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The Last
Great Stoneman
Raid

By WM. BUSHONG, CO. C

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1910

The Last Great Stoneman Raid

BY WILLIAM BUSHONG, CO. C.

On the 20th day of March, 1865, President Lincoln and General Sherman were in consultation with General Grant at his headquarters near Petersburg, Va., while Sherman's army was at Goldsboro, N. C.

On this morning (the 20th of March), General George Stoneman left Knoxville, Tenn., with three brigades of cavalry.

The First Brigade was commanded by Col. W. J. Palmer of the 15th Pennsylvania Cavalry and consisted of the 15th Pennsylvania, the 10th Michigan and the 12th Ohio.

The Second Brigade was commanded by Col. Miller, and consisted of the 9th, 10th and 12th Tennessee Regiments.

The Third Brigade was commanded by Col. S. B. Brown of the 11th Michigan, and was composed of the 11th Michigan and two regiments of Kentucky troops.

All under the personal command of General Stoneman.

The Division moved rapidly to Strawberry Plains, through Bulls Gap to Jonesborough, reaching the Wataga river on the 26th. Turning southeast, and by a rapid march the Division crossed the mountains into North Carolina.

At Boone, N. C., the Division encountered a large force of home-guards, capturing four hundred prisoners.

From Boone the column turned eastward to Wilksboro, N. C., then turning northward pushed on to Dobson, a town near the Virginia line, crossing into Virginia at Hillsville. Turning eastward passed through Jacksonville, then turning northward to Christiansburg, arriving here on the 4th day of April. Christiansburg was a large town on East Tennessee and Virginia railroad.

The surprise of the town was complete. The telegraph office was captured, and Stoneman's operator taking a seat at the instrument chatted a half hour with the operator at Lynchburg before that operator suspected that he was imparting secrets of the dying Confederacy to a Yankee.

The distance from Knoxville to Christiansburg is 350 miles, but Stoneman, in his zigzag course, had traveled over 600 miles in fifteen days.

If Stoneman's purpose was to deceive and confuse the enemy, he was remarkably successful, for his own officers and men were kept in ignorance of the object of the expedition.

At Christiansburg, while destroying the railroad, the truth dawned upon us; we were cutting the last avenue of escape that lay open to General Lee, and were a part of the machine by which the last great army of the Confederacy was to be destroyed.

I have said that General Grant was at Petersburg. Stoneman, with his troopers, was the hand with which he reached out to cut off Lee's escape.

From this moment Stoneman's men felt that the end was near, and we would be in at the death.

After destroying twenty-five miles of the East Tennessee and Virginia railroad, the Division dashed off in a south-easterly direction to Martinsville, West Virginia.

From the rapidity of our march it was clear that more important work was ahead of us.

Crossing into North Carolina we passed through German-town, Salem, Winston, and on the 9th of April we struck the Danville and Richmond railroad at Greensboro. Soon, ten miles of this important railroad was destroyed.

Twenty miles south of Greensboro lay Salisbury, the place of the one prison pen in the Confederacy that could fairly dispute the first honor with Andersonville.

Salisbury was also an important depot of Confederate supplies and was garrisoned by five thousand men under General Gardner who, when he heard of the Yankee Cavalry tearing up the railroad at Greensboro, at once marched out to drive away the raiders, as he well understood the importance of the Danville and Richmond railroad at this moment.

The force led out from Salisbury by General Gardner to defend and protect this railroad consisted of four thousand infantry and fourteen pieces of artillery.

This force was encountered by General Stoneman at the Yadkin river, about ten miles from Salisbury.

The Union Cavalry men drew their sabers and literally cut the entire rebel force to pieces, capturing the fourteen pieces of artillery and over thirteen hundred prisoners.

Stoneman's loss in killed and wounded was very slight.

During the night Stoneman's force moved cautiously on, and before morning occupied the town of Salisbury, capturing a vast collection of ammunition, provision, clothing and small arms. These, with an immense amount of cotton, were destroyed.

The tracks of the different railroads at this point were also destroyed, but that part of the work at Salisbury in which the soldiers took most delight, was the burning of the infamous prison pen in which so many thousands of our comrades had starved and frozen to death. There were the burroughs and holes which those wretched men had dug in the ground for a miserable shelter.

There were the walls from which the brutal sentinels had fired on the starving, defenseless men, and there were the broad acres of thickly planted head boards, beneath which 12,126 soldiers of the republic, dead from starvation and exposure, were laid for their last sleep, to awake again at the last roll call in the great hereafter.

A few hundred wretched survivors were found, but all who were able to be moved had been exchanged the previous February.

The sight of all this produced a profound impression upon officers and men.

That they did not at once sweep the town from the face of the earth, was because they were soldiers actuated by a higher motive than even a just revenge.

The stockade and prison buildings were burned, but no citizen's property was destroyed. The main purpose of the expedition was now accomplished.

The East Tennessee and Virginia and the Danville and Richmond railroads were destroyed, and as the Coast railroad from Richmond to Savannah was in the hands of General Sherman, Lee was hopelessly isolated from the Gulf States. Stoneman's work was done, and on the 17th of April he started on his return to Tennessee, taking with him the brigades of Brown and Miller.

