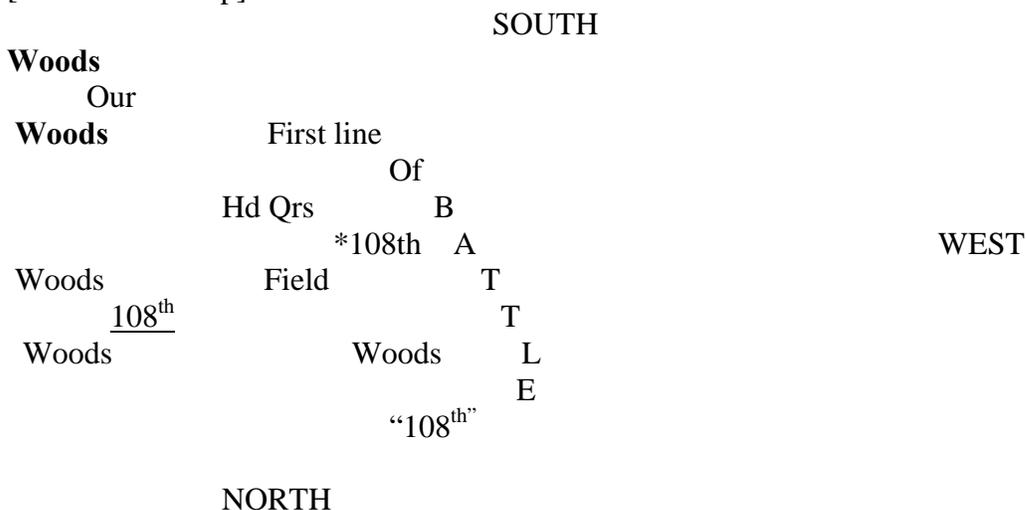


Camp of the 108th N Y Vols
Falmouth, Virginia
May 7th, 63

Dear Father,

We are once more in our old camp trying to make ourselves comfortable in the ruins of our once beautiful tent. We reached here yesterday after a march of fourteen or fifteen miles, and tired as I was, I should have written to you immediately to assure of my safety only that I knew no mail could leave camp before noon today. I have written two or three short notes since we left camp, but as they were so entirely disconnected, I will try and go over the whole ground at once and give you a general idea of our movements from the time of our first starting out, until the present. Our orders were for 8 days rations, and 60 rounds ammunition. With these we left camp at about six o'clock Tuesday A.M. April 28th. Until crossing the river we were kept entirely ignorant of our real intentions, the common opinion being that we were merely going up the river to deceive the Rebs while the crossing was to be made below. All our actions seemed to confirm this idea. Two divisions of our Corps were all that went with us, and the first day we halted for the night, after having marched only about three miles. Fatigue parties were sent out and a couple of roads were completed Wednesday and just as we expected to cross on them we started for some point further up the river. That night we camped about five miles from the preceding one, and in the morning were mustered for pay for the months of March & April. We then moved on a few miles and waited until about 4 PM for the pontoons to be laid. While stopping at this point Hookers order was read and for the first time we understood that we were to cross, and heard that the 5th, 11th, 12th had preceded us. We crossed the river without firing a gun and moved back from the river about four miles to a large field which eventually became the key as it were to our whole position. ¹

[Hand drawn map]



Above I have endeavored to give you a little idea of our position. The place marked "Field" was our camping ground of the first night. The next day we marched up the road a mile or so expecting a fight but were disappointed. We came back to the same field for the night. The 5th Corps in the mean time had been out and stirred up the Rebs and then fallen back a little outside "our first line of battle". The little square on the cross road just behind this line was Hooker's Hd.Qrs. Here in the angle between the roads was another large field filled with batteries. Early on the 2nd we were under arms and drawn up on the left hand side of the road where you see a dot [*]. Here we lay all day. Near night the fighting began very severely along the whole line and everything seemed to be going favorable. A few shells came over where we were but did no damage. At about six, we were advanced, and drawn up in line on the east side of the road about a quarter of a mile in rear of the front line ["2nd"] and ready to support them. While we were here, the firing on the right became more rapid, and was evident that we were giving way there. Our brigade was immediately sent over there.² We filed through the field just in rear of our first line of battle. Here we suffered our first loss. The Rebel batteries opened on us and wounded a good many men. Our batteries in the field replied, and I had a chance I have longed for of seeing an artillery duel in the night.. The fused shell could be seen for half a mile and looked beautiful. We then filed into the woods and took up our position where you see "108th". We were still in rear of other lines of battle and comparatively safe. In the morning at day light the attack was made. In about half an hour the front line gave way and fell back upon the 2nd. This line held its ground in our neighborhood very well but to the right, they broke and ran. The right of our brigade was thus exposed first. We on the left soon had our chance and were firing away when the 12th NJ and 14th Conn. broke and ran. This exposed us to a flanking movement, and our line was changed in such a manner as to prevent this in part. Here we stood for some time the boys fighting splendidly, when Powers seeing that we were likely to be surrounded ordered us off the field. We went off in good shape by the same road we came and stopped in the large field first mentioned where there is a dot[*] marked (108th NY). Here we lay during the rest of that day of fighting. The Rebs repeatedly came to the edge of the woods but could not cross the open field. Our troops finally fell back and formed a new line just back of this field and covering it. We were where you see 108th here we lay about 40 feet behind the front line which was composed of Dutchmen & the biggest cowards I ever saw in my life. Here we lay until yesterday morning the Dutchmen firing a volley about every two hours and killing about as many of our own men as of Rebs. Wednesday was intensely hot, but at night it rained awfully and came off cold. At 9 P.M. we were under arms & stayed so until 2A.M. Thursday when we started for the river, and after 8 hours steady march found ourselves in camp. We expect orders to march & as I am very busy I must cease.³

