

THE REVENGE RAID ON LAKE MATTAMUSKEET



Harper's Weekly of November 20, 1862

By Donald E. Collins

Following the removal of a large part of the Federal occupation army in North Carolina to join General George McClellan's peninsular campaign in Virginia, effective Union control of the Tar Heel state consisted of only a few towns in the coastal region and the Outer Banks. And with regular Confederate troops largely absent from the state to fight in other theaters of the war, defense against the occupying Northerners was left in the hands of local partisan rangers, or "guerillas," as the irregular Southern soldiers were commonly called. When Federal troops ventured more than five miles from the occupied towns in any direction, they entered a "No Man's Land" that was effectively controlled by neither side, but was regularly patrolled by local citizens serving in the armed guerilla bands.

Captain Colin Richardson, and his men of Company G, Third New York Cavalry, hated guerillas. A time would come when that hate turned to a desire for revenge. His men of Company G, Third New York Cavalry kept constant vigilance on the irregular Confederate militia that patrolled the swamps and woods of eastern North Carolina. They wore civilian clothing so that when his cavalymen came across a group of men, they identified themselves as Unionists or neutrals, but never as Southern partisans. It was even believed, with some occasional truth, that guerrillas disguised themselves in women's clothing. Difficult to detect, they "murdered" camp guards and pickets "in cold blood." Such men were not soldiers, in Richardson's estimation, and should be shown no quarter.

For Richardson, the issue came to a head during a raid into the Lake Mattamuskeet region of rural Hyde County. On March 1, 1863, he led an expedition into the area comprised of his company and Company G, of the First North Carolina (Union)

Volunteer Infantry under Lieutenant George Joy. Over a three-day period, the expedition circled the 15 by 6 mile lake. They found bridges had been burned by slaves under orders from Henry Cradle, a local resident who possessed a written protection from North Carolina's Union governor Edward Stanly. Despite the governor's protection, Cradle was taken back to New Bern as a prisoner (his capture would later bring about an incident that brought censure on the raid.) On the second day, the expedition encountered and drove back enemy pickets belonging to local partisan ranger units. Near Fairfield, they defeated more of the enemy. That night, they camped nine miles from Lake Landing on the eastern end of the lake. The next morning, local guerillas operating from the cover of houses near the road fired upon the Federals. The rebels were driven into the woods by a combination of howitzer fire, cavalry, and infantry from the North Carolina Union company.

Leaving several cavalymen to burn the rebel headquarters, Richardson's force continued its march, meeting mounted pickets along the way. At a point about nine miles from Swan Quarter, a force of about eighty guerillas, operating from the cover of a swamp, attached the Federals. In the fighting that followed, Richardson's New York cavalry suffered the deaths of two officers, a sergeant, twelve enlisted men, and several horses. Only one man from the North Carolina Union company was killed. The expedition boarded transports for the return to New Bern the following day carrying its dead and wounded. Hating guerrillas, and bitter over the loss of so many of their men, the cavalymen pushed a prisoner, bound hand and foot, over the side to drown. Upon arrival in New Bern, another prisoner (Henry Cradle?) was paraded through town wearing a dress and with a sign on his back reading "*Guerilla caught fighting in women's clothing, and protected by Governor Stanly.*" Lieutenant Joy, who commanded the North Carolina Union company in the raid, would be brought up on charges, but pardoned by the governor who knew him as editor of the Union army newspaper in New Bern.

Captain Richardson, enraged over the loss of so many officers and enlisted men from his company in the guerrilla ambush, requested and received permission from corps headquarters for a return to the area with a much larger force. This time the expedition included the 101st and 103rd Pennsylvania, Richardson's cavalry company, and two howitzers, all under command of Colonel David Morris of the 101st Pennsylvania. Before embarking, Richardson addressed the men and officers of the expedition in terms that would encourage excesses and left no doubt in the men's minds that the purpose of the mission was revenge. Within three days, this much larger expedition boarded transports for a return to the Mattamuskeet region with the intent of punishing the local guerilla bands.

