

Letter from Confederate Soldier (Wilson) at Fort Johnson to Home, concerning July 18, 1863 attack on Battery Wagner, Folder 44, Fort Sumter National Monument, Manuscript Collection.

James Island Fort Johnson
Near Charleston So Ca July 23d [1863]

Dear Home Folks

You will be pleased to know that I am still in the land of the living. I am not sick but far from being well, it is now 15 days since we left Savannah Ga in that time we have had no change of clothing – or tents, have been exposed to considerable hardship. No sleep for 5 days or nights at a time. The fighting on Morris Island was very severe. We went over on Saturday returned this morning at 4 O'clock had no sleep all the time, and but little to eat. The truth is no one wanted to eat. The Yankee Iron Clads and Ships keep up a fire all the time, So the men in Battery Wagner have no chance to Sleep in the day time, and at night we all have to work to fix up the damage done in the day by the Shot and Shell which fall into the Fort at the rate of about 400 per hour. There are bomb proofs in Battery Wagner but not enough to protect the men from the fire of the gunboats. So our Regt had to take the chances out in the Battery. There we had to cling to the sides of the Fort and lay down on the ground and protect our selves as best we could. It was very dangerous – some shell bursting a few feet from our company, covering us up in sand, I never in my life thought men could be placed in such danger and so many get through safe. The shelling stop at dark except about each ½ hour through the night they throw one, just enough to keep them in the Battery from sleeping or working, but the work must be done, So each night we fix what the Yankees unfixed in the day. Our Regt got over in time on Saturday night to reinforce and change over the Battery and take 96 Yankees prisoners including a number of Officers, one Major of the 55th Pa Regt, I have his Canteen – I saw no Philadelphia Boys with that exception I trust I may never be in such a fight. All day long the Yankee Gunboats and the Fort on the Island (for the Yankees have 3) kept up a fire on the Battery. The Bombardment was terrific it kept up until night on dusk, driving the men from their Guns, and spreading terror among the troop. The Guns of the Yankees played into the Battery from 3 directions. All at once they stopped and the Yankee Army consisting of the 48th NY, 9th Maine, 7th Mass, 62d Ohio, 63d Pa Regts - and two Black Negro Regts – The 54 Pa [Mass.] and 2d So Ca Regt opened on the Battery. That is

commenced a charge - coming up in close columns. We opened on them from the Battery with canister shot with deadly effect, but the white men charged gallantly - no mistake - all say so - they came right up into almost certain destruction. The officers leading in the advance - in one place I saw a Col - Lt Col - Captain and two Lieuts killed within 5 feet of each other - twice they planted their flag on the Battery - but each time it was cut down - we did not capture any colors. The having of nigers to fight is no fancy - it is true - I have seen them - two Regt was to have charged one end of Wagner if they had charged as did the white men on our left, the fighting must have lasted longer and more of them been killed - but the nigers would run - only a few being killed in the moat or on the parapet of the Battery, but Fort Sumpter opened fire on them and sent lots of the Damn Scoundrels to the other world. I never saw such a sight as presented itself on Sunday morning at day brake - as far as the eye could reach could be seen the dead and dying on all sides could be seen the result of the fight. I volentered to go out to collect the wounded yankees. I had a chance to see what was to be seen- in the ditch to our left there was 115 killed in a space of about 100 feet - So you can see that there was some brave yankees engaged - I never saw such a sight, men with heads off many with legs shot off- feet, hands and in fact any part of the body - Such complete destruction of life - So wholesale - it makes me shudder to think of it. One poor fellow I saw had a ball shot through his head taking off the forehead both eyes and his ear - I would like to forget his appearance he was alive 24 hours after the fight - others so shot as to be unable to tell if man or beast - the killed was about 8 to 1 wounded generally it is just the reverse. The men killed was as a general thing fine looking, large men - all the prisoners I talked with seemed to regret the war, but thought it would continue. Our loss in killed and wounded was about 100. The yankee boys I think about 1000. It took a whole day to bring the dead - a flag of truce came over the morning after the fight - from the fleet in a surf boat carrying a white flag and the old Stars and Stripes - asking to bury their dead and to provide for their wounded - This was refused - After staying some little time the yankee party put back. The land forces of the yankees on Morris Island are very close to us, their HeadQrs being about 700 yds from the fort. We have Rifle pits 300 yards from the Battery and post advance pickets in front of our rifle pits about 50 yds. It is very dangerous to be on picket, for the yankees have sharp-shooters and Sharp Rifles and shoot well. To day it is raining very hard, but we have got so we do not mind it. We have no tents. I have no blanket except an indian rubber

one I got from a yankie. On Monday Night a call was made for pickets from our Regt. Our company was a part of the party detailed – Major Bacon was in command, we was posted, some in front as an advance 50 yds in advance of our Rifle pits. The balance in the pits – the advance was to stand and fire on the enemy if they came and retreat to us in the pits – we (in the pits) not to fire until the advance found – and they as they came up to give the countersign which was “here you mule”¹ from some bad management the Countersign was not known all along the line – The Yankees fired on the advance, They kept them at bay some time, but was soon drove in they found us hollowing, “Here you Mule.” Some of our men fired on them – the battery hearing the firing and we running to the Battery and calling on the fort to stop firing. She opened on us thinking we was the yankees, the whole line of the Battery opened on us, with grape and canister shot and small arms, we lost five out of our small party – it was a strange mistake to make and might have proved a big dangerous over. It frightened us all very much. I lay down on the ground until it was over. To day all is quiet for the first time since we have been over here hope it only last. We have come over here to rest. May have to go back in a few days. Over there we have no chance to write, hence the long delay – I am well but very tired. I got some yankee trophies. A yankee Canteen, haversack, Coat and Shoes. I enclose \$1 yankee bill. Also some stamps to put on letters to Joe. I enclose a yankee letter. Write often. I will telegraph if any thing happens. No mistake or if I should be killed in a fight I have made arrangements to have you know it at once. My love to all. I wish I was out of this war, it is too dangerous. I want to get me detailed as Hospital Steward, he can do it, and in that there is no danger. I have much to say but I have no room, do not be uneasy about me. My love to all. Yours affectionately

Wilson

¹ This expression was probably “Here’s your mule,” a common expression of derision toward the calvary.