

## **SHERIDAN AT CEDAR CREEK**

Inspired repulsed battalions to engage,  
And taught the doubtful battle where to rage.

--Addison.

## **SHERIDAN AT CEDAR CREEK**

General Sheridan took command of the Army of the Shenandoah in August, 1864. His coming was the signal for aggressive fighting, and for a series of brilliant victories over the rebel army. He defeated Early at Winchester and again at Fisher's Hill, while General Torbert whipped Rosser in a subsequent action, where the rout of the rebels was so complete that the fight was known as the "Woodstock races." Sheridan's plan after this was to terminate his campaign north of Staunton, and, returning thence, to desolate the Valley, so as to make it untenable for the Confederates, as well as useless as a granary or storehouse, and then move the bulk of his army through Washington, and unite them with General Grant in front of Petersburg. Grant, however, and the authorities at Washington, were in favor of Sheridan's driving Early into Eastern Virginia, and following up that line, which Sheridan himself believed to be a false move. This important matter was in debate until October 16, when Sheridan, having left the main body of his army at Cedar Creek under General Wright, determined to go to Washington, and discuss the question personally with General Halleck and the Secretary of War. He reached Washington on the morning of the 17th about eight o'clock, left there at twelve; and got back to Martinsburg the same night about dark. At Martinsburg he spent the night, and the next day, with his escort, rode to Winchester, reaching that point between three and four o'clock in the afternoon of the 18th. He there heard that all was quiet at Cedar Creek and along the front, and went to bed, expecting to reach his headquarters and join the army the next day.

About six o'clock, on the morning of the 19th, it was reported to him that artillery firing could be heard in the direction of Cedar Creek, but as the sound was stated to be irregular and fitful, he thought it only a skirmish. He, nevertheless, arose at once, and had just finished dressing when another officer came in, and reported that the firing was still going on in the same direction, but that it did not sound like a general battle. Still Sheridan was uneasy, and, after breakfasting, mounted his horse between eight and nine o'clock, and rode slowly through Winchester. When he reached the edge of the town he halted a moment, and then heard the firing of artillery in an unceasing roar. He now felt confident that a general battle was in progress, and, as he rode forward, he was convinced, from the rapid increase of the sound, that his army was failing back. After he had crossed Mill Creek, just outside Winchester, and made the crest of the rise beyond the stream, there burst upon his view the spectacle of a panic-stricken army. Hundreds of slightly wounded men, with hundreds more unhurt, but demoralized, together with baggage wagons and trains, were all pressing to the rear, in hopeless confusion.

There was no doubt now that a disaster had occurred at the front. A fugitive told Sheridan that the army was broken and in full retreat, and that all was lost. Sheridan at once sent word to Colonel Edwards, commanding a brigade at Winchester, to stretch his troops across the valley, and stop all fugitives. His first idea was to make a stand there, but, as he rode along, a different plan flashed into his mind. He believed that his troops had great confidence in him, and he determined to try to restore their broken ranks, and, instead of merely holding the ground at Winchester, to rally his army, and lead them forward again to Cedar Creek. He had hardly made up his mind to this course, when news was brought to him that his headquarters at Cedar Creek were captured, and the troops dispersed. He started at once, with about twenty men as an escort, and rode rapidly to the front. As he passed along, the unhurt men, who thickly lined the road, recognized him, and, as they did so, threw up their hats, shouldered their muskets, and followed him as fast as they could on foot. His officers rode out on either side to tell the stragglers that the general had returned, and, as the news spread the retreating men in every direction rallied, and turned their faces toward the battle-field they had left.

