

THE RIO GRANDE EXPEDITION

1863-1865

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## PREFACE

In October 1863 the United States Army launched the Rio Grande Expedition from New Orleans. The third of four Federal campaigns against Confederate Texas, this expedition was led by Major General Nathaniel P. Banks. He had been ordered by President Abraham Lincoln to plant the flag in Texas as a warning to the French in Mexico. He was also to stop the export of cotton through Brownsville, Texas. By December, Union forces controlled the Texas coast from Brownsville to the Matagorda Peninsula. By January 1864, however, the expedition ground to a halt as Banks prepared for the fourth and final attempt to invade Texas, the Red River campaign. This dissertation tells the story of the Rio Grande Expedition. It examines not only the military activities of Union and Confederate forces, but also the fear generated within the civilian population of Texas as Union invaders threatened to overrun the state. It also examines the impact that Federal troops had on events in Mexico, both during and after the war.

I am deeply indebted to Dr. Richard Lowe for his direction of this dissertation and to the other members of my committee (Ray Stephens, J. B. Smallwood, Robert LaForte, William Painter, and Richard Ruderman) for their scholarly advice over the years.



## CHAPTER I

### TO PLANT THE FLAG IN TEXAS

During the Civil War, the year 1863 marked a turning point for Union armies on the battlefield. The two July victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg and the crushing Confederate defeat at Chattanooga marked the beginning of the end for the Confederacy. President Abraham Lincoln had waited a long time for such victories to come. Perhaps the Union would be preserved after all.

Despite the major victories of 1863, Lincoln worried about those things that might allow the Confederacy to continue the struggle. Although the Confederacy had been cut in two by the Union victories at Vicksburg and Port Hudson, states west of the Mississippi River still caused grave concern for Lincoln. The one state that presented the most problems was Texas.

Despite the best efforts of the Union blockade, Lincoln could not stem the flow of cotton being exported from Texas. If one thing could keep the Confederacy alive, it was its ability to export cotton. This vital commodity allowed the Confederacy to trade for war materials which they desperately needed. Lincoln believed he had to stop the flow of cotton out of Texas if he expected to hasten the end of the Civil War. The area where active cotton trading took place was in the lower Rio Grande Valley. The two principal cities involved in the trade were Brownsville, Texas, and Matamoros, Mexico, directly across the river. Located at the mouth of the river on the Mexican side was the town of

Bagdad, the port of entry for goods assigned to northern Mexico. Used as early as 1780 as a port of entry, it never grew large until the Civil War transformed it into a bustling center of commerce. Bagdad offered tolerable anchorage and harbor facilities for the numerous vessels that crowded its waters. Many accounts indicated that a state of lawlessness existed in Bagdad, a common characteristic in many boom towns. Once goods were unloaded at Bagdad, they were carted thirty miles west over bad roads to Matamoros. Many of these goods were ferried across the river to Brownsville. The Mexican government levied a duty of 12 1/2 percent on all goods exported before the goods were allowed to be ferried across to Brownsville. The primary Confederate export, cotton, would return to Bagdad by the same route, with the Mexican government collecting import duties. The twin cities of Matamoros and Brownsville were the major centers of the trans-Mississippi cotton trade with Europe.<sup>1</sup>

One aspect of this region's geography posed a difficult problem for Lincoln. Half of the mouth of the Rio Grande was Mexican territorial water and could not be legally blockaded since Mexico was a neutral country. As a result, Matamoros, like Bermuda and Nassau, became a large depot for exchanging European goods for cotton.<sup>2</sup> This unique international situation and the commercial opportunities it presented were not lost

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<sup>1</sup>William Watson, Adventures of a Blockade Runner or Trade in Time of War (London: T. Fisher Unwin, Paternoster Square, 1898), 20-21; James Daddysman, The Matamoros Trade: Confederate Commerce, Diplomacy and Intrigue (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1984), 18-20; Bill Winsor, Texas in the Confederacy: Military Installations, Economy and People (Hillsboro, Tex.: Hill Junior College Press, 1978), 82.

<sup>2</sup>Bern Anderson, By Sea and by River: The Naval History of the Civil War (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1977), 228-29.

on a Brownsville business called M. Kenedy and Company. Formed in 1850, this steamboat company had a virtual monopoly on steamboat operations from Brownsville upriver to Rio Grande City by 1861, a distance of about 100 miles.<sup>3</sup> This company, led by Richard King, Mifflin Kenedy, Charles Stillman, James O'Donnell, and Robert Penny, anticipated that the mouth of the Rio Grande would become the back door of the Confederacy through which large quantities of cotton would flow.

When the war broke out in 1861, the members of the company used their steamboats to aid the Confederate cause. In order for their boats to haul cargo for the Confederacy, the company placed their steamboats under Mexican registry. This meant that Union blockaders could not seize their cargoes because of Mexico's neutrality. When the Union naval vessel U.S.S. Portsmouth came to blockade the mouth of the Rio Grande, the steamboats hid behind a front of Mexican ownerships and registry that placed titles in the names of some of the firm's Mexican friends and business connections in Matamoros. M. Kenedy and Company, with offices in Matamoros, conducted business on both sides of the Rio Grande. Even though Federal blockaders at the mouth of the Rio Grande were to check on all trade, they would not interfere with vessels flying the flag of a neutral country.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Pat Kelley, River of Lost Dreams (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 45.

<sup>4</sup>Tom Lea, The King Ranch, 2 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1957), 1:183-86; John Salmon Ford, Rip Ford's Texas, ed. Stephen B. Oates (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1963), 463-65; Chauncey D. Stillman, Charles Stillman, 1810-1875 (New York: Chauncey D. Stillman, 1956), 27; Kelley, River of Lost Dreams, 45.

Although M. Kenedy and Company eluded the grasp of Union blockaders, another problem emerged for this company. The Rio Grande, or "Rio Bravo" as it was sometimes called, proved to be a difficult river for steamboat navigation. One foreign visitor made these comments about the Rio Grande:

Many of the turns were so sharp that the steamer, though of no great length, could not be steered round them, but often had to butt up against the banks, which caused her head to bound off and pushed her round, and by backing and repeating this several times, she succeeded in getting round the corners.<sup>5</sup>

The river, about eighty yards wide, had a depth of about seven to nine feet. The depth at the mouth of the river, however, was only three feet. This meant that large ocean-going vessels from Europe could not sail up the river to Matamoros without running aground. They preferred to stay at the mouth of the river and let the shallow-draft riverboats bring the cotton to them. The roundtrip voyage from Matamoros to Bagdad (roughly sixty-five miles) required about twelve hours to complete.<sup>6</sup>

Although reliable land and water transportation in the lower Rio Grande Valley region was available, getting the cotton to Brownsville from Texas cottonfields became a formidable task in overland transportation. There were no railroads leading to the lower Rio Grande Valley. Cotton destined for Brownsville and Matamoros had to be carried great distances in wagons drawn by oxen and mules. The distance from Brownsville to San Antonio was 200 miles; to Austin, 250 miles; and to the railhead at Alleyton, nearly

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<sup>5</sup>Watson, Adventures of a Blockade Runner, 19-23.

<sup>6</sup>Robert L. Kerby, Kirby Smith's Confederacy: The Trans-Mississippi South, 1863-1865 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), 181; Watson, Adventures of a Blockade Runner, 19.

300 miles. Houston, the center of the small Texas railroad network, was another fifty miles southeast of Alleyton. What divided these cotton collection points and Brownsville was two to four hundred miles of semiarid desert country. In good weather the cotton wagons made the trip in four to six weeks. Droughts from time to time turned the region into a forbidding desert. Depending on the severity of the drought, the wagon trains might be stopped altogether because there was not enough water or grass to support the oxen and mules pulling the wagons. Usually after a good heavy rain, the wagon trains would start moving again.<sup>7</sup>

A number of wagon trails led to the region from the plantations of Arkansas, Louisiana, Texas, and even some states east of the Mississippi. Perhaps the most travelled route stretched from the railroad terminus at Alleyton to Brownsville by way of the King Ranch near Corpus Christi. The teamsters broke the journey into three segments. The first part of the journey extended from Alleyton to Goliad, about ninety miles. From Goliad, the wagon train traveled another eighty miles to the King Ranch. The last leg of the journey to Brownsville covered a distance of about one hundred miles. Usually, when the cotton made it to Alleyton or Goliad, Mexican teamsters hauled it over the last stretches of the journey.<sup>8</sup>

Another wagon trail led from central Texas through Austin, San Antonio, and then to the King Ranch and Brownsville, or to other points on the Mexican border like Roma,

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<sup>7</sup>Daddysman, Matamoros Trade, 24-25, 107; Watson, Adventures of a Blockade Runner, 25.

<sup>8</sup>Daddysman, Matamoros Trade, 107-109.

Laredo, or Eagle Pass. A third route went through Gonzalez (east of San Antonio) and then on to Laredo or Eagle Pass. Wagon trails existed on both sides of the Rio Grande from Eagle Pass and Piedras Negras southward to Brownsville and Matamoros. On occasion, cotton was transported from Roma to Matamoros by way of steamboat since the Rio Grande was navigable up to Roma. By far the most important cotton depots were Alleyton, San Antonio and the King Ranch.<sup>9</sup>

A few wagons came at first, but as the Federal blockade tightened by the end of 1861, these few became an ever increasing flood of wagons and oxcarts making their way to the Mexican border carrying cotton to be exported on European ships. They came in such numbers that the Alleyton to Brownsville trail came to be called the Cotton Road.<sup>10</sup> Although exact statistics are few, observers of the Texas cotton trade during the Civil War described one common characteristic. The trade was indeed heavy. One account of this cotton trade came from a British officer, Lieutenant Colonel A. J. L. Fremantle, who visited the settlement of Bagdad at the mouth of the Rio Grande in the spring of 1863. He estimated that seventy vessels were at the mouth of the river receiving cotton from two small steamboats. He wrote that on the banks of the Rio Grande "for an immense distance endless bales of cotton are to be seen." The celebrated blockade runner William Watson portrayed a similar scene in the spring of 1863. He noted that at the mouth of the Rio Grande nothing indicated a port or city, but off the coast for a distance of about four

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Daddysman, Matamoros Trade, 107-108; Harry S. Drago, The Steamboaters (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1967), 110.

