

## THE CIVIL WAR SKIRMISH NEAR BOLIVAR, TENNESSEE: MARCH, 1864

William W. Chester

Many articles concerning fratricidal acts during the Civil War have been published. Also, numerous records reveal military incidents where fighting occurred with brother against brother, father against son, and neighbor against neighbor. The skirmish near Bolivar, Tennessee, is indicative of this type of warfare in West Tennessee during the War Between the States.

The 6th Tennessee Cavalry Regiment, USA was also called the 1st West Tennessee Cavalry Regiment. It was organized at Bethel, McNairy County, Tennessee, in August, 1862, with Colonel Fielding Hurst in Command. By November 1862 six companies were mustered into the regiment. Four of these companies were composed mostly of men from Weakley County, Tennessee. Company I was organized at Dresden in June 1862 by Captain Orlando H. Shearer. Company K was organized at Dresden in July 1862 by Captain Thomas H. Boswell. Company L was also organized in July 1862 at Dresden by Captains John W. Moore and John H. Edwards. Company M was organized at North Gibson, Tennessee, in August 1862 by Captain William Carroll Holt. These companies were mustered in October 1862 as the 1st West Tennessee. They transferred to the 6th Tennessee Cavalry Regiment, USA in July 1863 and served in West Tennessee under Colonel Fielding Hurst until near the close of the war.

On January 17, 1864, Brigadier General William Sovy Smith wrote General U.S. Grant: "We have given Colonel Hurst a roving commission with his regiment to 'grub up' West Tennessee. I think he will reduce that district to order."

At the end of February 1864, Confederate General Leonidas Polk, the Department Commander, summoned Nathan B. Forrest and Stephen D. Lee to his headquarters at Demopolis, Alabama. There General Forrest was informed that three small regiments of Kentuckians were to be assigned to his command at Columbus, Mississippi. The Kentuckians were to be mounted for cavalry service. The best place to find horses for them, he believed, was in their home state. The unmounted Kentuckians gladly agreed to march back toward their homes.

Four small brigades were organized. The First, commanded by Colonel J.J. Neely; the Second by Colonel Robert McCulloch; the Third by Colonel A.P. Thompson, and the Fourth by General T.H. Bell. General James Chalmers was assigned to the command of the First Division, composed of the First and Second Brigades, and General Abraham Buford's division was composed of Thompson's and Bell's brigades.

The command, consisting of Buford's Division, was set in motion at Columbus, Mississippi, on the 15th of March, and General Forrest reached Jackson, Tennessee, on the 20th, a distance of one hundred fifty miles.

At Jackson, Forrest found the people in distress over the operations of Colonel Fielding Hurst and his Union regiment, described by Forrest as "renegade Tennesseans." Hurst, Forrest reported, had levied cash tribute upon Jackson and had arrested, carried off and confined citizens, while his men were responsible

for the murder and, in some cases, mutilation of five known members of Forrest's command who had fallen into their hands. Demand was made upon the Federal authorities at Memphis for restitution of the money extorted, for the release of citizens held in confinement at Fort Pillow and elsewhere, and for the surrender of Hurst and the officers and men of his command to be tried and dealt with for their offenses. When the demand was refused, as was to be expected, Forrest issued from Jackson a proclamation of outlawry against them.

Later, while operating in the neighborhood of Paducah, General Forrest ordered Brigadier General James A. Chalmers to follow him into West Tennessee. Many of Chalmers' men were from West Tennessee counties. Obeying the order from Forrest, Colonel J.J. Neely arrived in Bolivar with his First Brigade on March 29, 1864.

Meanwhile, Sherman at Nashville, in accordance with Grant's previously mentioned instructions, was combining a far-reaching plan for the defeat of General Forrest. General B.H. Grierson was ordered out of Memphis with his cavalry to hold Bolivar and protect the line of the Hatchie. Also, Brigadier General James C. Veatch, with an infantry division destined for Chattanooga, was ordered to land near Savannah and strike inland to intercept Forrest about the headwaters of the Hatchie, in the vicinity of Purdy, Tennessee. However, finding no evidence that Forrest was coming by Purdy, Veatch dropped back down the river to Clifton and marched toward Chattanooga.

