

BATTLE OF IRISH BEND.

APRIL 14, 1862.

The Twenty-fifth Anniversary Celebrated To-day by the 25th Connecticut Volunteers, Colonel George P. Bissell.

The Union troops which served in the Department of the Gulf during the war have had scant justice done them in the war histories. They saw arduous service in a section of the country where disease was more to be dreaded than battle. They did their duty faithfully and well, but were often handicapped by the incompetency of their department commanders. It was not their good fortune to have much to do with events that will be regarded by the historian as decisive of the war, like the work of the Army of the Potomac on the east or of Sherman's grand army on the west. In the few great events, like the capture of New Orleans, it was their fate to follow Farragut and garrison the places which the great naval leader captured.

The battle of Irish Bend will never be regarded as one of the great events of the war, but it was a very serious piece of work for those engaged in it, and the survivors have a right to celebrate its twenty-fifth anniversary. It was a hot fight while it lasted, but unfortunately the commanding general of the division was unfamiliar with the lay of the land, and the results achieved were far incommensurate with the opportunity for a great victory.

Irish Bend is a place on Bayou Teche, Louisiana, where the bayou makes a bend like the letter U. A few miles below Irish Bend was Fort Blount, occupied by the rebel forces. The design of the expedition was to surround and capture the confederate troops. For this purpose a force had been sent against Fort Blount from below and were successful in dislodging the enemy. Another force under General Grover had been sent across Grand Lake to strike Bayou Teche, a few miles above the fort, and cut off the retreat. So far all was well.

As a rule the road followed the windings of the bayou, but unfortunately General Grover was ignorant of the fact that there was a cut-off road. Imagine the bayou bending in the shape of a letter U, with Irish Bend in the center of the curve. Imagine also a cut-off road running the nearest way to connect the two points. Grover's division landed all right, but instead of marching up and taking position where the cut-off road joined the bayou road, it marched in the other direction, and at Irish Bend encountered a rebel force. This force was stationed here apparently for just such a contingency, and held the Union forces just long enough to enable the bulk of the rebel army to cross the cut-off road and get a good lead in their retreat toward Opelousas.

This is the story in a nut-shell. Instead of capturing the entire rebel force, as might easily have been the case, there was a sharp fight between General Birge's brigade and the rebels, resulting in a Union success, but a success of almost no value in comparison with what might have been.

General Birge's brigade consisted of the Twenty-sixth Maine, Twenty-fifth Connecticut, 159th New York, the Thirteenth Connecticut, and Rodgers Regular Battery. After reaching Bayou Teche on the evening of the 13th of April, 1862, the command marched early next morning toward Franklin and Fort Blount. The Twenty-fifth Connecticut, Colonel Bissell, had the advance and after passing the picket line went forward with five companies as skirmishers and five companies in reserve. After marching about two miles the skirmishers discovered the enemy, posted in a strip of woods on the bend, and concealed by a high rail fence. Here a rebel battery opened fire on the advancing troops. The line of battle was formed as speedily as possible, the Twenty-fifth having the right and the Thirteenth the left, the left of the line resting on the bayou. A hot fight followed, the enemy being reinforced by the arrival of troops on a transport from below. The brunt of the fight was borne by the Twenty-fifth Connecticut, the Twenty-sixth Maine, and the 159th New York, which were finally obliged to retire under the destructive fire of the enemy, re-forming in the rear of the reserve brigade which came up to their support. General Birge's official report says: "In the meantime the Thirteenth Connecticut on the left of the road had entered a grove between which and the main road was an open field, about 300 yards in width. Emerging from this grove under a deadly fire it steadily advanced; the men loading and firing as they marched; broke the enemy's lines, and driving him back in the utmost confusion, captured two ensigns, one drummer, a quantity of small-arms, the flag of the Sixth Maryland's Cannoneers, several horses, and from 50 to 60 prisoners. The regiment was now far in advance of the right of our line, and in rear of the enemy's left.

Deeming it imprudent to press the enemy farther until supported I ordered Colonel Warner to fall back to the edge of the wood and hold that position. The Twelfth Maine coming up, the Thirteenth again advanced and pushed through the wood, the Twelfth following, and the skirmishers of the First brigade at the same time entering on their right. Little or no resistance was offered by the enemy, but on reaching the opposite ground beyond he was discovered in line with artillery, supported by infantry and cavalry, on rising ground about 1,000 yards distant. I immediately reported the position to General Grover, and was ordered by him to withdraw the Twelfth Maine and Thirteenth Connecticut to the center of the wood, and to form them, with the Twenty-fifth Connecticut, Twenty-sixth Maine, and One hundred and fifty-ninth New York, in two lines, the left resting on the bayou.

Meanwhile the enemy's gunboat Diana had come up the Teche and commenced throwing shell and solid shot in the wood at short intervals. By direction of General Grover a company of sharpshooters from each regiment was concealed on the bank of the bayou to pick off her gunners should she come within range, which at one time she threatened to do.

About 2 p. m. was ordered by General Grover to advance the Twelfth Maine, with a strong line of skirmishers in front, to feel the enemy. Before this order could be executed he suddenly withdrew, and the Diana was discovered to be in flames."

The fight lasted but a little while but the brigade lost in killed, wounded, and missing 353 officers and men, the heaviest losses being as follows: One Hundredth and Fifty-ninth New York, 4 officers and 15 men killed, 5 officers and 73 men wounded, 30 men captured or missing; Twenty-fifth Connecticut, 2 officers and 7 men killed, 5 officers and 72 men wounded, 10 men captured or missing; Thirteenth Connecticut, 7 men killed, 4 officers and 43 men wounded; Twenty-sixth Maine, 11 men killed, 2 officers and 48 men wounded. Colonel Molinaux, commanding the 159th New York, was shot through the head while encouraging his men, and was carried from the field. The official report says:--

"Captain Sprague and Lieutenant Sirlockland and Kenney, Thirteenth C. V., Lieutenant Reeves, Twenty-sixth Maine, and Lieutenant Waterman, Twenty-fifth C. V., all wounded but not disabled, refused to leave the field until the close of the engagement."

The Twenty-fifth Connecticut, which bore the brunt of the first of the fight, was entitled to special credit because it was the regiment's first fight and showed the stuff of which it was made. In less than twenty minutes it lost, killed and wounded, probably one-sixth of the men present for duty, but it stood up to the rack like a veteran regiment and was at no time demoralized or broken.