“It seems impossible that a single man should have escaped....”

THE MULE TRAIN CHARGE AT GETTYSBURG

by Lance J. Herdegen

The ammunition wagons of the First Division of the First Army Corps reached the Union rally point at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, at midday July 1, 1863. After the forty wagons were parked, Ord. Sgt. Jerome Watrous of the 6th Wisconsin, in charge of the train, rode ahead to a nearby rise where he found excited staff officers organizing a defensive position near a small cemetery. The roadways into the town were crowded with wounded and demoralized soldiers. Off to the northwest, there was the sound of heavy fighting.

The word from the front was mixed. The Johnnies were just ahead, the wounded men said, a lot of them, and they were coming on hard. Wing commander Maj. Gen. John Reynolds was down and probably dead. Watrous’ own First Division was in the thick of the fighting, but holding its own. One thing was certain—the Army of the Potomac had found the invading Confederates and the expected battle that might decide the war was underway.¹

The two small brigades of Brig. Gen. James Wadsworth’s First Division, Watrous was told, reached the field northwest of town just after 10:00 a.m. to surprise and roll back two advancing Confederate brigades. Of the First Division’s two small brigades, the first—“Long Sol” Meredith’s—was the most notable. It included the 2nd, 6th, and 7th Wisconsin, 19th Indiana and 24th Michigan. It was the only all-Western organization in the Eastern armies and was known as the “Iron Brigade of the West,” a name given by Maj. Gen. George McClellan as he watched the regiments fight up the National Road at South Mountain the previous September 14. The soldiers were also recognizable to friend and foe because of the tall black hats worn by the men. “It is those damned black hat devils of the Army of the Potomac,” the Confederates called to each other that morning outside Gettysburg as the brigade first deployed its lines.²

The division’s Second Brigade led by Brig. Gen. Lysander Cutler was made up of New Yorkers and Pennsylvanians. Three of its five regiments were positioned north of the Chambersburg Pike while the 2nd and 7th Wisconsin, 19th Indiana and 24th Michigan charged forward and sharply repulsed other Confederate regiments south of the roadway. The Second Brigade was hit just coming into line and was quickly driven backwards, but the Union position was restored a few minutes later when the 6th Wisconsin of the Iron Brigade, held in reserve, came up to charge Confederates firing from an unfinished railroad cut. The Black Hats, with the assistance of the 95th New York and 14th Brooklyn (84th New York) of the Second Brigade captured more than 200 prisoners and the red battle flag of the 2nd Mississippi Infantry.³

The Confederates retreated to a nearby ridge while the First Division reformed along McPherson’s Ridge northwest of Gettysburg. Other arriving elements of the First Corps soon extended the Union line to the left and right. To the north of town, regiments and brigades of the arriving Union Eleventh Corps began to form a line to engage more Confederates approaching from that direction. By early afternoon, the fighting was again very heavy as the Confederates came again in thick lines that overlapped the undermanned Union position on the left and the right. It was soon a desperate situation and the Federal cartridge boxes were almost empty. A staff rider was sent back to look for the ammunition train.

It had been a long night and morning for young Jerome Watrous. The mailbags reached the army when the division halted the previous night at Marsh Creek, several miles south of Gettysburg. In his packet was a letter in-

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forming him that an artillery shell had killed his younger brother, Henry, who was with the 4th Wisconsin at Port Hudson on the Mississippi River. But there was little time for Watrous to grieve. The ordnance wagons and crews were moving at daybreak to distribute the required sixty rounds of ammunition ordered for each soldier. The two brigades, the first Federal infantry to reach the Gettysburg area, moved out a short time later and Watrous and the ammunition wagons followed. The day was already hot, but there appeared to be little anticipation of battle. The talk centered on a possible reception by the citizens of Gettysburg, but that soon faded as artillery began to thump up ahead.

Watrous found himself in charge of the ammunition for the entire division. The division’s ordnance officer, a man who could not be kept out of a fight, had, despite strict orders not to leave the train, galloped ahead with a wave of his hat to volunteer at the front for duty as a staff officer.

But Watrous, one of those capable and energetic young men produced by the frontier, was up to the task. His parents brought him to Wisconsin Territory in 1844 from Broome County, New York. His family at first called him “Cub” (his mother said he was a “roly-poly, good-natured baby”), but the nickname was soon lost in the hard life on a rugged frontier. His father died before Watrous was an adult and the stocky young man was out on his own before he was twenty. He first worked cutting trees, then as a young and very serious schoolteacher, and finally as a printer’s devil and reporter for The Appleton Crescent, a weekly newspaper in southeast central Wisconsin. His first editor pronounced the name “Jerome” cumbrous for a newspaperman and young Watrous became “Jack,” a name used by his friends then and later.

