

**THE
BATTLE
OF
THOMPSON'S
STATION,
TENNESSEE**

MARCH 5TH, 1863

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NOTES:**

Confederate Strength/Casualties:

"The Confederates had in action and in reserve in this engagement, including the two batteries, at a fair estimate, 6,000 men." - (Wyeth, 162)

Forrest's Brigade:

(Brigadier General Nathan Bedford Forrest, commanding)

"...Of his command there were on the field about 1,700 men..." - (Wyeth, 161)

"Forrest occupied the extreme right, his regiments - some 2,000 strong..." (Jordan & Pryor, 233)

(Biffle's) Regiment: 6 killed; 15 wounded (Wyeth, 161); Captain J.M. Reynolds, Co. B, captured the colors of the 19th Michigan Infantry (Forrest's Report, page 121)

(Cox's) 10th Tennessee Cavalry (Lt. Col. Edward Butler Trezevant, commanding, mortally wounded; died: March 7, 1863; buried: Elmwood Cemetery, Memphis, Tennessee) :

1 killed; 9 wounded (Wyeth, 161)

(Edmondson's) Regiment: 9 wounded (Wyeth, 161)

3rd [4th] Tennessee Cavalry: 2 killed; 21 wounded (Wyeth, 161)

McCann's Battalion: 3 wounded; 2 missing (Wyeth, 161)

Forrest's Bodyguard (Captain Montgomery Little, commanding) : 1 killed (Wyeth, 161)

Freeman's Tennessee Battery: (Captain Samuel L. Freeman, commanding) :

Cosby's Brigade:

(Brigadier General George Blake Cosby, commanding)

1st Mississippi Cavalry:

28th Mississippi Cavalry:

Armstrong's Brigade:

(Brigadier General Frank Crawford Armstrong, commanding)

"...about 1,600..." - (Jordan & Pryor, page 233)

3rd Arkansas Cavalry (Colonel Samuel Garrard Earle, commanding): 6 killed; 28 wounded (Wyeth, page 162)

4th Mississippi Cavalry: 9 killed; 37 wounded (Wyeth, page 162)

Sanders' Battalion: 14 wounded (Wyeth, page 162)

Jenkins' Alabama Squadron: 2 killed; 12 wounded (Wyeth, page 162)

Whitfield's Brigade:

(Colonel John Wilkins Whitfield, commanding)

"...1,800 Strong..." - (Jordan & Pryor, page 233)

"Total engaged, about 1,400..." - (Wyeth,)

3rd Texas Cavalry (Major A.B. Stone, commanding): 7 killed; 25 wounded (Wyeth, 162)

6th Texas Cavalry (Colonel L.S. Ross, commanding): 2 killed; 34 wounded (Wyeth, 162)

9th Texas Cavalry (Lt. Col. D.W. Jones, commanding): 3 killed; 19 wounded; 1 missing (Wyeth, 162)

Whitfield's Legion (Lt. Col. John H. Broocks, commanding): 11 killed; 59 wounded; 7 missing (Wyeth, 162)

King's 2nd Missouri Battery: (Captain Houston King, commanding)

Federal Strength/Casualties:

	Killed:	Wounded:	Captured/Missing:	Total:
33rd Indiana Infantry: (606 effectives; Lt. Col. J. M. Henderson, commanding)	13	85	407	505
85th Indiana Infantry: (330 effectives)	8	25	251	284
19th Michigan Infantry: (531 effectives; Colonel Henry C. Gilbert, commanding)	20	92	345	457
22nd Wisconsin Infantry: (378 effectives; Colonel William L. Utley, commanding)	2	29	129	160
*124th Ohio Infantry: (Lt. Col. James Pickands, commanding)				0
*18th Ohio Battery: (six Rodman guns; Captain Charles C. Aleshire, commanding)			2	2
*2nd Michigan Cavalry (detachment):	2	11		13
*4th Kentucky Cavalry (detachment): 12		1	11	
*9th Pennsylvania Cavalry (detachment):	2	5	6	13
Total:	48	247	1,151	1,446

* - "... Aleshire's (Eighteenth Ohio) battery, consisting of six Rodman rifled guns, a small regiment of Gilbert's Division, which remained as rearguard to the train and did not enter combat, and portions of the Second Michigan and Ninth Pennsylvania Cavalry Regiments, about 600 men."
(Official Report of Brig. Gen. Absalom Baird, U.S. Army, commanding Third Division, Army of Kentucky [page 83])

Anecdotes from the battle:

"March 5th, soon after daylight, two negro boys, about twelve years of age, were brought into camp, who said they had come in from Van Dorn's army, and that it was out this side of Spring Hill, and was coming to take Franklin. I sent them at once, with some mounted men, to General Gilbert; I heard nothing from my messenger."

(Official Report of Colonel John Coburn, Thirty-third Indiana Infantry, commanding First Brigade, [page 85-86])

"Mar. 5th – About 8 am receive orders to form in line of battle (placing horses in charge of dismounted men) – move up & take position on the left of the brig. – throwing out Co's 'A' Capt. T.G. Berry & 'H' Lt. S.A. Griffith as skirmishers about 250 yards in front of Brig –"

(Diary account of Adjutant George L. Grisom, 9th Texas Cavalry Regt., C.S.A.)

"On the morning of March 5th, our pickets were driven in, and my command was drawn up (dismounted) in the position previously selected; the two brigades composing General Jackson's division on a range of hills crossing the Franklin Pike: General Armstrong on the right; Colonel Whitfield on the left, and General Forrest's brigade on the same line of battle, stretching out into the open fields. On the extreme right (left?), Captain King's battery was posted so as to command the valley, which spread out in front of the position for half a mile. About 10 o'clock the enemy made his appearance on the crest of the hills lying over against us, and made dispositions for attack. He drew up his line in front of our center and left for attack, and with his main force advanced, through a well-directed fire from King's battery, on our extreme left."

