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THE CAMDEN EXPEDITION: SPRING, 1864

A Paper
Presented to
the Staff
Department of History
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In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for
Research Seminar

483

by
James Adrian Ryan, Jr.

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THE CAMDEN EXPEDITION: SPRING, 1864

General Nathaniel P. Banks assumed command of the Department of the Gulf for the United States on November 8, 1862. In assuming his office Banks received orders from General-in-Chief Henry W. Halleck conveying President Lincoln's concern that no time be lost in opening the Mississippi River for military and naval operations. As soon as this was accomplished, Banks was to consider other operations, such as an expedition up the Red River to liberate the cotton and sugar in Northern Louisiana and Southern Arkansas. He was also to establish a base of operation for the invasion of Texas.¹ This decision was the genesis of the Camden Expedition through Southern Arkansas, in the Spring of 1864. The campaign was the culmination of a series of events which led to the eventual failure of the entire Red River Expedition, of which the Camden Expedition was but one phase.

The Confederate fortress at Port Hudson, on the Gulf, surrendered on July 8, 1863, leaving the city of Mobile the only port in Confederate lands between Florida and New Orleans. General Grant and Admiral Farragut urged Banks to operate

¹The War of the Rebellion; Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1891), Series I, Volume XV, pt. ii, p. 590. Cited hereafter as O.R.

against Mobile at once. The President, however, urged Generals Banks and Halleck to initiate operations toward Texas because of new situations in Mexico.² Military intervention, backed by Napoleon III, had given the United States Department of State reason to suspect French interests in Texas.³ On August 10, 1863, General Banks received orders from General Halleck to occupy one or more points in Texas for "reasons other than military."⁴ Halleck's pet project was an expedition up the Red River to the Confederate capital at Shreveport, however, he offered Banks the final decision.⁵ Banks proceeded with an operation on the Texas coast, involving an amphibious landing, which was a complete failure.⁶ By October, Banks had decided to attempt another landing, this time on the Rio Grande. The landing took place at Brazos Santiago on November 2, 1863.⁷ The Union flag flew over the barren sand dunes of south Texas and General Banks was satisfied.⁸ General-in-Chief Halleck then, according to his nature, suggested that "the views of the government must be carried out."⁹ Halleck also approached

²Roy P. Basler, ed., The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953), p. 384.

³O.R., I, XXVL, Part, i, 664.

⁴Ibid., p. 675.

⁵Ibid., p. 673.

⁶Ibid., pp. 695-97.

⁷Ibid., p. 396.

⁸Ibid., p. 832.

⁹Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence Clough Buell, eds. Battles and Leaders of the Civil War, Vol. IV (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1956), pp. 345-47.

Major Generals Frederick Steele in Arkansas and William T. Sherman in Mississippi for concurrence on the Red River route.¹⁰ On January 23, 1864, General Ulysses S. Grant ordered detachments of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Army Corps, under General A. J. Smith, to rendezvous with the Mississippi Squadron under Admiral David D. Porter at the mouth of the Red River.¹¹ General Steele, in Little Rock, was also informed that he was to participate by joining Banks in Shreveport, thus driving the Confederates out of both states.¹² The troops under Banks were to march north from New Orleans through the Teche Bayou land to rendezvous with Porter and Smith at Alexandria, thus proceeding to Shreveport.¹³

Steele faced grave difficulties in Arkansas, in that many of his troop's enlistments were up and they wanted to return home. To Steele's dismay, the First Iowa Cavalry was ordered home.¹⁴ While on garrison duty in Little Rock, Steele commanded the Department of Arkansas, a force of 40,000 men.

¹⁰O.R. I, XXXIV, Part ii, 145.

¹¹Johnson and Buell, p. 346.

¹²Robert L. Kerby, Kirby Smith's Confederacy (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), p. 292.

¹³J. Culter Andrews, The North Reports The Civil War (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1955), pp. 497-8.

¹⁴O.R. I, XXXIV, Part i, p. 663.

The Department was divided into the District of East Arkansas, headquartered at Helena; the District of Northeast Arkansas, headquartered at Batesville; the District of the Frontier, headquartered at Fort Smith; and Steele's Headquarters in Little Rock.¹⁵ On March 15, 1864, Frederick Steele received a direct order from Grant to move "in full cooperation with Banks on Shreveport," in spite of Steele's pleadings for a mere southward feint to draw the Confederates away from the Red River.¹⁶ The Union General, his staff, and two divisions, complete with brass band playing "Yankee Doodle",¹⁷ marched out of Little Rock, March 23, to be joined by General John M. Thayer's Frontier Division at Arkadelphia for the Camden Expedition through Southwest Arkansas.¹⁸

The Confederates had sensed a move in Louisiana as early as January, 1864,¹⁹ feeling that Banks would "make the Red River Valley his great object in the coming campaign."²⁰ In preparation the Confederate command was reorganized in order to concentrate the most effective leaders along the Federal route.²¹ The Trans-Mississippi Department of the Confederate

¹⁵Ibid., Part ii, p. 809.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 616.