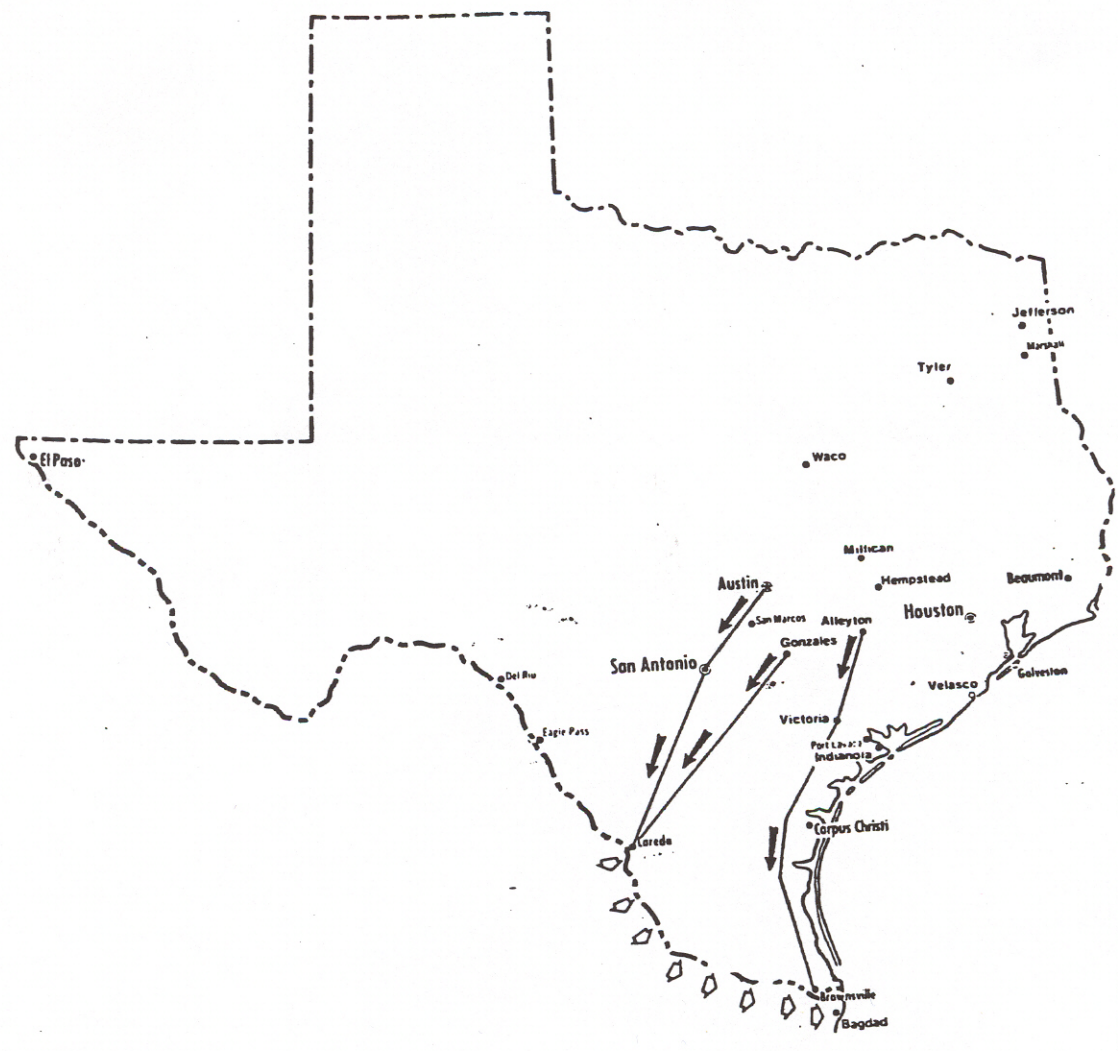


Figure 1, Map showing cotton routes to the Rio Grande

miles a fleet of nearly one hundred ships of various sizes were loading and unloading cargo.<sup>11</sup>

Additional accounts from civilian, military, and government officials described the Brownsville/Matamoros region as a bustling, commercial center. A diplomat at the consulate in Matamoros called that city the "great thoroughfare" to the southern states. Lookouts aboard Union blockaders at times counted hundreds of ships at the mouth of the river. A Union newspaper writer estimated that early in 1863, supplies worth four million dollars were going through Matamoros each month. The city of San Antonio in June 1864 had so much wagon traffic that it was forced to levy a tax on each bale carried through its streets to help pay for road repair and for removal of dead animals abandoned by the wagon trains heading southward.<sup>12</sup>

The last months of the war brought no decrease in the Brownsville/Matamoros cotton trade. Major General Lew Wallace, a Union officer on a mission of peace to Texas, described the commercial activity at the mouth of the Rio Grande. In a letter to his wife on 5 March 1865, he described the cotton trade at the mouth of the Rio Grande:

I find on examination that reports of the extent of trade in progress at Matamoros are not exaggerated. From the deck of this steamer I can look towards the mouth of the Rio Grande, scarcely nine miles away, and see more vessels than are to be seen any one day in the harbor of Baltimore, all

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<sup>11</sup>Watson, Adventures of a Blockade Runner, 16; Sir Arthur James Lyon Fremantle, The Fremantle Diary, ed. Walter Lord (reprint of 1864 ed.; Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1954), 6.

<sup>12</sup>Kerby, Kirby Smith's Confederacy, 178-79, 182; U. S. War Department, War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, 128 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), series 1, vol. 9, p. 674 (hereafter cited as ORA).



foreign vessels, loading and unloading cargoes, of which about one-eighth only goes legitimately into Mexico. The rest is consigned to Matamoros for the rebel authorities in Texas. Matamoros is crowded with goods -- in fact, skillful judges say there are more in store there than the city of New Orleans. Another evidence of incompetency on our side.<sup>13</sup>

Matamoros during the four years of the Civil War served primarily as a Confederate port. The city prospered as a result of this voluminous trade. The cotton sold for fifty cents a pound in gold, about five times its prewar price. At times, cotton worth four million dollars was exported monthly. The two factors that contributed to the increased cotton trade were the Federal blockade of Confederate ports and the cotton famine in Europe. The traffic in cotton was so heavy that the area's Mexican population referred to this era as Los Algodones, "the time of the cotton."<sup>14</sup>

The growing magnitude of the commerce in the Brownsville/Matamoros area alarmed the Lincoln administration. Disrupting this trade would damage the Confederate war effort by denying them European imports. Lincoln also considered another major factor in disrupting the Texas cotton trade. The North needed cotton to win the war. Reports reached Washington that thousands of bales of cotton were being stored in Texas for later export. Capturing this cotton would help Lincoln in two ways. First, the Confederacy would be denied this cotton to sustain its war effort. Second, cotton from

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<sup>13</sup>Lew Wallace, Lew Wallace: An Autobiography (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1906), 820-21.

<sup>14</sup>James A. Irby, "Line of the Rio Grande: War and Trade on the Confederate Frontier, 1861-1865" (Ph.D. diss., University of Georgia, 1969), 5; Paul Horgan, Great River: The Rio Grande in North American History (New York: Rinehart and Company, 1954), 837; New Orleans Daily True Delta, 5 March 1863, 16 December 1864; New York Herald, 9 January 1865; Daddysman, Matamoros Trade, 820-21.

Texas could be used by textile mills in the North that desperately needed a reliable and steady supply of cotton.<sup>15</sup>

Pressure for a military expedition to Texas to gather cotton for the North came from a group called the National War Committee of the Citizens of New York. This committee consisted of prominent Republican merchants who represented the economic interests of New York. Texas cotton would revitalize New York's economy. They used the influence of Andrew Jackson Hamilton, a prominent Texas Unionist, to further their economic goals. Escaping from Texas into Mexico in the summer of 1862, Hamilton achieved hero status when he arrived in New York in September 1862.<sup>16</sup> A delegation met with Lincoln on 9 October 1862 to discuss the possibility of a military campaign against Texas. The delegation included members of the New York war committee, A. J. Hamilton, and other Texans. Hamilton informed Lincoln that a Federal force of about five thousand troops would be sufficient to conquer Texas. Once this force landed at the mouth of the Rio Grande, Texas Unionists would flock to them and join them in restoring Union rule in Texas. This force would also disrupt the Confederate exchange of cotton for contraband on the Rio Grande. The delegation also reminded Lincoln that the cotton

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<sup>15</sup>New York Tribune, 7 February 1863.

<sup>16</sup>Andrew Jackson Hamilton was born in Alabama in 1815. He had lived in Texas since 1846, holding various political offices. Suspected by some fellow Texans of plotting to overthrow the Confederate state government in Austin, Hamilton fled to Mexico in the summer of 1862. During the Civil War he would be one of the strongest civilian promoters of a Union invasion of Texas. William C. Harris, With Charity for All: Lincoln and the Restoration of the Union (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997), 87; Richard Lowe, The Texas Overland Expedition of 1863 (Fort Worth: Ryan Place Publishers, 1996), 16.

shortage in the Northeast had prevented military contracts from being filled, thus hurting the Union war effort. Finally, Hamilton informed Lincoln that Union control of the cotton trade in Texas might attract rebels back into the Union by giving them an outlet to sell their cotton.<sup>17</sup>

Although the political union between North and South had been severed, cotton was indeed the fabric that still held it together economically. Even though the Confederacy was at war with the Union, the Confederates still continued to trade with the North for war supplies. Merchants in cities under Union control, like New York or New Orleans, traded actively with the port at Matamoros. Prior to 1861 a clearance from New York to Matamoros had been given only about once a year. But between August 1861 and March 1864, 152 vessels with an aggregate tonnage of thirty-five thousand and laden with large cargoes had been cleared for that destination from New York. This trade between Matamoros and New York continued throughout the war and in the latter part of 1864 was reputed to be "heavy and profitable." Even Confederate General Hamilton P. Bee, the officer in charge of guarding Brownsville from the Union army in 1863, claimed that pistols and carbines could be bought in New York and shipped to Matamoros to supply Confederate forces in the Brownsville area.<sup>18</sup> Union generals protested to Lincoln about this illicit trade. Lincoln related to one general that the war had raised the gold price of cotton to six times its prewar level. This enabled the South to earn as much

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<sup>17</sup>Washington National Intelligencer, 18 October 1862; New York Tribune, 7 February 1863; Harris, With Charity for All, 90.

<sup>18</sup>Robert W. Delaney, "Matamoros, Port for Texas during the Civil War," Southwestern Historical Quarterly 58 (April 1955): 470, 480.

foreign exchange from the export of one bale through the blockade as it would have earned from six bales in peacetime. Every cotton bale that came into Union lines, even by means of "private interest and pecuniary greed," was one less bale for the South to export. Lincoln then stated, "Better give him guns for it than let him, as now, get both guns and ammunition for it."<sup>19</sup> Occupying the lower Rio Grande Valley offered Lincoln an opportunity to disrupt not only the Confederate export of cotton, but to procure that cotton for the Union cause.

