

TELEGRAPHING IN BATTLE

REMINISCENCES OF THE CIVIL WAR

BY

JOHN EMMET O'BRIEN, M. D.

OPERATOR AND CIPHER-OPERATOR U. S. MILITARY
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news of victory and defeat—all the tidings of glory and of horror that pertain to war.

The telegraph worked not only through sea and land, but invaded the clouds, carrying a light wire skyward by balloon near Washington, at Pohick Church, Virginia, and on the Peninsula. I will let Jesse Bunnell tell, in the following letter to me, how Park Spring, who was foreman of line construction with the Army of the Potomac, made these ascensions, and also describe the evacuation of Yorktown. ("M. C." was the telegraphic call for McClellan's headquarters.)

"New York, Nov. 1, 1884.

"DR. J. E. O'BRIEN, Scranton, Pa.

"MY DEAR COMRADE: Yours received. The aeronaut who took our wire up on the Peninsula was Professor Lowe, better known amongst us boys as 'Lo! the poor Indian.' So far as I (at 'M C') knew at the time, we were in telegraphic communication with the elevated balloon only two or three times. Park Spring, who was a fair operator, was, I believe, the only one who made these ascensions with Lowe. A double conductor flexible cable looped into the 'M C' wire and we worked direct with Park, who sat in the balloon with a pocket instrument, while Professor Lowe did the rope business, swearing at the men down below, etc. Nothing of any consequence was reported or transacted, however. I think there were no other wired ascensions on the Peninsula.

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“At Yorktown, or, rather, before Yorktown, the night it was evacuated, May 4th, I was on duty at ‘M C’ from 2 A.M. until 8 A.M. The previous evening had been made unusually lively for us by shells from the enemy, who seemed to have determined to give it to us very hot all along the line. We accounted for this by supposing that they were aware that all our heavy guns had at last been gotten into position and that the order was issued to open a terrific fire the next day. The fact was, they were evacuating Yorktown and shelling us to divert our attention, in which they succeeded perfectly. The tumult kept me awake long after I had turned in at my tent at 8 o’clock P.M., and when Jacques woke me at 2, all was still as death.

“About 3 o’clock I was sitting in a rustic bower which had been built in front of the telegraph tent door, when I saw a light in the sky over Yorktown. It grew larger and appeared to be from a burning building in the town. Then I heard over the wires questions going between the different operators stationed in the front nearest that point, as to ‘what was the fire?’ Then, a few moments later, an order was telegraphed Professor Lowe, at one of these stations, directing him to ascend, observe and report immediately. Then I could dimly see the balloon as it was allowed to rise a hundred feet or more. The report was indefinite, stating that the fire was either a sloop at the wharf, or a building in town. But

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very soon, about 4 o'clock, a sharp, sudden call at the instrument for 'M C' brought a message from, I forget where, stating that a deserter had come in reporting Yorktown evacuated! By the time I had aroused the General and some of his staff and returned to the instrument, several more messages to the same purport from other points were waiting for me, and 'M C' was being frantically called by every one who could get in. The General came to the instrument half-dressed, the staff crowded in and about the tent, telegrams were written or scrawled and *rushed* to every point on the line, with the result that, in about two hours, our whole army was rushing pell-mell from every point and along every road after the enemy. 'Twas a quick job for 'before breakfast.' They found the enemy, I believe, at Williamsburg. (Near Fort Magruder, two miles before Williamsburg. J. E. O'B.)

"I always recollect this episode as one of the striking occurrences connected with my early experience in the U. S. M. T. I was then but seventeen years old, and felt proud to have been the medium for the transmissions which caused that great army to spring, as one man, from its sleep to pursue the enemy.

"Yours truly, J. H. BUNNELL."

Our wires at the siege of Yorktown connected all the corps headquarters. The two operators, D. B. Lathrop and H. L. Smith, in the intrenchments nearest the town, rushed in with the first of our troops and hastened to the telegraph office to try the