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William C. Nelson to Maria C. Nelson (10 October 1861)

William Cowper Nelson

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Camp Esau, near Pensacola, Oct. 10th

My Darling Mother:

I seize the first opportunity, since our return from the Santa Rosa expedition, to inform you of ^{my} safety. I intended to have written last night, but was so much exhausted that I was unable to do so; this letter ^{however} will leave Pensacola as soon as it would have done had I written last night, as I intend sending it by private conveyance. I will now proceed to give you a full account of the expedition, and of as many incidents as came under my immediate observation. On last Monday night, our company in conjunction with two others from our Regiment, the Irrepressibles and Duitman's Rifle ^{Guard} were ordered to sleep on their arms, and be ready to march at a moment's warning, thirty pounds of cartridges were distributed, and we retired without taking off our clothes, nothing however occurred to disturb us that night, the next morning ten more rounds of car-

were given
bridges, and it ^{was} rumored that we would
have to march somewhere, some said to
Perdido river, others to the Navy Yard, some few
thought that Santa Rosa was our destination
but nothing definite was known, we were formed
into line about half past five, and commenced
our march, we first marched to Barrancas
redoubt and waited there about half an
hour, where we were joined by detachments
from the Alabama and Georgia Regiments, we
then marched on to the Navy Yard, by
detachments of the Louisiana and Florida
troops, we then embarked on board a steamer,
and steered for Pensacola, we arrived there
about 11 o'clock, about an hour was occupied
in disembarking, and ^{re}embarking on board
of barges, a small steamer took us in tow and
we steered for Santa Rosa Island, we had
to go very slow, and we were probably an
hour reaching land, we landed about six
or seven miles above the fort, and com-
menced our march towards it, our company
was the head of the column, we had about
1000 men in all, it was three or four
miles before we came to any pickets, I

had been out with a small party scouting
but had returned to my company when
we first came to the sentinels, there was
a scout on about 20 steps ahead of
our company he came suddenly up on
the sentinels around a corner, and shot
him before he could give the alarm,
we went on very rapidly then, Capt,
Benton came up to the next sentinel,
he started to run, the Capt after him
he was probably about 6 paces behind
him, when he turned around and fired
at the Captain, missing him however,
the Captain then struck him over the
head with his sword, and felled him
to the earth, when some one else ran
up and dispatched him with his bay
onet, we kept on advancing killing the
spickets, as we went until we came to the
Camp of Billy Wilsons, you ares, these we
set fire to, I was one of the party who
went to the commissary building
to fire it, we found some seven or
eight mules in there, we took these
out before we set fire to the building

I managed to secure one, and I and another member of our company mounted him and rode him about a mile. The most of the Yankees who were in their tents ran in at the first alarm, a good many however were killed in their tents and ~~at~~ about 15 or 20 taken prisoners. We had in the meantime spiked 9 guns, 3 rifled cannon, and 6 columbiads, there were very few batteries on the island. Having succeeded in our object, which was only to spike guns, burn and destroy property, and take prisoners we started back for our boats. I was riding along in the rear, when I met Lieut. Patton coming back hunting for Capt. Benton. I immediately offered my mule for some one to ride back to hunt for him. I dismounted, and another man was preparing to mount him, when an officer ~~came up~~ ^{came up}, riding a splendid sorrel horse. I challenged him, asking, who is that? he replied, "who in the hell are you, I am the Quarrel Officer of the Post." he immediately drew a pistol, but before he could shoot.

Billy Ellis who was standing near me shot him thru with his musket, his horse wheeled and ran off towards the Fort, he clung on for about 50 yards, when he fell I think, as we were returning we fell in with several parties of the enemy, and several little fights took place, in one of which a gentleman by the name of Webber in our company was killed. He was shot through the head, and didn't live 5 minutes. We succeeded in reaching our boats, ^{a little after sunrise} and had gotten out in the bay a little way when a detachment of about 300 Dickinites made their appearance, and commenced firing at us, we returning their shots with interest, two or three men belonging to our side who were in the boats were killed. I was standing on the deck of steamer, with the balls whizzing all around, we had got some distance out, and the firing had almost

ceased when a minnie ball passed within
a few feet of me and struck General
Anderson, inflicting a slight flesh wound
in his side, they had just taken him
down, when another one came along and
struck me, cutting my canteen strap in
two and passing through my haversack
and striking me on the hip, it
was so far spent however and meeting
with the obstructions which it did, that
it did not penetrate the flesh, but
merely bruised it a little, it hit
pretty hard though and hurt con-
siderably at first, I thought sure
I was wounded, and remarked so
to Mr. Clark who was standing some
little distance from me, he told me
to lie down, which I did, when
I soon discovered that I was not
hurt, still man in our company was wound-
ed in the shoulder, while in the boat, not
severely however, I have just seen
a letter from Dr. Gholson, he (as well
Dr. Lipscomb and Dr. DeRoche) was taken
prisoner, his letter is dated Fort. Pickens

he says he has been treated very kindly
and courteously and has no reasons
to complain. We took a Major of
theirs and Lieutenant, besides a good
many of Billy Wilson's pet Lambs,
they are very fierce-looking, but they
won't fight worth a cent. I believe
if General Bragg had opened on
the Fort, while we were burning
their camp, we could have taken
it easily. We destroyed about
200,000 dollars worth of property,
150 barrels of pork, 300 of flour,
besides all other kinds of provisions.
Some of our men got whole suits
of clothes, several of them took swords
and minnie muskets, one man
in our company brought back a
cartridge box, and after he got to
Camp he found 3 twenty dollar gold
pieces in it. I did not touch a dead
body, nor did I take a single thing
out of a tent. I send you the ball
which struck me, you will see by

the indenture, that it was put in
wrong, the sharp point ought to
have been out, had it been loaded
right, it would probably have
killed, as they go with a great
deal more force than. Young Aston
in Britian Guards was very severely
wounded, we lost about a dozen
killed in all.

Good bye,

Your loving son

Will. E. Nelson