¹⁷Ludwell H. Johnson, Red River Campaign (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1958), p. 171.

¹⁸Wiley Britton, The Civil War on the Border (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1904), p. 254.

¹⁹Kerby, p. 283.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid., p. 286.

States of America was commanded by Lieutenant General E. Kirby Smith, headquartered at Shreveport. The Confederate District of Arkansas was commanded by Major General Sterling Price, who relieved Major General Theophilus H. Holmes on July 20, 1863.²² Price held four divisions in the District of Arkansas under the command of Generals James F. Fagan, John S. Marmaduke, Thomas J. Churchill, and Mosby M. Parsons, headquartered at Camden. As Banks departed New Orleans, Price's Infantry Divisions were ordered to reinforce General Taylor at Shreveport, leaving only Marmaduke's division of 3,200 in Camden.²³ The Confederate general officers realized that in order for Steele to join Banks, he would have to unite at some point on the Red River. The point nearest Little Rock would be at the town of Fulton, with the Confederate capital at Washington in direct line. Still, the Confederates felt that if Steele wanted to strike a more southern point on the river, Washington's military road would be the nearest route. Steele's orders were to reach Shreveport through Camden, destroying that armed fortress on route.²⁴ In order to maneuver the Rebels out of Camden, he threatened their capital at Washington.²⁵

²²O.R., I, XXII, part 2, p. 242.

²³General Clement A. Evans, ed., Confederate Military History, Vol. X. (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1962), p. 237.

²⁴Britton, p. 263.

²⁵O.R., I, XXXIV, part 2, p. 728.

"The Camden Expedition started out 'in style'."²⁶ Steele's troops, soft from garrison duty, headed southwest toward Arkadelphia to rendezvous with General Thayer's 5,000 man division. The Union forces were harrassed the entire trip by Rebel guerillas, nipping at the rear of the column.²⁷ The Federals were organized specially to deal with sniping warfare of General Jo Shelby's "Iron Brigade."²⁸ The Union troops numbered 8,500,²⁹ with a large wagon train³⁰ and 12,000 head of horses.³¹ The column advanced very slowly, due to the boggy roads and swelled creeks and rivers from the spring showers.³² With a minimum of losses from sniping activities, the column reached the deserted town of Rockport on the Ouachita, March 26. Steele received a notification from Banks that he too was being delayed by rain and bad roads.³³ The Federals were put on half ration the third day of march

²⁶A. F. Sperry, History of the 33rd Iowa Infantry Volunteer Regiment, in Red River Campaign, by Ludwell H. Johnson, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1958), p. 171.

²⁷O.R., I, XXXIV, part i, p. 779.

²⁸"The Federal Occupation of Camden As Set Forth in the Diary of a Union Officer," Arkansas Historical Quarterly, IX (1956), 215.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Daniel O'Flaherty, General Jo Shelby (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1954), p. 208.

³¹Edwin C. Bearss, Steele's Retreat From Camden and The Battle of Jenkin's Ferry (Little Rock: Pioneer Press, 1961), p. 1.

³²O.R., I, XXXIV, part i, p. 576.

³³Ibid., p. 659.

because of the lack of food and forage on the advance.³⁴ When the column reached Arkadelphia, Steele found that General Thayer had not arrived and that he had sent no word of his location. Steele decided to remain in Arkadelphia to wait for Thayer, sending scouting parties north with no results.³⁵ Due to their half-rationed condition, Steele's troops broke ranks upon entering town in search of food.³⁶ Waiting three days, his men ate 11,000 rations and ransacked a girl's seminary. Steele decided to advance.³⁷

Thayer's column, marching three days out of Fort Smith, reached the Ouachita Mountains on the 25th. Due to the rains, gullies had been washed into the mountain slopes, washing out the roads and making it impossible for the trains to get through. Shelby's cavalry harassed Thayer, preventing effective communications between the two armies.³⁸ The Frontier Division arrived at Rockport a week after Steele had passed through.³⁹

The Confederate forces, meanwhile, were preparing to receive the Union column. Price held two of Marmaduke's three

³⁴Kerby, p. 300.

³⁵O.R., I, XXXIV, part ii, p. 47.

³⁶Johnson, p. 172.

³⁷Kerby, p. 300.

³⁸Wiley, p. 253.

