

## MEMORANDA ON THE CIVIL WAR.

### The Capitulation of Harper's Ferry.



ARMY WATER-CART.

RECENT contributions from distinguished officers of the Confederate army, relative to the battle of Antietam and the capitulation of Harper's Ferry, although substantially correct so far as they go, are necessarily incomplete, and do not present the situation and circumstances under which the last-named event took place from

the stand-point of the other side.

On the 8th of September, 1862,—being then in command of the Union forces at Martinsburg, Virginia, about two thousand five hundred of all arms,—I reported to General Wool at Baltimore, commanding the Department, that the enemy was approaching from the north in a force estimated at 15,000 to 20,000, and asked for instructions. General Wool replied :

"If 20,000 men should attack you, you will of course fall back. Harper's Ferry would be the best position I could recommend." \* \* \*

After reconnoissance, and some skirmishing with the enemy's advance, demonstrating that his force was too large to successfully oppose, especially as there were no defenses at Martinsburg, the post was, in accordance with General Wool's views, evacuated, and Harper's Ferry reached on the 12th.

Upon reporting to Colonel Miles, the officer in command, he showed me the following dispatch :

"WASHINGTON, D. C., Sept. 7, 1862. COLONEL MILES, Harper's Ferry : Our army [McClellan's] is in motion ; it is important that Harper's Ferry be held to the latest moment. The Government has the utmost confidence in you, and is ready to give you full credit for the defense it expects you to make. H. W. HALLECK, General-in-Chief."

In view of the foregoing dispatch, and of the fact that I had been ordered from Harper's Ferry to the command at Martinsburg a few days previously by General Wool, it was manifest that the authorities intended to retain Miles in command—very properly so, as he was an officer of forty years' experience.

The defenses of Harper's Ferry, if worthy of the name, consisted of a small work on the crest of Maryland Heights called Stone Fort ; another well down the western slope, where a battery of heavy naval guns was established. There was also down the western slope from the Stone Fort a line of intrenchments terminating at a work near the Potomac called Fort

Duncan, but this line was not occupied except at the upper end.

On Bolivar Heights a line of rifle-pits extended from near the Potomac southward to the Charlestown road, where a small work for the protection of artillery was situated.

In the rear of this line eastward, and in the upper part of the town, was an earthwork known as Camp Hill. Loudoun Heights (east of the Shenandoah) were not occupied by our troops.

The troops constituting the garrison were disposed by Colonel Miles as follows : on Maryland Heights, about two thousand ; on Bolivar Heights, from the Potomac to the Charlestown road, thence at a right angle to the Shenandoah, a distance in all of at least a mile and a half, seven thousand men ; in the work at Camp Hill, about eight hundred ; and the remainder, about one thousand, guarded the bridges and other points on the rivers.

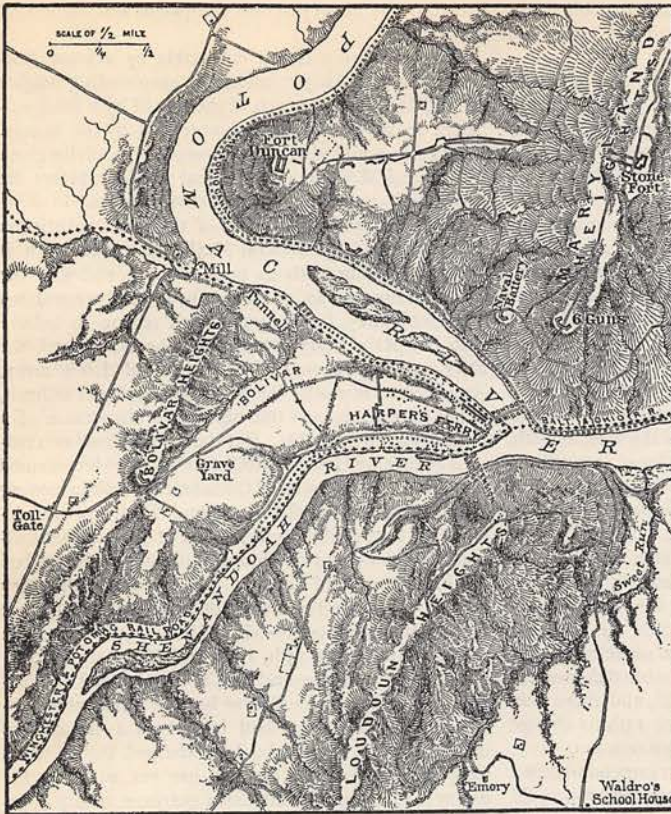
The distance from Maryland Heights to the nearest point on Bolivar Heights, by way of the pontoon bridge, was two and a quarter miles ; to the intersection of the Charlestown road, three miles. Thus the principal points to be defended were not within supporting distance of each other in case of assault, nor was either of them properly fortified.

