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*"Quaeque ipse miserrima vidi,
Et quorum pars magna fui."*

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INCIDENTS OF CAVALRY SERVICE

IN

LOUISIANA.

BY

CHARLES H. PARKHURST,

(Late Lieutenant-Colonel Third Rhode Island Cavalry.)



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INCIDENTS OF CAVALRY SERVICE
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LOUISIANA.

[Read before the Society June 14th, 1876.]

IN the early part of the war nearly every infantry officer of the line, and certainly every soldier, was fully convinced that the most comfortable and advantageous method of fighting the rebels was on horseback. As the result of this conviction many of the nine-months officers and men, especially of the Eleventh Rhode Island, who had tasted the delights of the famous march of one hundred and twenty-five miles in five days, from Suffolk to the Blackwater, under General Corcoran, were eager to join the Third Rhode Island Cavalry, which Colonel Willard Sayles was actively recruiting in the summer and fall of 1863.

It was thought to be a piece of great good fortune that this regiment was to be assigned to the Depart-

ment of the Gulf, and was to be under the command of General Nathaniel P Banks, whose military star was then in the ascendant. The regiment was sent to New Orleans in detachments, the first battalion under Major George R. Davis leaving in December, 1863, another detachment following in March, and a third, with Colonel Sayles, still later.

Only the first battalion and two companies of the Second Cavalry (which had been united with the Third) took part in that disastrous campaign known as the Second Red River Expedition.

This is neither the time nor the place to criticize the military career of General Banks. His record has passed into history. One thing, however, can be justly said of him, and that is, that he never attempted to relieve himself from the responsibility of the failure of this expedition. There has been much discussion in Congress, and there was much of what might be called free-rifted talk in the army concerning the objects of this campaign. Some have claimed that its object was wholly political, some that it was wholly for stealing cotton and sugar, and some at the time, for a quite brief period, actually thought

that it was for the purpose of conquering the rebels. Most of us were quite easily disabused of the latter theory.

General Banks's instructions from Washington were dated November 9, 1862, and contemplated, first, the reduction of Vicksburg and the opening of the Mississippi River. General Halleck uses this language: "The President regards the opening of the Mississippi River as the first and most important of all our military and naval operations, and it is hoped that you will not lose a moment in accomplishing it." Then it was suggested, after the capture of Vicksburg, to destroy the railroads at Jackson and Marion. This was done by Grant's and Sherman's armies. Then (I quote from General Halleck's instructions) "to ascend with a naval and military force the Red River as far as it is navigable, and thus open an outlet for the sugar and cotton of northern Louisiana." It is also suggested that having the Red River in our possession it would form the best base for operations in Texas.

These instructions from Washington are sufficient to show that whatever else may be charged against

General Banks, he certainly was not the originator of the expedition.

After the army and navy reached Alexandria and had moved towards Shreveport, some three hundred and fifty miles distant, and the head of the river navigation, known to be the great cotton depot for the surrounding country of Texas and Louisiana, every one felt that cotton was the great object of the expedition, as it was perfectly well known that if Shreveport was captured it could not be held except by a large force, and that it was not of sufficient importance to hold. It was nearly five hundred miles from the Mississippi River, and must be reinforced and supplied from the river, making necessary a constant and active patrol of the Red River by gunboats. Besides, the river itself was, if possible, more treacherous than the people who dwelt upon its banks, and was persistently low when Admiral Porter and his gunboat fleet most desired it "to be booming," to use his language. For some strange reason it wouldn't boom at all.

General Banks with his well-appointed army, all veterans, attempted to capture Shreveport. He

hoped to have made a union with General Steele, whose forces were supposed to be moving from Little Rock, Arkansas. The enemy's force was concentrated. General Banks and General Steele were moving towards each other at right angles, and never met, and never practically heard from each other or in any way co-operated. A large portion of General Banks's army, some ten thousand, under the command of General A. J. Smith, were practically and entirely an independent command. They were "loaned" to General Banks by General Grant, for thirty days. General Smith did not report to General Banks, and was, except nominally, quite without his command. His forces were splendid specimens of the Western soldiers, always ready for a fight, and no discredit can be cast upon them or their brave commander. But this anomalous condition of things, this having an independent command inside of the army of General Banks, was annoying to him and prejudicial to the successful management of the expedition. General Smith was, I am quite sure, a regular army officer. General Banks was looked upon by him as a political general who knew but lit-

tle of the business of a fighting campaign, and General Smith made no bones of expressing himself with great freedom about his nominal commander. It is also to be remembered that General Banks was expected to accomplish certain political results in setting up a State government in Louisiana, and as the result elections were held while the army halted. So that the short way to set forth the second Red River campaign would be to call it a "political-military-cotton-seeking expedition," and not much military either.

