

NOTE: This letter of November 27, 1863, Milton Barnes' personal account of the Union victory at Missionary Ridge on November 25 and his role therein, is historically the most important item in this collection. This victory opened the way for Sherman's advance to Atlanta and the sea. Ironically, although the 97th Ohio and its parent brigade (Wagner's) had not participated in the Union disaster at Chickamauga in September, their elan at Missionary Ridge matched that of the rest of the Army of the Cumberland thirsting for revenge. It led the 97th Ohio from a second line position at the beginning of the attack, which had been planned as a limited operation, to the front assault wave and the claim, shared with several other regiments, to have been first to reach the crest and assure the Union victory.

At the end of October, Grant's reorganization of his new command in Chattanooga resulted in the assignment of Wagner's Second Brigade to the Second Division (under Major General Philip H. Sheridan) of the Fourth Army Corps (under Major General Gordon Granger.) All were under Major General George Thomas as commander, Army of the Cumberland. Barnes, as noted previously, was acting commander of the 97th Ohio while Colonel Lane recruited in the regiment's home area, and led it through this battle, although he sarcastically noted in the letter that after the Ridge was taken "Col(onel) Lane and the Adjutant came up." (Lane, in his own official report, stated that he had arrived at Chattanooga en route to resume his command in time to witness the action on November 25. While praising another regimental commander in Wagner's brigade, Lane failed to mention Barnes at all.)

"Mission Ridge" (the contemporary appellation) stretches some eight miles in a north-northeast direction east of the Tennessee River and forms the eastern side of the Chattanooga Valley. Its elevation is approximately 500 feet above the valley plain. About halfway between Chattanooga and the base of Missionary Ridge are two wooded hills, Bushy Knob to the north and Orchard Knob to the south. Both were fortified Confederate advance works. The Confederate commander Bragg was headquartered in a house atop the Ridge opposite Chattanooga.

As finally evolved, Grant's battle strategy called for a main assault by Sherman at the north end of the Ridge and a secondary assault by Hooker from the Lookout Valley towards the southern end of the Ridge. The Army of the Cumberland, weakened by diversion of two divisions to support these attacks, was to "threaten" Bragg's center in support of Sherman and, once the Confederates were caught in the Sherman-Hooker vise, to launch a final assault if conditions warranted. Grant apparently regarded the Army of the Cumberland as still recuperating from the mauling at Chickamauga.

On November 23, when Grant became aware that Bragg had withdrawn two divisions (intended to augment Longstreet besieging Knoxville), he decided to test Confederate strength by having the Army of the Cumberland advance part way across the valley plain. That afternoon Granger's corps (short one of its three divisions) staged what seemed to the Confederates a "grand review", as Barnes put it, then suddenly wheeled right and overran Orchard Knob and Bushy Knob before the Confederates could rally. Sheridan's division was in support of the remaining division of the corps in the advance on Orchard Knob and was echeloned to its left. The 97th Ohio drove in Confederate skirmishers ahead of it but suffered no casualties, although those of the corps as a whole were high.

On November 24, the Army of the Cumberland rested in its new positions, since Sherman's main attack had been stalled by fierce resistance in rugged terrain. The 97th could see, to the south, Hooker's capture of Lookout Mountain as a necessary prelude to his own attack on the Ridge.

On the afternoon of November 25, Grant finally ordered the Army of the Cumberland to take Confederate breastworks at the base of Missionary Ridge as a demonstration to divert Bragg's attention from his flanks. Only two army corps were used in the four-division operation. Granger's two divisions in the center were flanked by one each of the other corps. Sheridan's division was in right center, with Wagner's brigade as its right and the 97th Ohio in the brigade's third reserve line. The base breastworks were easily taken by the first waves, while the reserve line halted just short pending further orders. A murderous fire rained down on both waves. According to Barnes' letter, he personally alerted the regiment "to be prepared to scale that hill! for I saw what was intended, although not one of us had been told what we were expected to do." (Conventional accounts have it that the initiative was spontaneous among enlisted men and company officers, regimental commanders being the last to realize what was happening.) Then "the word came" and the reserves moved to the base, pushed "right through and over" the front line and started the steep ascent of the Ridge. (Wagner's official report states that after first ordering his men to return to the base as the original plan envisioned no further advance, he then decided to storm the crest even before receiving permission from division and corps.) Some 40 minutes later the 97th Ohio, raked by crossfire as well as that ahead, and some other regiments of the corps reached the top. The 97th Ohio, according to this letter, "struck the top.....right at Bragg's headquarters" (According to his official report, the regimental colors crossed the crest just left of the headquarters house.)