³⁹Ibid.

cavalry brigades in Camden, while the other cordoned the Red River near Washington.⁴⁰ Price revised his plans to meet Steele. Brigadier General W. L. Cabell's Arkansas Cavalry Brigade was ordered to Tate's Bluff to reconnoiter movements at the fork of the Ouachita and Little Missouri Rivers. Brigadier General Jo Shelby's Missouri Cavalry Brigade positioned itself at Princeton to watch and wait for Federal incursion. Colonel Colton Greene's Missouri Cavalry Brigade joined Cabell March 28.⁴¹ Cabell and Greene were ordered to operate against the enemy's front, while Shelby was to strike the rear of the Federal column.⁴²

General Steele left Arkadelphia, April 1, 1864, on the Washington military road. Immediately, Shelby crossed the Ouachita in pursuit, entering Arkadelphia that evening.⁴³ Steele's move toward Washington surprised the Confederates, who expected him to turn south at Arkadelphia toward Camden. Sterling Price ordered Shelby to harass the Union communications and instructed Generals Marmaduke and Fagan to cross Steele's line of march.⁴⁴ The Federals marched to Okolona, twenty miles

⁴⁰Johnson, p. 172.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 173.

⁴²Albert Castel, General Sterling Price and the Civil War in the West (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), p. 174.

⁴³Johnson, p. 173.

⁴⁴Kerby, p. 300.

southwest, still seeking Thayer's column. General Marmaduke set up his defenses three miles south of the Little Missouri River crossing at Elkin's Ferry, leaving one regiment to guard the ferry.⁴⁵ Two miles north of Okolona, Shelby's Cavalry charged the Union rear guard. The Twenty-ninth Iowa Infantry was deployed at once and was able to repulse the Confederate cavalry twice. The Federals then advanced to a ridge overlooking Terre Noir Creek, near the rear of the supply train. General S. A. Rice was commanding the troops defending the train as the Confederates flanked the Iowa command. Rice's infantry charged the Rebel line as the train continued on route, only to be threatened by Cabell's forces. Rice's troops rush to catch up with the train in Okolona, after spending ten hours in fighting for two miles of road.⁴⁶ The advance guard of Steele's column reached Elkin's Ferry that evening.

The Confederate battle plan called for cavalry attacks on the Union flanks to hamper the march, while defenses were set up to intercept at the Little Missouri.⁴⁷ On the morning of the 4th, Marmaduke's scouts crossed Federal picket lines at the ferry. The Confederate general dispatched a regiment of cavalry to reconnoiter Steele's position. Meanwhile, the Union troops went into camp on high ground commanding

⁴⁵O.R., I, XXXIV, part 1, p. 821.

⁴⁶Britton, p. 259.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 260.

a southern view of the river crossing.⁴⁸ Steele's artillery set-up to sweep all approaches to the ford.⁴⁹ Marmaduke moved his two brigades directly in front of the Federal pickets on the south side of the river and bivouacked that night. At daybreak, the Confederates drove the Federal infantry to the south bank, forcing General Steele to send Rice's brigade as reinforcements.⁵⁰ Later that day Shelby's troops joined Marmaduke, and the Confederates withdrew to the south edge of Prairie D'Ann. Marmaduke was reinforced at the prairie by Brigadier General Richard Gano's Texas Cavalry Brigade and Colonel Tandy Walker's Choctaw Indian Brigade.⁵¹

After driving Marmaduke's forces off, Steele, caught in heavy rainstorms and flooded bottomlands, laid pontoon bridges across the Little Missouri and camped on high ground three miles south of the ferry.⁵² General Thayer's Frontier Division arrived at Elkin's Ferry on April 9th and was immediately transported across the flooded river to Steele's headquarters. Steele was very disappointed with his reinforcements, one soldier described Thayer's troops: "while we lay here, the long-looked-for and much-talked-of reinforcement of 'Thayer's command' arrived from Fort Smith. A non-descript style of reinforcement it was too, numbering almost every kind of soldier, including Indians, and accompanied by multitudinous

⁴⁸Britton, p. 264.

⁴⁹Johnson, p. 175.

⁵⁰Britton, p. 267.

⁵¹Johnson, p. 176.

⁵²O.R., I, XXXIV, part i, p. 675.

vehicles, of all description, which had been picked up along the road."⁵³ The Frontier column had very little supplies and had been delayed so long that the food stuffs for the entire expedition had run low. Steele sent word to Little Rock ordering a supply train be sent to Camden, with thirty days half rations for 15,000 troops.⁵⁴

Sterling Price, accompanied by General Churchill's Arkansas Infantry Division, General Parson's Missouri Infantry Division, and General Walker's Texas Cavalry Division, arrived in the Confederate camp on April 7th.⁵⁵ That same day, Steele began to move south to the northern edge of Prairie D'Ann where Confederate skirmishers were encountered. The morale of the Union troops was boosted as they came onto the prairie, one soldier remarking, "like an oasis, lies this beautiful prairie, in the midst of dense forests and almost impassable swamps, a relief for the traveller, who for many days has hardly seen anything but rock crowned by dark pines or gloomy cypress swamps."⁵⁶ The Federal forces moved across the prairie on the 10th, and drove General T. P. Dockery's Arkansas Infantry Brigade back into the Confederate lines. Throughout

⁵³Johnson, p. 176.

