

Words Behind The Pictures: Bigelow's Battery at the Trostle Farm, Gettysburg

Countless photographic images were produced during the course of America's Civil War. The pictures composed by Brady, Gardner, and O'Sullivan, to name but a few, have graced the pages of innumerable books and magazines. Some of these snapshots have been reprinted so often that they are immediately identifiable by most history enthusiasts. Unfortunately the stories behind the photos are often unknown and are viewed simply as disjointed or frozen moments in time; tales without prologue or epilogue. For instance, anyone familiar with the Battle of Gettysburg has probably seen the image of the dead horses lying about the Trostle House and barn. The caption under the photo might merely state the obvious, "Dead Horses at the Trostle Farm", but the heroics that preceded the death of those unfortunate animals remains hidden from all but the more curious. So, here are the words behind the picture.

Around 1:00 PM on July 2nd, Union General Daniel Sickles, uncomfortable with his position along Cemetery Ridge, directed his Third Corps troops to occupy higher ground three quarters of a mile in their front along the Emmitsburg Road. The western most reaches of this new line, situated in a peach orchard, formed a salient that would soon prove to be indefensible against the onslaught of Lt. General James Longstreet's Confederate First Corps. Longstreet, working since morning arranging his troops along Seminary Ridge, launched his assault at approximately 3:30 PM with an artillery barrage against Sickles' exposed line. One half hour later, out from the protection of the distant woods, stepped the gray clad Confederate infantry.

About this time the green untested men of the 9th Massachusetts Artillery Battery, under the command of Captain John Bigelow, were sent racing toward the imminent conflagration. At full gallop the 104 men and 88 horses charged diagonally across an open field just opposite Abraham Trostle's farmhouse. Orders to unlimber their six smoothbore Napoleons were given upon reaching the designated position along the Wheatfield Road, just 700 yards east of the soon to be famous Peach Orchard. Shot and shell rained down on the artillerists as preparations for battle commenced and very soon this baptism of fire produced its' first casualty. The men stopped everything and gathered around their stricken comrade, paying little heed to the growing battle. Captain Bigelow denied their requests to carry the gravely injured man to the rear but instead ordered them to their guns to commence firing. Men grudgingly returned to their pieces dismayed by their leaders' callous attitude. They were soon giving back what they were receiving.

The men of the 9th Massachusetts together with the rest of the cannoneers along the Wheatfield Road were able to check the surging South Carolinians under Brigadier General Joseph Kershaw in the undulating fields around the Rose Farm. Firing double canister, Bigelow's men forced the rebel troops to seek the comparative safety of a section of woods now called Stony Hill. The South Carolina troops first had to drive the Union infantry from the area after which they began snipping at the Massachusetts battery, killing both men and horses. As the battle raged the smoke obscured the field. If the billowing sulfurous clouds would have suddenly dissipated, Bigelow's men could have seen the precarious situation beginning to unfold around them. The Union line to the Ninth's left in the Wheatfield and Stony Hill area, was collapsing, while a new threat was mounting along Emmitsburg Road. The butternut clad troops of Brigadier Generals William Barksdale and William Wofford hit the Union right flank along Emmitsburg Road driving the 3rd Corps troops into a hasty retreat. Bigelow's battery was the anchor of the Union left flank along the Peach Orchard salient, and as such were the last troops given orders to withdraw. Captain Bigelow recognized that without infantry support the fast approaching confederate skirmishers would most assuredly empty every saddle as the Union cannoneers attempted to limber up their tubes. Numerous horses had already been killed or disabled by the continuous maelstrom of lead and steel flying through the smoke filled air thus there were few animals left to drag the precious artillery pieces to safety. Bigelow quickly surmised that the only chance of bringing his battery off successfully was to fire his pieces and retreat at the same time. In military terms this is called "retire by prolong firing". Prolongs are ropes tied to the trail of the piece and then attached to the limber. From this arrangement the cannon is able to be fired while in motion or stopped to get off a shot and then quickly moved. Also the recoil of the gun carries it along the direction of retreat. The maneuver Bigelow was requiring his rookie artillerists to perform is difficult for seasoned veterans under normal parade ground conditions, but with the uneven terrain and the cacophony of battle all around, this feat was nearly impossible, but it was their only recourse.