Even though darkness was fast approaching, Sheridan ordered Wagner's brigade and another to pursue fleeing Confederates down a road leading to Campbell's (Chickamauga) Station. The 97th Ohio and an Indiana unit led the way. About a mile from Missionary Ridge they met stiff resistance from Confederates on a ridge commanding the road, and reinforcements were required to capture it. What Sheridan called "a gallant little fight" is described in Barnes' letter as "the most ugly of the two fights [on November 25], for it was perfectly dark." His official report stated that "a large proportion" of the 149 casualties suffered by the regiment were sustained during this second engagement. Later that night the 97th Ohio moved to Chickamauga Creek, then back to Chattanooga the next day.

Both divisions of Granger's corps in the assault on the ridge suffered heavy total casualties in the operations of November 23-25, Sheridan losing 1,346 or more than a fifth of his total strength. Casualties in Wagner's brigade totalled 636, nearly half the divisional loss. The 97th Ohio casualties in both of the November 25 engagements, as noted were 149 killed and wounded, more than a third of their effective strength of 434 and, according to a regimental history, the highest of any Ohio unit in the assault. (A regimental history puts the total casualties at 156.)

Barnes' official report (delayed until February 1864 because of the sudden movement of Granger's corps to relieve Burnside at Knoxville) differs from his letter in its enumeration of the nine wounded officers. Two names in the letter (Captain Hunter, Lieutenant Shutt) are not listed in the official account. Three not mentioned in the letter were the regimental surgeon, Dr. Thomas W. Gordon; Captain William P. Gilley, and Second Lieutenant S. Echelberry.

Wagner heaped praise on his regimental commanders in his own report, including the following statement: "Lieutenant-Colonel Barnes, Ninety-seventh Ohio, deserves great credit for his soldierly bearing as he at the head of his regiment led his men through that storm of bullets....." Sheridan, also listing regimental commanders by name, said of them collectively: "By their brilliant example...men were inspired to the perfection of deeds of valor and heroism."

(Official reports cited are from War of the Rebellion: Official Records.....Series I, Vol XXXI, Part 2.)

MILTON BARNES to RHODA BARNES

Chattanooga Tenn.

Nov. 27th, 1863

My very dear love,

I have just telligraphed [sic] you of my safety and now I must write a word, but O I am so exhausted, am nearly dead for sleep and rest. otherwise tolerably well. Thanks -----O, thanks to the Great and Good Being who has been so kind and merciful to poor unworthy me. O Rhoda, dear, I do think I have been under this special care and protection, for when I look back and think over again what an ordeal I have just passed through it makes me almost tremble with awe[.] My heart has been filled with his praise, for his great deliverance in this trying time! Join me, O, my dear wife, in ascriptions of praise - to Him give all the glory! We have been in the midst of the greatest battle on record. It has been a comprehensive, masterly and unprecedented victory, successful and complete in all its parts. The result is not only a victory but a complete and perfect route of the great army of treason and rebellion in the south and west. On last sabbath day [November 22] Bragg's army encircled us from river around to river, occupying a high range of mountains thought to be perfectly impregnable[.] On Monday [November 23] at one o'clock our army moved out to the front in full view of from [sic] their camps. - They thought we were having a grand review, [but] at a given signal we commenced the attack and charged right into their camps in the valley and drove them back to the position on Mission Ridge. it was a complete surprise. I had the right of the front line of our Brigade but did'nt loose [sic] a man.

Milton Barnes to Rhoda Barnes
Chattanooga Tenn. Nov. 27th, 1863

- 2 -

We halted and threw up a line of defences during the night. the next morning, Tuesday, [November 24] Hooker attacked them on the right and drove them off Lookout Mountain, we lay and looked on, in amazement and wonder. Wednesday morning [November 25] Sherman crossed the river on our left and turned their other flank. At 3 o'clock a signal of six guns was fired and the whole line moved forward[.] our corps being in the center had to charge across the valley right in the face of Mission Ridge. by this time our regiment had changed places with another and was in our second line of the Brigade. moving across the valley about a mile our front line drove them out of their breast works at the face of the Mountain and halted a few minutes as if to rest. we halted and our men lay down. we were now right in front of the whole ridge, and all along the top of the ridge their lines bristled up, their batteries opened with grape and canister, and their infantry was just pouring their deadly volleys down the hillside until it beggared all description. the front line faltered. To ascend that hill, O it looked like rushing right into the very jaws of death! I rode along the line and told my men to be prepared to scale that hill! for I saw what was intended, although not one of us had been told what we were expected to do. the front line was still faltering at the foot of the ridge which was yet ~~a quarter~~ an eighth of a mile ahead of us. all cleared open ground. Sure enough! before I had got clean along my own line, the word came. I gave the word and every man sprang to his feet and started - doublequick. [We] struck the foot of the hill, closed up on the front line, - pushed right through and over them and up the hill. O Rhoda, but it was a hot place, bullets fell down that slope as thick

