

Swing Low, Sweet Harriet

(An Abolitionist Raid On The Combahee River)

Asa Gordon_S&DUSCT

"The difference between us is very marked. Most that I have done and suffered in the service of our cause has been in public, and I have received much encouragement at every step of the way. You, on the other hand, have labored in a private way. I have wrought in the day - you in the night. I have had the applause of the crowd and the satisfaction that comes of being approved by the multitude, while the most that you have done has been witnessed by a few trembling, scarred, and foot-sore bondmen and women, whom you have led out of the house of bondage, and whose heartfelt 'God bless you' has been your only reward. The midnight sky and the silent stars have been the witness of your devotion to freedom . . ."

Letter from Frederick Douglass, to Harriet Tubman Rochester, New York August 28, 1868

Tubman's outstanding contribution to the war was as a Union spy and scout. General Hunter, the commander at Fort Royal, recognized her expertise, tempered by her years in the Underground Railroad; under him Tubman organized a scouting service of black scouts and river pilots who surveyed and patrolled the Combahee River area in South Carolina.

In this capacity she was integral to a celebrated military action on the Combahee on 2, June 1863. Three ships under the command of Colonel James Montgomery, a veteran of the guerrilla battles in Kansas and a trusted comrade of John Brown, raided deep into South Carolina in a blow pointing forward to Sherman's march on Georgia. Harriet Tubman accompanied Colonel James Montgomery on the raid up the Combahee River in South Carolina. Leading the troops up the river, Harriet Tubman helped them avoid Confederate defenses and participated in the assault which destroyed commissary stores, cotton, and other property valued in the millions and helped over 700 slaves to escape to Union lines.

. About a month after the raid, the July 10, 1863, issue of the *Boston Commonwealth* printed the following story:

... black soldiers, under the guidance of a black woman, dashed into the enemy's country, struck a bold and effective blow, destroying millions of dollars worth of commissary stores, cotton and lordly dwellings, and striking terror into the heart of rebeldom, brought off near 800 slaves and thousands of dollars worth of property without losing a man or receiving a scratch."

The article went on to say that before the raid, Tubman had risked her life time after time as she went behind the enemy lines on spying missions. The liberated slaves were brought back to Port Royal, where the able-bodied men among them were inducted into Montgomery's regiment.

After the raid, Colonel Montgomery wrote to General Gillmore:

"I wish to commend to your attention Mrs. Harriet Tubman, a most remarkable woman, and invaluable scout." Mrs. Tubman was a living example of an old hymn which was sung by the evening campfires during the Civil War, "Rescue the Perishing, Care for the Dying."

Black Dispatches

Harriet Tubman, one of the nation's most famous African-Americans, was also one of the war's most daring and effective spies. She is renowned as a conductor of the Underground Railroad. Her espionage work, like that of many black spies, is far less known. But her exploits, centered along the South Carolina coast, are well documented, mostly because they were military operations.

Early in 1863, after she had spent nearly a year caring for refugee slaves, Union officers in South Carolina decided that she would be more valuable as a covert operative. She was asked to assemble a small reconnaissance unit of ex-slaves who knew the region and could gather timely intelligence. She found nine men, some of them riverboat pilots who knew every inch of the waterways threading through the coastal lowlands. One of her tasks was the finding of "torpedoes," as remotely-detonated mines were called then, placed along the waterways patrolled by Union river craft.

Her spying and scouting evolved into a kind of special forces operation under Colonel James Montgomery. A fervent believer in guerrilla warfare, Montgomery was a veteran of antislavery border fighting in Kansas. Like Tubman, he had met and admired firebrand abolitionist John Brown.

In July 1863, Tubman became Montgomery's second-in-command during a night raid up the Combahee River, near Beaufort, South Carolina. The Union gunboats, carrying some 300 black troops, slipped up the river, eluding torpedoes that Tubman's men had spotted. Undetected, the raiders swarmed ashore, destroyed a Confederate supply depot, torched homes and warehouses, and rounded up more than 750 rice plantation slaves.

