Abe Lincoln's Telegraph Operators.

Behind the Scenes With Lincoln in the Telegraph Office of the War Department.

How Our Military Telegraph Was Organized—Cipher Dispatches and How They Were Sent—How General Halleck Slaughtered at the Expense of the Soldiers and Something About Burnside's Vigilance—Stories of President Lincoln—How He Directed the Battle of Fredericksburg—His Interview With Tom Thumb and His Lunch of Beer and Crackers—The Dispatch That Downed McClellan—Reminiscences of Secretary Stanton—Telegraphing During a Battle and the Queer Adventures of a War Telegrapher—A Talk With One of Lincoln's Confidential Telegraph Operators.

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ONE OF THE greatest nerve centers of the late civil war was the telegraph office at the War department at Washington. Through it passed all the dispatches which came from the field, and by it were sent out the orders from President Lincoln and Secretary Stanton to the generals commanding. The most expert operators in the military telegraph corps were detailed for the war office. General Anson Stager, who had been superintendent of the Western Union telegraph, was the head, and next to him was General Thomas T. Eckert, who is now the manager of the Western Union telegraph lines. General Eckert is named the chief of bureaus to President Lincoln, and Lincoln used to chat by the hour with him in the telegraph office. Eckert was also a good story teller, and some of the best of Lincoln's stories were uttered while the operators were closing out messages of war. Under these chiefs there were a number of very fast telegraphers, among the brightest of whom was Edward Rosewater, now proprietor of the Omaha Bee. During the war Mr. Rosewater was for a time a telegrapher in the field. After the second battle of Bull Run he was brought to Washington to act as one of the confidential operators of the war department. During his stay in Washington on extra duty, and he has a number of most interesting stories of his experiences of the incidents of that time which have never been given to the public. I chatted with him the other night about the telegraph office of the war department and he:

"The war department during the time of President Lincoln was in the old war department building. This was a three story structure just above the White House. The telegraph office adjoined the office of Secretary Stanton. It consisted of two rooms, one of which was devoted to the preparation and deciphering of cipher messages, and another the operating room proper, which also contained the war department library. In the cipher room sat General Stager, General Eckert and two cipher operators. The operating room contained six marble tables, upon each of which was a telegraph instrument of the latest pattern. We had, you know, the finest machinery there was at that time, and the operators had to be fine players, and one of the requirements of the position was to be able to write out in legible hand with ink the dispatches as rapidly as they came from the wires. This is done by the operators now today. It was not so common then."

OUR WAR TELEGRAPH.

"Who organized our war telegraph, Mr. Rosewater?" I asked.

"General Anson Stager and General Eckert," was the reply. "General Stager was, you know, superintendent of the Western Union telegraph before the war began. He was called to Washington to take charge of the telegraph system and organize a military telegraph. The first wire built was that which ran from the war department to the navy yard. Then a system of communication was made with the camps lying within ten or twelve miles of the White House, and the cabinet thinking we could con with the navy superintend by a loop. The lines were soon extended to the Chain bridge, then over into Virginia and finally they had direct communication with all parts of the country. General Stager originated the cipher code to use in the department. He was an expert up your mount and in a time were ruling on the Pittsburg, Fort Wayne & Chicago road the two lines open which to nine miles of my telegraph office. General Stager cut the lines and by holding one above and one below his tongue was able to receive the messages by watching its movements caused by the electric shocks passing through it. By this means he received a reply that another engine would be sent to him at once. General Eckert was also an expert telegrapher. His relations with President Lincoln were very close, and he can, I venture, tell more good stories of Lincoln than any other man now living. President Lincoln often came to the telegraph office. He generally came in early in the morning and he often remained in the office at night when serious operations were going on in the field."

A STORY OF HALLECK.

"What were your arrangements for delivering messages at night, Mr. Rosewater?"

"There was, as a rule, not a great deal of work to be done at night," replied Mr. Rosewater, "though at times the wires were hot. I remember a great note of days I was the night chief of the office. I had in the corridor outside the operating rooms a half dozen cavalrymen, who were on hand to carry such dispatches as were important. I remember one night during the winter of 1863 that a telegram came urging that reinforcements be sent at once to Columbus, Kentucky. This was then a very important military point, and the rebels were moving upon it in large force, and the most powerful commanding had in his dispatch asked for reinforcements. The message came to me between midnight and 1 a. m. I handed it over to one of the orderlies, and told him to take it at once to General Halleck. I expected very soon after to receive order from Halleck as to the reinforcements. An hour passed by, nothing came. A second hour went by, and still no order. I was anxious for I feared that the wires might be cut or broken before morning, and in this case we could not hear the orders to our forces at Columbus. I remained on duty all night but no more came from Halleck. Between seven and eight o'clock in the morning I went out to my breakfast, and upon returning found that General Halleck had not yet ordered reinforcements. I asked the orderly if he had received the message, and, if so, why he had not brought an answer. He replied that General Halleck had given directions that he was never to be disturbed after midnight. The statement made me very angry. I wrote at the commanding general of the great army giving orders that he was to be awakened under no circumstances when such vital interests were under his charge seemed to be simply awful. I was so wrought up over the matter that I thought I would go to the president and tell him about the Halleck order. In the first place, however, I decided to ask General Stager, who was you know my superior officer. I did so, and told him that I was going to see the president. He replied by asking me what business it was of mine whether the order was sent or not. Said he: 'My boy, you have nothing to do with General Halleck's orders. We have done our duty. It is our business to receive and send dispatches, and that is all we do.' I was still angry, but after General Stager's making such a remark, I could do nothing. He was my superior officer, and his answer was in the nature of an order."

