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The Defense of the Red River

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Soon after my arrival in the Trans–Mississippi Department, I became convinced that the valley of the Red River was the only practicable line of operations by which the enemy could penetrate the country. This fact was well understood and appreciated by their generals.

I addressed myself to the task of defending this line with the slender means at my disposal. Fortifications were erected on the lower Red River; Shreveport and Camden were fortified, and works were ordered on the Sabine and the crossings of the upper Red River. Depots were established on the shortest lines of communication between the Red River valley and the troops serving in Arkansas and Texas. Those commands were directed to be held ready to move with little delay, and every preparation was made in advance for accelerating a concentration, at all times difficult over long distances, and through a country destitute of supplies and with limited means of transportation.

In February, 1864, the enemy were preparing in New Orleans, Vicksburg, and Little Rock for offensive operations. Though 25,000 of the enemy were reported on the Texas coast, my information convinced me that the valley of the Red River would be the principal theater of operations and Shreveport the objective point of the columns moving from Arkansas and Louisiana.

On the 21st day of February General Magruder, commanding in Texas, was ordered to hold Green's division of cavalry in readiness to move at a moment's warning, and on the 5th of March the division was ordered to march at once to Alexandria and report to General Taylor, who had command in Louisiana. About that time the enemy commenced massing his forces at Berwick Bay.

On the 12th of March a column of ten thousand men, composed of portions of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Army Corps under General A. J. Smith, moved down from Vicksburg to Sims port, and advanced with such celerity on Fort De Russy, taking it in reverse, that General Taylor was not allowed time to concentrate and cover this important work, our only means of arresting the progress of the gun–boats. The fall of this work and

the immediate movement of the enemy, by means of his transports, to Alexandria, placed General Taylor in a very embarrassing position. He extricated himself with his characteristic tact by a march of seventy miles through the pine woods. Banks now pressed forward from Berwick Bay, by the line of the Teche, and by the aid of steamers, on both the Mississippi and Red Rivers, concentrated at Alexandria a force of over 30,000 men, supported by the most powerful naval armament ever employed on a river.

As soon as I received intelligence of the debarkation of the enemy at Simsport, I ordered General Price, who commanded in Arkansas, to dispatch his entire infantry, consisting of Churchill's and Parson's divisions, to Shreveport, and General Maxey to move toward General Price, and, as soon as Steele advanced, to join Price with his whole command, Indians included. The Cavalry east of the Ouachita was directed to fall back toward Natchitoches, and subsequently to oppose, as far as possible, the advance of the enemy's fleet. It was under the command of General St. John R. Liddell. All disposable infantry in Texas was directed on Marshall, and although the enemy still had a force of several thousand on the coast, I reduced the number of men holding the defenses to an absolute minimum. General Magruder's field report shows that but 2300 men were left in Texas. Except these, every effective soldier in the department was put in front of Steele or in support of Taylor.

The enemy was operating with a force, according to my information, of full 50,000 effective men; with the utmost powers of concentration not 25,000 men of all arms could be brought to oppose his movements. Taylor had at Mansfield, after the junction of Green, 11,000 effectives with 5000 infantry from Price's army in one day's march of him at Keachie. Price, with 6000 or 8000 cavalry, was engaged in holding in check the advance of Steele, whose column, according to our information, did not number less than 15,000 of all arms. Shreveport was made the point of concentration; with its fortifications cover the depots, arsenals, and shops at Jefferson, Marshall, and above it was a strategic point of vital importance. All the infantry not with Taylor, opposed to Banks, was directed on Shreveport. Price with his cavalry command was instructed to delay the march of Steele's column whilst the concentration was being made. Occupying a central position at Shreveport, with the enemy's columns approaching from opposite directions, I proposed drawing them within striking distance, when, by concentrating upon and striking them in detail, both columns might be crippled or destroyed.

Banks pushed on to Natchitoches. It was expected he would be detained there several days in accumulating supplies. Steele on the Little Missouri and Banks at Natchitoches were but about one hundred miles from Shreveport or Marshall. The character of the country did not admit of their forming a junction about Natchitoches, and if they advanced I hoped, by refusing one of them, to fight the other with my whole force.

