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MY SERVICE IN THE U. S. COLORED CAVALRY

A PAPER READ BEFORE

THE OHIO COMMANDERY OF THE LOYAL LEGION

MARCH 4, 1908

BY

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1ST U. S. COLORED CAVALRY

Paper

of

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of

Cincinnati, Ohio,

Read before The Ohio Commandery
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MY SERVICE IN THE U. S. COLORED CAVALRY

Having served over two years in a good, hard-fighting infantry regiment, and being encamped at Newport News, Va., holding the dignified rank of Sergeant, I one day met our little fighting Major John G. Chambers who asked me if I would like a commission in the 1st U. S. Colored Cavalry, then forming at Fort Monroe, to which I made answer that I would, and two or three days thereafter I received an order, mustering me out of the service and also an order to report to Colonel Garrard for duty as an officer of the new regiment. Early the next morning, going down to the wharf to embark for Ft. Monroe, I showed to the sentry on the wharf (as my authority for leaving) the order mustering me out. He looked it over and said in a home-sick way, "I would give $800 for that paper." I reported to Colonel Garrard, and for the first time saw this officer with whose reputation as a brave and efficient Major of the 3d N. Y. Cavalry I had been well acquainted in the Department of North Carolina. This regiment, being the first colored cavalry regiment, had in its ranks a rather better class of men than the infantry regiments had; some being from the North and some being the outlaw negroes who, in slavery times, had been able to maintain their liberty in the swamps of Eastern Virginia and North Carolina. The regiment was officered largely from the 3d N. Y. Cavalry, and they were a thoroughly efficient and capable corps of officers. The regiment was soon filled, mounted and equipped, and constant drill soon made it have the manner and bearing of soldiers. Every one knew that the Campaign of 1864 meant business, and therefore all was in readiness when about May 1st orders came to move. We marched out through Hampton, of which not one house was left except the little old stone church which is still standing there. Through Big Bethel, the scene of one of the earliest disasters of the war, to Yorktown, memorable for its two sieges in two wars, and thence on to Williamsburg, passing between Yorktown and Williamsburg our infantry who, much to our surprise were marching very hurriedly back to Yorktown. We learned afterward they were put on board transports at Yorktown and sent up the James to City Point and Bermuda Hundred. The next day we went up the Peninsula, passing 6 and 12 Mile and burnt ordinarys, camping at night at New Kent Court House. I commanded the picket that night on the Bottoms Bridge Road and

the enemy's scouts were against us all night, keeping matters well stirred up. The next morning we turned South and met the enemy at Jones Ford on the Chickahominy. They were in an earthwork across the Ford and we opened on them with our howitzers in front and deployed as to cross in front, but a force was sent to the right up stream who managed to cross, and, coming down on the opposite side of the river, took the enemy in flank and soon drove them away from the ford. Killing some and capturing some of the enemy, and having some killed and wounded, our movement having been a feint to make the enemy believe that Butler's Army of the James, as it was afterward called, was moving up the Peninsula, having been accomplished, we returned to Williamsburg, arriving there the next day, where, to our astonishment, we met an order to go back at once and cross the Chickahominy at Jones Ford, sometimes called Jones Bridge, and proceed to Harrison's Landing, which we at once did, again fighting our way across at Jones Ford. Steamers were lying at the wharf in front of the old Westover mansion, and, going on board, we were soon thereafter landed at Bermuda Hundred and passing out took the advance of Butler's Army, being at the time the only cavalry he had. The first day out we came to the Richmond and Petersburg turnpike and turning to the right on said pike started "on to Richmond," but as the road approached Drewry's Bluff we were fired on by both infantry and artillery and forced back with loss. Halting and feeding at the Howlett House, a fine mansion on a high bluff overlooking the James, where the Confederates afterward erected a strong battery to hold back our Navy from ascending the river. In the afternoon we started out again on the same road with orders to break the Richmond & Petersburg R. R., which ran parallel with the pike; beyond the pike, when we crossed, we left three companies to guard and hold the crossing which was in a low swamp and heavily wooded ground. The remainder of the force passed through the swamp up a steep hill, and when we were fairly on top of the hill there came a crashing volley of musketry down behind us at the crossing, and looking down to the pike we saw the fragments of those three companies drift down the pike toward Petersburg like dry leaves before an autumn gale. A brigade of Confederate infantry was concealed in that swamp, who, letting us pass, thinking they had us cut off and securely bagged, had then simply risen and fired a volley at close range into these three companies. This volley killed Lieutenant Mains and killed and wounded a good many of the men. When we