The expedition arrived off the Hyde County coast on the evening of March 7. As the Pamlico Sound waters were shallow, the transports unloaded the troops thirteen miles from their destination, to be ferried to land by shallow-draft gunships. Once on land, the troops marched inland a half-mile to Swan Quarter, where Captain Richardson again addressed the troops on the nature of the expedition. Using the same harsh language as he had in New Bern, he reminded them that the purpose of the mission was to seek vengeance on the guerillas who had killed and wounded his men. According to his reasoning, guerillas were undeserving of being treated as regular soldiers. Orders were given to show no quarter.

Unfortunately for Richardson, the effort to seek retribution on the guerilla force that had killed his men during the earlier raid was unsuccessful. The offending enemy force

was nowhere to be seen. The guerillas were reported to be operating in groups of six to eight men, which were, in effect, too small to challenge the much larger Federal force. As such, no guerrillas attacked, and the raiders only took thirteen suspected guerrillas into custody, including a wounded Confederate lieutenant who had returned home after being paroled by a Union officer. The single reported "attack" on the expedition may simply have been by an elderly hunter who was unaware of the soldiers' presence.

On the first day, nine miles from Swan Quarter, as the troops encamped near an abandoned rebel earthwork, the sound of a gunshot awakened them. The guilty party turned out to be elderly one-eyed Thomas Voliva, who told the federals that he had been hunting bears with his son and was unaware of the presence of the soldiers. He was not believed, and was taken to New Bern as a prisoner. To protect themselves from further guerrilla attacks, every male along the route was taken into custody to prevent his joining any attack on the column. In addition to Voliva and the thirteen suspected guerrillas, the Yankees forced sixty other civilians to accompany the expedition.

Unable to take revenge on the guilty guerillas, retribution fell solely on the local civilian population. This took the form of pillage, plunder, burning, theft, and excessive foraging beyond the necessary need for food. From the time the army left Swan Quarter on March 9 until it re-embarked on the transports four days later, officers made no attempt to maintain discipline. The soldiers of the expedition, prompted by Richardson's angry words on the need for retribution, turned into undisciplined raiders operating beyond the control of their officers.

Corporal Luther Dickey, who was present and later recorded the events in his regimental history, placed the primary blame for the misconduct on the influence that the intemperate words of Captain Richardson had on the officers and men. Captain John Donaghy, commanding Company F of the 101st Pennsylvania, wrote that blame had to be shared by Colonel Morris, who at no point confronted his officers in regard to the conduct of their men. The colonel himself, in his official report, admitted to a lack of discipline in his own regiment, but placed greater blame on the lack of line officers in the 103rd Pennsylvania who had "*little or no control over their commands, and lack[ed] energy to enforce proper discipline.*" A contributing factor appears to have been the "fine vintage" of Hyde County, which was freely available to both officers and men without price or money. Historian Mark Grimsley, in his book "*The Hard Hand of War,*" argued that conduct such as that exhibited by the troops during the Mattamuskeet raid was seldom seen prior to mid-1863.

As the army moved along the roads circling the lake, it took time to forage for the expedition's troops and for items to be taken to New Bern. In doing so, it also took time to burn and plunder the property of local citizens. Little regard was shown for whether the owner was Unionist, neutral, or Confederate. The expedition encamped on two separate nights at the farm of Sylvester McGowan, a local Unionist who had enlisted in the First North Carolina Union regiment and was stationed in New Bern. While he was away, he left his home in the care of James Mason and his family. When told that the property belonged to a Union soldier serving in New Bern, Colonel Morris ordered his men to leave it undisturbed. His soldiers ignored orders and warmed themselves by burning McGowan's cook house and a thousand cypress rails, while killing his poultry and hogs for food. Though no receipts were left for the property taken and destroyed, in 1872, McGowan received \$144.50 recompense from the Southern Claims Commission.