It seemed probable at this time that Steele would advance first. When he reached Prairie d'Ane, two routes were open to him: the one to Marshall, crossing the river at Fulton, the other direct the Shreveport. I consequently held Price's infantry, under Churchill, a few days at Shreveport. Steele's hesitation and the reports of the advance of Bank's cavalry cause me, on the 4th of April, to move Churchill to Keachie, a point twenty miles in rear of Mansfield, where the road divides to go to Marshall and Shreveport. He was directed to report to General Taylor. I now visited and conferred with General Taylor. He believed that Banks could not yet advance his infantry across the barren country, lying between Natchitoches and Mansfield. I returned to Shreveport and wrote General Taylor not to risk a General engagement, but to select a position in which to give battle should Banks advance, and by reconnaissance in force to compel the enemy to display his infantry, and to notify me as soon as he had done so and I would join him in the front.

The reconnaissance was converted into a decisive engagement near Mansfield, on the 8th of April, with the advance of the enemy (a portion of the Thirteenth Corps and his cavalry), and by the rare intrepidity of Mouton's division resulted in a complete victory over the forces engaged. The battle of Mansfield was not an intentional violation of my instructions on General Taylor's part. The Federal cavalry had pushed forward so far in advance of their column as to completely over its movement, and General Taylor reported to me by dispatch at 12 meridian of the day on which the battle took place, that there was no advance made from Grand Ecore except of cavalry. In fact, however, General Franklin with his infantry was on the march and at once pushed forward to the support of the cavalry. When General Mouton with his division drove in the cavalry, he struck the head of Franklin's Troops, and by a vigorous and able attack, without waiting for orders from Taylor, repulsed and drove back Franklin's advance and opened the battle of Mansfield, which, when Taylor came to the front, with his accustomed boldness and vigor he pushed to complete success.

Churchill, with his infantry under Tappen and Parsons joined Taylor that night. The next morning Taylor, advancing in force, found the enemy in position at Pleasant Hill. Our troops attacked with vigor and at first with success, but, exposing their right flank, were finally repulsed and thrown into confusion. The Missouri and Arkansas troops, with a brigade of Walker's division, were broken and scattered. The enemy recovered cannon which we had captured the day before, and two of our pieces with the dead and wounded were left on the field. Our repulse at Pleasant Hill was so complete and our command was so disorganized that had Banks followed up his success vigorously he would have met but feeble opposition to his advance on Shreveport.

Having ridden forward at 2 A. M. on receipt of Taylor's report of the battle of Mansfield, I joined Taylor after dark on the 8th, a few yards in rear of the battle-field of that day. Polignac's (previously Mouton's) division of Louisiana infantry was all that was intact of

Taylor's force. Assuming command, I countermanded the order that had been given for the retreat of Polignac's division, and was consulting with General Taylor when some stragglers from the battle-field, where our wounded were still lying, brought the intelligence that Banks had precipitately retreated after the battle, converting a victory which he might have claimed into a defeat. Our troops in rear rallied, and the field was next day occupied by us.

Banks continued his retreat to Grand Ecore, where in intrenched himself and remained until the return of his fleet and its safe passage over the bars, made especially difficult this season by the unusual fall of the river.

Our troops were completely paralyzed and disorganized by the repulse at Pleasant Hill, and the cavalry, worn by its long march from Texas, had been constantly engaged for three days, almost without food or forage. Before we could reorganize at Mansfield and get into condition to advance over the fifty-five miles of wilderness that separated our armies, the enemy had been reinforced and intrenched at Grand Ecore. The enemy held possession of the river until he evacuated Grand Ecore.