GENERAL BURNSIDE'S VIGILANCE.

"—as this the case with the other officers?" I asked.

"No," replied Mr. Rosewater. "Many of the officers watched things more carefully. Take General Burnside, for instance. He often remained up all night. I could see, in fact, tell when he slept, and I often wired his dispatches as late as 3 o'clock in the morning. He was known Burnside before I met Halleck, and I did not think much of a man who could not stay awake upon great occasions all night. General Burnside was in command at the battle of Fredericksburg, where he had, you know, seen a most disastrous defeat. He did not want to be commander of the army, and he told President Lincoln that he was not competent to take charge of it. Lincoln insisted, however, and he at last accepted the place. Burnside maintained that there was treachery in the war department, and that the rebels got the orders sent out from the war department as soon as he did, and that in this way they were able to counteract his proposed movements before he could move.

PRESIDENT LINCOLN IN THE TELEGRAPH OFFICE.

"Was Lincoln in the office at the time of the battle of Fredericksburg?" I asked.

"Yes," replied Mr. Rosewater. "He came into the office at 3 o'clock that morning, and remained there until long after dark. He came over from the White House in his slippers, I remember. It was Sunday, and he dispatches were going and coming all day. President Lincoln stood behind me much of the time and dictated the dispatches to me, which I wrote and sent. I took the answers as they came from the wires and handed them to him. We were working and receiving news all morning. At noon the dispatches were still coming, and instead of getting a lunch, Secretary Stanton sent his ice pitcher over to the Willard building and had it filled with beer, and this beer, with some crackers, made up the lunch of the party. General Eckert, Captain Fox, acting secretary of the navy, all taking their turn at the pitcher. President Lincoln took his share of the beer, and I can, I venture, one of the few times he ever taken a drink of beer with President Lincoln.'

"How did President Lincoln act at such times?"

"He was perfectly simple and unassuming," replied Mr. Rosewater. "He did not seem to all anxious during the battle, though it was going against us. The result was, you know, we lost defeat, and we lost more than 12,000 killed and wounded. Burnside did not want to make the attack, but he was overruled by Secretary Stanton and President Lincoln. My recollection is that Lincoln said to me that President Lincoln was very much depressed and worn. He was never, however, given to a loud or a laugh seemed to relieve him. Shortly after the battle of Fredericksburg Burnside was released from command and Frank Leslie's newspaper published an illustration in which Lincoln was represented as the high chief executioner with a great big axe in his hand chopping off heads. On the ground near him is the picture by McClellan's head, which had just been chopped off. On side this was the head of Burnside and there were other heads at hand ready to be cut off. It was not long after the fight that one of these papers was lying on one of the telegraph tables when Burnside's dispatches came in. Looking at it General Burnside entered. Two discussed the picture together and both laughed heartily over it."

ABE LINCOLN AND TOM THUMB.

"I suppose there were many funny things happening even during the dark and days of the war, were there not?"

"Yes," replied Mr. Rosewater. "There were many little interesting things which seemed silly to me at the time. The war was so serious that I could not appreciate that good much like that of President Lincoln must have relaxed. I remember once when Tom Thumb, the famous Tom Thumb and General Nutt were brought by P. T. Barnum to the White House. President Lincoln and his cabinet gave a business or an hour and spent it in being entertained by them. This at the time seemed to me outrageous. I thought it was a very untimely proceeding to engross the attention of the president at such a time, but it was perhaps a needed relaxation. I saw Tom Thumb after wards and he told me that he rode to the White House that day in a carriage which was given to him by Queen Victoria."

M'CLELLAN AND HIS HORSES' TOBOGGAN.

"Did President Lincoln really know much about the operations of the war?" I asked.

"Yes, indeed. President Lincoln knew of every movement on the military chess board. He directed many of the moves himself. It was he who removed McClellan. I don't think the real story of this order has ever been told. It was just after the battle of Antietam in September, 1862. Both Lincoln and Stanton had been urging McClellan to move on after General Lee's army and capture it. I sent for President Lincoln's message after message to McClellan, directing him to move on, and McClellan repeatedly replied that rapid movement was impossible. He held back on various pretexts, and finally sent a message which capped the climax. This last telegram was as follows:

"President Lincoln:

"We are still delayed. Cavalry horses' tongues are sore.