heard the volley, Lieutenant Vandervoort, commanding the howitzers, tore down the fence, running his guns out into an open field on the brow of the hill, opened fire on the confederate infantry; but the Colonel did not think our position was just what he desired, as we now had the confederate infantry behind us and we knew the confederate cavalry was guarding the R. R. in front of us. These we went out expecting to fight but were not reckoning on the infantry, so we started on toward the R. R., seeking another road to return to our own lines and soon found one into which we turned at a gallop. Just as we did so the Confederate Cavalry, whose curiosity had been excited by the firing, and had come down the road to meet us, poured a volley into us, the bullets rattling on the wooden fence at the turn of the road like hail. This did not retard our speed and we came back into our infantry lines in such a cloud of dust that they sprang into line to meet us. The next morning we again struck the Richmond and Petersburg Pike and turned toward Richmond, this time with the infantry behind us, and we soon struck the enemy's infantry near where they had fired on the three companies the day before and we soon turned over the task to our infantry. We lined up along the side of the pike with our horses' tails in the bushes and the infantry and artillery defiled past us, going from our left to our right into action. Among the infantry was the 6th Connecticut, armed entirely with Spencer rifles. Just beyond the right of our regiment the pike crossed a low ridge or swell of ground, and on this ridge in the pike our people planted a couple of 20 pounder Parrott guns and opened with them on the enemy. This fire the enemy's artillery quickly returned, and I was sitting on my horse lazily watching our men work the pieces and the constantly recurring puffs of white smoke as the confederate shells burst over their heads when suddenly I noticed a commotion among the gunners who came running back down the pike with their rammers and swabs in their hands, and the teams with the caissons and limbers came back on the run and immediately the confederate infantry swarmed over the guns. I was no longer sleepy. It looked as if the cavalry was going to have a chance to win more glory, but our infantry was too quick, and with a counter charge they at once retook the guns. The gunners and the teams ran back, and immediately the guns were again jumping like mad creatures under the recoil of their discharge. Of the battle beyond this ridge I could see nothing, but the firing was heavy and at once there came from the front, defiling past us to the rear, a ghastly

procession of men wounded in every way in which men could be wounded and still retain the power of locomotion. Among them was a stout, hearty sergeant of this 6th Connecticut regiment limping to the rear, using two muskets as crutches. The calf of his right leg had been struck by a solid shot or unexploded shell. Though no bones had been broken, there was nothing left of the calf but bloody strings of flesh and trouser leg. But we were getting too near Richmond, and during the next day or two the enemy in our front was very heavily reinforced and outflanking our right Heckman's Brigade, impetuously attacked at the earliest dawn along the whole front. Heckman's Brigade was veteran troops who had heretofore had only victories and it fought with stubborn temper, but the confederates finally advanced with such a rush that they ran over Heckman's Brigade and left it, the dead and wounded and living in the rear of the confederate line of battle, not even stopping to place guards in charge; and a good many of our men, finding they were not restrained, passed down to the left, around the left of the confederate line and got back once more into our own lines, thus missing the pleasures of Andersonville.

The battle raged all day and only ceased with darkness. During the night Butler decided to withdraw his army within his fortified lines at Bermuda Hundred. Our cavalry picket line was ordered to hold its place only until the enemy advanced and then fall back also, within the fortified lines. Personally I was in command of that part of the line at Weirs Bottom Church where we had a howitzer. The infantry retired during the night, and in the morning we were unsupported except for the fortified lines about 3 or 4 miles in our rear. We had the howitzer loaded with shell and aimed at the road where it crossed the low hill back of the Howlett House, but the enemy were in no hurry to close in, and it was about 3 o'clock P. M. when, looking at this point in the road where our howitzer was aimed, I saw 8 or 10 confederate cavalry slowly and watchfully advancing. They were just where the howitzer was aimed and we fired on them at once, but they jumped their horses to the right and left out of the road like cats, and when the shell got there, there was nothing but the road for it to hit. They scattered to the right and left across the fields and carefully inspected our position but did nothing further on that part of the line.

