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My recollections of the Battle of Wood Lake, and the part taken in it by the 3d Regt. Minn. Vol. Infty

[Read at the reunion of the Third Regiment Minnesota Infantry, St. Paul, 1886]

Sept 23. 1862 the expedition against the Sioux Indians under the command of Gen. Sibley, was encamped at Wood Lake in what is now Yellow Medicine County. The command consisted of about 2000 men including some 275 of the 3d Minn. Infantry, paroled prisoners just returned from the south.

At this time nearly all the commissioned Officers were held prisoners of war in the south, there being but one commissioned Officer of the Regt. Lieut. R. C. Olin accompanying us. Before starting on the expedition and while at Fort Snelling, Major Abraham E. Welch formerly of the 1st Minn. Inf. was placed in command of the detachment of the 3d. Our camp on the eastern shore of the little Lake was upon high ground overlooking the surrounding prairie. Eastward a short distance was the Minn. Riv. and to the north of camp about ¼ mile ran the outlet of the Lake a small stream that a man could leap. Occupying a position in camp nearest this stream was our detachment.

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It was a fine morning, when at about 7 or 8 O'clock several Company wagons of the 3d each containing a few men, left camp for the purpose of foraging, and made their way toward the Government Agency at Yellow Medicine, the ruins of which was some 3 miles distant.

I may as well state here that the 3d galled by an humiliating surrender at Murphreesboro Tennessee, by a ~~coward~~ recreant and cowardly commander, had lost in a great measure their former high discipline, and were quite unruly, anxious only to redeem in the field their wounded honor, and this foreging move was I think wholly unauthorized.

Co. G. wagon leading they crossed the outlet of the Lake, and had reached the highland beyond about ¼ mile from camp when a party of 25 warriors sprang up from the grass where they lay concealed, and fired a volley into the leading wagon which was some 20 rods in advance mortally wounding Deggor Kimball and wounding several others. Wm. McGee immediately sprang ~~out and~~ from the wagon and returned the fire, the men in the rear wagons joined in the fray, and the Battle of Wood Lake had commenced.

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The attack was made in full view of Camp, and as soon as the firing was heard, our young and resolute commander – not waiting for orders from Gen. Sibley – shouted "All who want to fight fall in". A general rush was made for our guns, and in a minute or two ~~2 or 3~~ about two hundred of us were on the double quick for the scene of action. Deploying ~~about~~ one half the little command as skirmishers with the remainder following in reserve we moved swiftly forward on the now rapidly increasing forces of Little Crow.

Passing to the right of where the first attack was made, and toward the main body of Indians in sight we were joined by the foraging party, and pushing forward were soon engaged by the whole savage force, which to the number of eight hundred attacked us in front and on both flanks.

Our thorough drill in the south showed here to good advantage, our skirmish line moved steadily forward firing rapidly, forcing them back toward the bluffs of the Minnesota River. The scene from the Reserve at this point, remains vivid

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in my mind. The savages forming a semicircle in our front, and to right and left moving about with great activity howling like demons, firing and retreating. This quick movements seeming to multiply their numbers. We were whipping them in fine shape driving them back over the undulating prairie. A retrospect brings to mind Tennisons charge of the Light Brigade with Indians to right of us Indians to left of us, ~~Indians to left of~~ Indians in front of us, whooping and yelling, when suddenly an Officer from Gen. Sibley came charging in upon us hastily calling for Major Welch, approaching that Officer he spoke a few words to him, then wheeling his horse he shouted "Get back to Camp the best way you can" in speed ~~away~~ away as though he had just escaped "Out from the mouth of Hell"

The command given by the horseman with a mistake in the bugle call created much confusion. The Reserve about faced the skirmishers on the right ~~left~~ came running in on the Reserve. Sergt. McDonald and Bowler on the left kept the line of skirmishers steady fighting their way back to the Reserve

The battle from this point—about one mile from Camp—back over the line we had ~~come~~ just moved over, was disordered & independent, each man doing his best to keep the overwhelming savages from closing in upon us, a few ran ignominiously, but the great number fought bravely. Little Crow seizing the advantage that our retreat gave him endeavored to cut us off from support but our fire was too hot for them, Our retreating line had lay down a decent to the creek we had crossed with rolling hills on either side & here was pandemonium itself With Indians to right of us, Indians to ~~to~~ left of us, Indians behind us, charging ~~whooping~~ and yelling. Crossing the stream a stand was made on the plateau between it and camp and here joined by the company of Renville Rangers the fight was kept up for an hour longer. The Indians taking advantage of the low hills that bordered the narrow intervals along the creek. The 3d & Rangers covered by the tall grass, & interweaving knolls with grass bound on their hats fought them indian fashion. their fire kept little knots of them constantly bearing away their killed, & wounded

beyond our reach. An attempt was made to attack our camp by passing around the lake, but a detachment of the 6th Regt. went out and quickly dispersed them.