⁵⁴O.R., I, XXXIV, part iii, pp. 77-79.

⁵⁵Castel, p. 174.

⁵⁶"The Action at Prairie D'Ann," Arkansas Historical Quarterly, Vol. XIX, No. 1, p. 40.

the night the Missouri artillery batteries pounded Steele's forces. Shelby's cavalry made a charge through the Federal lines at eleven o'clock, but were repulsed by volleys of Union cannon fire.⁵⁷ On the morning of the eleventh, Steele's troops appeared on the prairie, as if on dress parade, with the "proud flutter of embroidered banners."⁵⁸ The Union troops marched within a mile of the Confederate breastworks, without drawing rifle fire.⁵⁹ Unable to incite the Rebel lines, the Federals withdrew to the location they had camped the night before. Steele ordered an advance on the Confederate breastworks the morning of April 12, only to find them deserted.⁶⁰ Reconnaissance patrols determined Price on route to Washington for the defense of the Confederate capital. Steele, actually interested in Camden, made a feint in the direction of Washington, sending a cavalry detachment in pursuit of Price,⁶¹ then turning his column south to rendezvous with the supply train from Little Rock.⁶²

⁵⁷Britton, p. 270.

⁵⁸Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Southern Arkansas, (Nashville: The Goodspeed Publishing Co., 1890), p. 553.

⁵⁹Britton, p. 271.

⁶⁰O.R., I, XXXIV, part iii, p. 761.

⁶¹Ibid., part i, p. 675.

⁶²Ibid., p. 661.

Steele's feint was so successful that Price did not find out about it until the next day.⁶³ The Confederate general immediately ordered Marmaduke to circle the Union column, by route of Prairie De Rohan, sixty miles south.⁶⁴ Fagan's and Maxey's divisions attacked the tail of the column near the hamlet of Moscow, directly south of Prairie D'Ann.⁶⁵ The Federal column found the trail immensely hard to traverse. Much of the Terre Rouge Creek and Cypress Bayou bottomlands were flooded and impassable. Steele's troops were forced to wade the swamps, much of the time pushing the wagons and artillery pieces through the mire.⁶⁶ Meanwhile, Price's orders a Confederate detachment rushed to Camden to destroy all Rebel property and to picket all roads leading to Shreveport.⁶⁷ The Federal commanders received information April 14, that the Confederate troops were making an effort to flank the column in order to make a defense at Camden. Assuming this to be true, Steele dispatched General E. A. Carr's Missouri Federalist

⁶³Castel, p. 175.

⁶⁴Evans, p. 243.

⁶⁵Britton, p. 273.

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 274.

⁶⁷Evans, p. 243.

Cavalry to the head of the column to reinforce General S. A. Rice.⁶⁸ These troops camped at White Oak Creek and the following day sent patrols out in search of Confederate forces operating in the area. The patrols managed to take two of Marmaduke's men prisoner, and were able to determine that Shelby's and Greene's brigades had joined Marmaduke, planning an attack at the junction of the Camden and Washington roads. On the 15th, Marmaduke's two brigades blocked the Camden road, shelling the advancing Union column with cannon fire. After a two hour fight, Steele's infantry was able to flank the Rebel line, driving them back into Camden.⁶⁹ That evening Steele's forces occupied Camden, after a running fight from Arkadelphia. The Union troops were half starved, worn-out and suffering from battle fatigue.⁷⁰

General Steele was met in Camden with the disastrous news that Banks had been defeated at Mansfield, Louisiana, on April 9th. With this news, Steele saw no reason to advance any further toward Shreveport.⁷¹ When the commander of the Trans-Mississippi Department, General Kirby Smith, heard of the Union defeat, he left Shreveport at once for Camden.

⁶⁸Britton, p. 274.

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 275.

⁷⁰"The Federals at Camden, Arkansas," (Extracts from a Private Letter, April 20, 1864), The Old Town Speaks, (Houston: The Anson Jones Press, 1951), p. 79.

⁷¹Britton, p. 278.

Temporary headquarters of the department were set-up at Calhoun, Arkansas, for a Confederate campaign to drive Steele's army out of Arkansas.⁷² Reinforcing Price's troops, Smith returned the eight thousand infantry which were on loan for the operation in Louisiana.⁷³

The Union troops at Camden were on the verge of starvation. Steele had managed to survive through gallant maneuvers, feint clashes and shows of power, but his army was in shambles.⁷⁴ The water in Camden had been poisoned by Confederates dumping carcasses of animals into the wells and springs of the region.⁷⁵ Upon entering town, the troops foraged for edibles, swarming kitchens, slaughtering milk cows and calves, and collecting contraband.⁷⁶ The few Union sympathizers in Camden sold corn to the troops, informing them of various stores of grain in the area. The Confederates, though, had made it a policy to destroy forage rather than turn it over to the Federals.⁷⁷ On April 16th, a Union patrol, south of Camden on the Ouachita River, captured the Confederate steamboat, Homer, filled with 3,000 bushels of corn.⁷⁸

⁷²Johnson, pp. 180-81.

