

Battery L at Gettysburg

By John Beatty

I thought as we are approaching the battle of Gettysburg and have many new members as well as some that haven't heard the story of Reynolds Battery at this battle, I would attempt over the upcoming months to try and do my best to tell the story of our beloved battery at this pivotal battle of the war. I will assume that you have a basic understanding of the events leading up to the battle, as well as the 3 day conflict as well. If not, I recommend you read a generic account first. I do not presume to be the foremost scholar on our role in the battle, so please be gentle...

To begin with, Reynolds Battery was attached to the 1st Corp of the Army of the Potomac under the command structure of the Artillery Brigade. Captain John Reynolds had the month before, been promoted to the rank of Major serving now on the staff of the Artillery Reserve. His brother, Gilbert Reynolds has just been promoted to Captain, replacing his older brother. The 1st Corp is camping on the night of June 30th just north of Emmitsburg, where Colonel Charles Wainwright the commander of the 1st New York Light Artillery is now been promoted to command the Artillery Brigade.

At daybreak on the morning of July 1st, General John Reynolds gave the order to move in the direction of Gettysburg as swiftly as possible. He is accompanied by Major General Wadsworth and his New York division, having received word from Brigadier General John Buford (remember the movie?) of his intentions to hold his position with his Cavalry against the Army of Northern Virginia.

According to the Official Records, it took over two hours for the entire 1st Corps to reach Seminary Hill, arriving at about 10:30 AM, just at the time General Reynolds was killed in the vicinity of our 1st day monument. Colonel Wainwright arriving on the scene, ordered his Artillery Brigade to go into park on the east side of Cemetery Hill, while awaiting orders. At this time, only Wadsworth Division and Captain Hall's battery were engaged, but both were badly in need of support. Major General Abner Doubleday of baseball fame, now in command of the 1st Corps, ordered Wainwright to bring a battery forward and place them on the crest, that very crest where General Reynolds fell and Battery L's 1st day monument stands today.

Wainwright selected Reynolds Battery L for the job, and ordered our boys forward. As the battery galloped over the top of Seminary Ridge and headed toward their position, Wainwright realized the position he had chosen for our battery was highly exposed and without any infantry support. He stopped the battery before they could unlimber and ordered them back into park behind the ridge. Soon Rowly's Division and Cooper's Battery took up a position about 350 yards from Cashtown Road. Reynolds Battery was called up again to move into position and once again called back due to a lack of infantry support.

Along the right flank of the line, Hall's Battery had been driven off from their position supporting Wadsworth Division. Wadsworth ordered Tidball's

Battery from Buford's Division, to move into position on the right of the 1st Brigade. Tidball immediately came under fire from a rebel battery to his north. Wainwright, knowing Tidball's Battery needed help, order Reynolds Battery into action at about 1:00 PM.

Reynolds Battery moved the 400 yards in what was reported to be mere moments and prepared to unlimber in a position slightly left and rear of Tidball's battery. Before our 1st section could finish unlimbering, a second rebel artillery battery to the west opened fire on both Tidball's and Reynolds batteries. The two rebel batteries had set up a perfect enfilade, and neither Tidball or Reynolds could hold. Captain Reynolds ordered the battery to withdraw. Before he could get the battery limbered and out of harm's way, a rebel shell hit the ground right in front of him, causing a large rock to launch toward the Captain, hitting Gilbert, just above the left eye. Gilbert fell from his horse, blinded in his left eye. Lieutenant George Breck, seeing Breck fall, ran over to help him. Gilbert managed to tell Breck to withdraw the battery. Breck reported glancing back to his section and saw that it was close to being overrun. Making some quick decisions, he ordered Orderly Sergeant Charles DeMott to lead Captain Reynolds to the hospital in the rear, and ordered the battery to "limber up" and withdrew to a position due west of the Seminary, roughly 300 yards to the rear of their current position, at the point where the monument is now, but facing north by northwest.

Colonel Wainwright met up with Captain Reynolds and Sergeant DeMott as they were approaching the Seminary. Reynolds, while talking to Wainwright, decided he could remain in command, and waited there for the battery to return to him. As the battery returned and unlimbered, Colonel Wainwright spoke again to Captain Reynolds and convinced him to go to the rear and see a surgeon. Sergeant DeMott then detached a dependable private by the name of Isaac Weinburg to stay with Reynolds and the two of them departed to a nearby church where the surgeon of the 1st New York Light Artillery was operating within the town of Gettysburg.

The battle continued to rage on, and Lieutenant Breck, with the help of Colonel Wainwright, chose various targets from this position for over an hour. At about 2:00 PM, Breck was ordered to move the battery further west, in support of Rowley's Division. After firing approximately 6 rounds, General Wadsworth ordered more artillery support. Lieutenant Breck detached Lieutenant Benjamin Wilber's section towards Wadsworth's troops, who in turn set up with Wadsworth's troops in an orchard, south of the Cashtown Road, hidden from the flanking fire by the McPherson Barn. They would remain here supporting Wadsworth, until he ordered a retreat.

Meanwhile, the battle west of the Seminary was growing hotter. After detaching Wilber's section, the remaining two sections under Lieutenant Bower and Lieutenant Breck, personally supervised by Colonel Wainwright, withdrew near to their previous position, south of where our monument now stands.

Bower's two sections watched two strong rebel columns march out of the woods, marching past their left about 1/3 of a mile away, then form a double line of battle, and move directly to the crest of the Seminary. They had in fact, flanked the Federal position. Bower opened up on these troops and was in good range, but Rowly's infantry division could not stand up to their rebel force. They broke and were in a full rout. Bower was then forced to cease fire, as his field of fire was now filled with Rowly's infantry.

When the rebels had reached a distance of only 200 yards away, Wainwright ordered Bower to withdraw the battery to a stone wall on the crest of Seminary Ridge. Wainwright had orders to hold the Cemetery Hill, but not being familiar with the ground, thought his objective was Seminary Ridge. He had already ordered two batteries into position on that ridge, with the intent to hold that position. Due to the shortness of the ridge, the guns were placed 5 yards apart, truly, hub to hub.

Lieutenant Wilber had just arrived into position when General Wadsworth ordered him to the rear, again repeating the order to defend the Cemetery. Wilber then withdrew from Wadsworth's Division, and rejoined the rest of the artillery at the Seminary.

Shortly after that, the Infantry caught up to and passed the Artillery position on the ridge. Wainwright, thinking that the Infantry was in full retreat and not willing to support his Artillery, ordered his Artillery to withdraw. His mistake was not known to him, until much later that night when informed at headquarters.

The last section to withdraw was Wilber's. As he withdrew, rebel skirmishers were within 50 yards of the road he was leaving by, and were freely firing into his section. All but the last of his guns made it out. One of the lead horses on his last gun was shot dead, and by the time it was cleared of his traces, 3 more horses from the team were down, including Wilber's own mount. Wilber ordered the gun abandoned. The 1st South Carolina Volunteer Regiment captured it. It would not be seen again until 1864 when it was found abandoned on the road to Spotsylvania, after the Battle of the Wilderness. It was recognized by its # 1 stamp on the barrel, being the first gun of that model off the assembly line. Colonel Wainwright and Lieutenant Breck watched the gun being overrun by the South Carolinians, and it was reported that Lieutenant Breck said, "it affords me pleasure to say that not the slightest blame can be attributed to Lieutenant Wilbur in the loss of his gun."

To be continued next month!