I had been in the saddle night and day and was thoroughly worn out and was more than half sick with malarial fever, and so after dark, holding my horse's reins in my hands, I sat down at the road side with

my back to the trunk of a tree, never dreaming of going to sleep, but alas, the next thing I knew I heard the Captain of my Company, who had commanded the line a little to the left, give the command, "Fours right, gallop, march," and away they all went in the darkness, leaving me alone in the woods. Be sure I was on my feet trying to gather a few of my scattered senses, when suddenly I heard a horse whining in the darkness, out a short distance in the woods, and rushing headlong in the direction of the sound, ran bodily against my horse who was quietly browsing on the young leaves. Mounting at once and spurring out into the road, started on the gallop down the road after the company; but soon coming to where the road forked, and not knowing where any of the roads led, as we were retiring on a different road from the one we went out on, I checked the horse to a walk and let him have his head and go where he pleased,and taking a good swinging stride with his head low he went on his way without hesitation. For myself, I drew a revolver and cocked and held it ready for what might happen. Going on thus for about an hour I suddenly heard in the darkness in front of me, the jingle of horse equipments and at once the challenge, "Who comes there?" To this I at once answered, "A friend," and riding up with my revolver in my hand found one of the men of my own company. Asking where the company was, I rode on to the bivouac and dismounting, with my saddle for a pillow, slept. Thus I believe I was the last man of that whole army to retire from the front of the enemy, but I never called the General's attention to the fact. As General Grant said, we were bottled up at Bermuda Hundred and the enemy used to amuse himself by firing on the transports going up and down the river below Bermuda Hundred, especially at a high bluff commanding the river, called Fort Powhatan. So Butler sent my company of cavalry and a battery of artillery and a regiment of infantry to hold and fortify the place. The artillery and infantry fortified toward the land with the river at their backs and the cavalry bivouacked outside the fortification. We scouted the country out toward Petersburg and brought in supplies of all sorts, among which were several fish seines, and with these we caught some fine shad, and with rowing and bathing we had a good time.

One morning an "intelligent contraband" came into camp and I asked him where he came from. He said he was a slave on the plantation of Mr. Wilcox, whose plantation was up the river. I was interested in horses and he told me that Mr. Wilcox, who was an officer in

the 2d Virginia Cavalry, had a very fine horse at home, resting and feeding up, and was now in first rate shape. That it was broken only to the saddle. The more I thought of this horse the worse I felt, and so I soon took my saddle and bridle, and strapping on a revolver, went down to the river and had a couple of our men row me up till we were opposite the Wilcox plantation, when I went ashore, and shouldering my saddle and bridle told the men to row back to camp, and going up across the fields went into the stable and without difficulty found the horse. Saddling and bridling him, I mounted and rode out past the house where I saw some ladies but did not speak to them. That horse was a beauty, and he went over fences, ditches, etc., like a bird. His color was a dark bay. A creek runs into the James River between the Wilcox plantation and Fort Powhatan and I had to ride about a mile back into the country before I could find a ford. I put the horse on a gallop to the ford, crossed and started back toward camp;, when across the fields to the right, on a converging road, I saw a squad of confederate cavalry. It was a race for the fork of the roads, but I was the better mounted and got there first and came into our lines flying. One of the men said, "For God's sake, Lieutenant, don't come in that way again, we came near shooting you." I tied my prize to the picket line and felt that I had done a good thing.