General Grierson ordered Colonel Fielding Hurst's regiment to move against Forrest's troops. It was near Bolivar on March 29th that Colonel J.J. Neely encountered the 6th Union Cavalry. This Union regiment, composed of men from many West Tennessee counties, was confident of a quick victory. However, when it became apparent that the Confederates intended to fight, Colonel Hurst attempted to withdraw; Neely promptly pursued and killed about twenty, including two captains, and took about thirty-five prisoners, including one captain. In addition, five wagons and teams, two ambulances, and 50,000 rounds of ammunition were captured. The main part of the regiment escaped by way of Sommersville to Memphis. Hurst's command, as a body, did not again encounter Forrest's men. General Chalmers, in a congratulatory address, told his soldiers that "*Colonel Neely drove Hurst hatless into Memphis, leaving in our hands all his wagons, ambulances, papers, and his mistresses, both black and white.*"<sup>2</sup> This small victory was a source of great satisfaction to the people of this part of the state. Hurst was a renegade Tennessean who had carried on a bitter partisan warfare.

The 6th Tennessee Cavalry Regiment, USA was mustered out of service on July 26, 1865, at Pulaski, Tennessee. The men from Weakley and Gibson Counties returned home to help rebuild the South of today.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>*Tennesseans in the Civil War, Part I.* Published by the Civil War Centennial Commission, Nashville, Tennessee, 1964. pg. 335.

<sup>2</sup>Lytle, Andrew. *Bedford Forrest and His Critter Company.* Green Key Press: Seminole, Florida, 1984. pg. 274.

A few months ago, several unopened letters written by Union soldiers from Weakley and Gibson Counties were found in an antique chest owned by an individual who has lived in Weakley County, Tennessee, for many years. The letters were among other old papers such as land deeds, checks and farm receipts. The original letters were opened and given to the State Archives in Nashville, Tennessee.

The writer obtained copies of the original letters and discovered that most of them were written by soldiers from the 6th Tennessee Cavalry Regiment, USA, located near Memphis, Tennessee. The soldiers were writing home to relate various aspects of the skirmish near Bolivar in Hardeman County. The letters were postmarked at Memphis and sent in care of an individual named J.M. White of Paducah, Kentucky. It is not clear how the letters made their way to the antique chest. However, they are presented in their original form to give the reader a view of what the Union soldier experienced during the skirmish near Bolivar, Tennessee.

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Memphis, Tennessee  
April 5th, 1864

To W. Lawrence and family,

I seat myself this moment to pen you a few lines. I am quite well and wish these few lines to find the family in good health. Well Pa our Whole country is overrun with Rebels and Memphis is threatened at this moment of writing. General Forrest has been up with you all taking Union City and attacking Paducah but we learn that at Paducah he never found Hawkins as he did at Union City the b\_ \_ \_ ful surrender of Union City by Hawkins begging description he ought to have done as we did some days ago at Boliver.

Col. Hurst was ordered out with his entire command to feel the position of Forrest so we went on sending scouts out in every direction and at night one come in with the news of 800 Rebels in Boliver. We were then 16 miles from Boliver. Well we thought we could whip 800 Rebels so with about 440 men we started driving in their pickets before us, Where upon a sudden came one whole Brigade in front and two Brigades on the wings fighting us and at the same time outflanking us and the brave old 6th Tennessee had to retire in double quick time. For 14 long miles we were on this double quick and the devils pouring in their iron hail upon the rear, but after all we lost but 20 men. Captain John Moore, Co. I was killed, Captain William C. Holt, Co. M killed, Lt. Hugh L. Nelly (M Co.) killed and some 10 privates killed. Coleman Smith (I Company) wounded in head and James Steel (Co. I) lost, we (suppose killed) his horse following in. This was an awful stampede and worst of all was no reenforcement within 40 miles of us. Well all our neighbor boys made it through safe. Sam Steel (Sgt., I Co.), the Lee boys, John Allman, Jake Betts (Pvt., I Co.) Dave Glisson, Andy Dinning, the Bastic boys, the Brogder Boys, Bowden Arnold and Tom Miller all got back safe. Bowden Arnold was taken prisoner but got away. Bud Bell, Bill Orsburn and John Cooley (I Co.) all safe.

