

THE ROAD TO GLORIFETA



"We saw him fearlessly lead the desperate charge which wreathed our banners with victory's laurels." "A better man never lived; a better man never died." - Sharp Whitley

Following the successful repulse of the Federal Navy from Galveston (See Confederate Army of New Mexico Epilogue), William Read Scurry remained in the Houston area with Major General John Bankhead Magruder. Impressed with the brigadier's competence and zeal, Magruder soon assigned Scurry to command of the Eastern Sub-District of Texas. Col. X.B. Debray, the area's former commander, was in turn given jurisdiction over Galveston Island and Virginia Point. As commander of the Sub-District, Scurry was handed a force with an aggregate strength of nearly 10,000. It was an important post. His new command consisted of 7,782 men present and ready for duty; 258 officers, 4,024 infantry, and about 3,500 cavalry. It also included another 2,115 who were either absent or on leave. (1)

Confident in General Scurry's abilities, Magruder left Houston in late February, 1863, to conduct a tour of observation and inspection of the defenses of the coast and the western part of the state. With both General Magruder and Brigadier General H.P. Bee involved in matters of great importance on the Rio Grande frontier, Scurry was left as the only general officer in the Eastern Sub-District. (2)

During the ensuing couple of months, much of Scurry's attention focused on Texan coastal defenses, including the repair and refitting of the captured Union steamship Harriet Lane. Following General Magruder's orders, Scurry used all his energy, and his thorough knowledge of the resources of the country, to improve the defenses of Galveston and the Sabine River. Under his command, troops were put in a state of efficiency and the area's works into good condition. He was also enjoined "to cause three regiments of cavalry to march at once to the northeastern frontier," with orders to round up deserters from Lieutenant General Holmes command in Arkansas and send

them back. This service was "considered to be of the last importance" and Scurry was told that it should "be vigorously executed." (3)

Towards the end of March, General Magruder also placed Scurry in command of "The Frontier Regiment of State Troops." With this unit and others, he was "charged to stretch" a line of men, "across the Indian frontier from Montgomery County to Fort Clark." Scurry was to occupy and preserve existing posts along this line, and "to form a secure protection for persons and property" from Indian depredation. If any of the posts were too far apart to prevent Indian invasion, he was to establish intermediate posts. The Frontier Regiment was initially a Texas militia organization, but it was to be accepted into Confederate service on the condition the troops "be supplied in every respect by the State of Texas."(4)

The logistics of his various assignments kept William Scurry busy at his Houston headquarters until April 22, 1863, when Kirby Smith sent word of General Richard Taylor's defeat at Bisland (See Confederate Army of New Mexico and Henry Hopkins Sibley Epilogues). Because of the subsequent Confederate retreat from southern Louisiana, Scurry was ordered to concentrate all available forces within his reach at or near Niblett's Bluff on the Sabine River. He was also ordered to "concentrate supplies and transportation for any prompt movement." General Smith believed that a mobilization on the Sabine would check any Union advance by Nathaniel Banks towards Texas. It also placed Scurry in a position to support Smith's other forces in the northern portion of the Department. (5)

Scurry, acted quickly, and on April 24, he ordered: Stone's regiment, Partisan Rangers, Philip's regiment of Baylor's Arizona Brigade, and Gurley's 30th Texas Cavalry to immediately take up the line-of-march, and report to General Smith by courier. A week later he added, Colonel Charles Pyron's regiment, Colonel J. Bates regiment, and Lieutenant Colonel Spaight's battalion. On May 14, Kirby Smith ordered Major General John G. Walker to march his division to join Taylor above Natchitoches. General Scurry, waiting at Niblett's Bluff, was also ordered to concentrate at Nacogdoches. General Magruder, meanwhile, sent word, that he had secretly ordered 2,000 troops from the frontier. These troops, he informed Scurry, would shortly join him on the march to Louisiana. All available forces in Texas were moving east. (6)

In time, these reinforcements reached General Taylor and were absorbed into his operations. General Scurry resumed his role as a field officer, and around September of 1863 was placed in command of the 3rd Brigade of Major General John G. Walker's Texas Division. His new

command consisted of: the 16th Texas Volunteer Infantry, 16th Texas Dismounted Cavalry, the 17th Texas Volunteer Infantry, and the 19th Texas Volunteer Infantry. (7)