At this time Lieut. Olin of the 3d with about fifty men made a wild charge into the midst of the savages, completely routing them in our front. This charge was so sudden and unexpected by them that we came nearly to a hand to hand encounter. 14 or 15 were here killed + fell into our hands they having no time to carry them away.

At this point and simultaneous with the charge of the 3d ~~the~~ a part of the 7th under Colonel Marshal and some companies of the 6th under Major McLaren moved out to our right and gallantly charging the savages swept the bottom below, driving them from the tall grass, and over the adjoining hill in great confusion —

Little Crow gave up the contest, and withdrew to his camp a few miles up the Minn. Riv. which two days later fell into our hands. together with a large number of warriors + their families

Incidents of the encounter.

During our retreat nearly every man seemed possessed with the idea that he was a commander. Brave Maj. Welch did all that a man could do at such a time to hold the men in line.

Above the din of musketry and the war whoop of the Indians, I remember the hoarse voice of Sgt. J. M. Bowler roaring like a madman "Remember Murphreesboro fight boys Remember Murphreesboro"

As we crossed the stream and gained the higher land a ball struck our gallant commander breaking his leg. He called out "I'm shot, take me in" I was near him at the time and springing to his side I caught him as he fell, and with the help of a comrade bore him into camp, a distance of about 1/4 mile on our way two or three men ran past us, the brave Officer saw them and with his broken limb swinging from our arms he ordered them back. I remember his words "Go back and fight you white livered cowards, Go back and fight or I'll shoot you. On reaching camp I said to him we'll leave you here behind thes wagons they afford some protection, "no"

said Hoe - pointing to a little eminence - "take me up on the hill where I can see the fight" so we left him on the hill with his face to the foe

Returning to the field I remember the appearance of one of our comrades H. D. Pettibone with his face covered with blood from a gunshot wound in the head He was still fighting like a hero.

This brief narrative of my recollections of this memorable engagement will not admit of a record of individual heroism suffice to say, that it was individual bravery that brought us out of what at one time seemed annihilation

Wood Lake, must always be considered the great battle of the Sioux war. While not so severe in casualties as Birch Cooley or so terrible in its character, in results its importance must be conceded. It was the waterloo for that bold, and wiley chieftain Little Crow and the closing scene in that most terrible of indian wars. 120 white captives were released women, and children who had been

subjected to the most inhuman barbarities by their merciless captors. More than 400 warriors were made prisoners - including the 38 executed at Mankato - besides some 1500 women & children with 150 tepes. The history of the Minnesota valley gives the number of warriors under Little Crow at Wood Lake at 300, this I think a great error. as the number of warriors captured then and soon after would indicate. Little Crow brought all his force to bear as it was a vital point, his main camp being but a few miles beyond, 800 was the estimate made at the time and is probably not far from right

The battle was fought almost wholly by the 3d Regt joined by the Renville Rangers, a fact that the hitherto published accounts have failed to reveal, and one that the casualties in killed and wounded - 40 in number - clearly show. and certainly one which every member of the old organization should take pains to establish beyond a doubt, that History may do justice to us and our brave comrades who have taken their last furlough

It is but fair to suppose that Major Welch—impulsive as he was—could not restrain himself in camp while the savages were shooting down his men in plain sight, and his rash act in leading his small force into the midst of Little Crows warriors was impelled by his bold + intrepid spirit.

In writing the above I have endeavored to state as clearly, and fairly as I can what came under my personal observation, and I hope that it will meet with the approval —in the main— ~~with~~ of my comrades of the 3d and also of the commanding Gen.

In conclusion I will say that much dissatisfaction existed in our detachment at the course pursued by the general commanding against the Sioux. But after 24 years have cooled the ardor of my youth, I for one am satisfied that it was well for the 3d, that a cooler head, and steadier hand was over, and controlling us than that of our impetuous brave and gallant commander Major Welch.

E. T. Champlin
Late Co. G. 3d Minn Vol. Inf.

Paper read by
Lieut E. T. Champlin
at Reunion of
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St Paul Sept. 1. 1886

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