On the 13th the divisions of Generals McLaws and R. H. Anderson, by order of General Lee, reached Maryland Heights, and attacked the force stationed there, under Colonel Ford, who after some fighting abandoned the position—as he stated, by order of Colonel Miles, but the latter denied having given such an order. Be this as it may, it is certain that the enemy could have easily taken it with the force at his command, whenever he chose to do so.

It has generally been considered that Colonel Miles should have tried to hold that position, even if it became necessary to mass his whole force there. The reasons given by him to the writer for not doing so were : (1) That his orders required him to hold Harper's Ferry, and this would be a violation of such orders ; (2) that water would be inaccessible. Moreover, it was manifest that if Harper's Ferry were evacuated, the enemy would close in from beyond Bolivar Heights, and from Loudoun Heights, and cross to the north side of the Potomac, thus wholly enveloping our small force with Lee's entire army, and virtually concentrating the latter in front of McClellan, with the river-crossing at Harper's Ferry, the principal object of its occupation, given up to the enemy.

Whether this view was correct or not, it is a fact that the maintenance of the line on Bolivar Heights till the morning of September 15th prevented the presence of the divisions of Generals A. P. Hill, McLaws, and Anderson with Lee, until the 17th, the day of Antietam, being four full days after General McClellan had received a copy of General Lee's orders directing the movement against Harper's Ferry, and





MAP OF THE DEFENSES AND APPROACHES OF HARPER'S FERRY.

disclosing the fact that fully one-third of his army was south of the Potomac, and much more than that, including the force under McLaws and Anderson, engaged in the movement against Harper's Ferry.

Officers of the Confederate army, before alluded to, writing for the June *CENTURY* (1886), have described the situation of that part of Lee's army north of the Potomac during the 14th, 15th, and 16th as one of "imminent peril," "very serious," etc., etc., virtually admitting that it might have then been defeated. Thus it will be seen that there were two sides to the question whether Maryland Heights was the "Key to Harper's Ferry" under the then existing circumstances, and that the detention of the Confederate forces around that place was prolonged, instead of abbreviated, by the continued occupation of Bolivar Heights, instead of the abandonment of the position for that on Maryland Heights.

During the afternoon of the 14th General Jackson, who had completed the investment of the place by his arrival on the 13th, moved forward with a view to occupy the ridge which is a prolongation of Bolivar Heights south of the Charlestown road and descends toward the Shenandoah River. To oppose this movement troops were advanced, but after a spirited engagement it was manifest that we could not prevent his establishment in the position sought, and at night our force was withdrawn within the lines of defense.

During the evening a consultation took place at which it was determined to send out all the cavalry,

as it was of very little use in the defense of the place, and in case of the capture or surrender of the post, the horses and equipments would be valuable to the enemy. Colonel Arno Voss, Twelfth Illinois Cavalry, ranking cavalry officer, commanded the force which thus escaped. The question whether the infantry could not also escape was discussed and given up, because it was deemed impossible to march it fast enough. Moreover, Colonel Miles considered that he had no right to evacuate Harper's Ferry. The testimony of the cavalry officers, given subsequently, was, with one exception, to the effect that the road was impracticable for artillery, difficult for infantry, and that they could not have escaped.

Soon after daylight on the morning of the 15th fire was opened by the enemy's artillery, comprising probably nearly or quite fifty pieces; those established at the southern extremity of Bolivar Heights completely enflading that part of our line extending from the Charlestown road northward to the Potomac; those placed on the south-western slope of Loudoun Heights, and on the west side of the Shen-

andoah near by, delivering their fire at an acute angle to our line, being half enfladed; those at or near the crest of Loudoun Heights taking us in rear; and still others in the valley beyond Bolivar Heights firing directly at our front.

The fire was chiefly converged upon the batteries we had established at and near the intersection of Bolivar Heights and the Charlestown road, that being the point upon which it was manifest General Jackson would deliver the expected assault.

The writer, being in command of the forces in this quarter, ordered the massing of the artillery there and the movement of the regiment holding Camp Hill to the front. These orders, as I afterward learned, were countermanded by Colonel Miles, who deemed it necessary to retain a force near the river-crossing; at all events, the order was not executed.

The artillery fight continued until half-past eight in the morning, when it was apparent the assault might be expected immediately. At this time Colonel Miles visited the work at the Charlestown road and said to the writer that the situation seemed hopeless, and that the place might as well be surrendered without farther sacrifice of life. It was replied that such a step should only be taken upon the judgment of a council of war, whereupon Colonel Miles called the commanders of brigades together, who, after consultation, and with great reluctance on the part of some, voted unanimously for capitulation if honorable terms could be obtained, for the following reasons:



*First.* The officer commanding had lost all confidence in his ability further to defend the place, and was the first to advise surrender.

*Second.* There was no reason to hope that the attenuated line on Bolivar Heights could be maintained, even for half an hour, against the greatly superior force massed for the assault, supported if necessary by an attack on our rear by Generals Walker and McLaws.