(Official Report of Maj. Gen. Earl Van Dorn, C. S. Army, commanding Confederate forces [page 116])

"The column... was just entering of the pass between the hills that we afterward occupied as our position, when we were opened upon by a battery of the enemy, placed close on the right side of the road at about half mile range. This was an 18-pounder, and the shell, passing close over the head of the column, struck in the ditch on the left side of the road about 150 yards in the rear, and within a few feet of the side of the column, exploding and plowing up the dirt and stones, but, by some wonderful Providence, without killing or wounding anyone. A 6-pounder also open at the same moment, but the shell fell a few yards to the left in the field, doing no damage. The new troops were at once deployed to the right and the left under the hills, to protect them from the shells that now literally rained upon them, and our artillery brought forward and place in position three guns upon the hill to the left and two upon the hill to the right of the road, and in a few moments were hotly engaged."

(Official Report of Colonel Thomas J. Jordan, Ninth Pennsylvania Cavalry [page 79-80])

"About 9 am ord'd to move up & take position behind a stone fence – done so by filing out one at a time from behind a church & and taking behind the fence & there await the enemy, their sharpshooters being in sight."

(Diary account of Adjutant George L. Griscom, 9th Texas Cavalry Regt., C.S.A.)

"Colonel Coburn ordered me into position on the hill to the left of the pike, with three guns of my battery. I put three guns into position on this hill... and commenced to play upon the enemy's battery, when these guns were opened upon by a second battery to the right. Colonel Coburn then ordered me to put my other two guns... on another hill on the right of the pike. I got these guns into position as soon as possible, and commenced to engage the enemy's battery."

(Official Report of Captain Charles C. Alshire, Eighteenth Ohio Battery [pages 113-115])

"About 10 a.m. on the morning of the 5th, I drew up my command on foot in the position assigned me, my right resting east of the turnpike, and the left extending along the crest of the hills just in front of my encampment."

(Official Report of Col. J.W. Whitfield, Texas Legion, commanding Second Brigade [page 123])

"On the approach of the enemy at 10:00 a.m. on the 5th instant, my command was placed in position, dismounted. Receiving orders from the major general, I advanced the Second Brigade, and took position behind a stone fence, 400 yards in front of the first line, and there awaited the enemy. Captain King's battery, attached to my division, had already opened fire, and the enemy's guns were replying when the enemy commenced advancing his whole force against my left (Second Brigade), which was soon reenforced by the Third Arkansas Regiment, of the First Brigade. The enemy advanced to within a few hundred yards of my position when the command opened fire, and, upon receiving orders to charge them, did so in gallant style, the enemy retiring behind a hill in front of our position."

(Official Report of Brig. Gen. W.H. Jackson, C.S. Army, commanding Second Division, Cavalry Corps [page 122])

"Colonel Whitfield's Texas Brigade... under cover of a stone wall, was immediately strengthened by the Third Arkansas Cavalry (Col. [S.G.] Earle commanding), from General Armstrong's Brigade, and the affair was commenced. The enemy advanced to within about 200 yards of our lines, when our troops, without waiting for an attack, charged them in fine style, put them to flight and pursued them across the valley to their original position on the opposite hill."

(Official Report of Maj. Gen. Earl Van Dom, C.S. Army, commanding Confederate forces [page 116])

"On the morning of the 5th, the enemy was found to be advancing again, and leaving our horses behind the hill, we crossed over to the north side, and near a church just south of the station we were formed behind a stone fence – that is, Whitfield's brigade, other troops to the right and left, our artillery being posted to our right on the hill near the pike... When they came to within a short distance of our front, Whitfield's brigade leaped over the fence, and, joined by the Third Arkansas, of Armstrong's brigade, charged them, and soon drove them back across the open field, back to the hill and cedar brake, their starting point."

(The Lone Star Defenders: 3rd Texas Cavalry Regiment, by S.B. Barron, 3rd Texas Cavalry, 1908 [page 148])

"The firing was kept up with great vigor during the advance to the depot, our column moving forward under a constant fire of shell and canister, as well as musketry, from a brigade posted behind a bank and stone fence beyond. The loss was slight and the troops moved forward in separate columns regularly and steadily to the depot. As this force advanced, a large number of the enemy arose from their cover on their extreme left and rallied to the battery beyond the depot."

(Official Report of Colonel John Coburn, Thirty-first Indiana Infantry, commanding First Brigade [page 88])

"Behind this hill the Federal forces were rallied, and upon Colonel Whitfield's arrival at the summit he was charged and driven back down the hill, his men having no bayonets with which to meet the enemy. Here his men made a stand behind the depot and buildings of Thompson's Station, and, with the assistance of two pieces of King's Battery, the enemy were again compelled to retire beyond the hill."

(Official Report of Maj. Gen. Earl Van Dom, C.S. Army, commanding Confederate forces [page 116])

"At this moment, I was informed that a force of 1,000 or more cavalry had been discovered advancing on our left, a mile distant, in the neighborhood of the Lewisburg Road. I immediately ordered the regiment to withdraw from the depot, intending at once to retreat, being convinced that we were in the neighborhood of an overwhelming force. Lieutenant Bachman, my quartermaster bore the order. They began to retire. The enemy with a cheer followed."

(Official Report of Colonel John Coburn, Thirty-first Indiana Infantry, commanding First Brigade [page 88])

"In the mean time, while these events were occurring on the left, general Forrest, on the extreme right, had pushed forward Captain Freeman's battery (of his brigade) to a hill in advance of his original position, and completely commanding the enemy's left."

(Official Report of Maj. Gen. Earl Van Dorn, C.S. Army, commanding C.S. forces [page 116])

"...they bore down with Forrest's (brigade) and Armstrong's brigade on our left. The dismounted cavalry on the hills to our left fell back, and the rebels planted two pieces of artillery in this position; it's fire enfiladed the Nineteenth Michigan, which was directed to change front to the left. This was followed by a furious assault of dismounted men on our whole left. They were repulsed and the attack repeated. The Nineteenth Michigan fell back to the rear of the Twenty-second Wisconsin. The rebels were again repulsed. They then charged up the road to gain the space between the Thirty-third Indiana and Twenty-second Wisconsin. The two companies on the extreme right were brought over, and drove back the enemy from the left of the Thirty-third Indiana. The Nineteenth Michigan was ordered across the road and placed to their left."

