

National Tribune, March 20, 1884

A Reminiscence of Cold Harbor

To the Editor NATIONAL TRIBUNE:

At midnight of the 31st of May, the 6th corps left its position on the extreme right of the army opposite Swift Run. The 3rd (Rickett's) division took the advance, followed by the 1st and 2d. The night was clear and beautiful. It was a relief to get away from the unceasing whiz of the rebel bullets that had laid low so many of our comrades in the bloody fields of the Wilderness and Spottsylvania. Our destination was thoroughly discussed by the boys as we marched along that night. Some thought we were going to White House Landing to guard our base of supplies; others, that we were going to help General Butler take Richmond, when up spoke little Irish Jimmie and said: "Now, boys, you are all mistaken; this is one of Grant's flank movements, and you will get all the fighting you want before night." As will be seen, Jimmie was right, and many a brave soldier who marched with us that night had answered to his last roll call before the sunset, at Cold Harbor, June 1, 1864. Soon after daylight we halted for breakfast. I then learned from an engineer officer on General Meade's staff (a townsman of mine) that he was directing our corps to Cold Harbor where we were to form a junction with General W.F. Smith's corps, coming from White House Landing.

We reached Cold Harbor about noon and relieved Sheridan's cavalry, who had been holding the line. I find in my scrap-book the following from the *New York Tribune*. The correspondent of the *Tribune* writes:

HEADQUARTERS 6TH Army Corps
Near COLD HARBOR, JUNE 2, 1864

A hotly-contested battle, commencing at about 4 p. m. and continuing far into the night, took place yesterday, resulting in the capture of 650 prisoners and the carrying of the principal works of the enemy. The gallant old 6th corps took the brunt of the battle, the division of Brigadier-General Ricketts having the honor of the grand charge in which the stated number of prisoners was taken.

At about 6 o'clock an advance was ordered, and the whole line moved forward. A narrow belt of woods intervened between Rickett's division and the enemy, and, on emerging from it into a ploughed field, the position of the enemy was plainly visible on a wooded crest beyond. A heavy fire of musketry and artillery was immediately opened upon them by the rebels in their works; but through this deadly storm our men steadily advanced over the ploughed field, through an intervening swamp, with a gallant determination never before excelled in the history of the war, and at the point of the bayonet drove the enemy from his earthworks, and held them during the night against repeated and furious assaults.

The following congratulatory order from General Meade was issued to Rickett's division:

HEADQUARTERS ARMY OF THE POTOMAC
10 P.M. June 1, 1864

Major-General Wright: Please give my thanks to Brigadier-General Ricketts and his gallant command for the very handsome manner in which they have conducted themselves today. The success obtained by them is of great importance, and if followed up will materially advance our operation.

G. G. Meade
Major-General Commanding.

The loss of my regiment in this first charge was comparatively light, and we were congratulating ourselves on the result when the adjutant-general of the 1st brigade came up to Col. Townsend and

said: "Colonel Townsend, your front is clear; the orders are for you to charge your regiment."

The brave Townsend drew his sword and stepping on top of the rebel works we had just captured, said: "Men of the 106th, you are ordered to make another charge; move forward shoulder to shoulder, arms apart; forward! march!" We had advanced but a short distance through the woods when we came to a swamp. Colonel Townsend gave the command: "Three left companies, left half wheel." On coming into line, after passing the left of the swamp, we found ourselves directly in front of a line of works. The colonel gave the command: "Charge bayonets!" and over the works we went, capturing many prisoners. The rebels seemed perfectly demoralized and offered but little resistance. In rear of this line of works was an open field, over which we advanced about a hundred yards. As no support came up on our left, the rebels filed out of their works and formed a line on our left flank. Another line was advancing in our front from the opposite side of the field, from which we were receiving a murderous fire. Our men were dropping like hail. It was here that the gallant Colonel Townsend fell--than whom a braver officer never led men in battle. Truly, we had marched into the "jaws of death," and into the "mouth of hell."

We fell back, having lost in killed and wounded, nearly 50 per cent of the men engaged. It was now getting dark, and groping our way back through the woods, we occupied the works captured in the first charge.

I suppose it will remain one of the unexplained mysteries of the war why a single regiment was ordered to make such a charge; but, as soldiers, it was not for us to criticise, although someone had blundered.

P. Robertson
106th New York Vols.

Ogdensburg, N.Y.

[Spelling/punctuation as printed in article]

From NYSAG Report: Robertson, Peter.---Age, 22 years.
Enrolled, July 20, 1862, at Oswegatchie, to serve three years;
mustered in a first lieutenant, Company C, August 27, 1862; as
captain, March 15, 1863; wounded in action, November 27, 1863,
at Locust Grove, Va.; mustered out with company, June 22, 1865,
near Washington, D.C.

According to my count from the records above, Company C had 6
men killed, 17 wounded and 2 captured on June 1, the greatest loss
of all companies that day. Captain Robertson would later be
reported as killed in action at Monocacy, MD, on July 9.

[Transcribed, and additional information added by Edward A.
Worman, 1/17/10]