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THE BATTLE OF VAL VERDE¹

Contributed by COLONEL M. L. CRIMMINS

THE affair at Val Verde, in which G troop, acting as artillerists under the heroic McRae, participated with so much honor to itself, its regiment, and the corps to which it legitimately belonged, is described by one who took a distinguished part in that battle—Colonel Joseph McC. Bell—and who, at the writer's request, contributes the following graphic account:

“After preliminary skirmishing for the few days preceding the battle of Val Verde, the force concentrated at Fort Craig, under the command of Brigadier-General E. R. S. Canby, consisting of portions of the Fifth and Seventh Regiments U. S. Infantry, parts of the Second U. S. Dragoons and Third U. S. Cavalry, and the New Mexican Volunteers, First and Second Regiments, was moved out of post at five o'clock A. M. the 21st of February, 1862, the column marching under command of Colonel B. S. Roberts, making its way north along the valley and east bank of the Rio Grande, the light battery of six guns known as McRae's Battery, composed of Company G, Second U. S. Dragoons, and Company I, Third U. S. Cavalry (Captain Alexander McRae commanding, with subalterns Lieutenants Lyman Mishler and Joseph McC. Bell), occupying a central position in the column. The movement of the enemy, under command of Rebel General Sibley (formerly Captain of the Second U. S. Dragoons), being known, we anticipated battle, and hoped to check the march of the Rebel force towards the upper country. At about six o'clock A. M., while the main body of our troops were leisurely making way along the river-bottom, orders from the front sent us along at a gallop, with the battery, into position on the west bank of the Rio Grande, opposite to a battery already established

1. *From Everglade to Cañon with the Second Dragoons*, pp. 239 ff. By Col. Theophilus Francis Rodenbough. Van Nostrand, New York, 1875.

by the enemy in a grove of heavy timber on the east bank of the stream, the distance between the batteries being about four hundred yards. In this position the light battery commenced its operations, and here successfully maintained itself during the morning, dislodging the opposing battery and forces, and clearing the east bank of the river so effectually as to enable the passage of the infantry forces and an occupation of the east bank. The exposed position of McRae's battery was not maintained without considerable loss, both in men and horses, which, however, seemed rather to inspire to greater efforts and greater enthusiasm. The prominence taken by the light battery early in the day was its destiny during the balance of the fight, and concentrated upon it the attention as well as the earnest efforts of the enemy. Under the personal supervision of Colonel Roberts, the operations of the light battery were carried on until mid-day without change of position, when we were moved to the east bank, the cavalry and infantry forces having already crossed the river. The 'wear and tear' of the morning required repair, both in men and horses; while the well-emptied limbers and caissons needing attention, the short respite after crossing was used in that way. In this second position the part taken by the battery was confined to occasional firing upon the enemy's cavalry and lancers, which were being massed some distance away.

"At this time the arrival of General Canby upon the field relieved Colonel Roberts of command, while a partial rearrangement of troops was made, which advanced McRae's battery to the front and extreme left of the line of battle, it being supported by two companies of the Fifth and Seventh Infantry, two companies Second Colorado Volunteers, with the First Regiment New Mexican Volunteers, commanded by Colonel Kit Carson, in reserve. In this last and third position of the battery the lay of the ground was such as to place it most disadvantageously for its free operations—crowded and hampered, and making a change of front, should the occasion arise, almost impossible. Hardly

had we taken position when, under orders from General Canby (who made his headquarters with us for the rest of the day), firing was commenced upon our side, which discovered two *masked* batteries of the enemy, situated in an old bed of the river, and enclosing our position distant some one hundred yards. The formation of this old river-bed gave ample protection to their guns and gunners, while their enfilading fire on our entirely exposed command was most destructive to men and horses. This terrific fire of canister swept through us for some time (the battery supports meantime lying protected in the rear, as their presence could be of no assistance), when a body of the enemy, numbering some twelve or fifteen hundred men, rose from behind the old river-bank, and charged us. To describe this charge would be but to tell of many similar ones during the war, in which wild ardor and determination were the moving features.

“On they came, without order, each man for himself, and the ‘devil for the vanquished,’ in true ‘Ranger’ style, down to almost the muzzles of our guns. Our New Mexican allies had, upon the first fire of the enemy’s batteries, fled to a more secure position on the west bank of the river; nor did they rest there, but continued their flight to still more distant quarters, leaving their gallant Colonel, Carson, and a few of his officers to do independent service in the battery. The remaining handful of the battery supports adding their efforts to ours, the enemy was driven back to cover again. Then again the Texan batteries opened with this same unsavory diet of canister, and we replied in kind, preparing for the next onslaught that was sure to come. And it did come, with larger numbers and more violence than before; and again, with double-shotted guns, they were driven back, but leaving us little able to resist successfully such another effort. In this second charge Captain McRae² and Lieuten-

2. This officer refused to surrender, but, seated upon a gun coolly emptied his pistols, each shot counting one Texan less, until, covered with wounds, he expired at his post. In the Confederate reports of the battle the enemy bears involuntary testimony to the heroism of McRae and his command.—Editor.

ant Mishler were killed, Lieutenant Bell thrice wounded, and certainly one-half the men and two-thirds of the horses either killed or *hors de combat*. The charging party of the enemy regaining their position behind the old river-bed, we were again treated to another and more continuous fire from their batteries, which we feared was but the introduction to another charge from their reinforced numbers. We hadn't long to wait for the *coup de main*. Down they came upon us, rushing through the fire poured into them, with maddened determination, until the whole force was inside the battery, where hand-to-hand men were slaughtered. Simultaneous with this third charge, a column of the enemy's cavalry moved upon our left flank, which commanded the attention of our infantry supports, leaving our thinned but enthusiastic battery-men to resist as well as possible the Texan force among us. At this juncture, when the battle was going hard with us, our reserve cavalry (a small squadron under command of Lieutenant Lord) was ordered, as the most available force, to charge into and occupy the battery until a portion of the Fifth Infantry could be brought from another part of the field. This movement was not a success, as it was found impossible for the cavalry to do anything amid the mass of struggling men, without riding down friend and foe alike; and having ridden close to the battery, their direction was changed to the rear. This movement, although made with the best intentions seems to have changed the whole spirit of the fight, from energetic determination to disappointment on the one side, and from wavering efforts to renewed exertions on the other. At this sorry period of the fight, with a large number of our men killed and wounded, horses dead and disabled, our supports badly thinned, and the enemy massing their forces upon us, General Canby gave the order to fall back. It was not possible to carry the whole of the battery with us, and but two guns and three caissons were taken across the river, under the fire that was poured into us by the Texan troops lining the east bank of the stream.

"Thence the whole command fell back to Fort Craig, and was put into shape to resist any attack that might be made upon the fort. Thus ended the battle of Val Verde, in which McRae's battery took so conspicuous a part.

"Too much praise cannot be given to the companies of Second United States Dragoons³ and Third United States Cavalry, manning the battery, for the part they took in the fight. *Failing in no duty, regardless of themselves, and having in view the honest performance of all that was to be done, they bore themselves as men of courage through the day,* and the regiments to which they belonged can claim with pride a participation in the battle of Val Verde, notwithstanding its *finale* was a defeat to our arms, although amply recompensed in the following successes of the campaign of New Mexico."

3. The casualties in G, Second Dragoons, comprised nine (9) enlisted men killed, eight (8) wounded, and two (2) missing.