(Official Report of Colonel John Coburn, Thirty-third Indiana Infantry, commanding First Brigade [page 85])

"...a battery of the enemy of four guns (which had heretofore been masked) opened upon our left flank, completely covering the ground upon which our infantry and cavalry were placed, making it necessary to change their positions, and also completely flanking our guns, and a battery to our right had previously opened upon our skirmishers in the valley near Thompson's Station. This battery Coburn determined to charge and take, hoping to throw back the left (right?) wing of the enemy upon their center and force the position. This was the culminating point in the battle."

(Official Report of Colonel Thomas J. Jordan, Ninth Pennsylvania Cavalry [page 79])

"General Armstrong came up upon a line with Colonel Whitfield. Two pieces of King's battery were placed upon the hill from which the enemy had been driven before. Forrest and Armstrong, and General Jackson with his entire division, charged in the most gallant manner upon the enemy, who were strongly posted on the hill from which they had formerly repulsed the Texas Brigade. After a fierce struggle for the crest of the hill, our troops were again driven down it, and with considerable loss. Here, the enemy's successful advance was checked by King's battery, which, with grape and canister, drove them back with great slaughter over the hill. In this charge fell the lamented Col. S.G. Earle..."

(Official Report of Maj. Gen. Earl Van Dorn, C.S. Army, commanding Confederate forces [page 116])

"During the fight the battery in charge of the 85th Indiana was attacked by [in italics] two rebel negro regiments [end italics]. Our artillerists doubleshotted their guns and cut the black regiments to pieces, and brought their battery safely off... It has been stated, repeatedly, for two weeks past, that a large number, perhaps one fourth, of Van Dorn's force were [in italics] negro soldiers [end italics], and the statement is fully confirmed by this unfortunate engagement. The Southern rebels have forced their miserable negroes to take up arms, to destroy this Government, and enslave us and our children."

("Indianapolis Daily Evening Gazette" newspaper, March 12, 1863)

Firearms at the BATTLE OF THOMPSON'S STATION, TN.

"The Tenth (Tennessee Cavalry, C.S.A.) was armed with double barreled shotguns, except my company (Company "C"), which had carbines."

("Forrest's Old Regiment" by Captain J.C. Blanton, Co. C, 10th Tn. Cav., as published in "Confederate Veteran" magazine, Vol. III [1895], #1 [January], page 41)

"The whole rebel force fought as infantry, and were armed with good carbines, Mississippi and Enfield rifles."

(Official Report of Col. John Coburn, Thirty-third Indiana Infantry, commanding First Brigade [page 85])



*C. P. Lincoln
19th Mich Inf.*

Captain Charles P. Lincoln, Coldwater, began as first sergeant of Company C. [Michigan Historical Collections]

ENGAGEMENT AT THOMPSON'S STATION

The new year began quietly in the western theatre following the Union victory at Stone's River at the close of 1862. Major General William Rosecrans, in command of the Army of the Cumberland, had halted his pursuit of the Confederates when his army occupied Murfreesboro.

As was often the case during the Civil War, Rosecrans' army was as exhausted and disorganized in victory as was the enemy in defeat. The Army of the Cumberland needed recruits to replace heavy casualties suffered at Stone's River, its supply lines had been seriously disrupted, and Rosecrans determinedly sought cavalry strength to match the Confederates. Amidst refitting, foraging and healing, Rosecrans was being pressed by the General in Chief Henry Halleck to begin an offensive. In early March, several Union armies began probing General Braxton Bragg's lines to determine his strength. The Confederates were launching similar tests.¹

Rosecrans ordered Brigadier General Charles C. Gilbert, commanding General Gordon Granger's second division at Franklin, to reconnoiter the Columbia Pike as far south as Spring Hill. His advance was also to serve as a foraging expedition.² Gilbert selected Colonel John Coburn's brigade to execute his mission. Coburn's brigade moved some 18 miles from Brentwood to Franklin on March 2.³

Coburn's force, as organized at Franklin, included his own

brigade the 124th Ohio Infantry Regiment, the 18th Ohio Battery and cavalry detachments from the 9th Pennsylvania, 4th Kentucky, and 2nd Michigan. He reported his strength at 2,837.⁴ Coburn's own brigade made up the core of his forces numbering 1,845 infantrymen. The 33rd Indiana with 606 and the 19th Michigan with 531 present for duty were easily the largest units. The 22nd Wisconsin had 378 effectives while the 85th Indiana mustered just 330 for the march. His mounted troops totalled some 600 and the 124th Ohio added about 400 additional foot soldiers.⁵ Attrition caused by sickness, death, and resignations left the 18th Ohio Battery at less than minimum strength. On the 27th of February, 1863, 39 infantrymen from Coburn's brigade joined the battery in order that it would have the necessary manpower to function. The reinforcements included several members of the 19th Michigan.⁶ These replacements must have accounted for twenty-five percent of the battery's manpower and most certainly these 39 men were ill-prepared for battle. The battery they joined was also short on experience having never engaged the enemy. Their subsequent conduct at Thompson's Station reflected their inexperience. Commanded by Captain Charles Aleshire, the battery consisted of six three-inch rifled Rodmans.⁷ Its caissons carried 1200 rounds of ammunition.⁸

Early on the morning of the fourth, Coburn's force marched out of Franklin with the 2nd Michigan Cavalry leading, followed by the 33rd Indiana, Colonel Coburn, staff and body guard, three guns of the 18th Ohio Battery, the 22nd Wisconsin, 19th Michigan, 85th Indiana, the remainder of the battery, the wagon train and the 124th Ohio bringing up the rear.⁹

Just prior to noon, Coburn's command met its first resistance as skirmishers clashed with Confederate cavalry four miles out of Franklin. The Rebel forces were those of General Earl Van Dorn's army then assembling at Spring Hill. Van Dorn's advance guard was also performing a reconnaissance mission. Coburn's task force began to deploy with infantry units as skirmishers and the 18th Ohio, getting into position. The 33rd Indiana and the 22nd Wisconsin fled off

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to the right of the pike, while the 124th Ohio and the 19th Michigan came abreast of the west side of the road.¹⁰ The artillery answered the Rebel fire and the second round "... from our piece sent one rebel and his horse to the hogs (for in fact the hungry beasts eat them both up that afternoon where they fell) ..." Still another missile made a direct hit smashing a gun carriage.¹¹ After a brief exchange of 15 minutes, the Confederates broke contact and pulled back to the next ridgeline.

