

About the Battle of New Market

This information appears in the following book, pages 2-6

Couper, Wm. *The V.M.I. New Market Cadets; Biographical Sketches of All Members of the Virginia Military Institute Corps of Cadets Who Fought in the Battle of New Market, May 15, 1864.* Charlottesville, Va: Michie Co, 1933.

Salient Features of the Battle in Connection with the Part Taken by the V. M. I. Cadets

CONDITIONS WHICH CAUSED THE BATTLE.

General Franz Sigel's march up the Shenandoah Valley from Winchester to New Market, Va., in May, 1864, had, as its objective point, the town of Staunton, where he could cut the Virginia Central Railroad (Now the C. & O. Ry.), and thus deprive General Lee's army and Richmond of one of their chief sources of supply; and whence he might, eventually, force his way to the rear of General Lee's army, then south of the Rappahannock River.

The only Confederate States force in the Valley, in May, 1864, was that of Gen. J. D. Imboden, consisting of cavalry, mounted infantry, and a battery of six guns, aggregating about 1,500 men. When Imboden heard of Sigel's advance, about May 2nd, he notified the Superintendent of the V. M. I. to hold the Corps of Cadets in readiness to reinforce his little army. As the Valley of Virginia was, in May, 1864, in the military department of Gen. John C. Breckinridge, C. S. A., who was then in Southwest Virginia, he at once assumed active command of the Confederate States forces for the defence of the Valley. And owing to the small number of Breckinridge's available forces, the Corps of Cadets was ordered, on May 10th, to join Breckinridge's Southwest Virginia forces at Staunton; from which point, the whole force could march down the Valley to join Imboden; or to which point, Imboden could fall back to join Breckinridge; either of which movements would necessitate a battle in the upper half of the Shenandoah Valley.

THE MARCH TO NEW MARKET.

The cadets were awakened by the long-roll on the night of May 10th, and ordered to march early the next morning on the road to Staunton.

On Wednesday morning, May 11th the corps left barracks and marched all day over the old Staunton road, (always in bad condition, especially in the rainy season), to the town of Midway, about 18 miles north of Lexington, and went into camp, sleeping in the rain that night.

On May 12th, the corps marched "in a drenching rain, through mud and water, to Staunton," about 18 miles.

On May 13th, the corps, having joined Breckinridge's veterans in Staunton, marched some 18 or 20 miles down the Valley Pike to a point south of Harrisonburg.

On May 14th, the corps continued down the pike, through Harrisonburg, to within about 7 miles of New Market, a march of about 15 miles, and went into camp in a body of woods on the east side of the pike.

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On the 14th, there was some skirmishing and an artillery duel between Sigel's advance column and Imboden north of New Market. (See small scale map.)

On Sunday, May 15th, about 1 a. m., a pitch-dark and rainy night, the cadets were quietly aroused, and after a prayer by Capt. Frank Preston, B Co., the corps commenced its march to the battle-field; but it did not reach the vicinity of New Market until some time after sun-rise, because of one or more protracted stops.

THE CADETS IN ACTION.

The corps, after marching and waiting on the pike for probably 10 hours, (the battle proper having commenced about 11 a. m.), was marched by column by the left flank from the pike to a point south of "Shirley's Hill," about one mile south of New Market, and was there, for the first time, formed into line of battle behind a fence at right angles to the pike. (See map, south-west corner.)

The corps then advanced north, in line of battle in the third and last echelon, over the crest of Shirley's Hill. (See map, position 1-b.) As the United States batteries did not get the range of the corps, until it reached the north slope of Shirley's Hill on its descent to the "River Road," there were no casualties up to that point. But on the descent, (probably somewhere near the present barn), CAPT. HILL, of C Co., and CORPORAL J. S. WISE, of D Co., and several others were wounded by the explosion of one or more United States shells. This was the corps baptism of blood.

