Letter of R. L. Crawford, James Island

Letter, 18 June 1862, of R. L. Crawford (1826-1863), James Island, describes action immediately prior to and during the military engagement at Secessionville, also known as the battle of Ft. Johnson, 16 June 1862. A native of Lancaster District, physician, and signer of the Ordinance of Secession, Crawford served first as assistant surgeon to the Ninth Regiment, South Carolina Volunteers, then as captain, Co. D, First Regiment, and South Carolina Volunteer Infantry. He was killed in action, 20 April 1863, near Suffolk, Va., by a shell from a Federal gunboat.

After describing in detail an encounter with a Yankee regiment the preceding week in which Crawford and Confederate forces under the command of Col. Capers had been involved, the letter tells of the Ft. Johnson fight. For two days Union artillery forces had besieged Confederate batteries at Secessionville. "Finding that they could not silence them," Crawford relates, "they finally concluded to take them by storm." After the Federal bombardment ceased, Confederate commander Col. Lamar ordered his men, "who were nearly exhausted from the long continued fight, to go into the rat holes and rest." Pickets were established and everything thought to be secure. The next morning, however, it was discovered that the Yankees had eluded the Confederate pickets, "and when the sentinel at the Fort discovered them they were not more than a hundred yards off."

After the alarm was sounded, Capt. Reid, who commanded one of the companies, found the Yankees to be only about forty yards from the fort. He immediately leveled a gun and fired into them and was attempting to sight another gun when he was shot through the head. Col. Lamar, who fired another gun, was also wounded in the face and neck. "The whole command was now in the fort but as they had no small arms and the Yankees had begun to come up the breast works their condition was truly critical." Determined not to give up their breastworks, the Confederates "gathered the large sticks they use to put their pieces in position, and succeeded in clubbing them back as they would come up." Soon thereafter, the Eutaw and Louisiana battalions opened fire upon the Federals and the Union columns began to fall back. But by this time reinforcements for both sides had arrived on the scene, and the battle became general.

According to Crawford, the Federals had fifteen regiments in the field, as opposed to six or seven Confederate regiments. The Union loss was estimated at between three and four hundred killed. The Confederates, he reported, captured some one hundred prisoners and five or six hundred stand of rifles. Confederate losses were estimated at forty killed and one hundred wounded. "I think the Yankees were all drunk," the letter jests, for "nearly every canteen was half full of liquor, the prisoners tell us their officers told them that the fort was out

of ammunition, and that all they had to do was to take it and go on to Charleston. They say that their officers were drunk and that they had been drinking all night. A number of our men who were on picket say that numbers remarked that night, that the Yankees must be drunk, they judged so from the fuss they kept."

At the time of the assault on Ft. Johnson, Crawford's regiment was on picket. He was officer of the day and in command of the camp. The letter explains that he received an order "to form the old and new guard and all of the sick that were at all able to go, and to push forward with them as rapidly as possible to where the fighting was then going on." "I had the long roll beat," Crawford continues, "when the guard turned out, these together with the sick that turned out, made me a company of about one hundred & twenty five." Marching at the double quick, Crawford's band of men reached the battlefield and entered the fight on the extreme right. Shortly afterward, "we were ordered back into a road and sent about a mile further down, we were intended to cut of their retreat. The rascals however crossed about half a mile above us and thus made their escape. Many of them however bogged down in the marsh and was there in the evening when the tide rose, some of them—who were near the edge, we drew out, and now have them prisoners, they say, they saw a great many go down."

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