Leading these troops, Scurry continued to show an aggressive strength that engendered confidence in both his men and his superiors. In March of 1864, the Federals were constructing a new fort at Plaquemine. General Taylor, contemplating an attack against the works and its 600 man garrison, wrote to General Walker; "Scurry can take the place with 500 picked men." "If you lay out the plan for him," Taylor told Walker, "Scurry will do it if possible." During the battles of Mansfield and Pleasant Hill, General Scurry led his brigade into action on the Confederate right flank. At Mansfield, troops under Scurry, working in concert with Generals, Walker, Bee, and Waul, "swept all before them." "Nothing could arrest the astonishing ardor and courage of our troops," reported Taylor. At Pleasant Hill, Scurry was again at the front. Despite being slightly wounded, he "behaved nobly." Looking back, one of his troopers wrote; "We saw his bold form towering above the lines of battle," and, "we heard his words of gallant cheer to the soldiers, who loved him." (8)

After the battle, General Taylor wanted to aggressively pursue Banks' retreating army. He was overruled by Kirby Smith. The commander of the Trans-Mississippi was gravely concerned about a Federal column, advancing from Little Rock under the command of Major General Frederick Steele. The size of Steele's force "was estimated at 10,000 men of all arms, with 25 pieces of artillery, and a train of 400 wagons." Instead of sanctioning Taylor's pursuit, Smith withdrew Walker's Texas Division and ordered it to march to Arkansas. General Taylor strongly believed, that Bank's hasty retreat would force Steele to fall back, and that action against his column was unwarranted. A feud promptly developed between Taylor and Smith over the decision. Taylor felt, that by withdrawing Walker, Smith had yanked the rug from under his operations. On June, 1864, he wrote to Smith; "The fruits of Mansfield have been turned to dust and ashes." "After the desire to serve my country, I have none more ardent than to be relieved from longer serving under your command." (9)

Making a forced march, Walker's infantry division hurried north to intercept Steele. As Taylor predicted, the Union column was already in retreat. Upon learning of Bank's collapse, General Steele had turned his force around and headed back to Little Rock. During his withdrawal, he was pursued and closely harassed by Arkansas and Missouri troops under Major General Sterling Price.

Price's sub-commanders were aggressive and competent, and in several sharp actions they defeated Union details and captured much of Steele's supply train. (10)

About noon on the 30th of April, a rattling of musketry told General Scurry and the other men of Walker's Division, that they had at last, and rather unexpectedly, overtaken the enemy. The Federals had erected a pontoon bridge and were in the act of crossing the Saline River, at a point known as Jenkins Ferry. Sterling Price's Army of Arkansas was already contesting their crossing. Price's men had marched through a dark night with heavy rain and fallen on the retreating Federals at first light. As soon as Steele realized, that an engagement was inevitable, he had turned to fight. He ordered those troops, which were already across the Saline, to re-cross, and "formed his line of battle in the form of a crescent around his pontoon bridge." Steele's position was a strong one, and his men further strengthened it, using such logs as were conveniently at hand to throw up temporary works. "The location was in a thickly-timbered bottom and the ground was covered with water, from ankle to knee deep." (11)

The marshy ground was almost impassable. Neither side was able to use its artillery effectively, rendering the battle a duel of small arms. As Walker's Texas Division approached, a rattling fire of musketry was plainly heard at their front. "At first a few scattering shots were heard; quickly, volleys of platoons succeeded, and soon the fire extended and increased, until the rolling reports of long lines of musketry could be distinctly recognized." General Kirby Smith, who was now in personal command of the Confederate forces, told Walker, that "the Arkansas and Missouri troops were at it, hot and heavy, and to press on the Texans." Sterling Price's troops were engaged for more than an hour, advancing all the while, when suddenly the right of Brigadier General Thomas J. Churchill's division gave way. With their ammunition exhausted, Price ordered Churchill's men to retire. Into this void rushed William Read Scurry with Walker's 3rd Brigade. (12)

Moving headlong into action, Scurry's men fiercely engaged the enemy. For the next forty minutes, while Price's men rested and refilled their cartridge boxes, Scurry's brigade sustained the Confederate right wing without assistance against 7,000. During this action, William Scurry was mortally wounded. When his soldiers wanted to bear him off the field, he refused. Instead he told them to return to their places and ordered his officers to advance the brigade. The roar of musketry was deafening. "The tide of battle ebbed and flowed - now advancing, then receding; but at no time did the ground fought over vary more than two hundred and fifty yards."