Other factors besides stopping the Confederate export of cotton also prodded Lincoln to action in regard to Texas. When civil war distracted the United States in 1861, European nations, primarily France, moved into Mexico to force that nation to pay its large foreign debt. Mexico's new leader, Benito Juarez, had suspended payments to all foreign creditors. France, Great Britain, and Spain hoped to establish a government in Mexico that could pay off Mexico's huge foreign debt. When Great Britain and Spain discovered that France had visions of empire in Mexico, they left France alone to operate in Mexico. The French leader Louis Napoleon had dreamed of a second glorious age for the Bonapartes and France. Since the United States was engulfed in its own civil war, it could do nothing to aid Juarez in his resistance to the French invasion of Vera Cruz in 1861.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Roy P. Basler, ed., The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, 9 vols. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 8:164 (hereafter cited as CWAL).

<sup>20</sup>Ford, Rip Ford's Texas, 359; Horgan, Great River, 837; Kevin R. Young, To the Tyrants Never Yield: A Texas Civil War Sampler (Plano, Tex.: Wordware Publishing, Inc., 1992), 150.

French control of Mexico would put a European power on the border of Confederate Texas, raising the possibility of European meddling in the Civil War. Secretary of State William H. Seward knew that the best way to prevent a Franco-Confederate alliance would be to occupy Texas. He urged such a course in March 1862. The longer the French stayed in Mexico, the greater the urgency of dispatches from American diplomats overseas. Charles Francis Adams, United States Minister in London, sent Seward a dispatch on 1 May 1863. It strongly recommended the occupation of Texas. When French armies occupied Mexico City on 7 June 1863, the military occupation of Texas became a national concern.<sup>21</sup>

While Juarez suffered through his most difficult time in Mexico, Lincoln experienced his most victorious summer of the war with the Union successes at Gettysburg, Vicksburg, and Port Hudson. Lincoln feared that these Union victories would make the Confederacy more desperate in its pursuit of a foreign alliance. In a letter to Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton on 29 July 1863, Lincoln conveyed to Stanton the urgency of occupying Texas. The president asked Stanton: "Can we not renew the effort to organize a force to go to Western Texas? I believe no local object is now more desirable."<sup>22</sup> On 5 August 1863 Lincoln sent a similar letter to Major General

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<sup>21</sup>ORA, series 1, vol. 9, p. 648; U. S. Navy Department, Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion, 30 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1894-1922), series 1, vol. 20, p. 201 (hereafter cited as ORN); Ludwell H. Johnson, Red River Campaign: Politics and Cotton in the Civil War (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1958), 34.

<sup>22</sup>Basler, CWAL, 6:354-55.

Nathaniel P. Banks, commander of the Department of the Gulf at New Orleans.<sup>23</sup> Lincoln congratulated Banks on his victory at Port Hudson but also stated that "recent events in Mexico, I think render early action in Texas more important than ever." Finally, on 9 August 1863, Lincoln sent a dispatch to Major General Ulysses S. Grant, commander of the Army of the Tennessee. Grant wanted to follow up his victory at Vicksburg by launching a campaign against Mobile. Lincoln urgently informed Grant that "in view of recent events in Mexico, I am greatly impressed with the importance of reestablishing the national authority in Western Texas as soon as possible."<sup>24</sup> These letters to Stanton, Banks, and Grant clearly indicated that Lincoln wanted to neutralize the French threat in Mexico by occupying Texas and preventing a possible Franco-Confederate alliance. Too much had been gained in the summer of 1863 to lose it all by allowing foreign intervention on behalf of the Confederacy.

Political pressures also prodded Lincoln to reclaim Texas. When Texas seceded, not all Texans supported the Confederacy. Hamilton's Texas Unionists, not to mention northeastern capitalists, roamed the corridors of the Capitol in Washington, begging for a

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<sup>23</sup>Nathaniel Banks was one of the most active of the higher ranking political generals. Born in Massachusetts in 1816, Banks was elected to various state offices, including governor. At the outbreak of the Civil War, Lincoln appointed him major general of volunteers. Serving at various posts in the Virginia theater, he saw some combat against General Thomas J. ("Stonewall") Jackson. In November 1862 Banks was appointed to head the Department of the Gulf. In July 1863 he captured Port Hudson after the fall of Vicksburg. From September 1863 to April 1864, Banks launched four unsuccessful campaigns in an effort to capture Texas. Ezra J. Warner, Generals in Blue: Lives of the Union Commanders (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964), 17-18.

<sup>24</sup>Basler, CWAL, 6:364, 374.

Federal army to liberate Texas.<sup>25</sup> Hamilton's first meeting with Lincoln may have been as early as August 1862. A letter from Lincoln to Stanton dated 4 August 1862 mentioned "these Texas gentlemen" who wanted an invasion force sent to the Rio Grande to reestablish the national authority there. The chances for a Federal invasion of Texas greatly improved by October 1862. On 9 October a delegation including Hamilton and other groups met with Lincoln. Hamilton urged Lincoln to send a Federal army to the mouth of the Rio Grande. This military expedition to liberate Texas would incite a mass uprising among the state's countless loyal citizens. These Texans would join the Federal army and help liberate Texas from Confederate rule. The restoration of Texas to the Union would deliver a staggering propaganda blow to the Confederacy. Hamilton talked with Lincoln again on 8 November. Hamilton's desire to liberate Texas clearly impressed Lincoln, and by 14 November, the President appointed him military governor of his state with the rank of brigadier general.<sup>26</sup>

While Hamilton lobbied in Washington for a Texas invasion, a small Federal naval force of five ships captured Galveston Island on 5 October 1862. This small fleet and about three hundred Union infantry held the island for the remainder of 1862. Hamilton's hopes of reestablishing Federal authority in Texas in 1862 were disappointed when Confederate Brigadier General John B. Magruder recaptured Galveston on 1 January 1863. In New Orleans, Hamilton badgered General Banks to send more Union

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<sup>25</sup>Lowe, Overland Expedition, 16; Frank H. Smyrl, "Texans in the Union Army, 1861-1865," Southwestern Historical Quarterly 65 (October 1961): 240.

<sup>26</sup>Kerby, Kirby Smith's Confederacy, 186; Basler, CWAL, 5:357; Harris, With Charity for All, 88-89; Smyrl, "Texans in the Union Army," 240-41.

troops to Galveston. These troops, representing the First Texas Cavalry (Union), were almost captured by Magruder when they arrived off Galveston on 4 January 1863. The First Texas Cavalry quickly sailed back to New Orleans after they discovered that Galveston was in Confederate hands once again.<sup>27</sup>

The loss of Galveston did not decrease Hamilton's desire to reclaim Texas for the Union. Hamilton now urged Banks to undertake the invasion plan Hamilton had long wanted, an assault at the mouth of the Rio Grande. In the spring of 1863, Hamilton returned to Washington for another round of lobbying and speaking in behalf of Texas's liberation. Events in the summer of 1863 made an invasion of Texas more urgent than ever. Important Union victories, not to mention the French capture of Mexico City, gave Hamilton the necessary lobbying ammunition to get Lincoln himself to begin pushing for a Texas invasion. Letters between high-ranking government and military officials in July and August 1863 clearly indicated that an invasion of Texas was indeed in the making.<sup>28</sup>

The Union army officer assigned the task of invading and conquering Texas in 1863 was Major General Nathaniel P. Banks. Shortly after assuming command of the Department of the Gulf in November 1862, Banks received instructions from General-in-Chief Henry W. Halleck. At the time of the appointment, the Union army controlled the Mississippi River north of Vicksburg and the area near New Orleans. Banks's most important objective would be the capture of Vicksburg with the able assistance of Major

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<sup>27</sup>ORA, series 1, vol. 15, p. 152; Lowe, Overland Expedition, 19; Smyrl, "Texans in the Union Army," 236-37.

<sup>28</sup>Basler, CWAL, 6:354-55; Harris, With Charity for All, 92-93.



General Ulysses S. Grant. Once Vicksburg was captured, Banks would proceed eastward and attack Mobile, one of the few ports on the Gulf coast capable of handling ocean-going vessels. Banks anticipated sending a force of about twenty-five thousand men against Mobile. After Mobile, Halleck wanted Banks to take Union forces and gain control of the Red River. If Banks was successful on the Red River, Union armies could then move into the eastern part of Texas. Halleck indeed gave Banks very sound military advice.<sup>29</sup>

Lincoln modified Union strategy in the Gulf Department in order to show the flag in Texas as a warning to the French. Federal authorities thought this necessary to discourage any idea that the French may have of aiding the Confederacy from Mexico. Lincoln wanted Banks to organize a force to go to western Texas, a region referred to today as South Texas, from Austin to the Rio Grande. An attack against Mobile would have to wait. South Texas now became the top priority within the Department of the Gulf.<sup>30</sup>

The planning of a Texas invasion proved to be a strategic dilemma for Banks. Lincoln wanted Banks to carry out an invasion of Texas to accomplish goals other than military. Regrettably, Banks received conflicting information from those above him. General Halleck first suggested a landing on the Texas coast at either Galveston or

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<sup>29</sup>ORA, series 1, vol. 15, pt. 2, p. 590; Kurt Hackemer, "Strategic Dilemma: Civil-Military Friction and the Texas Coastal Campaign of 1863," Military History of the West 26 (Fall 1996): 193-94.

<sup>30</sup>Kerby, Kirby Smith's Confederacy, 187; James M. McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 683; Basler, CWAL, 6:364.

Indianola. He later recanted this advice to Banks in a dispatch dated 10 August 1863. Although conceding that the army's mission in Texas had become more diplomatic than military, Halleck seized upon a phrase from Secretary of State Seward stressing that the flag be restored to "some one point in Texas." This gave Halleck the necessary flexibility he sought in issuing orders to Banks. Halleck now stressed a combined army and navy movement up the Red River Valley to Shreveport and eventually occupation of northeast Texas.<sup>31</sup>

At this stage of the operation, Banks perceived the difficulty of having a civilian commander in Lincoln and a military commander in Halleck. Since the start of the Civil War, the Lincoln administration had worked diligently to keep European powers from intervening. Diplomatically, U. S. soldiers positioned on the Mexican border would be far more effective in sending a message to the French than troops stationed in northeast Texas. Lincoln clearly wanted Banks to concentrate on "Western Texas," thus emphasizing the diplomatic nature of an expedition to Texas. Lincoln, however, left the military planning of the expedition in the hands of Banks and Halleck. Since Banks was a "political" general and not a professional soldier, he was unsure of his own military ability. As a result, he was easily intimidated by professional soldiers like Halleck.<sup>32</sup>

In the dispatch Halleck sent to Banks on 10 August 1863, he talked of the diplomatic nature of a Texas invasion, but stressed the Red River Valley as the best route

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<sup>31</sup>ORA, series 1, vol. 26, pt. 1, pp. 672-73.