In the ravine north of Shirley's Hill, (near "River Road"), the cadets were halted and made to discard their blankets, etc. And here they saw, for the first time, a sight which amazed them more than the carnage of battle: The officers of the veteran command, composing the second echelon, almost in front of the corps, when their regiment was ordered to advance, had to force the skulkers into ranks at the points of their pistols. The delay in the ravine, while seemingly quite long, is said to have been only a half hour. This was the lull before the storm, for the second or hottest part of the battle commenced between 1 and 2 p. m. It was probably during this interval, or a little earlier, that Imboden crossed over to the east side of Smith's Creek, with the intention of re-crossing it to the pike side, in order to turn Sigel's left flank; but the high water in the creek prevented him from consummating this movement. (See map, position 26.)

After ascending the south end of the "Bushong" plateau, (which extends about one mile north to the Bushong House, see map), a march in line of battle of one-quarter to one-half mile over this open and comparatively level ground, brought the corps within easy range of the three United States six gun batteries on the top of the "Bushong Hill." A glance at the map will show that Sigel's last position (map positions Nos. 20 to 25), was the very strongest he could have

taken, as it filled the narrow neck between the Shenandoah River and Smith's Creek, both of which were practically unfordable from the recent rains. This line, of almost one mile in length, with 18 guns on its right flank and four on its left, had to be charged and driven from its position, in order to win the battle.

When the corps reached the point several hundred yards south of the Bushong House, it was subjected to "a terrible fire of artillery." Here, CABELL, first Sergeant D Co., and JONES and CROCKETT, privates D Co., "fell dead from the explosion of one shell." Here also, but possibly a little farther back, the corps came within range of the United States musketry fire. Almost immediately after the explosion of the shell in D Co., McDOWELL, private B Co., "fell, pierced through the heart with a bullet."

The corps marched steadily and continuously over this open plateau up to the south front of the Bushong House through "mud, in many places over the ankles," a portion of the time being under both artillery and musketry fire; the alignment of the battalion was like that on parade; the gaps in the ranks, caused by the killed and wounded men, were filled automatically, as if nothing unusual had happened; and at no time did the corps' battle line even waver.

When the corps reached the Bushong House, which was near the center of its line of march, it divided in half; A and B Companies passing it on the east side, and C and D Companies on the west. This necessarily broke the previous alignment, which was never fully restored. This movement brought the whole corps into the Bushong orchard (say from 50 to 100 yards in width), where it came within from 200 to 300 yards of the three United States batteries on the top of the Bushong Hill, which "poured incessant volleys of canister and grape into us;" to this incessant fire of artillery, must be added the musketry fire of the 34th Mass. Infantry, immediately in front of the corps. (See map, position 23a.) "In this fatal orchard," STANARD and JEFFERSON, privates B Co., fell mortally wounded; "and, in fact, almost all our loss was here," including Col. Scott Shipp, in command of the corps, who was wounded. Capt. Henry A. Wise, of A Co., then took command, and retained it until the end of the battle.

The deadly fire of shells, grape, canister and bullets, to which the corps was subjected in the Bushong Orchard, did not cause it to retreat, or even to fall back temporarily; but the cadets "ran forward" to the remains of a demolished rail fence on the north edge of the orchard, "laid down behind the fence, and began, for the *first* time, to fire upon the enemy," the corps, by its rapid advance, having just gotten into the *first* line of battle and filled a gap, caused by the change of position of one or more other commands. (The location of this old fence is believed to correspond to that of the present wire fence on the north side of Bushong's present orchard.) Unfortunately, this position of the corps is not given by Prof. Turner on the Colonna-Morgan Map; though it is, by far, the most important one

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Beyond question, this was the crisis of the battle. The 51st Virginia Regiment on the left flank of the corps gave way, and had to be rallied. And about this time (say 3 p. m.), possibly a quarter of an hour earlier, the 62nd Va. Reg., on the right flank of the corps, while advancing in the rocky field just northeast of the Bushong House, had to fall back to prevent annihilation. (map Confederate States positions 18 and 19.) Position 19 was evidently the most fatal spot on the battle-field; for Capt. Woodson's Missouri Co. (attached temporarily to the 62nd Va.), lost 60 out of 70 men, or 85 per cent., in killed and wounded. (See monument to Woodson's Co., just northeast of Bushong Yard.)