*Third.* Great as was the disparity in numbers, the disparity in position was greater. Harper's Ferry and Bolivar Heights were dominated by Maryland and Loudoun Heights, and the other positions held by the enemy's artillery. The crest of Maryland Heights is at an elevation of one thousand and sixty feet; the southern point, nearest Harper's Ferry, six hundred and forty-nine feet; Loudoun Heights, nine hundred and fifty-four feet. The south-western slope of the latter and the grounds near by, west of the Shenandoah, where batteries of the enemy were placed, were three hundred to six hundred feet high. The elevation of Bolivar Heights is about three hundred feet, while Camp Hill and the town of Harper's Ferry are still lower. Thus all our movements of men or guns during the engagements of the 14th and 15th, as well as the effect of their own plunging fire, were plainly visible from the enemy's signal-station on Loudoun Heights. No effective reply could be made to the fire from these elevated positions, no suitable defenses existed from which to resist the assault, and there was no opportunity on the morning of the 15th to change our position, if there had been a better one to occupy.

*Fourth.* Awaiting the assault, then impending, with no hope of even a temporary successful resistance, did not seem to justify the sacrifice of life consequent upon such a course—the situation being regarded as one of the unfortunate chances of war, unavoidable under existing circumstances.

The writer was appointed by Colonel Miles commissioner to arrange the terms of capitulation, and at the urgent request of other officers I accepted the unwelcome duty, in the hope of obtaining honorable conditions. Immediately after the council broke up, Colonel Miles was mortally wounded; he died the next day.

As commissioner I was received very courteously by the Confederate officers, and the terms of capitulation agreed upon with General A. P. Hill provided that all private property of individuals and the side-arms of officers should be retained by them. Refugees, of whom there were a considerable number, were not to be treated as prisoners, except such, if any, as were deserters from the Confederate army. There were none of this class. All the Union troops were immediately paroled, and were not to serve again until regularly exchanged. A number of the prominent officers of the Confederate army spoke of our situation as hopeless from the hour when the investment was completed.

This paper has been prepared for the sole purpose of presenting the salient facts in the case, with no purpose of condemning or vindicating any one connected with it, directly or indirectly, and all incidents not actually necessary to show the causes of the event have been omitted by reason of the limited space which a magazine article allows.

But it is believed that the following facts are estab-

lished by the history of this campaign, and should be presented.

Harper's Ferry is not defensible by a force inferior to that attacking it, unless the surrounding heights be well fortified, and each of them held by a force sufficient to maintain itself unsupported by the others. It was this which doubtless prompted the advice given by General McClellan to General Halleck before the investment, that the garrison be withdrawn.

Had the hard-fought battle of the 17th at Antietam been delivered by General McClellan on the 14th at South Mountain, with as large a force, and with the same energy, and followed by a prompt advance down Pleasant Valley, there seems good reason to believe that Harper's Ferry would have been relieved, the river-crossing secured, the reunion of Lee's army, separated as it was by the Potomac, rendered difficult, if not impossible, and the capture or dispersion of a large part of it probable. But there may have been reasons governing General McClellan which to him seemed to demand the adoption of the course he took in moving against the enemy's left at Antietam. This, however, delayed the battle till the 17th, in face of the fact that Colonel Miles had informed him through Major Russell of the First Maryland Cavalry, who left Harper's Ferry on the 13th, that he could not hold that place more than forty-eight hours—viz., till the 15th. Thus the opportunities of the 14th, 15th, and 16th were lost.

Of course after General McClellan decided to postpone the battle, it would have been of immense advantage if Harper's Ferry had been held a day or two longer; but of those who have claimed that it could have been longer held, no one has yet, so far as the writer is informed, stated *how* a garrison mostly of recruits, under fire for the first time, could have successfully defended an area of three square miles, assailed from all sides by veterans three times their number, posted, with artillery, in positions commanding the whole field. The writer with due deference expresses the opinion that the force under Jackson could have carried the place by assault, within an hour after his arrival before it, or at any time thereafter prior to the surrender, in spite of any resistance which under the circumstances could have been made.

*Julius White.*

The report of the Military Commission censured Colonels Miles and Ford and Major Baird. It affirmed that there was nothing in the conduct of Colonels D'Utassy and Trimble to call for censure; and that General Julius White merited the approbation of the Commission, adding, "He appears from the evidence to have acted with decided capability and courage."—EDITOR.

#### Ripley's Brigade at South Mountain.

I FIND that some persons construe the article of General D. H. Hill, in the *JUNE CENTURY*, as reflecting upon the troops composing the brigade of General R. S. Ripley, at the battle of Boonsboro' or South Mountain. General Hill disclaims any such intention on his part, and the facts are these:

He correctly states Ripley's manoeuvres at Boonsboro' until we reached a position at the foot of the mountain,—on the west side,—when General Ripley said to me (colonel of the Third North Carolina Infantry) that we were entirely cut off from the rest of the army, except G. B. Anderson's brigade, which was on our right, and that he assumed the command