<sup>32</sup>Hackemer, "Strategic Dilemma," 196; Rowena Reed, Combined Operations in the Civil War (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1978), 323.

for Banks to invade Texas. This message mentioned only that the flag be restored at some point in Texas. Therefore Halleck wanted to attack Texas via the Red River Valley through Louisiana. From a military point of view, Halleck's plan had some arguments in its favor. First, an invasion up the Red River Valley would not have to depend on a tenuous seaborne supply line. Second, the cotton and granary of East Texas offered a far more valuable prize than the South Texas brush country. Other arguments could be raised in opposition, however. There were indeed strong Confederate forces in the Red River Valley that would certainly contest a Union invasion. Second, an overland campaign would be slow and tedious, and since the Red River was nowhere near "Western Texas," an invasion aimed at Shreveport would do little to influence the French in Mexico. Once he stated his opinion for Banks's benefit, Halleck then abdicated responsibility for the conduct of Banks's expedition to Texas. He never ordered Banks to take a specific course of action in Texas. The general-in-chief would tell Banks his military opinions, but Halleck always left himself a way out by emphasizing that his comments were suggestive in nature and not actual orders. For example, on 10 August 1863, Halleck stated, "I write this simply as a suggestion and not as military instructions." These vaguely worded messages by Halleck allowed him to take full credit for a military operation if it succeeded or censure a commander for his failure if he neglected Halleck's advice. In the end Halleck placed the responsibility for any action taken against Texas squarely on General Banks.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>Johnson, Red River Campaign, 41; Kerby, Kirby Smith's Confederacy, 187-88; ORA, series 1, vol. 26, pt. 1, p. 673.

By mid-August, Banks had decided on his course of action. His plan called for an assault against southeast Texas. Banks believed that the rebellion in Louisiana was kept alive by the military support of Texas. The Galveston\Houston area was indeed a major dispersal point for supplies coming in from Europe. His plan called for troops on naval transports to land near Sabine City, Texas, on the Louisiana border. From there they could dash into nearby Galveston and Houston from the north and east. Banks knew that the Confederates were already anticipating this attack but believed his troops could smash through the Texas defenses. The plan to invade southeast Texas did not totally ignore diplomatic issues. Once Galveston was secured, Banks planned to send an expeditionary force of five thousand men to the Rio Grande to establish a Union presence there.<sup>34</sup>

The campaign began in September 1863 with the Union's ill-fated assault against Sabine Pass. On 4 September 1863 five thousand men of the Nineteenth Army Corps under the command of Major General William B. Franklin left New Orleans bound for Sabine Pass. The twenty troop transports were escorted by four gunboats (the Sachem, Arizona, Granite City and Clifton). The invasion force under Franklin arrived at Sabine Pass on 6 September, but did not attack until two days later. The invaders were supposed to disembark about twelve miles below Sabine City. Instead, Franklin decided upon a frontal assault by attacking the lightly defended Fort Griffin guarding Sabine City. The fort was defended by Lieutenant Richard Dowling and forty-two men of the First Texas Artillery Regiment. After losing two Union gunboats and suffering 380 casualties, Franklin broke off the attack. Instead of making a second attempt to land troops, the

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<sup>34</sup>ORA, series 1, vol. 26, pt. 1, pp. 673, 682-83, 697.

mentally beaten Franklin ordered the expedition back to New Orleans. Banks's first attempt to invade Texas ended miserably.<sup>35</sup>

After the defeat at Sabine Pass, Banks determined that he would attack Texas by an overland route. Union troops could advance into Texas by two routes. They could advance across southern Louisiana toward the lower Sabine River or by way of the Red River into northeastern Texas. General Franklin, who had commanded the attack against Sabine Pass, was given command of this overland expedition to Texas. Franklin left New Orleans with an army of about thirty thousand men. Advancing westward across southern Louisiana, Franklin could decide whether he wanted to continue westward toward the Sabine or turn northward and follow the Red River into Texas. By 10 October 1863 Union soldiers occupied Vermilionville (present-day Lafayette) and then continued north toward Opelousas. Several things hampered the movement of Union forces in this direction. Water levels in many of the major rivers would not allow supply boats to reach Franklin's army. The Confederates who retreated in the path of Franklin's men destroyed all supplies and made logistical support very difficult. By mid-October a Red River advance into Texas seemed impractical.<sup>36</sup>

Once Vermilionville fell, Banks returned to New Orleans and contemplated a two-pronged invasion of Texas. Franklin's advance across Louisiana would draw most Texas

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 287-290, 311-12; T. R. Fehrenbach, Lone Star: A History of Texas and Texans (New York: American Legacy Press, 1983), 370; Andrew F. Muir, "Dick Dowling and the Battle of Sabine Pass," Civil War History 4 (December 1958): 193-94.

<sup>36</sup>ORA, series 1, vol. 26, pt. 1, p. 768; Johnson, Red River Campaign, 39; Lowe, Overland Expedition, 47.

troops towards the Louisiana border and leave most of the Texas coastline lightly defended. One target on the Texas coastline that offered multiple objectives for Banks was the city of Brownsville, on the Mexican border. Federal occupation of Brownsville would serve as a warning to the French in Mexico not to attempt an intervention on behalf of the Confederacy. Second, Brownsville funneled large quantities of Southern cotton to Matamoros in exchange for war material. Finally, Texas Unionists would have the opportunity to establish in Brownsville a state government loyal to Washington. Banks informed Lincoln on 22 October 1863 that while one portion of his army moved across southern Louisiana, he proposed to land troops on the Texas coast between the Sabine River and the Rio Grande.<sup>37</sup>

While Banks planned an attack on the Texas coast, the Union army under General Franklin had stalled near Opelousas and Barre's Landing (modern Port Barre). The last order Banks issued to Franklin on 11 October 1863 basically told him to hold his position and send out scouting parties to ascertain the best invasion route into Texas. Over the next two weeks Franklin sent dispatches to New Orleans trying to get specific orders from Banks on how his army should proceed. On 26 October 1863 Franklin informed headquarters that he might move his army southward to New Iberia and then attempt a cross-country drive toward Texas through Niblett's Bluff and the lower Sabine valley. While waiting to have this plan approved, Franklin received news that Banks had

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<sup>37</sup>Lowe, Overland Expedition, 47-48; Johnson, Red River Campaign, 39; ORA, series 1, vol. 26, pt. 1, p. 292; James G. Hollandsworth, Jr., Pretense of Glory: The Life of General Nathaniel P. Banks (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), 141; New Orleans Times, 31 December 1863.

embarked on another naval expedition to attempt a landing at the mouth of the Rio Grande. The commander of the expedition would be Major General Napoleon J. T. Dana. Upon hearing this news, Franklin decided to retreat to New Iberia in order to have a more dependable supply line. During this withdrawal, a portion of Franklin's army became separated from the main body and were attacked by Confederates under General Richard Taylor. This Confederate victory at the Battle of Bayou Bourbeau on 3 November 1863 reinforced the idea that the Red River route through Louisiana into Texas might have to be abandoned.<sup>38</sup>

Franklin's movement in Louisiana had put Confederate forces on alert from Galveston to Shreveport, and the Texas Overland Expedition had stalled by the time Banks left New Orleans for Texas. Brazos Santiago, a small island at the mouth of the Rio Grande, would be the location for Banks's third attempt to penetrate Texas. This invasion would be called the Rio Grande Expedition.<sup>39</sup>

All the Union activity in southern Louisiana did ultimately serve Banks in his third attempt to invade Texas. South Texas was indeed lightly defended. The Confederate commander at Brownsville, Brigadier General Hamilton P. Bee, had less than two hundred men to hold off a Federal invasion.<sup>40</sup> Even these men, who were part of

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>Lowe, Overland Expedition, 61-62; Hackemer, "Strategic Dilemma," 204; ORN, vol. 20, p. 632; ORA, series 1, vol. 26, pt. 1, p. 871.

<sup>40</sup>Hamilton Prioleau Bee was born in Charleston, South Carolina, on 22 July 1822. His brother, General Bernard E. Bee, was killed at the First Battle of Bull Run. Hamilton Bee came to Texas in 1837. After fighting in the Mexican War, he served in the Texas legislature from 1849 to 1859. At the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, Bee was

the Thirty-third Texas Cavalry regiment under Colonel James Duff, were ordered to Houston on 26 October 1863. Either by design or sheer luck, Franklin's activity in Louisiana had caused Major General John B. Magruder, who commanded the Department of Texas, New Mexico and Arizona, to move adequate Confederate forces to eastern Texas to repel these Union invaders.<sup>41</sup> Because of this move, Magruder left Brownsville virtually unprotected.<sup>42</sup>

Banks assigned the Rio Grande Expedition to the Second Division of the Thirteenth Army Corps under the command of General Dana. The composition of the Second Division included regiments mainly from three states, Illinois, Iowa, and Maine. Their commander, General Dana, had been promoted to the rank of major general after

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appointed brigadier general of state troops. In March 1862 he was commissioned a brigadier general in the Confederate army and placed in command at Brownsville. Bee later saw action in the Red River Campaign, fighting at the battles of Mansfield and Pleasant Hill. By war's end, Bee was paroled as a major general, although no record of this appointment has been found. Marcus J. Wright, comp., Texas in the Civil War, 1861-1865, ed. Harold B. Simpson (Hillsboro, Tex.: Hill Junior College Press, 1965), 75-76; Hollandsworth, Pretense of Glory, 141.

<sup>41</sup>John B. Magruder was born in Virginia in 1811. A West Pointer, he fought in Mexico, receiving two brevets. At the outbreak of the Civil War, he was made a colonel in the Confederate army. Serving in the Virginia theater, he rose to major general on 7 October 1861. Magruder was later criticized for his actions during the Seven Days' Battles. He was then appointed to command the District of Texas, New Mexico and Arizona on 10 October 1862. He was kept busy in this theater of operations by the numerous Union invasions launched by General Nathaniel Banks. When the war ended, Magruder refused a parole and went on to serve as a major general under Maximilian in Mexico. He died in 1871. Ezra J. Warner, Generals in Gray: Lives of the Confederate Commanders (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1959), 207-208.