The Boys all fought well. The 3rd Bat. brought in the fight and Co. I and part of Co. H fired the last guns checking the Rebels at a creek and tearing up the

bridge. This is the first time our whole command ever had to run. This is much better than giving up like Col. Hawkins did Union City and having a fort to fight in.

General Forrest has with him about 20,000 men in Tennessee and Northern Mississippi. He lives here in Memphis and wants his wife out of lines so he intends to attack the place. Well he will find 2 Paducah's here, four gunboats, 100 pieces of cannon to meet him. This alone will whip him. We have 14,000 effective men here. All the old troops are gone home on furlough having reenlisted as veterans.

Our whole regiment is out scouting again and guarding the Raleigh Bridge. Bill Todd and Eli (I Co.) were not on this raid, both being a little puny. I believe I have told you all the news and I am on detached service so you must excuse me this time. Say to all the connections and friends to write and read this letter to all the good old mothers who have boys in our Regt. I sympathize with Mrs. Steel, the wife of Jim Steel, I fear he is killed. Forrest said no quarter to the 6th Tennessee but Col. Hawkins he said was good Southern man. I had several balls shot through my clothes. Pink Lee (I Company) was shot with spent ball in the leg, no harm. John Alman (Sgt., I Co.) shot in side, very slight wound. Sammy Steel was shot in the foot, no harm. My horse was shot from under me—I soon mounted another.

All write to me soon. I am not at liberty enough to write you all at present so I will bid you all adieu,

Henry M. Lawrence  
Co. I 6th Tenn. Cav  
Memphis, Tennessee

To: Wm Lawrence and Family  
Como, Tenn.

In care of J.M. White—Paducah, KY.

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Memphis, TN  
April 5th, 1863  
Dr. J.C. Revis and Family

I at this moment having a few idle moments to spare from duty this briefly address you and yours. I am quite well and wish this to find you and family well. The news is of high interest to all and of a startling nature. Forrest's forces are nearing the post this morning. We were in line of battle at 4 o'clock and our cavalry were forced to retire from his presence yesterday near Somerville all in confusion. Since we were repulsed 4 days ago the 6th Tenn. suffered a heavy repulse the first day of April at Boliver, Tenn. We fought from 6 to 10 to 1. I mean we had 400 men and the rebs had 3000 or 4000 men in the fort at Boliver. We thought they had 800 and we knew we could whip them but they had been reinforced all night previous to the fight. The rebs put up a good fight and let me say to you it is the first time this 6th Tenn. Cav. had to run. We retreated 14

miles and the daring devils firing on the rear all the time we would run awhile and fight awhile and then run to keep them from flanking us.

The list of casualties of your acquaintance of the 3rd Battalion stand thus: (Killed) Captain John W. Moore, Co. L, Captain William C. Holt, Co. M, Lt. Hugh L. Neely, Co. M. Privates, Thomas (Sgt.) Williams, Co. M, Wilson Caraway and James M. Steel, Co. I. Lost as a prisoner, Coleman Smith, Co. I, dangerously wounded and left. We do not know all nor the condition of those taken prisoners. Forrest sent in a flag of truce asking the surrender of all the 6th Tenn. The General told him to get us by fighting if he could, but no other way and that the 6th Tenn. had done more fighting than any other Regiment in the Service. John Allmon was shot in the back not serious, Pink Lee shot in the leg with spent ball no harm. I was shot through my clothing in many places no harm. All of Co. I got in but Jim Steel and Cole Smith. Forrest said no quarter to the 6th Tenn. Well we have 40 of their men in our paws and by god, no quarter to them. We never have mistreated any Reg. Southern soldier nor will we yet if they will respect as soldiers when taken prisoners. If not, eye for eye and tooth for tooth. This the best we can do for them. I would like to know what the rebs have done in the country up here. We hear of Col. Hawkins barely surrendering Union City and all his men into rebel hands. Well this will do him but Col. Hurst would have spent his last drop of blood and then we would run like so many devils when overpowered. This is our manner and anybody don't like us may rec' [sic] same.