When we first went there Colonel Kiddoo was in command, but he had been superseded by another. About 6 o'clock an orderly appeared and gave me an order to report at headquarters, and upon so reporting, the Commander opened on me with "I understand you have been outside the lines without leave." I said, "Colonel Kiddoo gave me a standing authority to scout as I deemed proper," whereupon I was informed that said authority was revoked. Then the Commander said, "I understand you stole a fine horse and brought him into the lines, to this I said, "I could prove that he was a confederate cavalry horse and I did not need any authority to capture him." Whereupon he said, "Have that horse here at my headquarters to-morrow morning at 9 o'clock." and I went back to camp determined to, in the morning, take the worst horse from the picket line and send him up to headquarters, but that night a courier rode into our camp with orders to go on board the steamer on which he came, then lying at the landing, and report to our regiment at Bermuda Hundred. I took the horse up the river with me and about midnight we joined the regiment and soon had our picket line stretched and the horses fastened and stable guard mounted. I

saw my prize beauty securely fastened and went to bed. The first thing the next morning I went out to see him, and he had disappeared. The stable guard swore that no horse got loose and no human being approached the line during the night, but my horse was gone and I am still looking for him. Still shut up in the Bermuda Hundred lines, cavalry was of but little use there, but one day headquarters decided to make use of us and an order came to camp for the regiment to report at a certain point near the line at 9 o'clock P. M., in light marching order, and we were there. An orderly rode along the line with word for all officers to report at the right of the regiment. Going there, the Colonel informed us that the order was that the regiment was to pass out through the lines, and as soon as the head of the column was fired on by the enemy it was to charge right through the fortified lines of the confederate army, and getting through to its rear onto Richmond and Petersburg Pike, and destroy all confederate wagon trains and then pass on and tear up as much as possible of the Richmond & Petersburg R. R., and then when pursued by a superior force to escape westerly into the Shenandoah Valley or eastwardly to Norfolk. I may say that so far as I ever knew there was not so much as a hatchet in the regiment with which to destroy anything, or a match with which to set the fragments on fire, and as we rode back to the company I said to my Captain, "Well! somebody is drunk at headquarters," to which he made no response in particular, seeming engaged in thought. The regiment at once started down the road into the dark pine woods and presently came to our infantry outposts, who informed us that the enemy were right in front and we would be fired on at once, which was exactly what happened, and, according to orders, as soon as the Confederate infantry opened on us the order to charge was given, and on we went at a gallop, but were soon brought up in a heap. The head of the column had run into a heavy slashing of felled trees, among which, and in the woods on both sides of which was a heavy force of Confederate infantry. I was at the middle of the column, and, looking down the road to the front, in the darkness the fire of the Confederate infantry looked like a swamp full of fire flies. The men in the head of the column were firing on the Confederates with their revolvers. The Colonel was at the front, and seeing the hopelessness of the situation, gave the command, "Fours, right about, gallop, march," but it was slow getting the command back to the rear of the column, and I suppose we were in there about 20 minutes. A while after this the white cav-

alry became so short of horses that we were dismounted, the officers, of course, retaining their own horses, and the regiment moved back into a camp near the landing at Bermuda Hundred. While here one of our Lieutenants, named Bittner, got into a quarrel with the sutler, and, taking about ten men with their carbines, went to the sutler's tent and ordered his men to tear it down, which they proceeded to do when the sutler came out with a revolver and blazed away at Bittner's head, putting a bullet through his jaw, into his throat, whereupon Bittner's men opened fire on the sutler with their carbines and the sutler ran for his life, the men chasing him and firing as fast as they could, and managed to put a bullet through the sutler's lungs from rear to front. He ran into the adjutant's tent, and, falling on his cot, died there; and a few minutes afterwards they brought Bittner into camp on a board. He survived the wound. A few days thereafter Lieutenant Spencer, by the Colonel's order, shot one of the men dead in his tracks for disobedience of orders. We lay there in camp for a while, and then were sent into the lines about Petersburg, and details were made each day to act as ambulance corps and haul away the dead and wounded, who were all the time falling on the siege lines. While engaged in this work one day, two men got into a quarrel and one of them shot the other one dead in the Company street. He was at once arrested and tried by general court martial, and one day he was brought into camp by the provost guard with an order that he be hanged at once in the presence of the regiment. So a squad was sent into the woods to prepare the scaffold, and another went to the quartermaster's train for a piece of rope, and another dug the grave. It was a drizzly day and the ground wet, so the grave soon filled with water. The regiment was drawn up on three sides of a square around the grave and the prisoner was brought in an old farm cart, drawn by hand. The rope was adjusted around his neck, and then the cart was drawn out from under him, but the rope was new and wet and he hung dangling and kicking in the air, so the old grizzle bearded sergeant, who had charge of the execution squad, took hold of his feet and pulled down till he broke the prisoner's neck, and so the performance was ended.