<sup>42</sup>ORA, series 1, vol. 26, pt. 1, pp. 395, 439, 565; Daddysman, Matamoros Trade, 90-91; Fred H. Harrington, Fighting Politician: Major General Nathaniel P. Banks (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1948), 131.



being severely wounded at the Battle of Antietam. The regiments under his command were well-seasoned by combat; many of them had seen action at Vicksburg and Port Hudson. On paper the Rio Grande Expedition consisted of nearly seven thousand troops, although only about four thousand were present for duty.<sup>43</sup>

The Rio Grande Expedition left New Orleans on 26 October 1863. Although various sources gave conflicting numbers, the invasion fleet consisted of at least twenty ships, most of them troop transports. The transports were escorted by three warships, the Monongahela, Owasco, and Virginia. Commander James H. Strong led the naval element of the expedition, and Banks accompanied the fleet as overall commander. On the day the fleet set sail, Strong received information that French and British warships were stationed off the Rio Grande. This meant that the invading force had to exercise caution when approaching the mouth of the river.<sup>44</sup>

The Federal ships encountered a severe storm on 30 October 1863 off Aransas Pass near Corpus Christi, Texas. Since many of the ships were overloaded with troops and supplies, these vessels had great difficulty navigating the rough waters of the Gulf of Mexico. An account by an Iowa soldier, an officer aboard the General Banks, described how they had to lighten the ship in order to keep it from sinking. They threw overboard eleven mules, one battery wagon, and forage for the livestock on board. The next day the

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<sup>43</sup>ORA, series 1, vol. 26, pt. 1, p. 398; Mark M. Boatner, The Civil War Dictionary, (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1959), 221; Hollandsworth, Pretense of Glory, 141.

<sup>44</sup>ORN, series 1, vol. 20, pp. 643-47; Charles Dana Gibson and E. Kay Gibson, Assault and Logistics: Union Army Coastal and River Operations, 1861-1865, 2 vols. (Camden, Maine: Ensign Press, 1995), 2:336.

General Banks had to be towed by another steamer because she almost ran out of fuel. Another account, given by Captain Edward G. Miller of the Twentieth Wisconsin, described how the seas became so rough that one sailor was washed overboard and others became seasick and were eager to make landfall. The ships arrived at the mouth of the Rio Grande on the morning of 1 November 1863. The welcome cry of “Land Ho” was passed along from vessel to vessel. Banks, who sailed on the flagship McClellan, described the sea as high and the wind so strong that a landing was not attempted that day. Since the larger vessels could not get too close to shore, an effort was made to lighten them, which included letting the cavalry horses swim to land. One ship, the George Peabody, upon which traveled part of the First Texas Cavalry, lowered twenty-five horses overboard to allow them to swim to shore. Only seven of the horses made it to land, however, and it was decided to terminate this method lest the cavalry become infantry. With the arrival of auxiliary vessels, the slow and tedious task of transferring men, equipment, and horses from the troop transports to the landing craft commenced. At noon on 2 November 1863, Union troops of the Nineteenth Iowa Regiment were the first soldiers to land on the island of Brazos Santiago near the river's mouth.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>ORA, series 1, vol. 26, pt. 1, pp. 20, 397-98, 425; ORN, series 1, vol. 20, pp. 643-47; Edward G. Miller, Captain Edward G. Miller of the 20th Wisconsin: His War, 1862-1865, ed. W. J. Lemke (Fayetteville, Ark.: Washington County Historical Society, 1960), 19-20; Michael A. Mullins, The Fremont Rifles: A History of the 37<sup>th</sup> Illinois Veteran Volunteer Infantry (Wilmington, N.C.: Broadfoot Publishing, 1990), 236; Henry A. Shorey, The Story of the Maine Fifteenth (Bridgton, Maine: Press of the Bridgton News, 1890), 55.

The arrival of the invasion force at the mouth of the Rio Grande was not totally unexpected by the Confederates. A series of fires were lit along the Texas coastline when the Rio Grande Expedition was spotted. The Houston Telegraph ran a headline entitled “Let The Enemy Come” and encouraged civilians to assist the grayclad troops in defense of their state. The article invoked scare tactics by pointing out that the enemy planned to garrison captured Texas towns with black soldiers “with a view eventually of colonizing American citizens of African descent--free Negroes--in this State.”<sup>46</sup>

Perhaps the most colorful account of the Rio Grande Expedition’s journey across the Gulf of Mexico came from Private James S. Clark of the Thirty-fourth Iowa Volunteer Infantry. His regiment traveled on the steamer Belvedere with a battalion of the First Texas Cavalry. Clark remembered how General Banks ordered the steamers into two parallel columns, one half mile apart. Clark recalled that “the spectacle of this formation of twenty-three steamers moving majestically across the sea, smooth as a lake, with the sun shining and the bands playing, was impressive and inspiring.” Although the expedition started with good weather, they soon encountered fierce storms. Clark wrote, “Our fleet is scattered to the four winds. Some of them we fear are lost entirely. The white caps are madly tossed in air, and the furious billows roll mountain high. Our old boat creaks and bends in a frightful manner, and reels and lurches from side to side like a

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<sup>46</sup>Chicago Evening Journal, 17, 19 November 1863; Houston Telegraph, 1 November 1863

drunken man. There is a great fear lest she will go down with her cargo of life. As a partial relief all the cavalry horse were thrown overboard.”<sup>47</sup>

After the fierce storms abated, another soldier traveling with Clark composed a short poem about their adventure on the Gulf of Mexico:

Banks moves in a mysterious way,  
His blunders to perform.  
He puts a fleet upon the sea  
To be scattered by the storm.<sup>48</sup>

The debarkation occurred at the same spot where American soldiers under General Zachary Taylor went ashore during the Mexican War. Because of the shallow water, most of the fleet anchored about one mile offshore. Union troops encountered no Confederate resistance, although two sailors and seven soldiers drowned when boats from the Owasco were swamped in the surf. Two regiments of cavalry were sent ashore first as an advance guard, horses and men forced to swim to the mainland. The infantry shortly followed, some wading up to their armpits. From the time the expedition left New Orleans until the actual landing at Brazos Santiago, the losses of the invasion fleet had been relatively light. Commander Strong reported the loss of only three boats, but the crews were rescued. In a message to Halleck dated 4 November 1863, Banks reported, "I have the honor to report that on November 2, at meridian [noon], the flag of the Union was raised on Brazos Island, which is now in our possession." Banks then related how the recent troop movements in Louisiana had drawn Confederate defenders from the Rio

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<sup>47</sup>James S. Clark, Life in the Middle West: Reminiscences of J. S. Clark (Chicago: Advance Publishing Company, 1916), 103-4.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

Grande to eastern Texas. Without that activity, the landing at Brazos Santiago may have been strongly contested. Finally, Banks announced his intention to move up the coast toward Galveston as soon as the Rio Grande was secured. He therefore requested that Halleck send reinforcements. Banks still had in mind the eventual capture of Galveston, but instead of attacking from the sea or from the north, Union forces would advance up the Texas coast and take Galveston from the south.<sup>49</sup>

By 3 November all of the Union soldiers had disembarked and were ordered forward to Brownsville. Some of the soldiers were landed at Brazos Santiago; others were landed at the mouth of the Rio Grande. Just north of the mouth of the Rio Grande was a small inlet called Boca Chica separating Brazos Santiago and the mainland. One Illinois regiment crossed this inlet, but with great difficulty. Colonel Charles Black, commanding the Thirty-seventh Illinois Regiment, gave a detailed account of his men crossing this body of water. He stated that “It was a most ludicrous sight. Men with kettles, pans, tincups, guns, knapsacks, clothes, accoutrements [sic] etc. dotting the wide ford, some naked, others in drawers and shirts, others in full dress.” The colonel also mentioned that most of the men took off their shoes, only to receive severe lacerations to their feet from the sharp oyster shells that covered the bottom of the ford. To ease the

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<sup>49</sup>ORA, series 1, vol. 26, pt. 1, pp. 20, 397-98, 425; Benjamin F. McIntyre, Federals on the Frontier: The Diary of Benjamin F. McIntyre, 1862-1864, ed. Nannie M. Tilley (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1963), 248-250; William J. Hughes, Rebellious Ranger: Rip Ford and the Old Southwest (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964), 211; John W. Hunter, “The Fall of Brownsville on the Rio Grande, November, 1863,” (Typescript, Arnulfo L. Oliveira Memorial Library, University of Texas at Brownsville, Brownsville, Texas), 17; James M. Beverly, A History of the Ninety-first Regiment Illinois Volunteer Infantry, 1862-1865 (White Hall, Ill.: Pearce Printing Co., 1913), 11.

crossing of Boca Chica, army engineers built a pontoon bridge. Two long india rubber bladders over which cross-timbers were laid composed the bridge. It was capable of carrying immense loads and greatly assisted the invading Union army. Their first major target, the city of Brownsville, lay thirty miles inland. On the morning of 6 November 1863, the Ninety-fourth Illinois Volunteers, under the command of Colonel William M. Dye, were the first Union soldiers to enter Brownsville. The troops found that the evacuating Confederates had set fire to Fort Brown and destroyed large quantities of property that could not be removed. Part of the fire burned two city blocks and set off four tons of condemned gunpowder, sending debris across the river into Mexico. Many Union soldiers commented on the immense quantity of cotton lining the wharf of Matamoros. One of the officers remarked that an estimated ten thousand bales “stood in plain sight on the opposite side,” while only 150 bales remained on the north bank. These bales were quickly confiscated. Colonel Dye then established headquarters at what was left of Fort Brown.<sup>50</sup>

War was no stranger to the lower Rio Grande Valley. If anything, war had promoted the population and economic growth of the region. The principal fort in the area, Fort Brown, had been built by General Zachary Taylor during the Mexican War.

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<sup>50</sup>ORA, series 1, vol. 26, pt. 1, pp. 20, 399, 425; Tilley, Federals on the Frontier, 253-55; Boatner, Civil War Dictionary, 833; Daddysman, Matamoros Trade, 91; Brian Robertson, Wild Horse Desert: The Heritage of South Texas (Edinburg, Tex.: New Santander Press, 1985), 116; Mullins, Fremont Rifles, 238, 240; Muster Roll of the Ninety-fourth Illinois Volunteer Infantry Regiment dated November-December 1863 stationed at Brownsville, Texas, Compiled Records Showing Service of Military Units in Volunteer Union Organizations, Record Group 94, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Microfilm M594, Roll # 28).