The army and the navy moved toward Shreveport but failed to see the promised land, and after the battle at Sabine Cross Roads, where, to use the expressive language of some of the soldiers, they skirmished with a baggage train of some three hundred and fifty wagons separating the cavalry from the infantry supports, this grand army changed its direction and concluded to return to Alexandria. The Confederates were again unaccommodating. They resisted General Banks's approach to Shreveport, and they resisted persistently his efforts to return to Alexandria. They continued their want of accom-

modation the entire distance. The treacherous river seemed imbued with the same spirit, and though Admiral Porter said his flat-bottomed gunboats could run anywhere where there was a heavy dew, still they would run aground in Red River. But at last the expedition, after some severe fighting, reached Alexandria.

Just above the town the river runs over a rocky bed where the water is quite shallow, and Porter's gunboats could not pass this point on account of the low water. One of the gunboats had been grounded and destroyed some distance above. Colonel Bailey, the Acting Engineer of the Nineteenth Army Corps, proposed to get the gunboat afloat by constructing wing dams, and so to raise the water to a sufficient height to float the boat over the bars. His offer was declined, as the navy at that time neither desired or regarded counsel from landsmen, and as the result of this stupid jealousy the gunboat had to be destroyed to prevent her falling into the hands of the enemy. In a dispatch to the Secretary of the Navy, a few days before, Admiral Porter said: "If nature does not change her laws there will be no doubt a

rise of water." But nature for some reason declined to accommodate the Admiral, and the experience of a western lumberman was required to save the entire gunboat fleet.

After the army had reached Alexandria it was compelled to remain as the guardians of Porter's fleet of gunboats. The great object of the campaign had failed of success; Shreveport with its stores of cotton was still in the enemy's hands; the army was dispirited at the failure, and grumbled, criticised and swore as only beaten soldiers can.

Colonel Bailey was confident that by the construction of dams, the water above the town could be raised to a sufficient height to float the fleet over the rapids. The Admiral, it was generally understood, had no faith in Colonel Bailey's damming the river, though if common rumor is to be credited, the Admiral and most of his men were heartily in favor of and actually did exercise themselves continually in damming the Red River and all connected therewith. General Banks, however, if the statements of those who ought to know are entitled to any credit, had from the first an abiding faith in the success of Col-

Colonel Bailey's scheme and showed his faith by his works. On Sunday, the first day of May, the work was commenced. Colonel Bailey had full authority to detail as many men from the army as he desired, and nearly the whole of the infantry were employed at different times in the construction of the dam, and in eight days this vast work was finished.

The river at this point was about eight hundred feet in width and the labor was commenced by running from the left bank what was called a "tree dam," made of trees and brush cross-tied with heavy timber, filled in with brick and stone, and otherwise strengthened in nearly every conceivable way. This "tree dam" extended about three hundred feet into the river, and large coal barges filled with brick and stone were sunk at the end. From the right bank of the river cribs loaded with brick and stone composed the dam on that side. At this time the water on the rapids was not more than four and a half or five feet in depth, and the current was said to be some ten miles an hour. The result of the building of the dam was to raise the water above to a sufficient height so that, on the afternoon of the eighth of May, five

vessels passed the rapids and lay at anchor just above the dam. Great fears were, however, entertained that the immense pressure of water upon the dam from the piling of water above it, would cause it to give way, and the Admiral was constantly urged to get his vessels in readiness to make the passage, which was conceded to be their only hope of safety. This, however, was not done. Neither advice or suggestions from the land forces were favorably received by those in charge of the fleet. The next morning part of the dam was carried away, and four of the gunboats passed through the opening thus made and reached a place of safety. Nearly the whole army were watching the experiment with great anxiety, and when the first gunboat, the *Lexington*, made the passage successfully, one loud shout of joy went up from the thousands of soldiers gathered upon the banks, and for the time all jealousies and heart-burnings were forgotten and all united in awarding all praise to the hero of the hour, Colonel Bailey. It was well known to the officers of the army, that the naval forces had openly stated that it was the intention of General Banks to leave the fleet

to take care of itself, but I do not believe that the idea was ever entertained for a moment by General Banks, and his published dispatches to Admiral Porter and his conduct from the day of his return to Alexandria until the fleet was safe, furnish the best answer to that unfounded scandal.