Steele was still slowly advancing from the Little Missouri to the Prairie d'Ane. I deemed it imprudent to follow Banks below Grand Ecore with my whole force, and leave Steele so near Shreveport. Even had I been able to throw Banks across the Atchafalya, the high water of that stream would have arrested my farther progress. An intercepted dispatch from General Sherman the General A. J. Smith, directing the immediate return of his force to Vicksburg, removed the last doubt in my mind that Banks would withdraw to Alexandria as rapidly as possible, and it was hoped the falls would detain his fleet there until we could dispose of Steele, when the entire force of the department would be free to operate against him. I confidently hoped, if I could reach Steele with my infantry, to beat him at a distance from his depot, in a poor country, and with my large cavalry force to destroy his army. The prize would have been the Arkansas Valley and the powerful fortifications of Little Rock. Steele's defeat or retreat would leave me in position promptly to support Taylor's operations against Banks.

Leaving Taylor with his cavalry, now under Wharton, and the Louisiana division of infantry under Polignac, to follow up Banks retreat, and taking the Texas, Arkansas, and Missouri divisions of Infantry, I moved against Steele's column in Arkansas. Steele entered Camden, where he was too strong for assault, but the capture of his train at the battle of Marks's Mill on the 25th of April forced him to evacuate Camden on the 28th and the battle of Jenkins's Ferry on the Saline, April 30th, completed his discomfiture. He retreated to Little Rock. Churchill, Parsons, and Walker were at once marched across country to the support of Taylor, but before the junction could be effected Banks had gone.

To return to Taylor, after the enemy left Grand Ecore General Taylor attacked his rear at Cloutierville, whilst a detachment under Bee held the Federal advance in check at Monette's Ferry. General Taylor's force was, however, too weak to warrant the hope that he could seriously impede the march of Banks's column. After the latter reached Alexandria, General Taylor transferred a part of his command to the river below Alexandria, and with unparalleled audacity and great ability and success operator on the enemy's gun-boats and transports.

The construction of the dam, aided by a temporary rise in Red River, enabled Admiral Porter to get his fleet over the falls. Had he delayed but one week longer, our whole infantry force would have been united against him.

Banks evacuated Alexandria on the 12th and 12th of May, the fleet quitted the Red River, and the campaign ended with the occupation of all the country we had held at its beginning, as well as of the lower Teche.

The operations of Taylor on Red River and Marmaduke on the Mississippi prevented A. J. Smith from obeying Sherman's order to return to Vicksburg in time for the Atlanta campaign.

Through the courtesy of the editors of this work, I have carefully read a statement in which are grouped in detail the covert insinuations, the gossip of camps and capitals, and the misstatements of well-known facts that go to make up the old story of many versions of "an arrangement at Washington whereby Kirby Smith's army was to recede before the army of General Banks, falling back through the State of Texas, and finally to disband. In anticipation of this," the story continues, "Confederate cotton to an amount named, belived to be 25,000 bales, was to be gathered at points convenient for transportation and taken by three commissioners, residents of New Orleans, who would accompany the expedition under Banks, and sold by them; the proceeds to be divided like naval prize money, and to go to make fund for the benefit of such Confederate officers and men as might expatriate themselves in Brazil or some other country. General Banks was instructed to carry out this arrangement. General Dick Taylor was assigned to the command of the Army of the West Mississippi after this arrangement was entered into and before its execution, was not a party to it, and purposely prevented its being carried out by bringing on engagement at Mansfield. After the navy commenced taking the cotton, claiming it as prize of war, wrangle began over it and its distribution commenced."

I remark in passing that neither the emphatic statement in regard to General Taylor, nor the equally explicit one about the destruction of cotton, can stand the test of dates; for General Taylor had been in command since 1862,--in fact before either General Banks or

myself, -- and I ordered the cotton to be burned, in accordance with the settled policy of the Confederacy, as soon as I heard of the bank's movement, and before I knew of the approach of the navy. There is not the least foundation upon which this story could rest. The circumstances alleged are impossible to have happened without my having been a party to them. My power in the Trans-Mississippi Department was almost absolute. I bought cotton through my Cotton Bureau at three and four cents a pound, and sold it at fifty cents a pound in gold. It passed in constant streams by several crossings of the Rio Grande, as well as through Galveston, to the agents abroad. It would have been absurd in me to have called in the devious and uncertain agency of a Federal army, and of cotton speculators from within the Union lines, when I could at any time have safely exported and placed to my credit abroad thousands of bales of cotton.