Coburn acted promptly to apprise General Gilbert of his situation while the brigade remained in position awaiting further instructions. The enemy driven by Coburn's command was estimated as being from 2,000 to 3,000 strong. Although Coburn believed he could advance, he expressed concern that if he did, Rebel cavalry would flank him and be between him and Franklin. Explicitly he asked, "What shall we do?" It is probable that a second message was carried to General Gilbert at the same time. In it, Coburn attempted to apprise his commander of the Confederate artillery strength and how burdensome the long string of wagons had become. On the tough decision of whether or not to advance, Gilbert ducked his responsibility and passed the buck to his subordinate, simply telling Coburn he had considerable discretion. Gilbert did, however, authorize him to detach his forage elements. Colonel Coburn took advantage of the opportunity and released half of his wagons to the rear.¹² What seems incomprehensible, however, is that General Gilbert could leave Coburn the option to proceed, knowing that if he did, the enemy would soon be in his rear and have him cut off from Franklin.

Coburn's force resumed the march, pushing Confederate pickets for an additional two miles. Informed that a sizeable cavalry force was threatening his left flank on the Lewisburg Road, Coburn ordered his command to halt, then to fall back in order to secure his flanks. The Union forces camped on ground previously held by Van Dorn's advance.

Further information of the supposed threat ahead became more apparent at daybreak when two Negro youths entered the Union lines and reported that Van Dorn's entire command was

*20 The 2
Gard?*

*7 Miles to
Spring Hill
12 min*

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THEY TRIED TO MAKE MEN FREE

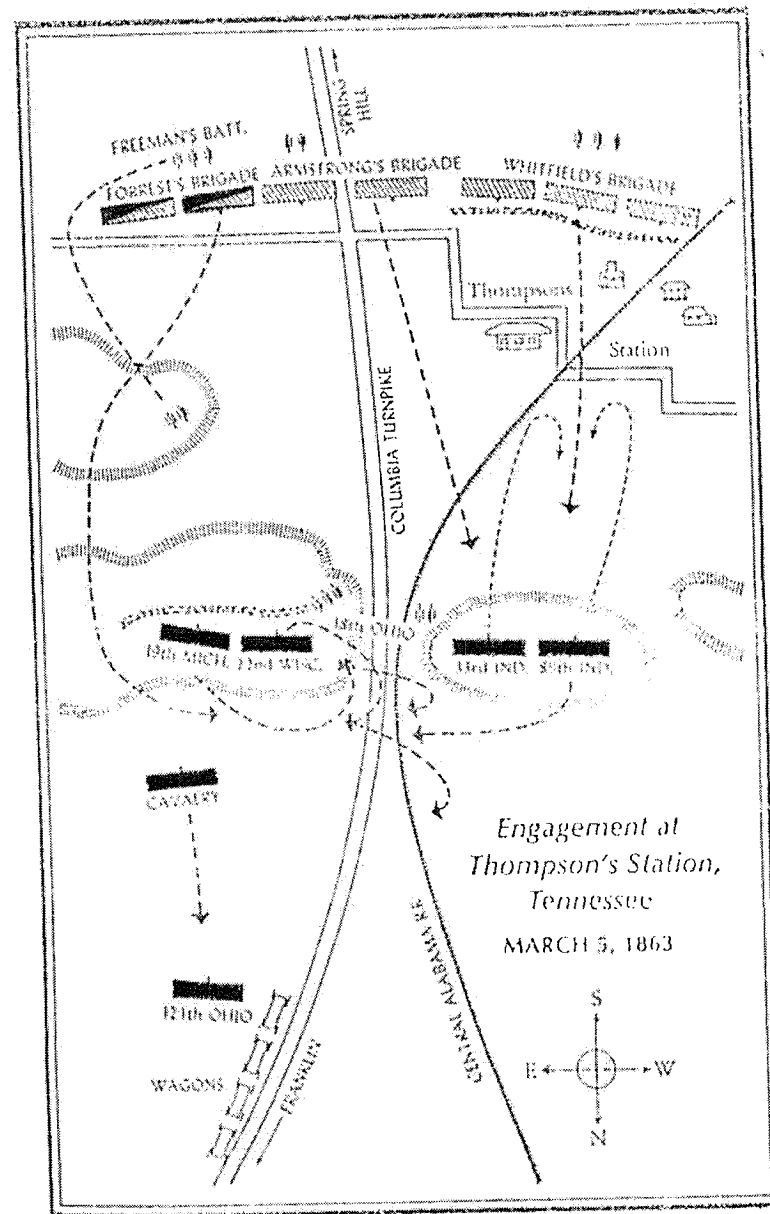
massed just south of Thompson's Station. Coburn dispatched the informants back to Franklin, accompanied by a mounted escort, to advise General Gilbert. In response, headquarters was silent. Gilbert may have believed that Coburn had considerable latitude in the execution of his orders and in a very general sense that may well have been the case; yet, for certain, one option which Coburn did not feel at liberty to exercise was to retreat. Coburn had filled 39 wagons with forage, made contact with a force he could not handle, and kept on going.

The battle tally for the first day of the engagement showed the Federals getting the best of it inflicting some 10 Rebel casualties while suffering only three wounded among its ranks; two members of the 9th Pennsylvania cavalry and a corporal in Company E, 19th Michigan Infantry. Joseph Coshun became the 19th's first combat casualty. In addition, the Union artillery would be short one gun. One of the Rodman's was down with a broken axle, accidentally disabled while changing positions. The Pickers posted, half-asleep Yankees waited for tomorrow.

The morning of March 5 broke cold and "Nary reb was seen." With the 19th Ohio guarding the ammunition train, Coburn's force marched south in search of the enemy. The anticipation was short for after marching about four miles the Rebels were met in force. With a Confederate battery laid in on the pike, Coburn's lead infantry regiment, the 22nd Wisconsin, drew fire as the first round sent them digging for cover. "It was no more that the whole regiment involuntarily crouched to the earth, the command was immediately 'over the fence and lie down!' and that command was obeyed as quickly as any command ever was."¹⁶

Coburn ordered his brigade into action with the 19th Michigan to the west side of the pike to anchor the left flank, the 22nd Wisconsin abreast and also on the left, the 33rd Indiana deployed across the road from the Badger regiment and the 85th Indiana in line holding the extreme right.¹⁷

Coburn's infantry occupied a range of hills overlooking Thompson's Station from the north with the village nestled midway in the valley floor below separating the two armies.