There was not from the beginning to the end of the campaign, that kindly feeling existing between the army and navy which should have been found, and I have always felt that cotton or the desire to own other people's cotton, which has caused so much misery to the country, had much to do with many of the untoward results of this campaign; and it is quite certain that every soldier who took part in that campaign will endorse the statement of General Banks, that Admiral Porter's published official statements relative to the Red River campaign are at variance with the truth (of which there are many thousand living witnesses), and do foul injustice to the officers and soldiers of the army, living and dead, to whom the navy is wholly indebted for the preservation of its gunboat fleet.

The fleet was saved and the orders were given to

return to New Orleans. It was the fortune of the Third Rhode Island Cavalry to be on outpost duty for the three days prior to the evacuation of Alexandria, and when we withdrew our outposts and fell back upon the town on the evening of the third day, we found what we had left as a flourishing town nothing but ashes. The whole country was dry and parched. Every thing about the town was like tinder, and the story which was generally believed was, that the fire was caused by a soldier, who had become enraged at the exactions of some of the post traders in the town, discharging his pistol into a heap of combustible material in the store, thus igniting it, and in a few hours hardly a building was left in the compact part of the town.

The Fifth Cavalry Brigade had the post of rear guard for the retreating army, and though the post of honor was given to the Third Cavalry, there were many officers and men who after three days and nights in the saddle, would not have grievously mourned had they been permitted to share for a little time this post of honor with some other regiment.

An army on the retreat is never especially happy,

no matter how brilliantly the retreat is conducted. Falling back is not enlivening, and an army thus circumstanced is not inclined to take much stock in the reports of great successes elsewhere, unless they are wonderfully well authenticated. An instance of this happened at Marksville, or Mansura, as it is sometimes called. Two days after we left Alexandria we met the enemy, in quite strong force, disposed to make a stand. Our forces were drawn up in line of battle at early dawn, and stretched over the magnificent plain. Just before going into the fight, word was brought to the regimental officers from General Banks, that he had received news by special messenger from General Grant of the capture of Richmond. Such news would naturally have aroused some enthusiasm, even among troops dispirited by defeat, but as the word was passed down the lines by the respective regimental commanders, not a murmur of applause was heard, and one irreverent private said: "You can't smooth out this retreat by any such nonsense as that; we heard the same story at Port Hudson and it's no truer now than it was then."

After a few hours of lively fighting, resulting in

quite severe loss to the enemy, we started for Simsport on the Atchafalaya, where Colonel Bailey again showed his engineering skill in the construction of a pontoon bridge of steamboats. The river or bayou here is some six hundred yards in width. The bridge was certainly of novel construction. Western steamboats, as is known, differ materially from an eastern craft in the style of construction. The bow of the western boat is practically on the level of the lower deck and is open. Colonel Bailey collected a sufficient number of the transports that were at Simsport and arranged them side by side the whole width of the river or bayou, and then built his bridge by simply laying plank across the bows of the boats as they lay there, and thus the entire army of General Banks passed over, no longer to be his army, but now to belong to the Division of the Mississippi, under the command of General E. R. S. Canby.

For the remainder of the term of service of the regiment their duties were only quasi military, as the condition of affairs in Louisiana was only quasi civil, if indeed it has ever been more than quasi civil. The forces remaining in Louisiana were practically

an armed force occupying the territory and trying to support and maintain the system of civil or quasi civil government which General Banks had endeavored to establish in the early part of 1864. Our chief duties were hunting guerrillas and jayhawkers (as there was no considerable armed force on or near the Mississippi), and in protecting the Northern men who had leased the abandoned plantations and who were trying to make their fortunes in using the labor of the freedmen. This was a costly and sad experience for most of them, for they either had to employ some old resident called a Union man, who had been in neither army—a stay-at-home who had the vices of both armies and the virtues of neither—or else to rely upon their own judgment, and whichever conclusion was adopted was quite sure to result in financial ruin.

General Thomas W. Sherman, who had lost a leg at Port Hudson, was in command in that part of Louisiana embracing New Orleans and certain posts on either side of the Mississippi River. His staff was at times quite largely composed of young men who had secured that great object of a second lieu-

tenant's ambition, a position as aid on a brigadier-general's staff. The presumption of some of these young men was only excelled by their ignorance. Insulting messages were often received in the name of General Sherman, from these young sprouts, by general officers who had forgotten more than these aids to the General ever thought of knowing. The result was that while everybody respected and honored General Sherman, he was never a favorite as a commanding officer.