⁷³Britton, p. 279.

⁷⁴Castel, p. 176.

⁷⁵Kerby, p. 312.

⁷⁶The Old Town Speaks, p. 80.

⁷⁷O.R., I, XXXIV, part i, p. 680.

⁷⁸Ibid., p. 661.

Steele's scouts reported a large forage supply fifteen miles west of Camden on the Washington road the 16th. A Union supply train was immediately sent out to collect the much needed grain. Units of the First Kansas Colored Infantry were detailed to guard the wagons along with detachments from three Kansas cavalry regiments.⁷⁹ The column left Camden at 5 A.M., April 17th, and using the area of White Oak Creek as a base of operations, foraging the region began. Evidence of Confederate activity in the area was quickly ascertained by the number of crop burnings.⁸⁰ The forage officers were not particular about what their men took while foraging, permitting the ransacking of local residences. One particular incident recalls a Confederate patrol visiting a farm house immediately after the Federals left, to find, "The only occupant, a woman, had been stripped of all clothing by the Federal foraging party, the bedclothes taken, and she had only the drapery of the windows left."⁸¹ The train was put into motion toward Camden, as soon as it was loaded. A reinforcing guard of three-hundred eighty men from the Eighteenth Iowa Infantry joined the column at Poison Springs, ten miles from Camden.⁸²

⁷⁹Ibid., part iii, p. 237.

⁸⁰O.R., I, XXXIV, part i, p. 680.

⁸¹Evans, p. 250.

⁸²Britton, p. 281.

Generals Price, Shelby, Maxey, and Marmaduke were camped near the community of Woodlawn, sixteen miles southwest of Camden, when the forage train was ordered north by Steele.⁸³ Confederate scouts brought the news of foraging activities on the Washington road, April 17th, to Colonel Colton Greene headquarters outside of Camden. Greene notified Marmaduke at once, who in turn dispatched a request to General Fagan, at Jenkin's Farm for additional troops. Fagan directed the brigades of General W. L. Cabell, Colonel W. A. Crawford, and General S. B. Maxey to reinforce Marmaduke, a reported force of 1,800. Marmaduke immediately mapped his plans out for Price's approval, however, General Maxey was senior to Marmaduke and was placed in command of the projected attack on the Federals.⁸⁴ The Confederates believed the Union troops to be about 2,500 in force; operating under this assumption, the Rebels struck swiftly.⁸⁵ The Washington road was blocked by Cabell's command, while Maxey's division flanked the Federal column on the right. Price, fearing his force outnumbered, rushed his personal escort, the Fourteenth Missouri Cavalry Battalion, along with the remainder of Maxey's Division, to Poison Springs. The effective strength of the Confederate force was 3,100 men.⁸⁶

⁸³Bearss, p. 11.

⁸⁴O.R., I, XXXIV, part i, p. 841.

⁸⁵Ibid., part i, p. 819.

⁸⁶Johnson, p. 185.

Immediately upon contact with the Confederate skirmishers, the Union infantry guarding the train was sent to the head of the column to form battle lines. The Kansas cavalry detachments were commanded to defend the flanks.⁸⁷ Due to dense pine thickets, the Confederates were able to conceal their movements, requiring details of Union cavalry to ride out and reconnoiter the situation. Each time, the reconnaissance details would be forced back to the Union column by volleys of rifle fire from the Twenty-ninth Texas Cavalry, four hundred yards south of the road.⁸⁸ The Texas cavalry was the first to move, flanking to the right, charging through dense underbrush, to take cover behind a rail fence.⁸⁹ The Confederate artillery opened up with a cross-fire in the right-angle position, while Cabell and Marmaduke moved in on the Union line. The Confederate infantry advanced through the pine woods to assault the Union defenses twice, only to be repulsed.⁹⁰ The opposing forces fought so close in the second assault that the men could be heard calling to each other. General Maxey's Texans introduced themselves and called out, "You First Nigger, now buck to the Twenty-ninth Texas."⁹¹ The Union commander, Colonel James M. Williams, recollected that:

⁸⁷O.R., I, XXXIV, part i, p. 841.

⁸⁸Britton, pp. 283-84.

⁸⁹O.R., I, XXXIV, part i, p. 748.

⁹⁰Britton, pp. 285-86.

⁹¹Britton, p. 286.