On March 12, the column visited the 6,000 acre plantation of Judge Donald, the largest slaveholder in the area. After filling their wagons with cotton, corn, and bacon to

be carried to New Bern and burning stacks of fodder, the Federal soldiers moved on, followed by some of Donald's slaves. Thus far, the expedition had been joined by approximately sixty escaping slaves who brought with them horses, mules, oxen, donkeys, buggies, carts, and an assortment of household goods. It is noteworthy that, of Donald's four hundred slaves, no more than sixty took their chance at freedom. The fleeing slaves proved to be a hindrance for the army, as they slowed its progress. The decision to flee with the army proved to be a tragedy for the slaves, left behind to the mercy of their masters when the expedition boarded the transports for a return to New Bern.

The confiscation and plunder of local property began as soon as the troops left Swan Quarter on March 9. As the various elements of the expedition moved along the rutted wagon roads surrounding the lake, they emptied the contents of all the meat houses and cellars they passed. Every farm lost its hams, chickens, and everything edible, or that struck the interest of individual soldiers. Sergeant Justus Barr Clark, Jr. of the 101st wrote in his diary, "*The country was the richest we have yet seen in the Southern state ... and having captured large quantities of hams, chickens, etc. (sic) during the day, (we) began cooking them. All the pots, pans, and kettles in the neighborhood were pressed into service.*" At one farmhouse, the soldiers entered and removed a roast beef that had been freshly prepared for the family meal. As Captain Donaghy, who partook in the misappropriated food, remarked, "*so much for the feelings of chivalry.*"

Captain Donaghy, whose company traveled behind the main column, described the devastation left by the army. "*Plundering seemed to have been extensively indulged in by the main force ahead of us, to judge from the debris we saw on the road as we followed after. Books, papers, wearing apparel (sic) and household articles were strewn about. We passed by the burning ruins of a family mansion, which we were told afterwards, belonged to the captain of the guerrillas.*" The escaping slaves were put to good use in the enterprise. When bees stung several soldiers trying to lift honeybee hives with their bayonets, they turned the task over to the escaped slaves accompanying the column. The plunder was such that Donaghy feared that the wanton devastation was so great that bushwhackers might try to wreak vengeance on the column.

On March 11, the rag-tag army completed its march around the lake and headed toward the landing at Swan Quarter. It had rained incessantly for two days, and the wagon road was muddy. The citizens watching the caravan pass might have been amused at its appearance, had they not been witnessing a parade of their own possessions pass by in enemy hands. The two Pennsylvania infantry regiments that had begun the march as foot soldiers became a comic "cavalry" as they traveled the eastern shore of the lake. By this time, a majority of the force was riding, mounted on horses, mules, donkeys, oxen, and cows, or was drawn by them in a variety of vehicles ranging from stylish family carriages to home-made wagons with wheels constructed of boards nailed together crosswise. Infantry Captain Donaghy commandeered a small donkey and rode along with his feet dangling near the ground until the mule tired of its rider and evicted him by running under a wagon. Donaghy was both greatly amused and highly disgusted at the sight presented by the army. "*Such a collection of animals and vehicles never before or since marched in procession on this continent ... Every vehicle that had been in vogue in that part of the country during the 18th and 19th centuries must have been brought into requisition on this raid.*" He conjectured that the lack of order and discipline was so great that it could be annihilated by an enemy force one-quarter its size.

Fortunately, no enemy had attacked and no Federal soldier had been killed or wounded as the expedition came to an end at Swan Quarter that evening. The troops bivouacked in town that night and all the next day. During that time, they burned a small mill against orders, perhaps a final act of revenge before departing. Although the mission had been a failure in terms of visiting retribution on the guerillas, Colonel Morris' official report put the best face on it, noting that it had been successful in capturing a large amount of forage and other property. Although much was left behind, the expedition returned to New Bern with 17 horses, 13 buggies, a yoke of oxen, the 35 ton schooner Snow Squall, 8 cart-loads of cotton, 1,500 pounds of bacon, and 400 bushels of corn. He failed to note that the escaped slaves were left behind to the mercy of their masters.

