

Camp 108th NY
September 10th 1

Dear Father

Since writing home, I have received two letters, one from you and one from Mary, both of which you might consider answered by this detailed account.

Monday Sept 5th – Commanded a fatigue detail of 500 enlisted men, and 12 officers. Went to work on fort Scenk [??] a small redoubt on the Jerusalem plank. This redoubt is built on that part of our lines which approaches nearest the rebel fortifications and is bisected by the plank road which runs from it directly through the enemys [*sic*] works and from them to Petersburg². Our own and the Rebel Guns command this road and it is, except in the immediate vicinity of the fort whence the fortifications protect it, rather a dangerous thoroughfare. In the immediate front of Fort Scenk the Rebel pickets were about 75 yards distant, but the amicable feeling existing between them and us made us as safe as though they had been removed four times that distance. Through the day everything was tolerably quiet the pickets exchanging papers etc. and Rebel artillery only throwing half a dozen or so shots at us.

About 4P.M. a regiment of colored troops passing from right to left marched by the fort and then instead of keeping under the protection of the fortifications filed directly to the rear, down the plank road, I have already mentioned. For a time they were concealed by the works, but when the Rebels caught sight of them the shell and shot began to come thick and fast. The firing was beautiful and the darkies made the liveliest kind of time for shelter. Then Fort Warren and another fort in our rear begun to reply & for half an hour we lay very quiet with the shot from both sides going directly over us³

On reaching camp we first got our whiskey ration and then orders to march. We moved at about sunset and at 2 AM. of the next day had a strong line of breastworks built about 2 mile distant from our previous position and facing directly to the rear. Wednesday morning we moved about a mile farther to the right now become the left and repeated the digging in maneuver. Thursday was a repetition of Wednesday, and Friday (yesterday) we filed directly to the rear (the main part) & went into position on the same line we moved from Monday and only a mile to the right. About midnight the firing on the front line was very rapid and heavy, and this morning 75 Johnnies passed here all captured on the picket line in front of Fort Scenk where General Hancock had concluded they were a little too close. Within the last week a railroad has been built running directly through our lines, and relieving the wagon train of a great portion of the work they have been performing. This performance is very annoying to the enemy and whenever the train comes in sight of any portion of their line they salute it with a few shells but to little effect.⁴

We are living now better than ever and if we did not move from point to point so frequently would we [?? *be* ?] perfectly satisfied. Large additions of recruits and substitutes are coming to the army every day, and I think that in a couple of months we will be able resume offensive movement.

I saw Seward the other day and took dinner with him. The 4th lost heavily in the fight at Reams Station and is now only about 400 strong⁵. I am well and my leg perfectly sound at last. Love to all affectionately your son

Sam

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

[This PS was written sideways at the top of the first page of the original letter]

P.S. Ask mother to send me a fine comb and be sure to have it one that will take hold. S

Notes:

¹ On August 1st, 1864, Sam applied for a leave on medical grounds since the wound from the Wilderness had opened and was granted leave for 20 days on August 7/64 (NARA file; *108th New York*, p.136). Sam left on the 7th hence the hiatus from July to Sept. 1864. The camp of the 108th as well as the rest of the brigade was located to the southeast of Petersburg, near the Jerusalem Plank Road and in the area of the terminus of the Military Railroad (*O.R.42*, 1, p.50).

²First of all there is no such fort with this name on the Petersburg front. From Sam's description of the location, the two works in the area described are Fort Sedgwick and Battery 21. Fort Sedgwick was built for 25 guns and an 800 man garrison so could hardly be considered 'a small redoubt'. Battery 21 was designed for only 4 field pieces and therefore could be the 'small redoubt' in question. As the name *Scenk*, this is a bit confusing. The men named these installations after officers usually killed in battle but in this case the name could be Sam's phonetic attempt to refer to Captain Daniel F. Schenck, the officer of the 50th NY Engineers who was in charge of re-working the works (*O.R. 42*, 2, pp.955,968). So perhaps 'Scenk' is Sam's rendition 'Schenck', with 'ch' pronounced as 'k'?? Other than that there is no record of the name 'Fort Scenk'.

³Sam's bemused and somewhat indifferent response to the plight of the 'Darkies' under fire was probably typical since generally the white troops had little use or respect for the colored troops in the Army of the Potomac. Sam's comment especially to his abolitionist father is also not unusual since most northern abolitionists still did not see the Blackman as an equal.

The return fire from 'Fort Warren' is also a mystery location since no such fort seems to exist under that name in the rear or anywhere else. The batteries behind 'Fort Skenk' were Battery 22, Fort Davis and Fort Prescott.

⁴ The 75 men were taken by the 1st Brigade, 3rd Division. Hancock was Major General Winfield Scott Hancock, Commander of the 2nd Corps (*O.R. 52*, 1,p.51).

⁵ Seward is Seward F. Gould, Capt. Co.K, 4th NYHA. At Reams Station the 4th NYHA lost 375 men.