"for another quarter of an hour the fight raged with desperate fury, and the noise and din of battle of the almost hand-to-hand conflict was the loudest and most terrific it has ever been my lot to listen to."⁹²

General Maxey ordered Greene's brigade to reinforce Marmaduke by positioning itself in the center between Maxey's and Cabell's divisions. With this strategy, the Confederates again charged the Union line, retiring after a twenty minute fight. Each time the Rebels would retreat, their artillery would begin to pound the Federal lines bitterly.⁹³ Following the third attack Colonel Williams pulled his colored infantry back closer to the supply trains. Realizing he could not hold any longer against the advancing Confederates, the order was given to retreat to Camden via the nearest route,⁹⁴ pursued the entire way by the Southern cavalry. Lieutenant Colonel John M. Harrell reported the scene as follows:

"Away trotted the poor black men into the forests, clinging to their rifles, but not using them, while the pursuing Confederates cut them down right and left."⁹⁵

The beaten Federal column entered the perimeter of Camden about eight o'clock that evening.⁹⁶ As a result of repeated threats made by the Confederate troops that they would show

⁹²O.R., I, XXXIV, part i, p. 745.

⁹³Britton, p. 287.

⁹⁴Ibid., pp. 289-90.

⁹⁵Evans, p. 250.

⁹⁶Britton, p. 290.

no quarter to Negro soldiers, and, that day, having seen the Southerners shooting and bayoneting the wounded, most wounded Negroes that could get to their feet, joined the retreating column.⁹⁷ Many of the wounded Negroes, forced to rest during the withdrawal, were bitten by snakes while lying in the grass during the night, some of which reached camp "horribly swollen from the effect of the poison."⁹⁸

Battle results for Poison Springs were a Federal loss of 122 men dead, 97 wounded and 81 missing. Losses in the First Kansas Colored Infantry Regiment were 117 killed and 65 wounded. Confederate General Cabell credited his regiments with killing 80 negroes. Colored soldiers separated or cut off from their units were shot on sight.⁹⁹ As spoils of the battle, the Rebels captured four cannons, one hundred seventy wagons and trains, and one hundred prisoners.¹⁰⁰ The Confederate loss was set at sixteen killed, 88 wounded and ten missing.¹⁰¹ Perhaps the most tragic aspect of the losses was revealed in a report from Captain W. C. Rowland of the Eighteenth Iowa Infantry, on burial assignment, three days later:

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 291.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ O.R., I, XXXIV, part i, p. 847.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 826.

"Three days afterwards (April 21) a burial detail was sent from the Eighteenth to the field, under command of Major J. K. Morey. Word had been sent that no d__n nigger would be permitted on the ground. The Major buried six white officers and eighty men of the . . . (1st) Kansas. The Eighteenth lost . . . (80) men killed, wounded and missing. My company, H, lost twelve. The white dead were scalped and all were stripped of clothing, which was worn by the rebels. To add insult to the dead officers of the colored regiment; they were laid on their faces, and a circle of their dead soldiers made around them."¹⁰²

Steele's position in Camden became very unstable due to the supply shortage. On April 19th, Captain C. A. Henry, Steele's chief quartermaster, notified the general that within the fortifications of Camden, there was only enough forage to provide one day's rations for the animals.¹⁰³ Desperate for news from the over-due supply train from Little Rock, Steele sent Colonel Thomas Benton's Twenty-ninth Iowa Infantry on march toward Pine Bluff in search.¹⁰⁴ That same day, Union scouts reported the arrival of Kirby Smith in the Confederate headquarters near Woodlawn. Steele also received information of a Confederate plan to drive the Federals out of Arkansas.¹⁰⁵ Seventeen miles out of Camden the Iowa infantry

¹⁰² A History of the First Regiment Iowa Cavalry Veteran Volunteers, From its Organization in 1861 to its Muster Out of the United States Service in 1866, quoted in Edwin C. Boarss, Steele's Retreat From Camden and The Battle of Jenkin's Ferry (Little Rock: Pioneer Press, 1961), p. 37.

¹⁰³ O.R., I, XXXIV, part i, p. 682.

¹⁰⁴ Britton, p. 293.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

met the much needed supply train. The train was immediately unloaded and sent back to Pine Bluff for another load.¹⁰⁶ Fearing a repetition of the Poison Springs calamity, Steele ordered a brigade of infantry, four hundred First Iowa Cavalry, and two sections of the Second Missouri Federalist Light Artillery Battery to accompany the train.¹⁰⁷

When Kirby Smith arrived at the Confederate headquarters, he found that Price had not put his (Smith's) orders into effect; it cut Federal communications routes. The Trans-Mississippi commander ordered Fagan's cavalry force of 3,500 to destroy Union depots at Pine Bluff, Little Rock and Devall's Bluff, and to place his force between Steele and Little Rock.¹⁰⁸ Fagan's column left Woodlawn, April 22nd, the same day the Union supply train crossed the Ouachita River, headed for Pine Bluff. In order not to draw attention to Fagan's massive move to El Dorado, Price staged an artillery barrage on Camden that same day.¹⁰⁹ The Confederate column crossed the Ouachita, forty miles south of Camden, where it learned from Shelby's scouts of the heavily guarded supply train. Accompanying the two hundred eleven supply wagons and 1440 troops were a "large number of citizens, cotton speculators, Arkansas refugees,

¹⁰⁶Britton, p. 293.

