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The War Fifty Years Ago

Desperate Struggle at Thompson's Station, Tennessee. Confederate Cavalry Captures a Federal Brigade. General Forrest's Troopers Surround Their Foe. Federals Surrender In a Mass--Colonel John S. Mosby's Famous Band Kidnaps a Federal General. Bold Night Foray Into the Heart of a Big Camp. General E. H. Stoughton Surprised While Asleep.

By Captain GEO. L. KILMER, Late U. S. V.
THE story of the fight around
the little farmers' depot known
as Thompson's Station, in cen-
tral Tennessee, on March 5,
1863, reads like a page in the history
of some irregular warfare. A Federal
column of 1,500 men started out early
to head off and fight the enemy. Their
Confederate opponents were also out
early, and, after giving the Federals
all the fighting they cared to stand up
against, marched them en masse to
Libby prison.

The Confederate leaders in this bold
sweep were not novices in the art of
war, although General Forrest, the
real hero of the masterly exploit, had
come up from the class of farmer sol-
diers. Forrest's chief in the affair at
Thompson's Station, General Earl Van
Dorn, was an ex-officer of the United
States regular army, trained at West
Point. His daring strategy in the war
had already won him fame.

Van Dorn had just joined the Con-
federate army in Tennessee from Mis-
sissippi with 4,500 troopers, the men
who had figured in his last previous
exploit, the capture of Grant's military
supply depot at Holly Springs, Miss.,
on Dec. 20, 1862. With Forrest rode the
remnant of the brigade which fought so
desperately at the attack on Fort Don-
elson a month before, about 600 sabers.

A Negro Gives the Alarm.

The day preceding the fight at Thomp-
son's Station the Federal brigade of
Colonel John Coburn, comprising the
Thirty-third and Eighty-fifth Indiana,
the Twenty-third Wisconsin, the Nine-
teenth Michigan Infantry and the Ninth
Pennsylvania cavalry, marched from

lines hidden behind those convenient
hills, waiting for the foe to walk into
the trap. Van Dorn got word the
night of the 4th of Coburn's intended
trip to Spring Hill, and before day-
light of the 5th his squadrons and bat-
teries were posted along the ridge to
the right and left and in the rear of
the gap at Thompson's Station. Cob-
urn approached cautiously, sending
his cavalry and guns, with infantry
supports, to the knolls which overlook-
ed the narrow valley. He intended to
establish himself in the gap and wait
for re-enforcements, the better to
cope with Van Dorn.

Federal Retreat Ordered.

While the Federals were pushing for-
ward for vantage ground, Van Dorn's
guns opened upon them. Undaunted,
Coburn's men rushed for the battery
and were within 150 yards of it when
the troopers in gray, dismounted and
in hiding, sprang forward and met the
resolute fellows with a hot fire from
their carbines. At the end of half an
hour's struggle the Federals retired,
but the incident gave Coburn's Eight-
eenth Ohio battery time to unlimber
for action on a knoll fifty feet above
the valley. Three guns opened fiercely
upon the Confederates, who began to
show themselves boldly over the field.

While the firing was hottest at the
station, Colonel Coburn's scouts re-
ported a body of Confederate cavalry
moving around his left on a crossroad.
Being convinced that he had stirred up
a hornet's nest, the luckless colonel
ordered the force to retreat from the
station before the line was outflanked.
The cavalry and artillery which should
have covered the withdrawal of the

his men. Forrest charged twice upon
the fence, but the Federals maintained
their ground with firm courage. Final-
ly this force was overcome, and For-
rest pushed on to the railroad in Cob-
urn's rear, charging up a steep slope
held by Coburn's infantry. In this
charge Forrest's line suffered heavily
under the galling Federal fire. The
last rush carried Forrest, with his es-
cort, up to the Federal commander, and
the fiery southern fighter demanded
surrender at the point of the pistol.

Coburn had just learned that his men
were without cartridges, and he told
them to fix bayonets and drive Forrest
from the slope. But Forrest's men
were swarming in all directions and
Van Dorn closing down upon the pos-
ition, which was already under fire of
his guns, he having passed beyond the
station in triumphant pursuit, it was
for Coburn surrender or a frightful
massacre, and he surrendered.

The fight had lasted five hours. For-
rest held the road in Coburn's rear.
His troops and those with Van Dorn



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GENERAL E. H. STOUGHTON, U. S. A., VICTIM
OF MOSBY'S FORAY.

were all mounted, and there were no
re-enforcements in sight to save the
day for the Federals. Coburn's men
fought heroically and made the enemy
pay dearly for his success. The Fed-
eral loss in killed and wounded was
235 men and officers, while the Con-
federates lost 358 killed and wounded,
including nine officers, among them a
colonel and a major killed. Coburn
surrendered 1,150 unwounded men.

Mosby's Night Riders at Work.