THEY DIED TO MAKE MEN FREE

Coburn had seized the high ground flanking either side of a narrow gap through which passed the Central Alabama Railroad and Columbia Turnpike before descending to the valley below. The Union commander positioned two guns of Captain Aleshire's 18th Ohio Battery right of the pike and alongside the 33rd Indiana while the other section got into action just off the roadbed to the left occupying a slight rise. The Union cavalry were drawn up in the rear of the 19th Michigan and less than a half mile back on the pike, Coburn had located his trains under guard of the 124th Ohio Infantry.¹⁸

Although Coburn's information about the disposition of Confederate troops was incomplete, he was aware that the Rebels held the commanding terrain on the south side of the valley to his front and that their artillery located along the pike and in the rear of Thompson's Station had found the range. Coburn unknowingly was cooperating with Van Dorn's plan. More importantly, he was badly outnumbered. When the engagement began around 10:00 a.m., the Confederates had approximately 5,300 men present. Later in the morning, Brigadier General William T. Martin's First Brigade arrived adding 700 fresh troops to the already disproportionate numbers. There was a sharp difference in mobility as all Confederate units were mounted. Comparing artillery made the odds ever worse. In Captain S.L. Freeman's Tennessee Battery and Captain Houston King's Second Missouri Battery, Van Dorn had slightly more than twice as many big guns.¹⁹

The union commander first sent three companies of the 33rd Indiana forward to drive out Rebel sharpshooters who had occupied Thompson's Station. The Hoosiers succeeded and Coburn next sought to remove a much greater threat by silencing the battery to his right front. Coburn again looked to his fellow Indianians as he ordered forward the rest of the 33rd and the 85th Indiana. The Federals filed off their hill, formed into separate columns and went for the guns. While opposing batteries exchanged fire, the Union offensive pushed forward through "an iron hail." The Hoosiers advanced to within a short distance of the depot when they were suddenly met with

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Colonel J.W. Whitfield's brigade which had remained concealed behind the wall until the advancing forces were at close range. The advance of the Indiana regiments was stopped and thrown back.²⁰

The retreating Yankees fell back toward their first position with Whitfield's brigade and the 3rd Arkansas from Brigadier General Frank Armstrong's brigade applying the pressure of a determined counterattack. Reaching the crest of the hill, they rallied to defend.

Excitement and adrenalin ran high. In an unusual act of heroics and recklessness, Major William R. Shafter left the 19th Michigan and rode hard across the pike arriving just in time to help consolidate the Indiana troops rallying to make a stand. Shafter stayed long enough to participate in a charge which drove the Confederates back down the hill.²¹

On the east side of the pike, too, the Union position was being seriously tested. The 19th Michigan and 22nd Wisconsin had first gone into position on the reverse slope of a cedar crowned hill. There they had sought shelter from Confederate artillery fire as both regiments assembled behind a stone fence. During the early hours of the engagement, Coburn had assigned these regiments a reserve role. The Rebels acted promptly to threaten the Union left as Brigadier General Nathan B. Forrest, commanding the Confederate right, sent two guns of Freeman's Battery to occupy a hill about a half mile southeast and flanking the Union left.²² Company C of the 19th Michigan was ordered to send four of its best marksmen forward as sharpshooters. They crept down into the valley using a cornfield to camouflage their approach on several unidentified horsemen. Their presence was soon detected and Freeman sent an artillery shell crashing down through the row of cornshocks. The foursome raced to the rear "accelerando double-quick" easily scaling the stone fence behind their regiment position.²³

With his flank exposed, Colonel Gilbert ordered his regiment to march to the right and rear and occupy a position under the guns of the 18th Ohio Battery. To meet this new artillery

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threat, the Union battery turned its guns to face the foe and the duel continued. Thus situated, both infantry regiments were immediately under the path of the artillery projectiles and the guns were "... sending their demoniac sounding missiles. . . so close to our ears that all those unaccustomed to such sounds would dodge their heads and unvoluntarily shrink closer to the stone wall as they went by." ²⁴

A first battle would bring out both the best and worst in a volunteer regiment. In almost remarkable fashion, the 19th Michigan Infantry consistently demonstrated its willingness to fight. There were just a few exceptions. Captain Elisha Bassett's conduct was undoubtedly the most disgraceful. During the engagement, he took cover behind a tree and refused to command his company; finally he deserted, riding back to Franklin unable to face responsibility or fear. Following the battle, Colonel Gilbert recounted the incident while proceeding to press charges:

As soon as my regiment became engaged he abandoned his Company and took shelter behind a large tree 15 or 20 yards in the rear of our line. I found him there & in asking what he was doing there & why he was not with his company he replied that he could not take any part in the fight, that I must not depend upon him for anything, that the Lieut could command the Company & begged me to excuse him. I repeatedly ordered him to his post but he refused to obey. We soon had occasion to change our position when he ran off down the Rail Road track where he lay for some time. He at length ran off again further to the rear & crumpled a horse belonging to one of the Cavalry & rode back to Franklin - I have never seen a man exhibit so much cowardice & fear as Capt Bassett did on this occasion - His Company was ably commanded by Lieut Hubbard & did well. Capt. Bassett admits all the facts & only excuses himself in the pretense that he was sick. He was sick before the action commenced & it would have required no more physical ability for him to have remained & done his duty than it did to run away. . .