Dr. this letter send you the true history of our late disaster. Read it to persons who like to speak lightly of our Regt. I will say General Forrest has 20 or 30,000 men in Tenn. Now a general move is being made by them just at the time all our troops are gone home on furlough as veterans. We are camped on Popular Street at Raleigh Road and all this Regt. is gone to Raleigh to guard a bridge but a few of us who lost our horses. My horse was shot from under me but I soon found another and mounted him. We have but few troops in Memphis at this time but Forrest knows better than to come in. Four gunboats will whip him alone.

Well Dr. I am on detached service and you must excuse me for the present. I will mail this letter in the morning. Give my respect to your family and James Revis family and would wish to be remembered by you all, and you will accept my kind wishes for your future welfare.

With esteem I am yours Truly,  
Henry M. Lawrence  
Co. I 6th Tenn.  
Memphis, Tenn.

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Memphis Tenn  
April 8, 1864

Dear Father and Family

With a degree of interest I seat myself to pen you a few lines which leaves me in good health. I wish this may find you and all the family in good health. I have no news of very high interest to pen only we had a small fight the other day

with General Forrest's Command. He had 3000 men and we had 600 and we fought until we were nearly surrounded and then we had to run like young Devils just from the Lower regions of hell. Well we lost about 40 men in killed and woundid and missing. We lost two men out of our company—James M. Steel and Coleman Smith. I hear of the Rebels doing much in our part of the country. Well I cannot guess what more will be done with us. I guess we will move on them soon. I want you to write me what the Rebs have done and all about it when you get this letter and write all the news you may have. I sent to Mary \$1,000 in money by a (?) Casey Jackson of Dresden, Tenn. and he said when he got home he would give the money to Joe Oar (?) to give to her. Well I don't know whether he got home or not. Write to me whether he gave the money over or not.

Hurst and Daniel are both well as usual and all the boys are well generally.

I will write no more at present only I remain Yours Truly.

William R. Kimbrell

Co. I 6th Tenn.

Memphis, Tenn.

To: Joseph Kimbrell and Family

Como, Tenn.

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April 8, 1864

Memphis, Tennessee

Dear Mother

I now seat myself to drop you a few lines to let you no that I am well at this time hoping these few line may find you all well and doing well. Well I have some very bad news to rite this time. We have had a verry hard fight since we left home the last time and lost several of our Regiment. I will tell you some of them that was kild and captured. Father is missing whether he was kild or captured we cannot tell. Lieut. Greely was wounded and I think William Little and William Baker was kild. James Young is captured. Thomas Leach, G.A. Harvey and Allen Smith is captured. We lost about 14 of our Company. I have told you all that I know of being kild. We had the fight near Bolivar. There was about 3 thousand of the Rebels and about 700 of us. We fought them about two or three hours but we had to retreat and that in Double quick. The Rebels followed us about 10 or twelve miels. They got 6 or 8 wagons and all our ammunition. We don't no but what the men that we lost was all kild but I believe several of them got away so I want you to rite to me as soon as you get this letter and by that time it is likely I can tell you more about the fight before I close my letter. I must tell you that Milton was captured but we got him back again. he wants to come home very bad but I have way of sending him home. All the rest of the Boys is well at present so no more at this time.

But remember your affectionate son until Death

J.T. Holt

To: Mrs. Mary Holt Before I close I want inform you that C.J. Little has not been able for duty since we left home but I think he is Better at this time.