The men of the 9th uncoiled the prolongs and prepared the limbers under the endless, murderous fire of the Confederate sharpshooters. The swarming Confederate troops had recognized the designs of their Union foe and stepped up their attempts to disable the remaining horses. Finally the battery was prepared; the dead and dying horses were cut from their harnesses, the guns were loaded, and the limbers manned. The beleaguered Massachusetts battery was now heading back across the field they had previously charged, their destination was a small gateway leading to the Trostle farm road and safety.

The retreating battery was firing solid shot and canister into the ubiquitous Confederate troops, who, because of the total collapse of the Union front and flanks, were able to surround the artillerists on three sides. To make matters worse the Confederate artillery, under Colonel E. Porter Alexander, had advanced their pieces into the vacated Peach Orchard and began firing into the backs of Bigelow and his men. Both man and beast were the recipients of this terrible and severe fight. Horses were decapitated by flying balls while men were swept away by the deadly canister shot. The progress of the 9th was continually slowed by the need to remove the dead horses from the teams and these discarded animals along with the badly wounded men marked a bloody path of this desperate retreat. Also slowing the battery was the boulder-strewn field over which the lumbering wooden wheeled vehicles had to travel. The fight was not all one sided though. The double canister and bouncing solid shot were decimating the Confederate attackers. Whole lines of men were mown down from the deadly projectiles emanating from the guns of the 9th whose vigorous fire was keeping the Confederates at bay.

Finally the battery reached the gateway leading to the farm lane but found it to be only wide enough to allow the passage of one limber at a time. Just as Bigelow was ordering his men to limber up their guns for a dash through the narrow gate, up reined Lt. Col. Freeman McGilvery on his bullet ridden horse. McGilvery commanded the four-battery brigade of which Bigelow's was one. His orders were for Bigelow to sacrifice his battery and to "hold your position at all hazards" while the Union army attempted to form a line of defense along Cemetery Ridge. The men were stunned. After fighting for their lives and just moments from their escape, a certain death warrant had been issued. Without wasting time Captain Bigelow issued orders to quickly unlimber and assume a defensive posture.

The position they were ordered to defend was a corner formed by two perpendicular stone piled walls. The battery was arranged in a semi-circle and to their right was a wall and the gateway leading to the Trostle farm lane and safety. To their rear was another low stone wall. To the 9th's front was the 21st Mississippi and portions of other rebel units mixed together during the whirlwind of conflict. Scattered amongst the harried defenders were large boulders making it near impossible to work the guns. Again the cannons began to spew forth their deadly projectiles. Fuses were cut short on case shot and shell so that they would explode soon after exiting the muzzles. Double canister tore through the overwhelming enemy troops. But each murderous discharge of the guns propelled them backwards decreasing the area between the guns and the stone walls. Dead, dying, and wounded horses as well as soldiers were piling up in this shrinking postage stamp sized battleground.

The fighting became hand-to-hand as the Confederates, sensing victory, surged forward to capture their hard fought prize. The artillerists used the rammer heads, sponge staffs, and hand spikes to fight off the unstoppable rebel attackers. Unable to stem the swell of the Confederate tide, Bigelow yelled, " cease firing, and get back to our lines the best you can." With most of the horses dead the precious cannons were left on the field as the men ran for their lives. More men fell as this Dantesque melee was finally reaching its' bloody conclusion. Captain Bigelow was wounded and fell from his horse but was saved from certain capture as Bugler Charles Reed, halting his retreat, returned to help him from the field. A feat for which Charles would win the Congressional Medal of Honor. In the end Bigelow's Battery successfully held the Confederates long enough for the Union Army to regroup, but at a high price. Three quarter of the officers and sergeants as well as 19 enlisted men were lost to Confederate fire. A staggering 80 of the original 88 horses were killed, 45 fell across from the Trostle House alone.

The picture accompanying this article was composed by Timothy O'Sullivan on July 6, 1863 from inside the semi-circular defensive position taken up by Bigelow and his brave men. The dead horses seen are some of the 45 scattered in and around the Trostle farmhouse. The Trostle barn is in the background (note the cannon ball hole in the upper stone wall, the lower mark to the right) and the narrow gateway is to the left where the fence post is leaning against the boulder.