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He also claims that he had tendered his resignation a short time previous & he ought not to be required to risk his life when he was expecting to leave soon. I respectfully ask that he may be dismissed the service. ²⁵

At this critical time, Aleshire's gun section which supported the Union left, stopped firing and withdrew to the pike. With the Union artillery gone, Forrest now made his move to get to the enemy's rear. The regiments commanded by Colonels J.H. Edmundson and James Starnes moved forward determined to flank the cedar hill. ²⁶ Union commanders tried to adjust to meet this new threat. The 19th Michigan was in an exposed position following the departure of the gun section. It was also in a column by division formation meaning that companies were in columns two abreast, a formation which lent itself to movement but could mass only a two company front if the regiment were attacked in either the front or rear. Gilbert marched his regiment around the hill previously defended by the artillery and took up a new position near the road. They left them in the same formation facing the railroad! ²⁷ The 22nd Wisconsin followed suit shifting its position toward the pike forming a new line near the brow of the hill and to the left of the 19th Michigan. ²⁸

The ranks of the infantry were filled with untried volunteer soldiers and there is little doubt that the 22nd Wisconsin, including its commander, Colonel Utley, was tense. They now held the Union left, they were pinned down by artillery fire and they had just been alerted that the Rebs were flanking them with a large force. They waited, searching the cedars at the top of the hill and suddenly: "... smoke . . . betrayed the enemy and a volley from almost every gun in the regiment greeted them." ²⁹ Dismounted Confederate cavalymen pushed forward attacking both Union regiments in the left and rear:

We were compelled to face this attacking force by the

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rear rank, and as a consequence, only two or three companies of the 19th Michigan on the left were able to effectively return the fire, as the 22nd Wisconsin was now in our front and nearer the crest of the ridge. The enemy's fire along the whole line of the Wisconsin troops was terrific, and although they were also exposed to an enfilade fire from their batteries, the Wisconsin boys, with such assistance as could be rendered by their Michigan comrades, bravely repelled the attack and compelled their foes to retire. The command given by the cool and courageous Colonel Utley, of the 22nd Wisconsin, a moment before this attack upon our lines, became a pet byword or expression throughout the brigade for months afterwards. It was: "Look out, boys; get ready to shoot; the damned rebels are coming." And they were ready.³⁰

Staying the Rebel advance was short lived for they came again pushing toward the turnpike and now, if not denied, would soon divide Coburn's command.

Again, the 22nd would move or at least part of it and here the chain of command would break down. Utley was at the left of his regiment; Lieutenant Colonel Bloodgood, second in command, rode with the right. It is apparent that up until this point during the battle, Utley had issued orders through Bloodgood rather than assuming personal direction. Now in crisis, Bloodgood ordered the regiment up onto the pike supposedly under brigade orders to extend the Union left; Utley interpreted the movement as a rout. With the enemy in their midst and unable to hear above the roar of battle, the regiment responded to two commanders; Company A and the larger part of D left the field while the remainder heard Utley's command to halt.³¹

Yet this was only the beginning. Bloodgood and his part of the 22nd got out onto the road in time to meet the rest of the artillery also pulling back. Soon all of the cavalry were withdrawing and along with the 124th Ohio which escorted the ammunition, began an independent retreat toward Franklin.

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Within minutes, Coburn's effective strength was reduced by more than a 1,000 men and his ability to withdraw had been forfeited.³²

Under heavy pressure the 19th Michigan stumbled across the road just in time to support the repulse of another Confederate attack on the Union right. It arrived on the hill the Indiana regiments were defending at the critical moment when the full thrust of the Confederate assault was being felt. "They charged right in among us but our company had fixed bayonets and was determined to hold the hill. . ."³³ The Rebel charge was met with a "murderous fire."³⁴ Orders were immediately given to charge; the 19th Michigan struck with a fury engaging Armstrong's Brigade in a fierce counterattack. Confederate John Wyeth would later write that "Armstrong was badly handled in his affray . . ."³⁵ The lines met head-on:

With bayonets fixed, we charged them to the stone fence at the foot of the hill . . . At this fence Whitfield's brigade was in line, and with desperate courage sought to stay our advance. In this unequal contest of one regiment against a whole brigade, the fighting was more than hand-to-hand, and the acts of individual daring and courage were many. A sergeant of your companion's company (Company C) sprang upon the stone wall, seized the Texan's brigade colors, bayoneted its bearer, and we retain possession of the flag until the close of the contest.³⁶

Only cold steel discouraged these Texans forcing them back toward the depot. The 19th Michigan also came away with both the battle flag of the 4th Mississippi Cavalry Regiment and Armstrong's brigade colors.³⁷ They also brought off a number of prisoners. Sergeant John Griffis captured a Confederate and his lieutenant, Reuben Larzelere took custody of the prisoner, obligingly escorting him to the rear. And Lieutenant Larzelere stayed in the rear.³⁸ In the first charge, Company A alone lost five killed and seven wounded. "We made four charges down the hill and drove them every time. We killed a great many of

THEY DIED TO MAKE MEN FREE

them in the third charge. I got another prisoner and told him to go to the rear. As soon as Orlin Laylin saw him he said he would watch him so he up and shot him." ³⁹ In one of these charges, a Confederate soldier fired at Sergeant John Coblentz and missed. He "... then threw down his gun and up with his hands; but Coblentz said it was too late, and he bayoneted him." ⁴⁰ In a similar act of passion, Private Tim Deggett killed another Confederate. A fellow soldier later recalled the incident. "Tim is a rough wicked boy but has a heart like an ox, makes a good soldier. He is the one that shot the Reb at Springhill after we had surrendered." ⁴¹ These incidents dramatize the fierce struggle that ensued. The violent actions of Coblentz and others, also illustrated an unusual employment of the bayonet. Certainly fixing bayonets and charging the enemy was common throughout the Civil War; using the bayonet to kill an enemy was not. ⁴²

The Union troops held their ground, but now the greatest threat was being concentrated on the left flank and Coburn began reorganizing his defense. The 85th Indiana was ordered to change front facing the east as Coburn began organizing his new line parallel to the railroad. He brought the 19th Michigan alongside and to the right of the 85th. The 33rd Indiana remained the only regiment facing south as its left joined the 19th Michigan on the right at a 45 degree angle to the main line. The 22nd Wisconsin was drawn up on the extreme left next to the 85th Indiana. ⁴³

But the Confederates kept coming back, again and again. Two guns of King's battery were strategically positioned on the hill east of the pike which had previously been defended and would soon zero in on their target. Van Dorn then sent the brigades of Forrest, Armstrong and Whitfield to drive the Yankees from their hill. This time, their attack was too much; resistance broke and Coburn's brigade retreated, hoping to organize a stronger position on the higher ground to the west. King's Battery was relocated on the hill just abandoned and again directed effective fire on Coburn's retreating forces. A new line was quickly thrown together as battle weary Yankees awaited what would be the last Confederate assault. Forrest