(Signed) "GEORGE B. McCLELLAN."

"The idea of stopping a great army because of the soreness of the tongues of the horses was more than Lincoln could stand. Within an hour after the telegram came McClellan was off. An order was issued relieving him of the command of the Army of the Potomac."

BEHIND THE SCENES WITH STANTON.

"How did Secretary Stanton impress you?" I asked.

"Like M. Simon second to none in man of great force," replied Editor Rosewater. "There was no flying about him, and he did an enormous amount of work. You must remember that there were no stenographers or typewriters then to write dispatches and letters. Stanton wrote the most of his dispatches, which were very numerous. I sent all many telegrams for President and Mrs. Lincoln, and it was a curious thing to me that Mrs. Lincoln's hand writing was so much like that of the president that you could hardly tell them apart. At Sir General Burnside, he wrote a worse hand than Horace Greeley. Secretary Stanton's penmanship was a long, round hand."

TELEGRAPHING DURING A BATTLE.

"How about your work with the army, Mr. Rosewater? Telegraphing during a battle must be very exciting?"

"Yes, it is," replied Mr. Rosewater. "I was in a number of minor engagements, and I did all the telegraphing that was done for our army at the second battle of Bull Run. I remember that I was going to move right out to Manassas at that time, and I asked that I might be detailed to accompany General Pope so that I might be one of the first to arrive at the rebel capital. At Bull Run I had my instrument placed on the ground among the dead horses. There was dancing going on around me, and I could not tell whether we were whipping the rebels or whether they were whipping us. General Pope was sending dispatches all day, saying that he was victorious, and I supposed that we were really being defeated. At the first battle of Bull Run, you know, there was a line of scatters, which brought the news to Fairfax court house, from where it was telegraphed to Washington. The wire was not carried to the battle field, but the news was brought for ten miles to Fairfax station, and then sent. On the day of the battle the telegraph office, desk, chair, etc., consisted of a railroad tie, upon which the instrument was placed. The operator was a tree near Rose. He sent dispatches up and down stream, stating that everything was going well, and that for a time there was no news, and finally came a dispatch stating 'Our army is in full retreat.' President Lincoln and his cabinet were in the war department office at the time, and the news was great shock to them. That same night, however, orders were telegraphed over the country for reinforcements, and you know those men reached within two days."

"What kind of machinery did you carry with you to the field?" I asked.

"Not much," replied Mr. Rosewater. "During my service with General Frémont in West Virginia, as well as in the campaign with General Pope, all I had was a pocket instrument about three inches wide and six inches long. I could carry my instrument with me wherever at any point, and could disconnect it when we were through telegraphing. Wherever the army was stationed for any length of time we would establish an office immediately, we had a built placed on the ground for the instrument, and we set up the ground to do our telegraphing. The war telegraphers were soon watched by sharpshooters, and we had to be careful in selecting our positions. Sometimes the telegraph instrument would be placed in front of the army, and sometimes it would be away to the rear. The day before the second battle of Bull Run the wires had been cut between Manassas and Warrenton, Va., and I was sent out with a reconnoitering expedition to reestablish the connection. We had three men with us besides myself. We were attacked by artillery and flanked by cavalry, but we were able, notwithstanding, to connect the wires."

STORIES OF LINCOLN.

"Tell me how Abraham Lincoln looked when you saw him in the war department at that time."

"It was just like his picture, only possibly a little more worn. His eyes, you know, were brown. They were very sonorous eyes, and a peculiar thing about them was that you could see them in the dark, as you can those of some animals. They were deep set eyes, and they looked down upon you from under heavy brows. They were different from any eyes I have ever seen, and were at times full of friendliness and good nature.

"Speaking of Lincoln's appearance," continued Mr. Rosewater, "he was by no means averse to joking about himself. At one time while he was in the telegraph office the newsboys outside were calling out the papers. The Washington newsboys have a very funny pronunciation, and as Lincoln heard it he said to the operators:

"'Tell Lucy to if you the joke the Chicago newsboys send us on me?'

"The operators replied that he had not, and Lincoln went on:

"'It was but a short time before my first nomination, when I was at Chicago attending to some law business. The photographer had taken me to sit for a picture, and I did so. I had just had my coat cut, and my head, as is sometimes seen at best, looked especially rough through the new cutting. Just after my nomination some copies of this picture were printed and sent to the newsboys, who, having noted the face, yelled out as their cry:

"'Here's your picture of old Abe! He'll look better when he gets his hair combed.'"

"As Lincoln told this he laughed over it as heartily as it was a good joke on somebody else instead of himself."

Frank G. Carpenter

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