with the quick eyes of the old artillery commander, General Griffin realized the strength of the position and ordered battalions to the front and into position, and the troops forward. Soon the battle lines were formed and the skirmishers started the advance down the slope, and as the cavalry retired to right and left, became engaged with the rebel lines. Under this fire our skirmish line hesitated along the banks of a brook at the base of the hill, and Gen'l. Griffin directed the writer to go forward and push the line across, and while thus engaged another staff officer rode up with orders to stop the firing as a flag of truce had come in. This was accomplished with difficulty, for as soon as the fire in one part of the line was stopped rebel shots evoked retaliation. Before the advance was stopped by the truce the battle lines had moved forward and when halted were in three lines across this wide expanse of hill side clad in the fresh green of spring, and after announcement that a truce had been agreed on until Gen'l. Grant should reach the front, the troops as they stood, in lines of battle, were ordered to stack their arms and remain in position. The spectacle presented in that bright spring morning was one never to be forgotten, and whether looking from the summit of the high land around Appomattox or from the village itself, it was of surpassing beauty, and grandeur. The 155th regiment as part of the 5th Army Corps was indeed fortunate in having been permitted, from vantage positions, to look on two of the most decisive, and most inspiring scenes of the war of the Rebellion, and

perhaps the most spectacular of any in the history of wars, Gettysburg from the summit of "Little Round Top" and the military pageant presented at the moment of the truce at Appomattox. The troops of the corps not yet fully deployed in deep lines, stretching around a vast amphitheatre, under a bright sun, in a carpet of fresh green, and looking over and against an apparently untenanted tower, and in the lower land beyond the enemy brought to bay and with their foes before them and behind them. And there, what one who was there, can forget the emotions inspired, and consciousness that the end was accomplished, and that he had a part in the glory of it.

"After the firing along the lines had been stopped and the truce was in force, Gen. Griffin with his staff and escort started from his lines to enter the town and as the cavalcade approached the entrance of the main street, the temptation was too great to be resisted by the rebel skirmishers, to "pot" this flood of Yankees and a volley sent whistling bullets through the mass, fortunately with casualties only to horses, but the effect was ludicrous, looking back on the incident, however serious it seemed at the time, for everybody in the posse, save the General whose dignity had to be maintained, was moved by the same consideration that it was not the part of prudence to run under risk of being killed after the war was over, so there was an impetuous charge for the shelter of the barns and out buildings of the town. This fusillade quelled, the General with his retinue proceeded on through the town to the Court House an old and dignified building with ample grounds enclosed by an iron fence set on stone base. Here the party halted and dismounted, soon being joined by other Generals of both armies. And this scene was unique and furnished a commentary on the character of the war, a war of brother against brother, friend against friend, for here were gathered commanders of troops, who but an hour before were in hostile conflict, sitting along the stone fence recalling memories of their boyhood at West Point or of their service on the frontier plains, without rancor, but seeming as though they had casually met again after long absence.

"On the arrival of Genl. Grant and Genl. Lee they proceeded to the McLain house in the main street just within the village, where soon gathered a large array of General officers from both the armies and of all arms and while the momentous conference was being held within; on the broad porch across the front of the house and over the wide lawn without, an imposing concourse of Generals with

their staffs were met, Commanders on many heroic fields and heroes of many brilliant deeds, men whose names will live in history forever, as leading actors in the events of the most momentous conflict of all history. And they, it seemed, met here as guests one of the other rather than as enemies and talking together of everything else than of the deadly business they had but just now been in.

"The conference between the two great commanders over, they appeared on the porch and descended the long steps together, Genl. Grant escorting Genl. Lee across the lawn to his horse which was being held by an orderly. The crowd of onlookers following behind and standing apart, as the two central figures engaged in a dignified and courteous parting. What a glorious moment it was to the armies of the Union, and how full of proud memories it has been to those of us who were permitted to be partners in this grand climax of the Civil War.

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