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was ready for the clincher - having swept around behind the Union position he had effectively sealed off any possibility of retreat. With the fresh regiments of N.N. Cox and Jacob Biffle, he ordered his brigade to charge. Union ammunition nearly exhausted, resistance was hopeless. After firing a volley at the approaching Rebels, Coburn's command threw down their weapons and surrendered. ⁴⁵

In this last Confederate rush, a captain in Biffle's regiment captured the colors of the 19th Michigan. ⁴⁶

The casualties suffered at Thompson's Station attest to the fierce struggle that had been waged. Coburn's losses included 48 killed, 247 wounded and 1,151 captured or missing. The 19th Michigan and 33rd Indiana shared the dubious honor of recording the highest number of unit casualties. Those killed and wounded in these two regiments totaled 213. For the Confederates, Van Dorn reported casualties of 357. They suffered an astounding total of 38 casualties among officers including 14 who were killed in action, grim testimony of the price paid by officers who led by example. ⁴⁷ Although victorious, the Rebels knew they had been in a real fight. Shortly after surrendering, a Confederate soldier approached the ranks of Company E stating: "For God's sake give me one of youan's guns, for youn's killed weans before weans had thought of firing at youans." ⁴⁸

Following Thompson's Station, there was a sustained effort to fix the blame for defeat. Among infantry officers and privates, the concensus was clear; the fault lay with the supporting cavalry, the artillery, and Bloodgood's portion of the 22nd Wisconsin for cowardly retreating in the face of the enemy. No doubt, Coburn seriously missed these elements during the critical point of the battle; however, the die was cast by others many hours earlier. Naturally the cavalry, artillery and that portion of the 22nd Wisconsin involved saw it differently. It was the infantry who stayed and fought in an impossible situation, ignoring the opportunity to retreat. Alibis and excuses were abundant. Considering the contradiction, everyone could not possible be telling the truth. To suggest that the facts about command decisions at Thompson's Station

ment by holding the line of Rutherford's creek. Moving along it accordingly, the enemy keeping pace on the other bank, a series of spirited skirmishes were kept up, with little intermission, across the stream, until apparently something seemed to cause an alarm among the Federals, for they suddenly began a rapid retrograde movement, at a *double-quick*, to Franklin, as was subsequently ascertained.* General Forrest then followed the march of the main body of the Confederates to Columbia, where he took position the 12th of March; and this retreat before a greatly superior force was safely effected without any loss, under circumstances involving great hazard, in consequence of the condition of Duck river.

IV.

The pontoon-bridge at Columbia was repaired as speedily as possible, and headquarters were again pushed forward to Spring Hill on the 15th of March. General Forrest was now assigned to the command of a division made up of his brigade and that of Armstrong's, now including the Eighth Tennessee, and occupied the right of the line, his regiments extending between Spring Hill and Ridge Meeting-House, on the Franklin-Lewisburg turnpike, with a line of outposts and pickets thrown well in advance, and stretching across as far as to the near vicinity of the Federals in position at College Grove, on Harpeth river, and connecting at Thompson's Station with a similar line furnished by the other (W. H. Jackson's) division.†

Frequent outpost affairs now took place, fruitless of consequences, as is usual in that character of petty warfare, after a campaign has well opened. The most notable of these, and,

* Apprehensive, apparently, of a flank movement.

† Whitfield's and Cosby's Brigades.

perchance, of some profit as a species of sharp battle-drill, and of moral tonic effect upon the men, was a dash made at the Federal outpost at College Grove by three regiments, or detachments, of Forrest's immediate brigade, their commander, Colonel Starnes, leading. The enemy giving way, fell back across the Harpeth, and there made a stout struggle for an hour, in a strong position, from which they were finally routed and forced back upon their main body at Triune, with a loss on their side of some thirty killed or captured, and on the Confederate part of ten or twelve killed or wounded.

Having learned, through reliable sources, that the troops who had escaped from the affair at Thompson's Station, on the 5th of the month, were in position at Brentwood Station, on the Franklin and Nashville Railroad, guarding the railroad bridge over the Little Harpeth, nine miles rearward of Franklin, General Forrest received permission from General Van Dorn to attempt a *coup de main*, with his division, upon them. This he proceeded to execute on or about the night of the 24th of March. Starnes with his own, under McLemore, and Edmonston's regiment, moved forward on a by-way, crossing the Harpeth some six miles rightward of Franklin, and thence through fields and woods, deftly threading and eluding the enemy's pickets without discovery, to the point of destination. General Forrest himself, with his escort—Biffle's Regiment, the Tenth Tennessee, under Major De Moss, and Armstrong, with the First Tennessee, Third Arkansas, Second Mississippi, and Saunder's battalion of his brigade, and a section of Freeman's battery, under Lieutenant Huggins—made a detour leftward, by the way of Hillsboro, crossing the Harpeth at the Granny-White-Nashville turnpike, some six miles north of Franklin, whence he moved rapidly and directly upon Brentwood. Reaching the place just at dawn, the General made his disposition at once for the attack, although Armstrong—impeded by the artillery—had not yet come up, and Starnes

were hurriedly mounted and dispatched to its relief, General Forrest leading the succor party. Not a little confusion was produced, however, in the Confederate command by this intelligence, and the apprehension was that a grave attempt to cut off the retreat was on foot. General Forrest, on reaching the scene, found a considerable cavalry force in a threatening attitude, with several of his wagons and ambulances already in their hands. As he charged boldly upon them, they cut the draught animals from their traces and fled, with little show of pugnacity. Colonel Starnes coming up opportunely, however, on their right flank, they suffered a loss of at least fifty in killed and captured.* The Federals engaged in this affair, we learn from Federal sources, were detachments of four volunteer cavalry regiments, 545 strong, under General Green Clay Smith,† who had been detached by General Granger from Franklin that morning to reconnoitre and ascertain the purposes of the Confederate expedition, of which intelligence had reached that officer. Going to Brentwood, they found the bridge, camp, and stockade in ruins, and the garrison carried off as prisoners of war. Following rapidly on Forrest's trace, they came up with the train as related, when matters, at first favorable for the Federals, were soon given an adverse turn and termination by the incisive tactics of the Confederate leader.‡

* The Tenth Tennessee lost in this affair three killed, including Lieutenant Andrew Nesbitt, company "E," four wounded, and twenty-five captured.—*Notes of Major De Moss.*

† *Reb. Rec.*, VI. Doc. 147, p. 481.