The writer remembers very well an instance of the character of the dispatches that sometimes came from his headquarters. While stationed at a post called "The Hermitage," on the east bank of the Mississippi, opposite Donaldsonville, word came to me early one morning from a good friend to our cause, that the telegraphic line on the east side of the river had been cut about a mile below my farthest outpost, by the crew of a boat which had landed from a steamer that had come down the river just before daylight. It was well known that the Confederates had in the Red River an exceedingly fast and powerful ram or gunboat, known as the "Webb." This

boat formerly belonged in New York, and the strictest instructions had been given to the gunboat fleet on the Mississippi to keep a constant watch lest she should get out of the Red River. There were iron-clads at the mouth of the Red River, Port Hudson, Baton Rouge, and at Donaldsonville. The line of wires on the east bank extended from Plaquemine to New Orleans. There was also a telegraph line on the west bank of the river, extending from Donaldsonville down Bayou Lafourche to the railroad at Thibodeaux and thence to New Orleans. My informant was fully satisfied that the steamer that had passed down and whose boat's crew had cut the wires, was the Confederate ram Webb. I at once sent a messenger across the river to Colonel Fiske, commanding at Donaldsonville, and requested him to send the information by his telegraphic line to General Sherman. Colonel Fiske telegraphed, "Colonel Parkhurst reports that the rebel ram Webb has passed Donaldsonville, cutting the wires on the east bank." The reply Colonel Fiske received was: "Tell Colonel Parkhurst, we think here his rebel ram is a sheep. By order of General Sherman." The ram reached New

Orleans unmolested, passing the city at full speed, and when a short distance below the Custom House displayed the Confederate flag and commenced firing. Every one then knew the difference between the rebel ram and the sheep for whose origin I was to be responsible. It was generally understood after this telegram, that sheep was not a favorite subject of discussion at General Sherman's headquarters.

I had also sent word to the Captain of the gunboat at Donaldsonville, of what I had learned, and he, having his boat always under steam, started at once for New Orleans and arrived just in season to witness the destruction of the ram by a broadside from the man-of-war Richmond, which happened to be coming up the river, and recognizing the Confederate vessel flying the stars and bars had driven her ashore, whence her crew escaped into the swamps. Had it not been for the timely appearance of the Richmond, the Webb would easily have passed Forts Jackson and St. Philip and have gone out to sea. She was prepared in the most effective manner as a cruiser, and then my poor sheep would have assumed a more formidable character.

It was somewhat amusing to witness the intense mortification of the gunboat officers. Captain Fitzhugh's executive officer was on deck and saw the Webb steam by Donaldsonville. Her description was as well known to all the naval officers as that of their own vessels. Their special duty was to be on the watch for this very boat, and yet, though there was no other vessel answering her description in the river or any of its tributaries, in the hands of the Confederates, and though they knew that she was only waiting a favorable opportunity to elude their vigilance and make her way to the gulf, they permitted her to pass in plain sight without their knowledge, and received notice of her escape from the soldiers whose eyes (in their opinion) would have been better employed in attending to their duties on the land. I have never seen in any of the reports from the commanding officers of either the army or navy, any report of this affair except the report of the fact of the destruction of the Webb by the Richmond, and I have stated the facts as they came under my own observation.

It was not my fortune to visit General Sherman's

headquarters but once and I never personally received anything but the most courteous treatment from him, but the files of his department will show that there was at times some rather spicy telegraphing between the posts on the river and some of his staff officers. One of the great troubles of staff officers during the war was, that many of them assumed knowledge whether they had it or not, and many of the orders that were issued in the name of commanding officers were necessarily issued by staff officers without the knowledge of their chiefs, and much mischief was thereby produced. Of course General Sherman never personally authorized the, at the time, somewhat famous sheep dispatch, and probably may never have known of it, but he was blamed, after the results were known, for allowing such a dispatch to go from his headquarters.

As a Rhode Islander, I have always felt that General Sherman's abilities as a military man were not properly recognized during the war. He had no political wires to pull and no politicians were enlisted in his service or were welcome at his headquarters. He was every inch a soldier. He was faithful to

every duty. He always obeyed and always insisted on obedience. He was not easily convinced of error and was not gracious to criticism, especially from subordinates whom he had perhaps unjustly criticised, and when the attempt was made there was generally more strong Saxon than polite French in the General's language.

I have thus in a plain way noticed some incidents of cavalry service in the Department of the Gulf, and I shall be more than satisfied if by their recital I may have stimulated some more graceful pen to record the incidents of other campaigns where more stirring events occurred. Many of the most interesting personal sketches necessarily do not appear in any published records, and if this Society can continue to receive from its members and others from time to time, their personal observations, much really valuable historical material will thereby be obtained.