"The enemy," said a Confederate report on the raid, "seems to have been well posted as to the character and capacity of our troops ... and to have been well guided by persons thoroughly acquainted with the river and country." Unwittingly, the report was praising the work of slaves working for Tubman.

Reporting on the raid to Secretary of War Stanton, Brigadier General Rufus Saxton said, "This is the only military command in American history wherein a woman, black or white, led the raid, and under whose inspiration. it was originated and conducted." Tubman's spies added to the heroic chronicles of the Black Dispatches. "This source of information," said one historian, "represented the single most prolific and productive category of intelligence obtained and acted on by Union forces throughout the Civil War."

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No.19.483. CHARLESTON, S.C., CONFEDERATE STATES OF AMERICA, WEDNESDAY, MORNING, JUNE 3, 1863. VOL. LXI.

CHARLESTON.

WEDNESDAY MORNING, JUNE 3, 1863.

Yankee Raid on Combahee- A dispatch from Pocotaligo Tuesday morning reported that a party of Yankees had made their appearance, and were destroying the pontoon bridge at Combahee Ferry, besides burning some houses on the banks. About three hundred, the dispatch said, had also landed at Fields point, probably by a division of a part of their force to cover the burning operations of the others on the Combahee River. Later in the day it was reported that the enemy, after visiting several plantations and destroying considerable property, had gone back. They were still hovering around, however up to the late hour in the evening. The force making the raid is belived to be small. They have kept close to their boats on the river banks. Our forces are prepared for them should they attempt to move further inland. It was reported last night that they had burnt the residence of Mr. A. BURNEY, and had visited the plantations of Mr. HEYWARD and Mr. BLAKE, and one or two others, during considerable mischeif. They are no doubt endeavoring to imitate the Abolition raids recently made in other Southern States.

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No.19.484. CHARLESTON, S.C., CONFEDERATE STATES OF AMERICA, THURSDAY MORNING, JUNE 4, 1863. VOL. LXI.

THE COURIER.

The Yankee Raid on Combahee.- An official dispatch to General Jordan from General W.S. Walker, at Green Pond, 1: o'clock Thursday night, was received Wenesday morning, stating that the enemy had entirely disappeared.

We have been furnished from a private source with the following particulars:

A part of the enemy's force consisted of three companies of negroes commanded by white officers. One division landed at Field's Point, on the plantation of Dr. R. L. Baker, just at the mouth of the Combahee river, adjoining and running into Coosaw river. This party, after burning and destroying all the property on DR. BAKER'S plantation proceeded cautiously along the river bank, going through the bye-paths,&c., so as to keep under shelter of their gunboats.

They afterwards visited respectively the Rice plantations of Mr. OLIVER MIDDELETON, Mr. A. BURNET, Mr. Wm. KIRKLAND, Mr. NICHOLS, Mr. PAUL, Mr. MANIGAULT, Mr. C.T. LOWNDES and MR. W.C. HEYWARD. Here they came up to the pontoon bridge at Combahee Ferry, about fifty miles fom this city, and burnt it. At each of the plantations visited, after pillaging what they could, they set fire to and destroyed the residences, barns and other buildings, together with such other property as they were unable to take away.

A large quantity of Rice, established at between eight and ten thousand bushels, on Mr. NICHOL'S plantation, was destroyed. The costly and extensive library of Mr. NICHOLS, valued at \$10,000 or over, was totally consumed with his residence. Between six and seven hundred negroes, belonging principally to Mr. W.C. HEYWARD and Mr. Lowndes, were carried off. It is also feared that some of the Overseers have been captured, as several are missing.

After destroying the pontoon bridge at the Ferry and pillaging Mr. HEYWARD'S plantation, the parties retraced their steps and made their escape. There is no doubt but that this raid has been in contemplation for some time. About a fortnight ago, three negroes -one belonging to Dr. BAKER, one to Mr. O. MIDDLETON, and one to Mr. W.C. HEYWARD-ran away and escaped to the enemy, giving, it is supposed, the information which led to this raid.