Located on the north bank of the Rio Grande just opposite Matamoros, it received its name from Major Jacob Brown who first commanded the post and was killed in a Mexican bombardment on 9 May 1846. Two years later the city of Brownsville was founded by prominent businessman Charles Stillman, and a new fort was built just a quarter of a mile north of the original. When Texas seceded, Federal troops evacuated Fort Brown on 20 March 1861. Once Federal troops left, Texas militia under Colonel John S. Ford occupied the fort and began to make repairs. The future commander of the fort, Brigadier General Hamilton Bee, made an inspection in October 1861. He described the repairs begun by Colonel Ford as unfinished but noted that in a short time it could be made strong. The facility contained twenty-five cannons of different caliber and three hundred rounds of ammunition for each piece. Bee foresaw the importance of defending Brownsville as a port of entry for European goods coming from Matamoros. Ironically, he pointed out that if the enemy landed in force, a regiment at the fort could not hold them off or save the precious artillery. This invading column could within two weeks march overland and capture San Antonio. Bee urged that Brownsville be strongly defended or given up at once and the cannon removed while there was still time. When Bee arrived to command Fort Brown on 29 January 1863, he commanded not only the fort but also the Western Sub-District of the Department of Texas. This district included all the territory south of San Antonio to Brownsville and from the mouth of the Rio Grande to Laredo. On 3 February 1863 Bee complained that he would need at least five thousand men to defend the line of the Rio Grande from Brownsville to Laredo. All he

had at his disposal was one infantry regiment and two batteries of light artillery.<sup>51</sup>

What Bee had predicated two years earlier became a reality on 1 November 1863 when the first United States vessels appeared at the mouth of the Rio Grande. Bee now confronted the biggest dilemma of his military career. In his first telegrams to district headquarters in Houston on 2 November, Bee explained the countermeasures he would adopt against the invading Federals. Bee knew that he was about to be overrun; after all, he had only about one hundred men to defend Brownsville. He pointed out that he intended to hold the enemy in check as long as possible, retreating upriver and drawing supplies from the Mexican side of the river. Bee then sent a detachment of troops north to inform the cotton wagons headed for Brownsville that the city was under attack. Bee also planned to take any valuable supplies from Brownsville, leaving nothing of value for the enemy. As any officer in this situation would, he also asked to be reinforced.<sup>52</sup>

Bee had established two points of observation to keep him well-informed of Union movements at the mouth of the Rio Grande. Fifteen men of Company A, Thirty-third Texas Cavalry, under Captain Richard Taylor were stationed at the mouth of the Rio Grande. Another fifteen men of Company F were positioned at Point Isabel. Both companies reported on 2 November that fifteen vessels were sighted off the island of Brazos Santiago at the mouth of the Rio Grande. When Bee heard this news, preparatory orders were given to evacuate Brownsville. The following day a courier informed Bee

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<sup>51</sup>ORA, series 1, vol. 4, p. 118; *ibid.*, vol. 15, p. 966; Daddysman, Matamoros Trade, 22-24; Lillian and J. Lee Stambaugh, The Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas (San Antonio: Naylor Company, 1954), 117; Wright, Texas in the Civil War, 141.

<sup>52</sup>ORA, series 1, vol. 26, pt. 1, p. 433.



that Union cavalry, two hundred strong, were pursuing him and that no time should be wasted if he intended to evacuate Brownsville.<sup>53</sup>

Even before this courier had arrived, Bee had already sent a train of forty-five wagons with one million dollars' worth of supplies northward to prevent it from falling into the hands of the enemy. Once Bee received word of enemy cavalry moving toward Brownsville, he realized that this column represented the advance movement of a much larger invasion force. Realizing the hopelessness of the situation, Bee ordered the garrison fired and personally supervised the burning of all cotton that might fall into enemy hands. During these crucial hours, Bee reported that of the great number of Confederate citizens in Brownsville, only about a dozen turned out to help him and his men in their effort to evacuate Brownsville. Colonel James Duff of the Thirty-third Texas Cavalry confirmed the lack of assistance by the citizens of Brownsville. It was not until 5 p.m. on 3 November that Bee and eighty men of the Thirty-third Texas Cavalry left Brownsville bound for the King Ranch near present-day Kingsville. During Bee's retreat northward, he sent a message to General Magruder in Houston: "The enemy are in force. Brazos Island is covered with tents; twenty-six vessels, some of them very large. I think the expedition is from Fortress Monroe."<sup>53</sup>

As Bee marched north, he encountered cotton wagons headed for Brownsville. Following orders, he set fire to this cotton. In one instance, he met twenty-five cotton

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<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 432-35, 439-45; Robertson, Wild Horse Desert, 116; Stambaugh, Lower Rio Grande Valley, 117.

<sup>53</sup>Stambaugh, Lower Rio Grande Valley, 117; Robertson, Wild Horse Desert, 116, ORA, series 1, vol. 26, pt. 1, pp. 432-35, 439-45.

wagons that had come all the way from Arkansas. When Bee's men destroyed the cotton, one of the old teamsters commented that "The loss falls so heavily on so many. They had toiled so hard and so long and they are poor and needy. And to think we were so near our journey's end. I don't know how we can ever go home. To go back empty will be awful and besides, as you see, we have nothing to wear and winter is near and in all our company there is not so much as two dollars. I don't know why General Bee would want to burn our cotton."<sup>54</sup>

What followed in the wake of the Confederate evacuation of Brownsville can be described as pandemonium and chaos. Perhaps the best eyewitness account of the fall of Brownsville came from a cotton teamster named John Warren Hunter, a recent arrival in the city. On the morning of 3 November, a runner arrived at Fort Brown with the shocking news that a Federal fleet was off Brazos Santiago with at least fifty thousand men. Hunter noticed that shortly after the arrival of this runner, confusion reigned in the streets of Brownsville. One rumor that emerged early was that ten thousand drunken black troops under noted Unionist Edmund J. Davis were only a few miles from Brownsville and intended to burn the city to the ground. People cried out, "The Yankees are coming." Hunter then observed heavily loaded wagons pulling out of Fort Brown. His first impression was that General Bee was going out to meet the enemy. A Confederate officer walking by was asked the meaning of all the commotion. "I don't know. Ask General Bee," was his curt response.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup>Hunter, "Fall of Brownsville," 22.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 9-10.

Hunter also saw a company of artillerymen rolling their guns into the Rio Grande, including a fine 64-pounder. This revealed the true nature of the situation. Fort Brown and the city of Brownsville were to be abandoned to the enemy. A civilian approached the artillery officer in command and asked, "Lieutenant, what does all this mean?" The officer replied, "I am obeying orders." At about this time, the people noticed dense black smoke coming from the cotton yard. Soldiers put the torch to the cotton bales stacked on the river's bank so they would not fall into the hands of the enemy. The greatest cotton depot of the South became a swirling holocaust. At first, some thought that the enemy committed this act. No one believed that Confederate authorities would destroy such a valuable commodity. The panic worsened when the military buildings were also set on fire. Realizing they had to fend for themselves, the civilians now headed for the ferry to seek protection across the river in Matamoros.<sup>56</sup>

Hunter described terror-stricken citizens hurrying toward the ferry. Wagons, carriages, even wheelbarrows were used to get household items down to the ferry. The edge of the Rio Grande became cluttered with personal possessions that many had hoped to save from the enemy. The going price to get across the river was five dollars in gold for each passenger. As a large mass of people gathered at the ferry, eight thousand pounds of condemned gunpowder exploded at Fort Brown, showering fire upon the town. The force of the explosion sent a timber flying across the river and into the Mexican customhouse. Hunter believed that "heaven and earth collided," when he heard the explosion. He also remembered that people standing on the sidewalk were knocked to

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<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 10-12..

the ground by the concussion. A small boy standing at the edge of the river was thrown into the water and drowned. When the fires finally died down, most of Fort Brown had been burned, two city blocks badly burned, and the massive pile of household items by the ferry scorched. The explosion of gunpowder at Fort Brown created a scene out of Dante's Inferno. Unfortunately, the terror had just begun.<sup>57</sup>

By sundown on 3 November, with the retreat of Bee's men northward, criminal elements from both sides of the Rio Grande looted Brownsville. Hunter stated that mounted Mexicans rode up and down the streets of Brownsville shouting in Spanish, "Death to the gringos." The horsemen then fired their guns at houses, stores, and even terrified citizens standing on the sidewalks. Stores and private homes were plundered. The bandits shot at everyone, for madness unleashed respects neither race nor social standing. By the end of the next day, a home guard under the leadership of General Jose Maria Cobos, a political refugee from Brownsville, finally restored order to the panic-stricken city.<sup>58</sup>

When Federal troops arrived on 6 November, they found a smoldering city guarded by General Cobos, who surrendered the city to the Federals and moved back across the river into Matamoros. Once in Matamoros, Cobos led an insurrection and deposed the Juarista governor of Tamaulipas, Don Manuel Ruiz. In a communique dated 6 November 1863, Banks described Cobos as a political chameleon, willing to sell his

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<sup>57</sup>Hunter, "Fall of Brownsville," 13-15, Robertson, Wild Horse Desert, 116; Stambaugh, Lower Rio Grande Valley, 117.