In his memoirs, Sheridan says, in speaking of his ride through the retreating troops: "I said nothing, except to remark, as I rode among them 'If I had been with you this morning, this disaster would not have happened. We must face the other way. We will go back and recover our camp.'" Thus he galloped on over the twenty miles, with the men rallying behind him, and following him in ever increasing numbers. As he went by, the panic of retreat was replaced by the ardor of battle. Sheridan had not overestimate the power of enthusiasm or his own ability to rouse it to fighting pitch. He pressed steadily on to the front, until at last he came up to Getty's division of the 6th Corps, which, with the cavalry, were the only troops who held their line and were resisting the enemy. Getty's division was about a mile north of Middletown on some slightly rising ground, and were skirmishing with the enemy's pickets. Jumping a rail fence, Sheridan rode to the crest of the hill, and, as he took off his hat, the men rose up from behind the barricades with cheers of recognition.

It is impossible to follow in detail Sheridan's actions from that moment, but he first brought up the 19th Corps and the two divisions of Wright to the front. He then communicated with Colonel Lowell, who was fighting near Middletown with his men dismounted, and asked him if he could hold on where he was, to which Lowell replied in the affirmative. All this and many similar quickly-given orders consumed a great deal of time, but still the men were getting into line, and at last, seeing that the enemy were about to renew the attack, Sheridan rode along the line so that the men could all see him. He was received with the wildest enthusiasm as he rode by, and the spirit of the army was restored. The rebel attack was made shortly after noon, and was repulsed by General Emory.

This done, Sheridan again set to work to getting his line completely restored, while General Merritt charged and drove off an exposed battery of the Confederates. By halfpast three Sheridan was ready to attack. The fugitives of the morning, whom he had rallied as he rode from Winchester, were again in their places, and the different divisions were all disposed in their proper positions. With the order to advance, the whole line

pressed forward. The Confederates at first resisted stubbornly, and then began to retreat. On they went past Cedar Creek, and there, where the pike made a sharp turn to the west toward Fisher's Hill, Merritt and Custer fell on the flank of the retreating columns, and the rebel army fell back, routed and broken, up the Valley. The day had begun in route and defeat; it ended in a great victory for the Union army.

How near we had been to a terrible disaster can be realized by recalling what had happened before the general galloped down from Winchester.

In Sheridan's absence, Early, soon after dawn, had made an unexpected attack on our army at Cedar Creek. Surprised by the assault, the national troops had given way in all directions, and a panic had set in. Getty's division with Lowell's cavalry held on at Middletown, but, with this exception, the rout was complete. When Sheridan rode out of Winchester, he met an already beaten army. His first thought was the natural one to make a stand at Winchester and rally his troops about him there. His second thought was the inspiration of the great commander. He believed his men would rally as soon as they saw him. He believed that enthusiasm was one of the great weapons of war, and that this was the moment of all others when it might be used with decisive advantage. With this thought in his mind he abandoned the idea of forming his men at Winchester, and rode bareheaded through the fugitives, swinging his hat, straight for the front, and calling on his men as he passed to follow him. As the soldiers saw him, they turned and rushed after him. He had not calculated in vain upon the power of personal enthusiasm, but, at the same time, he did not rely upon any wild rush to save the day. The moment he reached the field of battle, he set to work with the coolness of a great soldier to make all the dispositions, first, to repel the enemy, and then to deliver an attack which could not be resisted. One division after another was rapidly brought into line and placed in position, the thin ranks filling fast with the soldiers who had recovered from their panic, and followed Sheridan and the black horse all the way down from Winchester. He had been already two hours on the field when, at noon, he rode along the line, again formed for battle. Most of the officers and men then thought he had just come, while in reality it was his own rapid work which had put them in the line along which he was riding.

Once on the field of battle, the rush and hurry of the desperate ride from Winchester came to an end. First the line was reformed, then the enemy's assault was repulsed, and it was made impossible for them to again take the offensive. But Sheridan, undazzled by his brilliant success up to this point, did not mar his work by overhaste. Two hours more passed before he was ready, and then, when all was prepared, with his ranks established and his army ranged in position, he moved his whole line forward, and won one of the most brilliant battles of the war, having, by his personal power over his troops, and his genius in action, snatched a victory from a day which began in surprise, disaster, and defeat