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Letter from John W.A. Gillespie to Editor

John W.A. Gillespie

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February 21, 1862

From the 78th Regiment

DOVER, NEAR FORT DONELSON, TENN.
Friday night, Feb. 21, 1862

EDITOR COURIER: --

This night one week ago, the rebels were in possession of this place, confident in their strength to hold it against any Federal force that might be brought against them; but their fond and cherished hopes have ended in disappointment. Their stronghold has been taken. Their forces have been scattered in every direction, (especially to the North) and to-night the “flag of our Union,” floats proudly to the breeze from Fort Donelson, while our own brave boys rest in perfect security within her entrenchments.

Our Regiment is encamped near the town, and one mile from the main Fort. Our tents were pitched in mud, half knee deep, and since last Tuesday evening we have had a dreadful time to get about.

On Sunday morning we left the steamers Tecumseh and Neptune, at an early hour, formed in line on the river bank, and started for the scene of the action. Just here let me say, that our beloved Major was very sick during Saturday and Sunday night. When Sunday morning came, he was but little better, scarcely able to stand, but before our line was formed, to the surprise and delight of all, the Major appeared on his spirited horse, ready to accompany us to the battle field and share with us the fate of this day, whatever it might be.

After marching eight miles over a circuitous route, we reached the outer entrenchment of the Fort, and there learned that the rebels had surrendered unconditionally.— After remaining on the road an hour, we were ordered back a few hundred yards to a piece of bottom land, where we took supper on one cracker to the man, with creek water for desert. After supper, we made our beds of _______ cornstalks, leaves and weeds, and the most of us slept comfortably until near daybreak, notwithstanding rain commenced falling at midnight. When morning dawned our blankets and clothes were wet, our fires nearly extinguished, and the prospect for breakfast anything but flattering. Some had whole crackers, while others had none, but all concluded to make the best of circumstances, and soon a general division (of the provender on hand) was made. Our breakfast was finished, and then each man settled himself down to await further orders. After waiting an hour or two, Co. Leggett (who had gone to Gen. Grant’s Head Quarters for orders) returned with the information that the boats with our baggage had gone up to Dover, and the regiment would march a few rods into the woods and remain until our tents and provision reached us. About this time, a disinterested spectator might have discovered, without the aid of a glass, a few long, wry faces. Empty stomachs were numerous, and crackers scarce as melons in April. But to finish my story as brief as possible, I will state that forty men were detailed to go to Dover and unship our goods. Next day, (Tuesday,) the job was completed, and at night, according to new orders, the regiment marched into town and pitched tents by candle-light. On the same day, Col. Leggett was appointed Provost Marshall of the town; since that time his duties have been arduous, so much so, that his whole time has been occupied. He has already brought order out of confusion, and while his administration thus far has been gratifying

1 Daily Zanesville Courier, March 1, 1862, p. 2
to the General in command, he has convinced all with whom he comes in contact, that his agility
and perseverance are equal to any emergency.

You have already received the particulars of the late bloody and desperate fight at this
place. I shall only add a few things which have come under our notice. The Fort with its
entrenchments, extends over a space of several miles. To simply hear of the place, you can form
no correct idea of its magnitude, not the immense amount of labor it has cost the (so called)
Confederate States, and for me to attempt to give a correct description in writing is more of a
task than I feel disposed to undertake, therefore I shall leave it for some one else to do.

When I came over the battle field on Monday morning, the ground was covered in many
places with dead men, dead horses, wagons, guns, cartridge boxes, belts, cannon balls, shells,
gun carriages, caissons, flour barrels, meat barrels, harness of every description, and in fact
everything ever seen in a military camp, had its representative in some shape, lying on the field.

Sixty-six pieces of artillery, 20,000 stand of arms, a large number of wagons horses and
mules, and a great amount of forage and provisions fell into our hands. Fifteen thousand
prisoners, with Generals Buckner and Johnson, have already been shipped to Cairo nd other
points North. Two or three hundred prisoners are still here, taking care of their sick and
wounded. Several of their medical staff officers are also here, doing all they can for their
suffering soldiers.

I saw General Buckner and staff, and conversed with the General a half hour on Monday
last. He entered very freely into conversation, and here let me use a little of his own language.
“Your men fight well, your resources are greater than ours. Your army is better clothed, better
fed and better armed than ours. You can furnish three men to our one, and though this defeat has
been a disastrous one to us, you can never conquer the South until you have killed our last man.”
When I got up to take leave, he shook my hand with the following remark. “Young man go and
reform.” I returned the compliment by saying, “General, go and sin no more.” The old traitor
and treacherous thief, John B. Floyd, made his escape with nearly all of his command. One
Company which he left is still here. I have talked with a number of men, and all declare Floyd
deserves hanging if ever a man did. Gen. Pillow escaped with a cavalry Regiment of eight
hundred men and horses.

The most of our wounded have been taken to Paducah, Cairo, Louisville, and Cincinnati.
The City of Memphis is still here with 150 of our wounded on board. The Allen Collier, left last
night for Cincinnati with the same number of sick and wounded. The last named boat was sent
here by the citizens of the “Queen City,” on an errand of mercy. She was loaded with twenty-one
Surgeons, three hundred nurses, and a large amount of Hospital stores and clothing. The
stores and clothing have been appropriated to their intended use, and while the Surgeons and
nurses labored untiringly with our poor fellows who had for days and nights been suffering from
their wounds. The Sanitary Committee go back to their homes with the blessings of a grateful
soldiery resting upon them. For the benefit of his friends, I will just say here that Wilbur F.
Armstrong has gone back to Cincinnati on board the Allen Collier. He has been very sick during
the past eight days with Kung fever. Last night our string band went aboard the Allen Collier to
serenade the Surgeons and nurses, I accompanied them, and had a pleasant time until 9 o’clock
when we started for our quarters. In attempting to step from one boat to the other, I missed the
plank and fell into the river, where the water was 30 feet deep. I went to the bottom once, and
was sinking the second time, when I was caught by the hand by Mr. Charles Butler of Franklin,
O. who, with the assistance of Lieutenants Harian and Blandy, and Serg’ts Robinson and
Vankirk, drew me up over the side of the boat. Had assistance come a few seconds later, I would
have been in a watery grave, but thanks to a kind Providence, my life has been spared, and tonight I am one of the most grateful beings living.

12 o’clock, M. Feb. 22d.-- A salute is being fired from the Fort in honor of Washington’s birthday. We have just learned that Gen. Grant has been made a Major-General. Col. M.D. Leggett has been appointed Provost Marshal, over the State of Tennessee.

The rain has been falling in perfect torrents since last night. The river is rising very rapidly. The water is backing (sic) up toward our camp and is now in very close proximity to several of our tents. We will doubtless have to pull up stakes and move to some higher point.

I will close this lengthy letter by saying that Lieut. Col. Hawkes is daily becoming more popular with the officers and men of the 78th. Major Carnahan’s health is improving and I hope he will soon be entirely well. If you think this letter is too lengthy for the interest it contains, I will write a little more the next time.

Yours

JOHN W. A. GILLESPIE

Company G, 78th Reg’t O. V. M.