¹⁰⁷Ibid.

¹⁰⁸O.R., I, XXXIV, part i, p. 788. There exists no direct orders from Kirby Smith to General Fagan. Fagan states his orders came from "district headquarters"--implying Sterling Price. It is possible that Smith issued the orders to Fagan through Price.

¹⁰⁹Britton, p. 294.

sutler, and other army followers, and also some 300 negroes.¹¹⁰

Fagan, driving his column forty-five miles, arrived at Moro Swamp on the 25th, eight miles from Mark's Mill. Yet undetected by the Union troops, the Rebels took their position on a local trail bisecting the Camden-Pine Bluff road at the mill.¹¹¹ Shelby's troops crossed the main road, positioning themselves in direct line of the approaching train. Cabell placed his troops parallel to the Camden road. Into this entrapment, the Union troops marched.¹¹² The fight lasted five hours, the Northern forces were massively overpowered by the dashing cavalry of Jo Shelby's and William Cabell's divisions. Federal losses were blamed to the separation of the forces in advance from those in the rear.¹¹³ Again the Rebels showed no mercy in the slaughter. The chief surgeon for the Federal train reported an estimated eight to nine hundred dead left on the battlefield. Many of the refugees and negroes accompanying the column had been "inhumanly murdered."¹¹⁴ Those who survived the onslaught reported:

¹¹⁰O.R., I, XXXIV, part i, p. 788.

¹¹¹Britton, p. 294.

¹¹²Evans, p. 254.

¹¹³Britton, p. 294.

¹¹⁴Ibid., p. 295.

"The rebs robbed nearly every man of us even to our Chaplin & many of our dead they striped (sic) of every stitch of clothes even their shirts & socks & left them unburied (sic) & the wood on fire & many of the wounded they jurked of (sic) their boots, blouses, pants & hats, & as they would plead (sic) to have their garments left they would damn them for abolitionists (sic) or niger (sic) thievers, & they also took from many of the prisoners some of the garments had . . . they had no respect for persons rank or age."¹¹⁵

A large portion of the Union cavalry managed to return to Camden the night of the 25th, to inform General Steele of the catastrophe.¹¹⁶ An emergency concil of war was called later that night by the Union commander to ascertain the condition of his army in regard to their latest defeat.¹¹⁷ Because of the deteriorating supply conditions,¹¹⁸ reports of heavy enemy infantry reinforcements in the area,¹¹⁹ and the worsening of communications with his Little Rock headquarters,¹²⁰ Frederick Steele concluded to evacuate Camden at once. The Federal expedition would march for Little Rock, crossing the Saline River at Jenkin's Ferry.¹²¹

¹¹⁵"War Diary," Annals of Iowa, Vol. XV, No. 6 (Des Moines, 1926), 438-39, cited in Bearss, p. 76.

¹¹⁶Britton, p. 295.

¹¹⁷Ibid.

¹¹⁸O.R., I, XXXIV, part i, p. 683.

¹¹⁹Ibid., p. 676.

¹²⁰Bearss, p. 89.

¹²¹O.R., I, XXXIV, part i, p. 667.

The order to evacuate Camden during the night went out April 26, 1864.¹²² The Federal quartermaster was directed to destroy everything of value which could not be taken on the march.¹²³ The artillery and baggage trains left the city immediately, followed after dark by the infantry regiments. Late that night the cavalry marched over the pontoon bridge that spanned the Ouachita. There were no Union troops in the city the morning of the 27th, even the bridge had been taken up and the Federal column was on route to Princeton.¹²⁴

The Confederate forces entered Camden the morning of the 27th, and immediately set to work building a raft bridge across the river.¹²⁵ Smith sent Marmaduke in pursuit of the Union column, but, because the nearest ford was forth miles to the east, it was impossible to catch up.¹²⁶ Pushing toward Princeton, Steele's army found forage enough to feed his column and was able to camp free from Confederate harassment. The march was succeeding so well, that rumors began to spread through the ranks of Rebels succeeding in interposing a force

¹²²Ibid.

¹²³Ibid.

¹²⁴Britton, p. 296.

¹²⁵Ralph R. Rea, Sterling Price: The Lee of the West (Little Rock: Pioneer Press, 1959), p. 111.