The stop of the corps at the orchard fence could not have been over 15 or 20 minutes. But whether long or short, it was the period of the greatest anxiety, during the day, to both officers and men; because it seemed that the next move, on either side would probably determine the result of the battle; and this proved to be correct. For Col. Edgar (an old V. M. I. graduate, commanding the 26th Va. Battalion), had succeeded in turning the United States right flank on the top of Bushong's Hill. (map, Confederate States position 16, and United States positions 20 and 21.) The success of this movement stopped the artillery fire and lessened the musketry fire against the corps, and probably against the 51st and 62nd Va., and speedily caused the United States line in front and to the left of the corps to break and retreat.

When the heavy artillery fire ceased, the command was given to the corps to charge. This order was obeyed, not only with alacrity, but with enthusiasm; "and though the company organizations were gone, yet they rallied round the colors and formed some sort of a line as we advanced." So eager were the cadets to charge the enemy, 100 or 150 yards off, that it was difficult for them to find time to load and shoot their old-fashioned muzzle loading muskets. This, the final charge, commenced in the wheat field, then a field of mud, just north of the Bushong Orchard, and continued for some distance north towards the Pike bridge over the Shenandoah. (See small scale map.)

The pursuit of the retreating army by the cadets continued until the corps "was halted by order of General Breckinridge." The company organizations and the parade alignment of the corps were never completely restored after the pursuit commenced.

The battle proper ended about 4 p. m., though there was some cannonading later in the day on Rude's Hill, about three miles north of the town. (See small scale map.)

It is a question of some doubt, whether any of the nine cadets, who were killed or mortally wounded, fell in this final charge; though a few of the cadets are said to have been wounded after the corps left the Bushong fence. The writer regrets that he cannot

locate, with any degree of accuracy, the points where Corporal ATWILL, A Co., private HAYNES, B Co., and private WHEELWRIGHT, C Co., fell; but he presumes that all three were killed or mortally wounded in "the fatal orchard."

As it is the desire of the writer, that this brief statement shall contain nothing but the *undisputed facts* of the cadets' connection with the battle, no effort will be made to fix the location, number, or condition of the United States guns captured by the cadets, since these questions have given rise to much controversy, and no definitive conclusion has yet been reached.

The cadets were credited with the capture of from 60 to 100 prisoners.

As the V. M. I. section of artillery under Capt. Minge (Cadet Capt. A Co.), could not follow the corps across Shirley's Hill, Colonel Shipp ordered Captain Minge to join the "general artillery column in the main road (Pike), and report to Major McLaughlin." (See map, artillery positions 4 and 13.)

The prompt execution of this order by Captain Minge (witnessed by the cadets from Shirley's Hill), as he took the cadet battery down the Pike towards the enemy at a sweeping gallop, was one of the most inspiring sights of the day, and it possibly bore fruit in the conduct of the corps at a later hour.

OPPOSING FORCES.

Prof. E. R. Turner's estimate of the opposing forces, probably the most careful one ever made, is as follows:

	INFANTRY	CAVALRY	ARTILLERY	TOTAL	GUNS
United States....	4,700	1,000	300	6,000	28
Confederate States.	3,400	900	200	4,500	18

But probably not over 4,000 United States troops and 2,000 Confederate States troops took an active and continuous part in the battle.

CASUALTIES.*

CORPS OF CADETS.

	ENGAGED IN THE BATTLE	DIED ON THE FIELD	DIED FROM WOUNDS OR EFFECTS	WOUNDED	TOTAL	PER CENT
Officers	6	2	2	33.3
Cadets	257	5	5	45	55	21.4
Total	263	5	5	47	57	21.7

*For details see Appendix, page 254.