Charleston Daily Courier

No. 19,485. CHARLESTON, S.C., CONFEDERATE STATES OF AMERICA, FRIDAY MORNING, JUNE 5, 1863. VOL. LXI.

The Combahee Raid.

We gather from several sources the following additional particulars of this raid:

The boats came up to Mr. KIRKLAND'S place about seven o'clock in the morning and landed some twenty armed negroes, in Yankee uniform, and officered by a white man. They destroyed his dwelling house, steam threshing mill, winnowing house, blade house, over seer's house, mule and horse stables, and some twelve hundred bushels of rice, besides taking with them ninety of his most valuable negroes. They also drank and destroyed a large stock of old wines. On Mr. NICHOLS' place they burnt the dwelling house, threshing mill, overseer's, driver's and negro houses, and about seven thousand bushels of rice, put up in bags ready for shipment. About seventy-four of Mr. NICHOLS' negroes were taken. At Mr. LOWNDES' they burnt the threshing mill, but saved his residence. About two hundred of Mr. LOWNDES' negroes were carried off.

The party that visited Mr. Wm. C. HEYWARD'S place consisted of about twenty negroes. This party landed at Combahee Ferry bridge, which they cut and partly destroyed. At this place they burned every house on the premises, also the threshing mill, four large flats and flat house, a corn mill, from three to five negroe houses, a hospital and overseer's house. They carried off about two-hundred and fifty-negroes from Mr. HEYWARD'S plantation. After setting fire to the pontoon bridge, they then retired down the river. A slight skirmish took place at Fields Point with a few of the negroes, who ran with great speed upon being fired at with one piece of cannon.

Mr. THOMAS FRIPP, who acted as guide for our men, was shot at by four negroes, who stepped out on the road and took deliberate aim at him. He was struck in the shoulder, arm and leg.

We are indebted to a friend for the following extract from a letter dated Green Pond, June 2:

The enemy came up to the pontoon bridge over the Combahee Ferry this morning; destroyed the

bridge; anchored two gunboats and marched up to the adjacent plantations; burned Mr. Lowndes' mills and several out houses, also Col. W.C. Heyward's buildings, Joshua Nichols', Mr. Middleton's, Mr. Burnetts, Mr. Kirkland's and others; driving off from their premises as many of the negroes that could be enticed. Major Emanuel manoeuvred his command admirably for he was totally unaquainted with the country; but we missed Col. J. and the Fifth Regiment. Major Emanuel bushwacked them for some time.

Gen. Walker came down this afternoon with reinforcements. The General is here awaiting tidings from the front. Capt. Bomar has gone to Farr Bluff to try and intercept the enemy at that point as they pass out with their boats. The enemy number some four or five hundred. If the guns at Combahee Ferry could have been retained in battery at that point with a sufficient force to man them the dastardly miscreants never would have dared to penetrate the channel so far. The expedition was, however, from all we can learn, a preconcerted plan between the negroes on the plantations and the Yankees at Hilton Head, they having communicated to the enemy the situation of affairs between Ashepoo and Combahee.

The dilatory reports of the pickets and exaggerated accounts of the number and positions of the enemy threw everything into a blank-botch.

Thomas Fripp was wounded in four places, during the skirmish near Fields' Point, as the enemy withdrew. Their vessels were side wheel steamers, badly equipped. The troops were mostly negroes, commanded by white men. Montgomery, the Kansas Jayhawker, was said to be in command.

A small estimate of the damage done, considering the abandonment of the present crop of rice must be five or six millions of money.

Mr. Lowndes lost about three hundred negroes.- Mr. Nichols lost all of his, together with his fine library, which was burned with the dwelling Mr. Nichols himself escaped.

