

A Letter from Edward Sherer to his Mother Detailing the Battle of Seven Pines



(above) photograph of Edward Sherer taken in 1862

The following letter, was written by 1st Lieutenant Edward Sherer of Company G in the First Long Island Volunteers and was published under the title "The Battle of Seven Pines ; The Part the First Long Island Regiment took in the Engagement" on page 2 of The Brooklyn Daily Eagle newspaper on Monday, June 9, 1862. The letter provides a valuable account of what the 67th New York Regiment experienced during their first major engagement, which would also be their most costly of the entire war, with 170 casualties sustained out of the 560 men taken into battle. The following transcription of the original article was made in 2015 by William DeMaria, the former elected historian of the 67th NY Historical Association:

Dear Mother: -- The battle of yesterday was indeed terrible. Our brigade was sadly cut up. Of our regiment, not a company has lost less than twenty men killed and wounded. Our company -- company E -- went into the fight with fifty-nine men; we have but twenty left. Lieut-Sullivan's body was brought in this morning. Lieut. Risedike, of company K, was killed, but his body has not yet been recovered. Capt. Reynolds, Capt. Van Ness, Lieut. Belknap, of company E, and Lieut. Croft, were seriously wounded, and have been sent to Fortress Monroe. Our officers and men all behaved admirably. We were four hours under a heavy fire of shot, shell and rifle balls. The firing commenced on Casey's division, directly in our front at about half-past 12 o' clock. At half-past 1 o' clock we were called into line. I was in charge of a fatigue of fifty men, draining the rifle-pits, at the time. The men dropped their shovels and picks, and rushed for their

rifles, while the shells and bullets were coming uncomfortably near. Company G having been detailed as a guard to Gen. Keyes' headquarters in charge of 2d Lieut. Hall, Capt. Belden and myself were without commands at the commencement of the fight. I was assigned to company E, and Capt. Belden remained at my side during the entire engagement. He stood his ground nobly, urging the men on constantly, and carrying orders from one end of the line to the other. We were first formed in line on the hill where we were encamped, just in front of Miller's battery, the battery of our brigade, but no other regiment was with us. We were ordered to lie down, that the guns of the battery might fire over us, and for two hours we lay on our faces, witnessing the terrible grandeur of the cannonading.

It was an awful sight – the bursting of the shells in mid-air, and the solid chug of the shot as they ploughed up the earth sometimes in our very faces. While in this position two of our men were killed, and about six wounded. The bullets whistled harmlessly over our heads or the mortality would have been much greater. When the enemy's guns obtained the range of our positions, it became necessary to remove the battery to another position, and we were marched out by the flank under a heavy fire, and formed in line in the edge of the woods on the opposite side of the road. The men formed in good order although the shots tore the trees all around us. When in line we were ordered to lie down and reserve our fire, and for half an hour we lay under a perfect hailstorm of rebel bullets, but not a man stirred from his position, save when, nor and then, some poor fellow who was struck would fall, heavily and helplessly, his comrades casting toward him a look of pity, but not one moved.

The 85th N.Y. regiment at this time came up the road on a double quick, and before a word of caution could be given, they had rushed directly in front of us and, entirely unprepared, received a deadly volley from the enemy. They had passed our line cheering loudly; it was instant all was consternation and dismay, and they broke in confusion, rushing wildly over our lines. Our men, with glorious coolness, lay perfectly quiet until they had passed in our rear, when, rising with a shout, we returned the fire of the dastards with interest. They (the enemy) were not more than 100 yards distant, and the smoke of our fire clearing away, revealed an entire brigade (as I afterwards learned) of the rebels directly on our flank, so that we were under a cross fire both front and rear, and only the fire of our right wing being effective.

At this time an order was given to cease firing, under the opposition that we were firing on our arm, and stopped him, for it was useless to try to make them hear me. We had no sooner ceased our fire than another terrible fire from our supposed friends made havoc in our ranks. It fairly mowed the men down. They broke, and for a moment a regular run seemed inevitable. It was then that the courage of our officers saved us. Gen. Wessels, Col. Adams, Cross and all the officers I could see drew their swords, and rushing to the front, the men rallied around them. Capt. Belden was very active and useful at this trying time. The men recovered, and for a time stood well, making great slaughter among the enemy, as we were afterwards told by prisoners taken. They asked us what regiment it was that held the woods and was the last to leave the field. They said we at one time repulsed and held in check four of their regiments, and had they not been confident in the strength of their reinforcements, they would have given way. During this stand, I noticed Lieuts. Croft, Belknap and Bliss; they were doing their duty nobly. The last I saw of poor Sullivan, he was firing his pistol with one hand, and waving to his men to come on with the other.

Gen. Kesse rode along our line as we were forming, and said – “Only hold this plane, bays, and the days is ours, but don’t give way, for this is my last line.” Sullivan waved his hat and answered – “We will hold it, General!” When it became actual slaughter for us to stand, the order was given to retreat, and turning to fire from every tree, the men slowly retired. Two of the color guards were wounded, and the national standard was riddled with balls. In the open field beyond the woods, another effort was made to rally on the colors. They were planted firmly in the ground, and Col. Adams rode in front of them, urging the men to stand. I tried not best to rally them, but the very men on who I laid my hands, would turn, and not two feet off, fall. It was in its last attempt that Belknap fell at my side. I cannot conceive how I escaped; the balls seemed to me in every possible proximity to me, and I certainly took no steps to avoid them. There was no chance about it – it was only by the most direct interposition of Providence that we all did not share the fate of poor Sullivan and others. We retreated in tolerable order to the rifle pits on the right of which we are now encamped, and had no sooner formed on our colors about 150 men, than we were sent out on picket. Capt. Howe was sick and I took command of the remnant of his company, then about a dozen men. The men have lost everything, knapsacks, haversacks, and canteens, and we pissed a miserable, sleepless night, expecting a renewal of the fight this morning. It commended again at 8 o’ lock, and we were sent forward as a reserve to Gen. Birney’s brigade which came up during the night. They have driven the enemy back to their old position, and Conch’s division, what is left of it, will be held strictly as a reserve today. Lieut. Daby has brought up some provisions, and the men are getting something to eat, the first they have had since yesterday morning. Joe brought along my knapsack, but had to leave my overcoat. Capt. Belden is safe and well.

*Your affectionate son,
Edward Sherer*

Since writing the above I have found about Lieut. Sullivan was still living when brought in from the field. He has been sent to Fortress Monroe.