Amid a falling rain and heavy fog, the lines convulsed back and forth, their position only discovered by the flash of their muskets. Eventually, overwhelming numbers forced General Scurry's command back about fifty yards. "This ground was not regained until two hours later, when the enemy was repulsed and the Confederate forces were victorious." During all this time William Scurry lay bleeding on the ground between the combatants. When his soldiers finally again reached him, his first words were; "Have we whipped them?" Then with his life slipping away, he said; "Now take me to a house where I can be made comfortable and die easy." (13)

Nightfall found the Confederate army in control of the field. Steele's men, after violently contesting the battle for nearly six hours had yielded the ground. Withdrawing across their India rubber pontoon bridge and slashing the pontoons behind them, the Federals left behind their dead and wounded, many wagons, and large amounts of supplies. That night, the Rebels camped near the field of battle, wet and cold; buoyed by their victory, but dispirited by their losses. (14)

Scarcely two weeks after Thomas Green charged into glory at Blair's Landing, he was joined in death by William Read Scurry (See Thomas Green Epilogue). On the morning of May 1st, General Scurry's troops were given the melancholy news that the "Hero of Glorieta" had died during the night. Later that same day, Scurry's remains were carried to the little town of Tulip, about eight miles away. His body was escorted by Walker's entire division, and the following morning, he was given a funeral with full military honors. "Our leader has fallen!" read part of his obituary notice. "Brigadier General William R. Scurry is dead. He fell on the field of battle, in the arms of victory, the place where heroes die. But oh! the price of victory! The precious offering of noble, generous, and heroic heart's blood has brought mourning to his conquering brigade. How difficult it is to realize that he is numbered with the heroic dead of the world's grand revolutions, the illustrious hosts of Freedom's martyrs!" After the ceremony, Scurry's body was returned to Texas, where in May he was buried in the State Cemetery. Lieutenant Governor Fletcher S. Stockdale delivered the funeral oration. Scurry County, Texas is named in William's honor. (15)

Footnotes (See *The Road to Glorieta* for bibliography)

1. OR,I,XV,p.979 General Orders No. 24, Hdqrts. Dist. of Tex., N. Mex., and Ariz.;
- OR,I,XV,p.1001, Abstract of Return of the District of Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona.
2. OR,I,XV,p.1000, Special Orders, No. 88, Hdqrts. Dist. of Tex., N. Mex., and Ariz.
3. OR,I,XV,p.1004, Special Orders No. 91, Hdqrts. Dist. of Tex., N. Mex., and Ariz.
4. OR,I,XV,pp.1027-1028, E.P. Turner to Brig. Gen. W.R. Scurry; OR,I,XV,p.1034, E.P. Turner to Brig. Gen. W.R. Scurry.

5. Scurry was also informed that, large numbers of stragglers and deserters from Taylor's army were making their way towards Texas, and General Smith directed him; "use all means in your power and call upon the civil authorities to assist in collecting these men and rendezvous them at Niblett's Bluff." OR,I,XV,p.1047, W.R.Boggs to Brigadier General Scurry; OR,I,XV,p.1049, W.R.Boggs to Brigadier General Scurry.
6. OR,I,XV,pp.1053-1055, W.R. Scurry to Capt. Edmund P. Turner, and Special Orders No. 67, Headquarters Eastern Sub-District of Texas; OR,I,XV,p.1071, W.R.Boggs to Brigadier General Scurry; OR,I,XV,pp.1079-1080, E.P. Turner to Brigadier General Scurry; OR,I,XV,pp.1083-1084, Kirby Smith to Maj. Gen J. G. Walker and W.R.Boggs to Brigadier General Scurry.
7. Blessington, "The Campaigns of Walker's Texas Division," pp.55-58.
8. OR,XXXIV,p.574, R.Taylor to Major General Walker; OR,I,XXXIV,pp.565-568, Report of R. Taylor, Lieutenant General; Davidson, "Reminiscences of the Old Brigade," September 27, 1888.
9. OR,I,XXXIV,p.779, Report of Maj. Gen. Sterling Price; OR,I,XXXIV,p.572, Report of R. Taylor, Lieutenant General; OR,I,XXXIV,pp.546-548, R.Taylor, Lieutenant General to General Kirby Smith, Commanding Trans-Mississippi Department.
10. OR,I,XXXIV,pp.780-782, Report of Maj. Gen. Sterling Price.
11. Blessington, "The Campaigns of Walker's Texas Division," p.249; OR,I,XXXIV,pp.780-782, Report of Maj. Gen. Sterling Price.
12. Blessington, "The Campaigns of Walker's Texas Division," p.250; OR,I,XXXIV,pp.780-782, Report of Maj. Gen. Sterling Price; OR,I,XXXIV,p.814, Report of Col. Simon P. Burns, Eleventh Missouri Infantry; OR,I,XXXIV,p.817, Report of Brig. Gen Thomas N. Maul.
13. Blessington, "The Campaigns of Walker's Texas Division," p.250; Webb, The Handbook of Texas, p.584.
14. OR,I,XXXIV,p.783, Report of Maj. Gen. Sterling Price.
15. Scurry's beautiful and moving obituary notice was written by Captain W.G. Weaver of the 16th Dismounted Cavalry. Blessington, "The Campaigns of Walker's Texas Division," p.256; Davidson, "Reminiscences of the Old Brigade," September 27, 1888.



The Road to Glorieta; A Confederate Army Marches through New Mexico



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