The Savannah News, of the 4th inst., furnishes the following concerning the Yankee-negro raid on the Combahee river:

Federal Raid in Carolina-The conductors and passengers by the Charleston Rail Road this morning, report that a considerable number of black Yankee troops made a raid on tuesday morning about six o'clock, on the Combahee river, near Green Pond; in the vicinity of Mr. Wm. H. Heyward's plantation. They destroyed several plantations, burning down the houses, destroying the fences and running off a large number of negroes. The exact number of negroes stolen is not known, but it is reported to be about one thousand. The raiders did not remain in the vicinity very long, but moved rapidly destroying everything in their path. They returned to their transports. They approached within five miles of the Charleston and Savannah Rail Road. It is said that this band of thieves are under the command of the notorious Montgomery, of Kansas notoriety. How long shall the Yankee nest of thieves and murderers on Hilton Head remain unmolested?

Later -Since the above was in type, we have conversed with Mr. Wm. Bradley, an officer on the Charleston and Savannah Rail Road, who arrived here on Wednesday morning. He informs us that a regiment of negro troops came up the Combahee river in two transports, protected by three gunboats. They landed at Wm. Henry Heyward's plantation about four o'clock in the morning, and proceeded to their work of destruction. There was a small picket in the immediate vicinity and with whom there was a brief

skirmish. The only troops to oppose them was a cavalry corps and an artillery company, both of them being at some distance from the scene. The enemy numbered from nine hundred to one thousand. During the skirmish Mr. Fripp, qa citizen, was mortally wounded. The work of destruction was rapidly done, and everything before them was destroyed and given to the flame. The enemy were only on shore some six hours, having embarked again on their transports about ten o'clock.

The buildings and property on some ten plantations were destroyed. We learn the names of the following gentlemen as being among the sufferers:Wm. H. Heyward, Wm. O. Heyward, Mr. Kirkland, Mr. Burnett, Mr. Nichols, Robert Chisohm, the Estate of Keith, J.L. Paul, and others, whose names are not remembered.

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HARRIET TUBMAN

Col. Montgomery and his gallant band of 300 black soldiers, under the guidance of a black woman, dashed into the enemy's country, struck a bold and effective blow, destroying millions of dollars worth of commissary stores, cotton and lordly dwellings, and striking terror to the heart of rebeldom, brought off near 800 slaves and thousands of dollars worth of property, without losing a man or receiving a scratch! It was a glorious consummation.

After they were all fairly disposed of in the Beaufort church, they were addressed in strains of thrilling eloquence by their gallant deliverer; to which they responded in a song -

"There is a white robe for thee."

A song so appropriate and so heartfelt and cordial as to bring unbidden tears.

The colonel was followed by a speech from the black woman who led the raid, and under whose inspiration it was originated and conducted. For sound sense and real native eloquence, her address would do honor to any man, and it created a great sensation.

And now a word of this woman - this black heroine - this fugitive slave. She is now called "Moses" having inherited the name for the many daring feats she has accomplished in

behalf of the bondmen and the many slaves she has set free. She was formerly a slave in Virginia - she determined upon "freedom or death", and escaped to Canada. She there planned the deliverance of all her kindred, and made nine successive trips to different slave states, effecting the escape of over 100 slaves and their successful establishment in Canada. Since the rebellion she has devoted herself to her great work of delivering the bondmen, with an energy and sagacity that cannot be exceeded. Many and many times she has penetrated the enemy's lines and discovered their situation and condition, and escaped without injury, but not without extreme hazard.

The above, from a correspondant of the Wisconsin State Journal, will remind many of our readers of their interviews with the heroine here mentioned,--Harriet Tubman. She has a more remarkable history than any fugitive we have ever met, some portions of which we shall give in our next issue. She is of unmixed negro blood, was born in Maryland - not Virginia - and has brought her rescued country people chiefly from the Eastern shore of Maryland, in the neighborhood of Cambridge. Her religious experiences are as startling as those of Sojourner Truth, whose letter we printed last week.