Col. Palmer, with his brigade, was ordered to Lincolnton, about fifty miles south of Salisbury. He found Lincolnton in the possession of a small force of Confederates, who were soon routed by Col. Palmer's escort, composed of Co. C., 12th Ohio Cavalry. As the rear guard of the brigade entered the town a force of four or five hundred rebel cavalry was seen leisurely approaching. An exciting horse race of three or four miles ensued and a part of the force were captured. From the prisoners it was learned that they were a part of Vaughn's Brigade, who were endeavoring to join Wheeler's Cavalry Division at Charlotte, South Carolina.

During the night of April 19th Major E. C. Moderwell, of the 12th Ohio Cavalry, was ordered by Col. Palmer to take two hundred and fifty picked men and go quietly, but with all possible speed on an expedition to destroy a bridge of the Charlotte and South Carolina railroad over the Catawba river, a distance of eighty miles from Lincolnton.

The Cavalry Brigades of Vaughn and Basswell Duke were in the Catawba Valley. Jeff Davis was at Charlotte, not many miles distant, under the protection of Wheeler's Cavalry. Both of these forces it was necessary for Moderwell to avoid.

At Dallas, North Carolina, early on the morning of the 20th, Moderwell ran upon a large force of Vaughn's Cavalry. A brisk skirmish ensued and thirty-five prisoners were captured.

Avoiding a general engagement, Moderwell pushed forward and early the next morning reached the vicinity of the bridge. A picket post commanded by a Lieutenant with about thirty men were completely surprised and captured, without a shot being fired by either side.

Knowing the desperate character of the situation, Moderwell determined to try a little stratagem. A hasty consultation with Captain DuBois settled that the Major should pass for General Stoneman and the Captain for General Gillum. Gum overcoats helped in the deception.

Major Moderwell said in the presence of the rebel Lieutenant: "General Gillum order Captain Hill to put his battery in position and open fire on the bridge at once."

At this the Lieutenant said: "General, I think the Major commanding will surrender if you will make the demand."

(The fact is that we did not have a piece of artillery within a hundred miles of us that we knew of.)

A flag of truce was sent in accompanied by the rebel Lieutenant with the following note:

Headquarters U. S. Cavalry Corps.
To the Officer Commanding at the Catawba Bridge:

Dear Sir:—In order to prevent unnecessary shedding of blood, I demand the unconditional surrender of the forces under your command.

GEORGE STONEMAN, Major General.
Commanding U. S. Forces.

General Gillum (Captain DuBois) represented the futility of attempting to hold the place, the rebel Lieutenant also stated what a large force he had seen and what he had heard General Stoneman say.

The rebel Major stormed and swore, but finally returned the following reply:

To General Stoneman, Commanding U. S. Forces:

Sir:—Owing to the cowardly surrender of my picket post and in consequence of the vastly superior force of your command, I surrender this garrison with its military stores.

E. M. JONES, Major Commanding.

The garrison consisted of seven officers and two hundred and twenty-five men, who were soon paroled. The small arms of the garrison were broken to pieces and the two pieces of artillery were spiked and run on the bridge, which was fired, and in less than thirty minutes had burned from end to end.

This bridge was the finest structure of its kind in the Confederacy, and when destroyed was beyond their power to rebuild.

It was eleven hundred feet long and supported by ten stone piers.

While the bridge was burning a brigade of rebel cavalry under General Ferguson came up on the opposite side and attempted to cross the river at a ford, but a few shots from our Spencer carbines soon taught them that it was not healthy to cross there. Major Moderwell held the ford until dark, but midnight found us thirty miles from the bridge. Men and horses almost exhausted, when we

camped for the night. At daylight a rebel officer appeared at our picket post with a flag of truce with a request from General Ferguson to General Stoneman for a cessation of hostilities for five days, which Moderwell eagerly granted, and that afternoon we joined the brigade at Dallas.

The result of this little expedition was the destruction of the most important bridge in the Confederacy, the capture of three hundred and twenty-five prisoners, two hundred and fifty small arms and two pieces of artillery. Of this expedition Mr. Lossing in his "Civil War in America" said: "It was one of the most gallant exploits of the war."

It was now the 22d of April, the army of Lee had gone down before General Grant, and Generals Sherman and Johnson had declared a truce between their two armies.

Intelligence of the armistice reached Col. Palmer by a courier sent from Sherman, then in the vicinity of Raleigh.

On the 24th Col. Palmer broke camp at Dallas and started toward Knoxville. At Henderson, N. C., word came to Palmer that the armistice was suspended. The same courier brought an order from Stoneman for Palmer to turn southward and instantly join in the pursuit of Jeff Davis. Here also Col. Palmer received a dispatch confirming the report that President Lincoln had been assassinated.

Well was it for the armies of the South that they had yielded before this electric poison was instilled into the hearts of the Union soldiers. For a moment the feeling of regret among the Union soldiers was that this great wrong could not be avenged on the field of battle. Such was the sentiment that nerved the officers and men of Palmer's brigade as they left Henderson at dawn on the 27th of April, 1865, to join in the pursuit of Jeff Davis.