<sup>58</sup>Hunter, "Fall of Brownsville," 15-17; ORA, series 1, vol. 26, pt. 1, pp. 399-401, 405.

interests to the highest bidder. Banks believed Cobos was pro-French and an enemy of the United States. One of Cobos's followers, Juan N. Cortina, had Cobos killed, however, and as a sign of good faith placed three steamboats on the Mexican side of the river under Union control. Cortina was actually a general serving the Juarista cause in northern Mexico. He had been sent by Juarez to kill Cobos and thus prevent an Imperialist takeover of Matamoros. When Banks reported to Lincoln and Halleck on 9 November 1863, he asserted that Brazos Santiago, Point Isabel, and Brownsville were under Union control and that Governor Cortina was friendly to the United States. So far it appeared that the Rio Grande Expedition would be a success, both militarily and diplomatically.<sup>59</sup>

Confederate Texans, on the other hand, braced themselves for what they thought would be the beginning of an all-out invasion of their state. When the Nineteenth Iowa unfurled its regimental colors on Brazos Santiago, the fear of invasion, with all the horrors Union armies were reportedly bringing to the South, became acute. General Bee, in retreating from Brownsville, suffered a hard blow to his military reputation. Richard Fitzpatrick, a Confederate commercial agent in Matamoros, called Bee's retreat from Brownsville, "one of the most cowardly affairs which has happened in any country." Fitzpatrick's comments came roughly two months after the Union repulse at Sabine Pass by a force of less than fifty Confederates. Apparently Fitzpatrick believed that history would repeat itself at Brownsville. Bee responded to this personal attack by pointing out that any attempt to defend Brownsville with the small force under his command would

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<sup>59</sup>ORA, series 1, vol. 26, pt. 1, pp. 399-401, 405; Lea, King Ranch, 207-210; Stambaugh, Lower Rio Grande Valley, 117, Kerby, Kirby Smith's Confederacy, 192; Robertson, Wild Horse Desert, 116.

have been suicidal. One other factor must also be considered in Bee's defense. He had orders from Magruder not to allow cotton or military supplies to fall into the hands of the enemy. In this regard, most historians believed that Bee followed the orders of a superior officer fairly well. But bruised reputations were a minor concern for Magruder. Texans would soon find that the capture of Brownsville was only the beginning of a major campaign by Union forces to occupy Galveston and the whole state of Texas.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup>ORA, series 1, vol. 26, pt. 1, pp. 448-49; Fehrenbach, Lone Star, 377; Kerby, Kirby Smith's Confederacy, 191; Hunter, "Fall of Brownsville," 23.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE FINEST CAMPAIGN OF THE WAR

Once Brownsville was under Union control, Major General Nathaniel P. Banks proceeded with his advance up the coast, intending to occupy all ports and passes between the Rio Grande and the border with Louisiana. Once the Texas coast was secured, his forces would move inland, capture Houston, and destroy rebel authority within the state. Another military option also presented itself to Banks. He contemplated the capture of the whole Texas border from Brownsville west to El Paso by cooperating with Union forces under Brigadier General James Carleton in New Mexico. This move would not only shut down the Texas/Mexico cotton trade, but also send a stronger message to the French in Mexico. Whichever option Banks chose, he believed it would be the "finest campaign of the war." Banks did not want to lose the momentum gained from his successful landing and occupation of the lower Rio Grande Valley.<sup>1</sup>

The Rio Grande Expedition had already accomplished some of its goals. It disrupted the cotton trade through Brownsville and established a significant Union presence on the Rio Grande for the French to ponder. Banks, however, received mixed reviews for his actions on the lower Rio Grande. When General-in-Chief Henry W.

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<sup>1</sup>Fred H. Harrington. Fighting Politician: Major General Nathaniel P. Banks (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1948), 133; James G. Hollandsworth, Jr., Pretense of Glory: The Life of General Nathaniel P. Banks (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), 143.

Halleck heard about Banks's activities, he was furious. Banks did not have instructions to operate on the Texas coast. Halleck described the Brownsville invasion as another "wild goose chase," in which Banks violated military principles by dividing his forces and leaving New Orleans vulnerable to attack. Secretary of State William H. Seward, on the other hand, congratulated Banks for his successful landing on the Rio Grande, pointing out the important diplomatic impact it would have on "the confusion resulting from civil strife and foreign war in Mexico."<sup>2</sup>

Gilbert D. Kingsbury, a former United States postmaster in Brownsville and Union sympathizer, enthusiastically welcomed the Rio Grande Expedition. In a letter to his sister Mariah, Kingsbury stated that "On the 6<sup>th</sup> instant, General Banks and a part of his command arrived here. I crossed to Brownsville for the first time in 22 months. I was made acquainted with the General and his staff, and was nominated a candidate for the madhouse. Indeed I learn that all my friends voted me to be a maniac, but my joy and enthusiasm surprised nobody."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Harrington, Fighting Politician, 131-32; Rowena Reed, Combined Operations in the Civil War (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1978), 323; U. S. War Department, War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, 128 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), series 1, vol. 26, pt. 1, p. 815 (hereafter cited as ORA, and unless otherwise indicated, all future ORA references in this chapter will come from series 1, vol. 26, pt. 1); Hollandsworth, Pretense of Glory, 143.

<sup>3</sup>Gilbert D. Kingsbury to his sister Mariah, 10 November 1863, Gilbert D. Kingsbury Papers, 1855-1874, Center for American History, University of Texas, Austin.



Once the Brownsville garrison was organized, Banks left for Corpus Christi on the morning of 13 November 1863 with about 1,500 men aboard nine vessels. He left behind at Fort Brown Major General Napoleon Dana, commander of the Thirteenth Army Corps. The attack force was commanded by Brigadier General Thomas E. G. Ransom of the Third Brigade, Second Division of the Thirteenth Army Corps. Ransom, once described by General Grant as “the best man I ever had to send on expeditions,” acquired considerable combat experience prior to the Rio Grande Expedition. He had fought at Fort Donelson, Shiloh, and Vicksburg and was wounded three times in those campaigns. At the time of the Rio Grande Expedition, he was twenty-six years of age, one of the youngest generals in the Union army. Banks's orders to Ransom, dated 15 November 1863, told him to attack the city through Corpus Christi Pass, which separates Padre and Mustang Islands, then land troops on Mustang Island to capture a Confederate artillery battery located there. Since the water was shallow at the pass, a shallow-draft steamboat, the Matamoros, was to land troops on the inner side of Mustang Island. The United States gunboats Monongahela, Virginia, and McClellan would provide naval support for the landing.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>James Daddysman, The Matamoros Trade: Confederate Commerce, Diplomacy and Intrigue (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1984), 93; ORA, pp. 410-11; Ezra Warner, Generals in Blue: The Lives of the Union Commanders (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964), 390; Hobart Huson, Refugio: A Comprehensive History of Refugio County from Aboriginal Times to 1953 (Houston: Guardsman Publishing Company, 1953), 37; James S. Clark, Life in the Middle West: Reminiscences of J. S. Clark (Chicago: Advance Publishing Company, 1916), 105; J. D. Barnes, What I Saw You Do: A Brief History of the Battles, Marches, and Sieges of the Twentieth Iowa Volunteer Infantry, during their three years' of active service in the War of the Rebellion (Port Byron, Ill.: Owen & Hall Publishers, 1896), 32; Chester Barney, Recollections of Field Service with the Twentieth Iowa Infantry Volunteers (Davenport, Ind.: Gazette Job



Figure 2, Map of the Texas coast

Union soldiers bound for Corpus Christi began loading their transports on 15 November 1863 at Brazos Santiago and left that evening. The regiments involved in the attack included the Thirteenth and Fifteenth Maine, Thirty-fourth, Twenty-sixth, and Twentieth Iowa, the Eighth Indiana, First Engineers of the Corps d' Afrique, and one battery of artillery. The expedition arrived at Corpus Christi around 2 p. m. on 16 November. Banks hoped to land troops on the inner side of Mustang Island, through Corpus Christi Pass, the entrance formed by Mustang and Padre Islands. A sandbar prevented the steamer Matamoros from accomplishing this task, however. Therefore, Banks landed his invasion force on the outer coast of Mustang Island by means of surfboats. The landing, which occurred on the south end of the island, occupied most of the night.<sup>5</sup>

Ransom landed with about 1,200 troops on the south end of Mustang Island; the remainder landed about four miles below Fort Semmes, a Confederate outpost located at the northernmost end of the island, commanded by Captain William N. Maltby of the Eighth Texas Infantry. Banks supervised the more northern landings from the gunboat

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Rooms, 1865), 247-48.

<sup>5</sup>ORA, p. 409; U. S. Navy Department, Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion, 30 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1894-1922), series 1, vol. 20, pp. 680-81 (hereafter cited as ORN); Nueces County Historical Society, The History of Nueces County (Austin: Jenkins Publishing Co., 1975), 37; Henry A. Shorey, The Story of the Maine Fifteenth (Bridgton, Maine: Press of the Bridgton News, 1890), 59; Muster Rolls for the Thirteenth and Fifteenth Maine Volunteer Infantry Regiments stationed at Matagorda Island dated December 1863, Compiled Records Showing Service of Military Units in Volunteer Union Organizations, Record Group 94, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Microfilm M594, Roll # 70).

McClellan. Some of the soldiers landed at this point waded through the surf near present-day Bob Hall Pier. The Confederate position contained an artillery battery with three heavy seige cannons and about one hundred men from Company I of the Eighth Texas Infantry and a few men from the Third Texas (State Troops). Ransom made a forced march of about twenty-two miles to approach Fort Semmes. Enemy skirmishers made a faint show of resistance about one mile south of the camp on the morning of 17 November. At this point, Ransom deployed the Thirteenth and Fifteenth Maine regiments to advance in line of battle against the fort.. The gunboat Monongahela fired a few shells at the rebel position. The Confederates, not expecting an attack, fought for a brief time but then surrendered unconditionally to General Ransom. The enemy flag was taken down from the fort and the Stars and Stripes raised in its place. One soldier of the Fifteenth Maine pointed out that the rebel flag taken from Fort Semmes later hung over the State Treasurer's office in the state capital at Augusta, Maine. In January 1928, sixty-five years later, Maine returned the captured flag to Texas in a ceremony held in Washington, D.C.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>ORN, series 1, vol. 20, p. 681; ORA, pp. 409-10; Alwyn Barr, "Texas Coastal Defense, 1861-1865," Southwestern Historical Quarterly 65 (July 1961): 28; Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph, 15 December 1863; Alfred T. Mahan, The Gulf and Inland Waters (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1883), 188; Regimental Returns of the Eighth Texas Infantry dated 10, 19 January 1864 stationed at Galveston Island, Compiled Records Showing Service of Military Units in Confederate Organizations, Record Group 109, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Microfilm M861, Roll # 60); Beverly, What I Saw You Do, 33; Edwin B. Lufkin, History of the Thirteenth Maine (Bridgton, Maine: H. A. Shorey and Son, Publishers, 1898), 58; Shorey, Fifteenth Maine, 59; Barney, Twentieth Iowa, 247-48; Corpus Christi Caller Times, 28 May 1961.