Late in the fall of 1864 we were sent to Norfolk, Va., to do Provost Guard duty, and were there to the end of the war. Norfolk was at that time the base of supplies, so to speak, of the great armies up the James, and of the great naval establishment which we at that time had. Its inhabitants were chiefly gamblers, thieves, saloon keepers and

prostitutes, and out in the roads lay the fleets of France, Great Britain, Russia and the United States, and when the sailors got shore leave, things at times got very hot; in fact, on two or three occasions we were obliged to fire on the fighting mobs in the streets to disentangle them.

After Lee's surrender all the colored troops in the East were collected at City Point and organized into the 25th Corps. It was understood we were going to Mexico to fight the French and Maximillian but strange stories got around among the colored troops. The story being that the Government was going to send them south to work on the cotton plantations to pay the national debt, and many went to their officers to ask if it was true, and, being assured there was no truth in it, would declare themselves satisfied; but a marked change came over them, and they became sullen and disobedient.

This increased, and when half of my regiment was put on a small, light draft river steamer, to go down the James River to Hampton Roads, they went aboard with no good grace and we had only begun our journey down the river when the men on the lower deck began firing at objects on the shore. I was on the upper deck, and, drawing my revolver, started down to stop the firing, but I had got but half way down when a dozen carbines were put to my head and breast, and I was told that I could kill one man, but it would be the last one I ever would kill, and hundreds were standing around with their carbines in their hands. The argument was convincing, and I returned to the upper deck. Shortly after they either run out of ammunition or got tired of the sport, as they ceased firing. When we got to Hampton Roads and went on board the steamship Meteor, which was to take us to Texas, we found that the other half of the regiment had also mutinied on their way down the river, and when the whole regiment got together on the decks of the Meteor and compared notes of what they had done, they just went wild, and, refusing to obey all orders, began raising the devil generally. It was already dark when we went on board the Meteor, and during the night word was sent to Gen. Nelson A. Miles, the commandant of Ft. Monroe. He sent orders for the regiment to land at the wharf at eight o'clock the next morning, and when the steamship headed for the wharf the men very readily fell in at the order, supposing they were to have their own way and not be sent south. The wharf was then where it is now, between the Chamberlain and Hygeia Hotels, though neither of those hotels were there at the time. Approaching the wharf we saw the garrison of Ft.

Monroe drawn up in line about 150 feet from the beach, on the exact spot where the Hygeia Hotel was afterward built. They were facing the water, and when my regiment went ashore it was marched in between the garrison and the water, and then the order was given to ground arms. Many obeyed the order at once, but many hesitated and looked back at the garrison, and then all laid down their arms. They were at once marched back on board the ship, and the ship returned to her anchorage above the Rip Raps. This was the first and last time I ever saw Gen. Nelson A. Miles. He was a tall, handsome, blonde complexioned young man of about 25 years of age, who wore the straps of a Major-General with dignity and honor. When the ship returned to her moorings the men at first seemed dazed, but as the day wore on they became more and more unruly, and presently we found they had broken into the hold of the ship into the sutler's stores and were all hands getting wild drunk. They were shut out from this, but they already had a good supply hidden under their skins and elsewhere, and they went wild. Just about sunset a big pock-marked mulatto got on top of the pilot house near the bows of the ship and was haranguing the crowds on the deck below him, when he turned, and, shaking his fist at the group of officers on the quarter deck, he said, "'You damned white livered —— of —— we will throw you overboard," at which a great howl went up from his audience, whereupon three of the officers with their revolvers in their hands forced their way through the crowd and jerked the orator off the pilot house and dragged him back on the quarterdeck where Capt. Whiteman, of Xenia, Ohio, put his pistol to his breast and told him to hold up his hands and put his thumbs together. We were going to swing him up to the rigging by his two thumbs, but the fellow simply folded his arms and looked at his captors with an air of drunken bravado. Whiteman told him three times to hold up his hands, but he made no motion to obey and Whiteman fired. I was standing at Whiteman's left and was looking the man in the face when the shot was fired, and he did not change a muscle, and I thought Whiteman had missed him, but, looking down to his breast, I saw blood reddening his shirt front, and at once his arms dropped limply at his sides and he fell in a heap at our feet on the deck. When they saw their champion go down the men raised a wild yell and shouting, "Kill them; throw them overboard," they seized axes, hand spikes, pieces of lumber and whatever could be used as weapons which they found around the deck, and came pouring aft to attack us. Some of the