Palmer moved rapidly past Kings Mountain, crossed the mountains that divide the Carolinas at Hickory Gap, and on the 29th crossed the revolutionary battlefield of Cowpens, and on the same evening reached Smith's ford on the Pacolot river.

Here Jeff Davis had crossed only forty-eight hours previous.

On May 1st the brigade reached Spartansburg, South Carolina.

After marching all day and all night, on the morning of the second camped on the bank of the Saluda river near the Georgia line. After a rest of a few hours the brigade crossed the river on a long covered bridge, and on that day and night made an extraordinary march of eighty miles, arriving at Athens, Georgia, in the morning. This town up to this date had been free from Yankee invasion.

The place contained a considerable depot of supplies, and a large arsenal, at which the manufacture of small arms and cartridges was still going on.

At the arsenal a company of home guards attempted to make a defense.

Here the brigade remained one whole day. During the day some men of the 12th O. V. C. took possession of a newspaper establishment and issued the first and only number of a small "extra" entitled the "Yankee Raider," which perhaps was read but not enjoyed by the citizens of the place.

At Athens, Col. Palmer gained some vague information of the course of Jeff Davis, and the next day made a rapid march to Monroe, Georgia. Here it became apparent that we were on the immediate track of the fugitive Davis, and the brigade was deployed across the country, so as to sweep every road for a breadth of fifty miles. In this way the brigade swept over the country, capturing large parties of fugitives from the armies of Lee and Johnson, and several times coming within a few hours of Davis. In this way Palmer drove Davis with his family directly into the arms of General Wilson, who, coming up from his raid toward Mobile, deployed his cavalry over the country, and advancing toward Palmer, caught the fugitive traitor in a trap from which there was no escape.

As soon as the capture of Davis was secure, Palmer sent word along his line directing his men to look out for the rabble of Confederates who were swarming from the disorganized armies of Lee and Johnson, a great many of whom had disregarded the terms of surrender and had set out for their homes without signing or accepting the parole specified in the capitulation.

For a few days Palmer's men were busy capturing, disarming and paroling such as came that way. Among those captured in this way was Major General Wheeler and staff, whose paroles proved to be forgeries.

General Bragg and several other General officers, the Vice President of the Confederacy, Alexander H. Stevens, fell into the hands of Palmer.

Our work was accomplished, and it only remained for Palmer to bring his men back to Tennessee, a distance of two hundred miles, the distance was insignificant, but our route lay through the track of Sherman's army the year before. How the remainder of the brigade reached Tennessee, we of the 12th Ohio Cavalry, never knew.

The 12th Ohio, under the command of Lieut. Col. Bentley, crossed the Chattahoochee river at Warsaw, and on the 13th of May passed the battle scarred Kennesaw and Lost Mountains, crossing the Georgia Railroad at Tuhlahoma, and on the 15th crossed the line into Alabama and camped at Cross Plains.

The next day the regiment crossed the Coosa river at Gadsden and entered the mountain district of Northern Alabama, and on the 18th reached the Tennessee river at Kirby's Ford. Soon after going into camp on the river

bank, a U. S. gun boat came up the river, and seeing the strangely dressed soldiers on shore, they ran out their guns for a fight, but one of the soldiers waved a small U. S. flag, but the naval men were with difficulty persuaded that the ragged and promiscuously clad regiment belonged to the Union army.

Finding it impossible to cross the river here, on account of the swollen condition of the stream, Col. Bentley turned northeast, and for three days and nights traveled almost without forage and rations over one of the roughest roads it had been our bad fortune to encounter.

Finally just at sunset on the 23d of May, the first day of the grand review at Washington, the weary and travel stained regiment wound down the mountain into the valley of the Tennessee river at Bridgeport, Alabama.

Here at last were rations and feed that did not have to be stolen.

Since the 20th day of March the regiment had not drawn a government ration nor seen the National flag, except our regimental guidons.

During that period we had traversed six States, had shared in the last and longest cavalry raid of the Civil war.

Isolated as we were, and overshadowed by the greater events which had taken place just as it was sweeping through Virginia and the Carolinas, the Division of Stoneman had almost been forgotten.

The people had seen Lee stopped in his flight by some unknown obstacle. They knew that Jeff Davis had been driven into the clutches of General Wilson and captured, but in their joyousness over the general result they had been indifferent as to the methods by which it had been accomplished.

This last great raid had given the final thrust to the dying Confederacy, but it was outshone by the grander events at Raleigh and Appomattox.

General J. D. Cox, at Chicago, in 1868, referred to this final expedition in the following words:

"In March, 1865, General Stoneman made another important expedition out of East Tennessee into southwestern Virginia and the Carolinas, destroying the railroads by which escape from Richmond was possible for Lee's army, and performed services which, but for the fact that it occurred during the general crash of the rebellion, would have attracted universal attention.

"A little later the same dashing horseman had almost succeeded in capturing the person of Jefferson Davis, whose escort surrendered, but he himself by changing his direction of flight toward the Atlantic coast escaped for the moment, but only to fall into the hands of General Wilson and his gallant troopers."

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