Always interested in the politics of the day, Watrous and his brother marched in the Appleton “Wide-Awake Company” for Abraham Lincoln in the presidential campaign of 1860. With the secession crisis and the firing on Fort Sumter, the young man was among the first to volunteer for a company forming in his hometown. The volunteers became part of the 6th Wisconsin Infantry, which would become one of the best regiments in the famous Iron Brigade. Early on Watrous was singled out to take over the quartermaster’s duties for the regiment. His merit and ability were soon displayed and the young soldier was promoted to ordnance sergeant of the First Division.

After checking the situation at the rally point, Watrous returned to his halted train to be ready for whatever action was needed. A short time later a staff officer came riding up from First Division commander General Wadsworth with orders to get ten wagons of ammunition to the front as quickly as possible. Watrous rushed along the line picking out wagons and drivers. To Bert O’Connor of the 7th Wisconsin, one of the drivers and a steady man under fire, Watrous called, “Bert, you run your team to the front.” It was just a few minutes before the young sergeant had his ten heavy wagons in line,

7. Albert O’Connor enlisted Company A, Lodi Guards, from West Point, Wisconsin, June 12, 1861. He was wounded at the Wilderness in 1864 and was mustered out with his company July 3, 1865; Roster of Wisconsin Volunteers, War of the Rebellion, 1861-1865, 2 vols. (Madison, Wisconsin: Democrat Printing Company, 1886), vol. 2, p. 542.
two men on each seat. The order to each driver was simple—whip the mules into a “keen run” and do not stop until the order came to do so.

The roadway into Gettysburg was a good one, O’Connor said, and “you can bet we made those 10 mule teams spin along.” Soon the train was at the outskirts of Gettysburg, moving down a gentle grade at a reckless speed. “It seemed as those mules knew that glorious old Wadsworth’s gallant men were getting short of ammunition, and that we must get it to them without a moment’s delay,” O’Connor said.

The train turned left at the road northwest of town and soon passed the Lutheran Theological Seminary. A short distance farther it came to a Union battle line, but it proved not to be men of the First Division. A major came to Watrous, riding alongside him. “Stop that wagon train. It will be captured,” the officer shouted, but Watrous grimly shook his head and said his orders were to deliver the ammunition to his division and he was going to do it.

Then the wagons where out into the open field beyond the Seminary building and under the fire of at least a dozen Confederate artillery pieces. But Watrous and his train soon reached the area behind the Union battle line where he found regiments of the Iron Brigade and other units. With the drivers rolling the wagons along the line, the extra men tumbled off one wooden box of ammunition after another. Running behind the wagons came Watrous, who used the blunt end of an axe to splitter open the boxes so the bundles of cartridges could be rushed to the fighting men. Three wagonloads, almost 75,000 rounds, were distributed, O’Connor said. “All this time the rebels were shelling us to kill. Nearly every wagon cover was hit with a shell, solid shot or minnie ball while we were there.”

Watrous ordered his wagons back to the town, pointing to the Chambersburg Pike telling his men they should issue the remaining rounds to any soldiers who needed them. The ten wagons contained the only ammunition at the front for the regiments of the First and Eleventh Corps. But as the wagons turned to obey the order the Chambersburg Pike was swept by “a perfect storm of shot, shell and bullets.” O’Connor saw a solid shot strike the saddle mule of the team next to him, cutting off both of the animal’s hind legs. The driver was a man everyone called “Indiana,” O’Connor said, and “I shall never forget the look [he gave] . . . when the poor mule fell down on the tbose stumps of legs.” Watrous ordered the harness cut from the injured animal, which was shot by one of the extra men with a revolver. At that instant, another shot made a flesh wound on the other wheel mule and still another shot away both hind wheels of the wagon. A retreating regiment of infantry came along and soon the ammunition was unloaded from the disabled wagon. Then it was driven into town “with three mules hauling the front wheels and box.” Two other wagons were also hit and “considerably damaged, but none of the ammunition was lost.” One of General Wadsworth’s staff officers watched all this in amazement as young Watrous held the wagons under fire to unload the damaged vehicle, then bring the train along the Chambersburg Pike near the unfinished railroad cut. “The sergeant had a very warm gallop across the railroad embankment into Gettysburg, . . .” the officer said later. “It seems impossible that a single man should have escaped through such a narrow passage . . .”