officers of the regiment were sick, some on detached duty, some were absent on furlough, and some on shore, so there were just sixteen of us to face the torrent. Without a word of command, perhaps by that instinct born of years of military service, we lined up across the quarter deck, each with a revolver in each hand. It seemed as if we would be swept away in a minute, but not a shot was fired, and they came pouring aft. Presently I saw one or two of those in front drop back and let others get ahead, and presently all stopped and glared at us like wild beasts. Then one threw down his axe and another his handspike and they all sneaked off toward the bow of the ship. Then we knew we had conquered. There was a thirty pounder Parrott gun lashed to the rail on the quarter deck, and, sending for the howitzer crews, we ordered the gun unlashed and the muzzle swung out so it swept the deck forward, and made them load it with cannister. Then we sent for the band and we sat around on the quarter deck with our revolvers in our hands and made them play for about an hour, but at every pause in the music we could hear the dying groans of the man shot. The surgeon had laid him on a blanket on the deck where he fell, and so great was his vitality that he lived for two days. Before that, while I was still in the infantry, I was in a fight where the man behind me was killed and the man first on my left was wounded, and I had a bullet through my coat, which happily did not touch the hide, all in about five minutes, and I thought that was pretty strenuous; but I can say it was but a Sunday School picnic compared to the time when, in the fading light of a summer day, sixteen of us lined up across the quarter deck of the old steamship Meteor and faced a howling, rushing mob of 700 half-drunken devils in the absolute assurance that we had found the place where without poetry or trimmings we must either conquer or die.

The ship sailed the next day. We went to Mobile, to the Southwest pass of the Mississippi, and then to Brazos Santiago, Texas, where we landed on July 3d, 1865. We lay in camp on the sand hills for about three months, but soldiering had lost its interest, and one morning I wrote out my resignation and took it to the Colonel. He laughed and said he would sign it, but I could not get it through. I took it to the Commander of the brigade and he signed it, but said as the Colonel had. I went on board a small steamer going up the Rio Grande to Brownsville, arriving there the next morning. I went to the headquarters of Gen. Weitzel. He demurred, but signed it, saying

I would never get it past Gen. Steele, but with the expenditure of some eloquence I persuaded *him,* and, returning to Brazos Santiago, took a steamer for New Orleans via Galveston. At Galveston I had to get the signature of Gen. H. G. Wright, and then went on to New Orleans, and, going to the headquarters of Gen. P. H. Sheridan, left the papers, being told to come back the next day. The next day I received a certified copy of the order mustering me out, dated September 27th, 1865, making my service in the army all told, three days less than four years.

With the order in my pocket, I returned to my room in the St. Charles Hotel, and, taking off my hat, looked at the crossed sabres on its front. With my pocket knife I cut them off; then taking off my jacket, I cut off the shoulder straps and realized, not without a heart pang, that I was no longer a soldier.

I still have the pistols which I held in my hands when we lined up across the quarter deck of the Meteor. I still have the crossed sabres and straps which I cut off in the St. Charles Hotel. They are not as pretty as they were forty-two years ago, but they still have for me a certain value.

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