Sam

Notes:

¹ Hooker's order was General Order No.47 (*O.R.* 25, 1,p.171). They crossed the Rappahannock on U.S. Ford Road -see the map for May 1st Letter- then moved south towards Chancellorsville where they would rendezvous with the other corps who had crossed the river farther to the northwest. As Sam pointed out in a previous letter the 108th was not involved on the first day of the battle.

The large field was in the clear area immediately surrounding Chancellorsville and was one of the few open spots in the Virginia Wilderness.

From May 2nd to May 3rd, the 108th would fight in various positions around this open area.

On the morning and early afternoon of May 1st Hays Brigade which included the 108th, would be situated west of Chancellorsville on the Orange Turnpike facing west as indicated on Sam's map. The Brigade later moved into the woods north of the Turnpike for the night. The next day from noon until 5 pm.their brigade was moved to the north and west of Chancellorsville in the intersection of Bullock Road and Orange Plank Road..

² Around 5 pm on May 2nd Jackson's Corps (Army of Northern Virginia) struck from the west and the 11th Corps, the right flank of Hooker's army, was driven in and threatened to unravel the entire Union line. Sam's brigade was sent to stabilize the disaster. On the morning of May 3rd the brigade was north of the Orange Turnpike and facing west, supporting or acting as a reserve behind Carr's Brigade of Berry's Division (3rd Corps, 2nd Division, 1st Brigade Army of the Potomac). This was the final fight for the 108th NY on May 3.

³Carr's line gave way and Pender's Brigade of Lee's army broke through and overlapped the right of Hays Brigade. In the melee that followed Hays was captured when his horse fell on him so command of the Brigade went to Col. Charles Powers of the 108th NY.

At this point a post war controversy was created. Sam states that the brigade line held initially but the 12th New Jersey and 14th Connecticut broke and ran thereby cutting the brigade in half, leaving only the 130th Pennsylvania and 108th New York to fend for themselves, During this last fight the brigade was aligned as follows:

LEFT

RIGHT

130 Pa 108 NY 12 NJ 14 CT. ↑ Facing West

Sam claims that the 130th PA and 108th NY were split from the brigade line when the 12th NJ and 14th Ct. were overwhelmed and broke.Colonel Powers confirms this description in his brigade report (*O.R.*25, 1, p.375).

Theodore Ellis of the 14th Connecticut claims they gave way because an opening was created when the 12th NJ broke and ran (*O.R.*25, 1, p.377).

Major John Hill of the 12th NJ said his troops came under a "destructive fire upon our right flank, the regiment [*14th Connecticut*] upon that flank having given away" (*O.R.*25, 1, p.378).

Jenkins of the 130th PA took a further shot by claiming that his boys were standing and fighting but had to leave since the 108th NY 'passed to the rear" (*O.R.*25, 1,p.379). So after the initial break the 108th retreated and left the 130th !!

Pierce reporting for the 108th NY say nothing of these claims (.*O.R* 25, 1, p.379

Benjamin Hirst of the 14th Connecticut confirms that his regiment broke in a disorderly retreat (Hirst,p.126) In the regimental history of the 14th CT. (1906) the writer claims that the 12th overlapped the left of the 14th

Transcribed by Terry Crooks.

The original letter is in the *Porter Family Papers*, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, University of Rochester Libraries.

and when they opened fire it caused all sorts of problems for the Connecticut boys who retreated in good order (Page,p.122).

From the viewpoint of the 12th NJ, they were shakily holding on on their right flank –Co.F was in trouble but holding – when suddenly the regiment to their right (14th Ct.) “broke and fled for their lives” leaving the 12th NJ to its fate. When the Jerseymen finally retreated their movement was upset by the 130th PA fleeing from its position south of the 12th NJ and slicing through the 12th in retreat (Longacre, p.99). So now the 130th runs also! What actually happened is quite difficult to determine.

“The Dutchmen” who Sam refers to were the German soldiers of the 11th Corps. The 11th Corps formed the extreme right of Hooker’s position and received the brunt of Jackson’s assault on May 2nd. These men, a large number of which did not speak English were viewed with suspicion and a certain degree of disdain for their fighting ability.

Jackson’s attack was not a total surprise as is usually depicted since numerous warnings about the flanking force were sent from regimental commanders to O.O.Howard, 11th Corps Cmdr., but they were pooh-poohed or ignored. But as usual there must be a “Fall Guy” after a disaster, so the “Dutchmen” were blamed.