The night of March 7, 1863, was
made memorable in the camps of the
army around Washington by one of
Colonel Jack Mosby's boldest exploits.
Having been chased up and down the
country at a pace not to his liking by
Colonel Sir Percy Wyndham's First
New Jersey cavalry, the bold Virginia
partisan decided to raid Federal head
quarters at Fairfax Court House and
carry the active Englishman to Rich-
mond.

Stealing past the Federal cavalry
pickets by a circuitous ride under the
guidance of a deserter, Mosby and his
band of twenty-nine troopers struck
the Federal guards on the road just
outside the village.

The few sentinels who challenged
the strangers were appressed with the
ready answer, "Fifth New York caval-
ry." One after another the guards
both on and off duty surrendered at
the point of the pistol and even
thought their captors were comrades
playing a practical joke. The desert-
er, who knew the lines thoroughly,
was sent after Colonel Wyndham, but
that officer happened to be in Wash-
ington. In roaming about the hostile
lines Mosby's followers had picked up
several prisoners, one of whom said
that he was a guard at the headquar-
ters of General E. H. Stoughton, com-
mander of the infantry outposts.

Capture a General in Bed.

Falling to get the particular colonel
he wanted, Mosby decided to take a
general instead. With half a dozen
trusty fellows he stole up to the win-
dow of the general's house, aroused
the inmates and stated that he bore a
dispatch for the commander. A staff
officer came to the door and was seiz-
ed without ceremony. He led the way
to the room where the general lay
asleep. The noise of entering made by
the intruders aroused him, and, turn-
ing to face them, he saw a brace of re-
volvers pointing at his head. "General,
get up, dress quick. You are my pris-
oner," said Mosby.

"What?"
"My name is Mosby. Stuart's caval-
ry are in possession of this camp, and
Stonewall Jackson between you and
the army."

"Is Fitzhugh Lee here?"
"Yes."
"Then take me to him; we were
classmates."

Thoroughly deceived, Stoughton of-
fered no resistance, and the night rid-
ers galloped away with their prisoner
from the midst of several thousand
armed men who stood at his call. The
daring capture had been effected with-
in a few hours' ride of Washington.

Mosby had cut the telegraph lines
which connected the Federal camps,
No alarm was sent to outlying troops,
and the raiders passed unchallenged
between large camps of Federals, even
close enough to hear the calls of the
sentinels on guard. Riding on to Cul-
peper Court House, Mosby turned his
prisoner over to his chief, Jeb Stuart,
who declared in official orders that the
capture was "a feat unparalleled in
the war."



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COLONEL JOHN S. MOSBY AND SOME OF HIS BAND.

Franklin southward under instructions
from the commanding general to go as
far as Spring Hill and see "what is in
our front." The country ahead of the
column was broken by long swells and
ridges 50 to 200 feet high, and the out-
look from any point did not extend be-
yond half a mile to the south.

Late in the day the enemy was met
in a lively skirmish, the fact reported
back to headquarters and the column
placed in position for a night attack.
Early on the 5th a negro brought word
to Colonel Coburn that Van Dorn was
marching to attack Franklin and had
already passed Spring Hill to the north-
ward. This news was also sent back
to headquarters without bringing a
modification of Coburn's orders to go
to Spring Hill.

There being no enemy in sight at 8
o'clock a. m., Coburn sent his cavalry
to scour the country, and the infantry
marched forward. As the column ad-
vanced it stirred up the skirmishers of
the enemy, who slowly retired and re-
fused battle. At Thompson's Station
the pike leading to Spring Hill and the
railroad pass through a gap in a low
range of hills covered with cedars and
having steep bluffs. Just in advance
of the station Coburn's cavalry dis-
lodged some Confederate skirmishers,
and he looked for the moment as though
the enemy would not stand for battle.
But Forrest and Van Dorn had their

infantry left the field and were seen
no more in the fight. Coburn accused
the officers of these commands of des-
erting him in his extremity.

The Federal retreat was the signal
for a dash from Van Dorn's center
upon the station. Parts of three bri-
gades charged the station, but were
fought off by Coburn's men. The Con-
federates had no bayonets and but for
the assistance of the artillery, which
raked Coburn's line lengthwise, would
have been beaten from the field. Cob-
urn ordered his officers to make a
stand on a ridge in rear of the station
and fight to the last.

Rapid Fire With Carbines.

While the fight was on at the station
Forrest saw with his keen soldier's eye
that there was not room for his brigade
in that narrow, crowded valley and gal-
loped his men around the Federal left
to strike the force defending the sta-
tion in the rear. This was the body of
horsemen which had alarmed Coburn.
Forrest's leading regiment opened rapid
fire with carbines upon Coburn's bat-
tery, which was moving to ground in
the rear, and drove it back toward
Franklin. Two of Forrest's guns also
opened upon the retreating line.

Meanwhile part of Coburn's command
changed front and took a position be-
hind a stone fence which lay directly
in the path of Forrest. Dismounting

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