¹²⁶Castel, p. 178. .

between the army and its headquarters in Little Rock. How true this was, for General Fagan's force crossed the military road a few hours ahead of Steele, unaware of his presence.¹²⁷

Steele's perpetual enemy, the rain, came on the 28th, making the roads impassable and flooding the bottoms. The Union column reached the Saline River in the afternoon, finding it too deep to ford. The pontoon bridges were brought forward and in three hours the wagon trains had been sent across, the balance being transported during the night and the following morning. The rain never quit and by noon on the 29th, the bottoms were flooded for two miles.¹²⁸

Colonel Colton Greene's Missouri Cavalry, of Marmaduke's division, slushing for miles in the mud, caught the Federal rear guard, the afternoon of the 29th.¹²⁹ The Confederate troops pounded the Union column with howitzer fire. The Union troops managed to repulse the attackers for a time, enabling Steele's forces to set-up adequate defenses of the ferry. Under the cover of night, the Northern troops withdrew to a location nearer the river and less exposed. In these positions the Federals were able to control the approach to the ferry.¹³⁰ In order to engage the Union forces, the

¹²⁷O.R., I, XXXIV, part i, p. 669.

¹²⁸Britton, p. 296.

¹²⁹Britton, p. 297.

¹³⁰Ibid., p. 298.

Confederates had to advance down a narrow rectangle formed by two fields. The approach was made more difficult by the mud, traversed by hundreds of troops and wagons all day, causing the soldiers to sink to their knees.¹³¹

General T. J. Churchill's Arkansas Infantry Division arrived at the battlefield, deploying his units as skirmishers.¹³² The Federal troops were drawn up behind a long embankment with their left flank protected by swamp lands and their right, by a creek.¹³³ Churchill's troops were forced to retreat after two hours of heavy fighting. Price immediately ordered General M. M. Parson's Missouri Infantry to Churchill's support. Again, the Confederates attacked the Union lines, only to be beaten back.¹³⁴ Marmaduke, dismounting his cavalry, tried to flank the line through the creek bottom and likewise failed. One of Marmaduke's batteries was captured by the Second Kansas Colored Infantry, who bayoneted three of their prisoners, after they surrendered, in retaliation for Poison Springs.¹³⁵

Churchill's and Parson's divisions were relieved at 11:30 A.M. by General John Walker's Texas Cavalry Division. The Texans were not able to break the Union line and, leaving

¹³¹ Evans, p. 265.

¹³² Britton, pp. 300-1.

¹³³ Castel, pp. 181-82.

¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 182.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

thousands dead, pulled back.¹³⁶ As the Rebels attempted to regroup, Steele withdrew his rear guard to the north bank of the river, destroying the pontoon bridge in his retreat.¹³⁷ With no way to pursue the Union troops, Kirby Smith, his forces pommelled by their enormous defeat, abandon the chase. Steele's column entered Little Rock on May 3, 1864, ending the Camden Expedition.¹³⁸

The Confederate losses at Jenkin's Ferry were estimated to be at 1,000 killed and missing. The Federals showed 594 killed, wounded, or missing.¹³⁹ Kirby Smith, disappointed, returned to Camden. In a letter to Jefferson Davis, Smith managed to take the credit for the victories won by the others and left the blame for Jenkin's Ferry with Sterling Price.¹⁴⁰

The Confederate successes in the defense of South Arkansas rest on the military leadership of General Sterling Price and the support of Generals Marmaduke, Shelby, and Cabell. The small force of Rebels were able to keep Steele's 13,000 man force at bay, suffering 2,750 casualties, compared to the Confederate's 2300, one thousand of which came at the Jenkin's Ferry battle. The Federals lost 635 wagons with 2500 mules.¹⁴¹

¹³⁶Evans, p. 266.

¹³⁷Britton, p. 308.

¹³⁸O.R., I, XXXIV, part i, p. 653.

¹³⁹Ibid., p. 691.

¹⁴⁰Kerby, p. 314.

¹⁴¹Johnson, p. 203.

The Federal failure came as a result of not being able to fulfill General Bank's "conditions essential for success" of the campaign.¹⁴² The first condition was that a complete preliminary organization be made in order to avoid delay in movement. Steele could not stay in contact with Banks, Thayer, or his headquarters in Little Rock. A second requirement was that supply lines be maintained. The Union commander was forced to surrender his Camden fortress in order to get food for his army. The expulsion of Confederates from Arkansas was the third rule. Steele was never able to have a complete victory over Price's army until his frantic retreat to Little Rock. Bank's last point; the enemy must be kept fully employed to prevent raids and diversions. Again, Frederick Steele, on the defensive the entire campaign, was not able to engage the Confederates in his favor. Because Steele was not in favor of the campaign from the beginning, he cannot be held responsible for its failure. He can be held responsible for his military blunders at Poison Springs and Mark's Mill.¹⁴³ Unfortunately for Frederick Steele and N. P. Banks, warfare is not measured by its rules and methods, but by its particular outcome.

¹⁴²Johnson and Buell, p. 346.

¹⁴³Johnson, p. 204.

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