In the town the streets were crowded with fleeing soldiers. “The sergeant made me take the rear in the retreat, he riding by my side” O’Connor said. “When we turned to the right . . . the rebels were shelling the town right lively.” The Eleventh Corps was falling back into the town in disorder. Watrous and O’Connor and the rest of the train were caught amid the “zip, zip and zipping of a shower of bullets” with a line of rebel infantry advancing just 15 rods away, moving into the city on a double-quick.” The Confederates were so close that retreating Federal officers “discharged their revolvers at them” and O’Connor stood in his wagon bed to add the fire of his revolver. Finally, a New York regiment gave the Johnny a volley that drove the gray line backwards. “The street was packed with troops, mounted officers, artillery and cavalry, and such confusion I never saw,” O’Connor said. “But there was method enough in the confused crowd to push forward at a good pace for Cemetery ridge, where a halt was made.”

Lt. Col. Rufus Dawes of the 6th Wisconsin reached the rally point with his regiment ahead of the train and found the “enemy was all around us, and closing in, firing and yelling . . . I found everything in disorder. Panic was impending over the exhausted soldiers. It was a confused rabble of disorganized regiments of infantry and crippled batteries.” But the situation quickly changed, he said, with the arrival of Maj. Gen. Winfield Scott Hancock of the Second Corps who carried orders from Army of the Potomac commander Maj. Gen. George Meade to take command of the field in light of the death of Reynolds.

Watrous and his wagons reached the rally point just after Dawes and the survivors of the 6th Wisconsin. Every one of his wagons was hit from “one to a dozen times

Sergeant Watrous' probable route through the McPherson Farm.

Map by John Heiser
with solid shot, shell or bullets.” The first general officer encountered was Maj. Gen. O. O. Howard, who was “sitting upon his horse with as much coolness as though he was watching a Fourth of July parade,” Watrous said. Just beyond, where the wagons passed over a ridge to safety, was Hancock, “young and fresh and bright and constantly active.” Watrous rode up with a salute to ask for orders. The general looked over the young sergeant and his battered wagons.

“Good God, what have you got here? What have you got a wagon here for? You haven’t been into action?” Watrous nodded. “Yes sir, just came back with the rear guard.”

“Well,” said the general, “did you lose all your ammunition?”

“No, sir. Distributed nearly all of it.”

“Lose any of your wagons?”

“Well. I got back with some of them” Hancock nodded again and smiled.

“Good. But it is the first Mule Train Charge I ever knew anything about. You did well, Sergeant,” the general said. “Just move your wagons down there and report to me in half an hour.”

O’Connor said five mules and three of the extra men were wounded and that he had never been in a hotter place during his four years as a soldier than during that occasion at Gettysburg. In the final tally, Watrous and his teamsters provided ammunition to four divisions. It was the delaying fight of the soldiers of the First and Eleventh Corps that was decisive for it allowed the Union army to consolidate on the high ground south of the town that proved the key to victory in the three days of fighting.

Watrous, who later became adjutant of the Iron Brigade, always gave much of the credit for that success at Gettysburg to Hancock. Twenty years later, in a speech to veterans in Milwaukee during a memorial service on the death of the general, Watrous recalled the chance meeting on the battle field and noted it was the only time in his four years in uniform that he met Hancock.

“It did me lots of good—I don’t suppose it did the general any,” the old soldier said, the memory fresh in his mind. “I think I grew about a foot and a half [on seeing Hancock], and it was after a hard day’s work too.”

15. Lt. James G. Rosengarten, ordnance officer for the First Corps, estimated 228,000 rounds of small arms ammunition were “expended.” If correct, the 8,700 men of the First Corps expended eighty-six rounds per man in the battle, or sixty rounds carried to the field and twenty-six issued from Watrous’ wagons. Of that amount, Rosengarten reported, 9,000 rounds were issued from the First Division train to the Third Division, First Corps, and 13,000 from the First Division train to the Third Division, Eleventh Corps. OR. vol. 27. pt. 1. pp. 264-65. Some of the ammunition distributed to the Iron Brigade regiments ultimately fell into the hands of the Confederates. Maj. J. Jones of the 26th North Carolina mentions in his report that his men collected ammunition from the enemy’s dead and that his regiment was very low on ammunition. OR. vol. 27. pt. 2. pp. 642-44. For a discussion of the types of ammunition used see Dean S. Thomas, Ready . . . Aim . . . Fire! Small Arms Ammunition in the Battle of Gettysburg (Bingerville, Pennsylvania: Thomas Publications, 1981) and Rosengarten’s report.