Milton Barnes to Rhoda Barnes
Chattanooga - Tenn Nov. 27th, 1863

- 3 -

as hail. all sense of fear left me. I took off my hat[,] waived [sic] to my men and dashed along back and forth along the line - all the command I could think of was - ["] forward - forward men - ~~forward!~~["] it was enough[,] the boys caught the spirit, and not a man of mine flinched nor fell back until wounded. My poor horse was perfectly wild with excitement. he leaped over brush and logs and rocks and never missed his feet. Up - up we went slowly, steadily gaining ground by inches, our poor boys dropping all around me, still it seemed [to] me I was safe. Up, up [we] went, and still the leaden hail poured in deadly volleys. here a man gains a tree and fires. there one gains a rock[,] discharges his gun - reloads and starts forward. I beconned [sic] and halloed ["]forward["] until my lungs almost gave out. we were gaining the hill slowly but surely - pushing on up, up. then my horse gets a wound in the top of the head, shakes his head but goes right on, first to one side then to the other. we are nearly up. he receives another wound in the shoulder[,] the poor fellow staggered. I got off, turned his head down the hill and said to myself go poor fellow, but he would'nt go back, but whirled around and charged right up the hill again, and I lost sight of him. he was going right into the rebel lines, but we were now nearly up there and the rebels were beginning to break - a few minutes more and we gained their works. - were on the top of Mission Ridge with [the] enemy flying in confusion down the opposite side. I was nearly exhausted. my men were perfectly frantic. We struck the top of [the] Ridge right at Bragg's head quarters, captured a number of prisoners. they said Bragg remained there until we were half way up, before he quit the spot. as soon as we could get into lines again we started on, ours and the 40th Ind.

Milton Barnes to Rhoda Barnes
Chattanooga, Tenn. - Nov. 27th, 1863

- 4 -

[Indiana] in pursuit[.] directly here came one of my men with my horse! he had caught him, I mounted him again. it was now dark, [we] followed on about a mile when the enemy halted on a hill covered with thick wood, here we stopped and fought them for a solid hour without any support but our two [97th Ohio and 40th Indiana] regiments. finally re-inforcements came and again we drove them and occupied the ground too tired, and too dark to go farther[.] General Wagner gave us great praise and well he might. General Sheridan came up also and complimented the boys. It is needless but perhaps not idle to state that just as the fight closed Col Lane and the Adjutant came up.

There my dear wife. I have only given you an outline. I despair trying to give you a picture of the reality. It is considered one of the most daring feats of the war. It was viewed from one of our forts by General Grant and a number of others. I enclose a copy of Genl Thomas' order of congratulation, to show that I am not writing this to deceive you my love. Major [James W.] Moore was shot in the right hand just as we started up the Mission Ridge but he came on up and fought well, till he was ordered to the rear. he was not in the second hitch after dark. I had it all alone, here ~~my~~ horse was struck twice more there [sic], but they were spent balls and did not hurt him much. the second was the most ugly of the two fights, for it was perfectly dark. We lost heavily in both. Our loss is fifteen killed and one hundred and twenty five wounded. Among the killed was poor Tom Williams, the bravest of the brave. Capt [William K.

Milton Barnes to Rhoda Barnes
Chattanooga, Tenn - Nov 27th 1863

- 5 -

Rosemond was wounded. [Captain William F.] Hunter, slightly in the corner of his mouth[.] [The] Major's wound is only a flesh wound across the palm of the hand and will heal rapidly. he will get a furlough by it and be home in a few days. none of the officers['] wounds are considered fatal. no [97th Ohio] officer [was] killed but eight [were] wounded, Moore, Hunter, Rosemon[d], [Captain Martin] Weiser, [First Lieutenant James] McClure, [First Lieutenant John J.] Brady, [Captain James H.] Linn and [Second Lieutenant William] Shutts. no others that you know, I believe.

There my dear ones, I must get a little sleep. **we move**

God bless you is my daily prayer.

O what reasons I have to be thankful!

I will write again in a day or two, unless we move somewhere which is quite likely, but as soon as possible my love. You will let Papa's folks know of my safety. Oh what a victory, what a victory!

Your own Milton