‡ The Federal relation of this affair, just cited, is a characteristic example of the manner and matter of Federal newspaper accounts of war incidents. Gene-

ral Smith made no such stand, much less did he fight such odds; he made no such persistent pursuit, as is painted by this correspondent, after coming up with the train; and not one wagon or ambulance did he actually carry off. What we relate of the affair is taken from the lips of General Forrest, abundantly confirmed afterward by other accounts written by spectators at the

The march was now resumed homeward as far as Hillsborough without further hinderance. There the main body encamped, while the prisoners, under Captain Forrest and a proper escort, were sent forward the same night in the direction of Columbia. And, on the following morning, meeting no opposition by the way, Forrest led his command safely back to their quarters near Spring Hill. One effect of this brilliant raid was to bestir the Federals to somewhat greater watchfulness; consequently they placed all the fords of the Harpeth under strict watch and ward, with a heavy picket-line from Davis's Mill to Franklin: but a little late, for Forrest had already gained his ends!

After returning to their quarters about Spring Hill, the usual routine of cavalry outpost service was resumed, without noteworthy incident until about the 9th of April, when General Jackson—commanding the immediate advance—having been led to suspect and express the opinion that the enemy were evacuating Franklin,* General Van Dorn ordered a reconnoissance in force of the position on the 10th.

Forrest's Division was ordered to assemble at the Ridge Meeting-House, on the Lewisburg turnpike, and move thence by that approach to Franklin, while Jackson was to advance by the Columbia-Franklin road; and by six o'clock on that morning the movement began. By ten o'clock A.M.—Arm-

time. See dispatch to *Chattanooga Rebel*, dated Columbia, March 26th, 1863; "Centurion's" letter to *Atlanta Southern Confederacy*, April 8th, 1863; and, besides, there is complete evidence in the document itself of its gross exaggerations.

* The Federals had been closely observed by the Confederate scouts, and bodies of troops were known to have

gone in the direction of Triune; and it may also be inferred from General Gordon Granger's telegraphic report of the affair that he had been sending off some of his troops, though fully anticipating an attack, and having, therefore, been prepared for it with Stanley's Division of cavalry stationed on the Murfreesboro road four miles from Franklin.—See *Reb. Rec.* VI. Doc. 160, p. 518.

strong's Brigade leading—Forrest's Division encountered the Federal pickets, strongly posted in a wood extending on and between both avenues of approach. A sharp skirmish then took place. General Van Dorn, at the same time moving with Jackson's command, had become likewise engaged on that flank. Armstrong drove the force in his front before him out of the woods, across an open field, and into the town where the Federals took shelter behind fences, in the houses, and other very favorable defensive positions.* Meantime, Colonel Starnes, who followed with his brigade at an interval of two miles, observing the little resistance made to Armstrong, supposed there was no risk, and omitted to throw out flankers on his right. Moving thus exposed, he was suddenly assailed, at a point four miles from Franklin, by a strong Federal cavalry force, under General Stanley, that had been thrown across from the Murfreesboro road.† In this attack the Fourth Regiment United States Regular Cavalry charged at full speed and captured Freeman's Battery, that officer, and thirty of his men, at the moment rearward of Biffle's Regiment, but in advance of the other regiments of the brigade. So sudden and unexpected was the onset there was no time to prepare for action; the gunners and drivers not captured quit their pieces, and some of the caissons, having been turned about, were driven into the first regiment in the rear, causing at first a good deal of disorder. Colonel Starnes, at the time with Biffle's Regiment, hearing the firing, dismounted it quickly, and, turning, made a vigorous counter-attack, by which, after a short but sanguinary struggle, the Federals were driven off the field, leaving behind Freeman's guns and some of the men, but unfortunately retaining that gallant and

* See Report of Captain Machett, † General Granger's Report before commanding Fortieth Ohio Volunteers. cited.
—*Reb. Rec.* VI, Doc. 160, p. 519.

most valuable officer in their possession with some thirty of his men. And here we must pause to stamp an indelible infamy upon the escutcheon of the Fourth Cavalry—no less than the deliberate murder by one of its officers of a prisoner of war, the bold and skillful Freeman, who, as before said, had remained in their hands. As his captors were carrying him from the field on foot, he was ordered to break into a run; unable to do this, an officer rode up and shot him through the head, to prevent his recapture.* We regret profoundly to have to believe this atrocious deed, but are assured that it was perpetrated, and under circumstances utterly without palliation or extenuation.†

Driven from the field, or, as the Federal report says, "outflanked and nearly surrounded," the Federals fell back rapidly across the Harpeth river within shelter of their fortifications, when Starnes pushed ahead to support Armstrong, who was still engaged on the outskirts of Franklin.

At the same time, General Van Dorn, with Jackson's Divi-

* Captain Freeman at the beginning of the war was a lawyer; he entered the army at an early moment, as a subaltern in a company of volunteers. His artillery company, one of the very best in the Confederate service, was raised in Sumner county, Tennessee. He was a Christian gentleman, standing high with Forrest, who was not easily pleased. The officers and men esteemed him greatly, and his loss, much deplored, cast a gloom over the command. Even General Forrest wept at his grave, and all were deeply moved as this promising soldier was consigned to his last home at Spring Hill on the 11th of April, 1863. See Appendix for brief sketch.

A staff-officer, who served long with Freeman, in speaking of him as an artillery officer, observed that "his favorite guns were his twelve-pounder howitzers, his preferred ammunition two thirds canister, and his distance as close as his General would let him go."

† The men of Forrest's Tennessee regiments were greatly incensed by this act, who at once expressed their determination to inflict complete vengeance upon the Fourth Regulars for it, a determination which was carried out in a measure on subsequent fields—as, for example, at Okalona, and afterward at Selma, in Alabama, just before the end of the war.