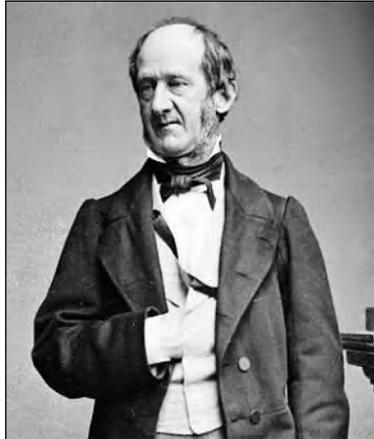
The expedition departed Swan Quarter on March 13, 1863. The disregard for orders and lack of discipline that had characterized the mission on land continued as the troops boarded the transports. In order to reach the heavier draft transport *Northerner* which was anchored thirteen miles off-shore in deeper water, the lighter draft gunboat *Escort* was used to ferry the men from shore to ship. When the first transfers from the 103rd reached the *Northerner*, they tended to remain on the loading side of the ship, to await the next group of transfers. This caused the vessel to list dangerously to one side, making it difficult for the craft's officers to control. When the men of the Pennsylvania regiment ignored repeated orders from both the boat's and expedition's commanders, an exasperated Colonel Morris seized a gun from the hands of an enlisted man and fired a warning shot down the side of the boat to regain order. One man was accidentally wounded in the incident.

The expedition arrived back at New Bern on the following day to the sound of cannon fire. It was at first believed to be celebration as it was the first anniversary of the Union capture of the city. But on landing, it was learned to be the closing round of a Confederate attack on Fort Anderson across the Neuse River by Confederate General James J. Pettigrew.

The final word on the failed revenge raid came from outgoing Union Governor Edward Stanly. Two weeks after the raid, the governor, who was widely unpopular with the Union military in the state, asked, to protect North Carolinians against abuses such as those perpetrated against them during the Hyde County raid. "*In numerous instances, all well authenticated,*" he wrote, the soldiers "*entered and robbed the houses of loyal men, destroyed furniture, insulted women, and treated them with scorn.*" His protest was forwarded to Colonel Morris, who, in his own report on the raid, acknowledged that excesses occurred, but blamed them on the absence of discipline among the two Pennsylvania regiments, while absolving himself of blame for disobedience to his orders. There was little more that Governor Stanly could do in the way of protest. Unpopular with the army, and in disagreement with President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, he had resigned as governor and was on his way out of North Carolina.

There can be no doubt that the Mattamuskeet raid of March 1863 violated the acceptable conduct of Civil War warfare. General William T. Sherman, noted for bringing the hard hand of war to the civilian population of the South, presented his views on the limitations of foraging in enemy territory in his Special Field Order 120, issued on November 9, 1864. As a general principle, he wrote, "*in districts and neighborhoods where the army is unmolested, no destruction of such property should be permitted.*" "*As for [taking] horses, mules, wagons, &c., belonging to the inhabitants,*" this was permitted, while "*discriminating between the rich, who are usually hostile, and*

the poor or industrious, usually neutral or friendly.” While applicable only in principle to the Mattamuskeet raid, the actions of the troops were, according to the conscientious John Donaghy, *“the most discreditable affair in which the 103d Regiment participated during the nearly four years of its service.”* Thanks to the honesty of his memoirs and the determination of Luther Dickey to accurately record the history of his regiment, the raid is remembered in history.



Edward Stanly, the detested military governor of eastern North Carolina
(Photo Brady)



General John G. Foster, commander of the Federal forces in eastern North Carolina
(Library of Congress)



Wild federal soldiers on a foraging spree (Kean Archives)