Ransom praised not only the men directly under his command, but also the naval support under the command of Captain L. P. Griffin. Not only did the navy help in landing troops; it also fired fifteen shells at the enemy garrison. Captain Griffin also served as a naval aide to General Banks, providing valuable advice for landing troops in the rough surf. Contrary to what a noted historian has written, Banks coordinated the army/navy movements against Mustang Island fairly well. Although the spoils of victory were relatively light, the action proved significant. Mustang Island controlled one of the choke points that restricted access to the landward side of the barrier islands along the Texas coastline.<sup>7</sup>

During the battle for Fort Semmes, panic gripped the citizens of Corpus Christi. The sound of gunfire could be heard in the town, and the terror-stricken inhabitants expected momentary invasion. Weeping wives and parents were distraught with worry over the fate of the local troops serving in Maltby's command on Mustang Island. News of the battle was sent to General Bee, in camp on San Fernando Creek near present-day Banquete, west of Corpus Christi, and he began a hurried march to the city. Meanwhile, the Confederate steamer Cora had been sent from Fort Esperanza to rescue the men at Fort Semmes, but was driven off by Federal fire. When he arrived in Corpus Christi, Bee was of no great help to the frightened people. He did, however, send Lieutenant Walter Mann, under a flag of truce, to determine the fate of the Fort Semmes garrison and the

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<sup>7</sup>ORN, series 1, vol. 20, pp. 681-82; Kurt Hackemer, "Strategic Dilemma: Civil-Military Friction and the Texas Coastal Campaign of 1863," Military History of the West 26 (Fall 1996): 207. Fred H. Harrington, in his biography of Banks, stated that Banks failed to arrange effective cooperation with his navy escort on the Rio Grande Expedition (Fighting Politician, 131).

steamer Cora. The Federals held Mann prisoner for several days but later released him. By that time, word reached the city that Maltby's men were safe, though prisoners, and that the Cora had returned safely to Fort Esperanza.<sup>8</sup>

The next Union target on the Texas coast was Fort Esperanza on the north end of Matagorda Island. This fort guarded Pass Cavallo, the entrance to Matagorda Bay, formed by Matagorda Island to the south and Matagorda Peninsula to the north. This Confederate post, built in early 1863 by slave labor under the direction of Caleb G. Forshey, had impressive armament. It consisted of one 128-pounder Columbiad, six 24-pounder smoothbores, one 12-pounder mounted on a carriage, and one 32-pounder Parrott. Two thousand Confederates were reportedly defending the post. In fact, only about five hundred men were on duty in November 1863. Most of these soldiers belonged to the Eighth Texas Infantry under the command of Colonel W. R. Bradfute. Around the fort snaked several hundred yards of trenches. About six miles directly east of the fort, near the Pass Cavallo lighthouse on the coast, a maze of trenches with redoubts at each end was dug completely across the island. Five miles west of the fort on the interior side of the island was the small settlement of Saluria, a health resort established on the island in the 1850s. A ferry connected Saluria and Fort Esperanza to the mainland. On the mainland side of the ferry, the Confederates established an artillery

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<sup>8</sup>John Salmon Ford, Rip Ford's Texas, ed. Stephen B. Oates (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1963), 352; ORA, series 1, vol. 26, pt. 2, pp. 850-51; Eugenia R. Briscoe, "A Narrative History of Corpus Christi, Texas, 1519-1875" (Ph.D. diss., University of Denver, 1972), 430.





battery consisting of two Dahlgren boat howitzers and two rifled Parrotts. This battery provided protection for a possible evacuation of Matagorda Island <sup>9</sup>

The Union expedition against Fort Esperanza was commanded by Major General Cadwallader C. Washburn. Born in Maine in 1818, Washburn moved to Wisconsin in the 1840s and became a prosperous lawyer and businessman. His brothers Elihu and Israel were prominent in northern politics, and even General Washburn had served three terms in the House of Representatives. In 1862 he was commissioned colonel of the Second Wisconsin Cavalry. Serving primarily in the western theater of the war, Washburn achieved the rank of major general by the time of the 1863 Vicksburg campaign. By November 1863 Washburn commanded an aggregate of various army units within the Thirteenth Army Corps. The major elements under his command included the First and Fourth Divisions, and Third Brigade, Second Division. This last unit, under General Ransom, captured Mustang Island. Washburn now replaced Ransom as senior officer on the upper Texas coast.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Bill Winsor, Texas in the Confederacy: Military Installations, Economy and People (Hillsboro, Tex.: Hill Junior College Press, 1978), 40-41; Hackemer, "Strategic Dilemma," 208; Lester N. Fitzhugh, "Saluria, Fort Esperanza, and Military Operations on the Texas Coast," Southwestern Historical Quarterly 61 (July 1957): 96-97; Marcus J. Wright, comp., Texas in the Civil War, 1861-1865, ed. Harold B. Simpson (Hillsboro, Tex.: Hill Junior College Press, 1965), 143; Walter Prescott Webb, ed., The Handbook of Texas, 2 vols. (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1952), 2:158. For more information on Civil War artillery, consult James C. Hazlett, Edwin Olmstead, and M. Hume Parks, Field Artillery Weapons of the Civil War (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1988).

<sup>10</sup>Warner, Generals in Blue, 542-43; Mark M. Boatner, The Civil War Dictionary (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1959), 892; Richard Lowe, The Texas Overland Expedition of 1863 (Fort Worth: Ryan Place Publishers, 1996), 30; ORA, p. 896.



Fort Esperanza was a tougher obstacle than the small garrison at Mustang Island. As a result, the Union expedition was reinforced by another 1,300 men. On 21 November 1863 Washburn arrived at Mustang Island to take command. On the following day he received orders from Banks to commence the attack on the fort. By this time, Union troops occupied Saint Joseph Island, just to the south of Matagorda Island. The men were ferried from Mustang Island to Saint Joseph Island. Washburn arrived at Saint Joseph Island aboard the steamer Clinton on the 22nd. The next day he marched his men to the north end of the island, a distance of eighteen miles. Washburn had sent ahead General Ransom, commanding the Third Brigade, Second Division, to see if a bridge could be built between Saint Joseph and Matagorda Islands, a distance of about 300 yards. When Washburn arrived at this pass (called Cedar Bayou), he saw that it would be impossible to build a bridge. As a result, he decided to ferry his men across to Matagorda Island. He also learned that the element of surprise that Union forces had at Mustang Island had been lost. An advance Union scouting party on Saint Joseph, led by the Thirty-fourth Iowa Infantry, fought a skirmish with a Confederate scouting party from Fort Esperanza on 23 November. A Confederate officer named Major Hill was killed and one Union soldier of the Fifteenth Maine was slightly wounded. One account of this incident described how Major Hill, an artillery officer from Fort Esperanza, marched a small party of soldiers to the south end of Matagorda Island. As he arrived at Cedar Bayou under a flag of truce, a Sergeant James Saunders of the Fifteenth Maine swam over to ascertain the wishes of the party. Major Hill questioned Saunders as to the purpose of the expedition, and the disposition of the men taken prisoner at Fort Semmes. When Saunders refused to give up

any information, a struggle ensued and the rebel major drew his revolver, shooting the Maine sergeant. Union soldiers from Saint Joseph Island returned fire, killing Major Hill.<sup>11</sup>

Washburn was delayed in crossing from Saint Joseph to Matagorda Island by a strong winter storm on 24 November. The troops were finally able to ferry over the next day. On the 26th they marched twenty miles toward the north end of the island. One veteran described this seaside march as “among the hardest” his regiment ever made. To make things worse, a rare snowstorm buffeted the Union soldiers. Some of these men dug holes in the sand and covered themselves with the hides of wild cattle recently slaughtered. One soldier of the Fifteenth Maine commented that Texas ‘northers’ “completely throw our New England winter gales into the shade.” A “Texas norther cannot be adequately described; it must be experienced to be fully appreciated.” Despite the harsh weather, Union forces were now within ten miles of Fort Esperanza. Washburn's men finally got a better view of their objective on 29 November when they marched to within 800 yards of the fort. According to one Union soldier, Esperanza had parapets ten feet high and fifteen feet thick, flanked by water on both sides. It was an awesome sight to Union infantry that foggy November morning. The inclement weather prevented an immediate attack. Therefore, the Federals scouted the enemy position and moved artillery into place. The bad weather also prevented Federal gunboats from offshore shelling. A small skirmish did occur a few days earlier on the morning of 27

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<sup>11</sup>Hackemer, "Strategic Dilemma," 208; *ORA*, pp. 418-19, 427; Barr, "Texas Coastal Defense," 28; Clark, *Life in the Middle West*, 106; Lufkin, *Thirteenth Maine*, 59; Shorey, *Fifteenth Maine*, 61-62.

November when Confederate pickets were driven into the fort. Union soldiers started to dig trenches and prepared to lay siege.<sup>12</sup>

The Battle of Fort Esperanza took place on 29 November 1863. Two Union artillery batteries, the First Missouri Light and the Seventh Michigan, shelled the fort throughout the entire day. Confederate artillery responded, but neither side inflicted much serious damage. At one point during this artillery exchange, troops of the Thirty-third Illinois Regiment, Vicksburg veterans, taunted the rebel gunners by pretending to catch cannonballs in their hats. One of the few Union casualties in the engagement involved a soldier who, seeing an apparently spent cannonball rolling on the sand, foolishly tried to stop it with his foot. This piece of solid shot ended up breaking his leg.

The Confederate commander, Colonel Bradfute, held a council of war that night and decided that the fort would have to be abandoned. Exploding magazines after midnight on 30 November signaled the Confederate evacuation. The victorious Yankees described the explosion and fire as a “grand exhibition,” and “one of the wildest and grandest scenes mortal man ever witnessed.” Bradfute also spiked the cannons and took his men to the mainland, realizing that his small garrison could not survive a Union siege or fight off the ever growing Federal force on Matagorda Island. Both sides suffered light casualties. The Confederates had one man killed and ten others taken prisoner. The Federals reported one killed and ten wounded. A few of the Confederate prisoners

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<sup>12</sup>ORA, p. 419; Albert O. Marshall, Army Life; From A Soldier's Journal (Joliet, Ill.: Chicago Legal News Company, 1884), 309-37; Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph, 5 December 1863; Lufkin, Thirteenth Maine, 60; Clark, Life in the Middle West, 106; Shorey, Fifteenth Maine, 62-63.

reported that the governor of Texas wanted to surrender the state and all the troops he enlisted. They also went on to say that half the people in Texas supported the Union and there would be little fighting in the state.<sup>13</sup>

Soldiers of the Eighth and Eighteenth Indiana regiments were the first to enter the fort. The Hoosiers chased the fleeing Confederates to a ferry used to cross over to the mainland. Prior to the attack on Fort Esperanza, Union forces failed to capture this ferry because the shallow water at the entrance of Matagorda Bay prevented any ships from entering the bay. By the time Federal troops arrived, they found only the disabled ferry but seized a cannon used to guard the crossing point. If the Federals had been able to capture the ferry, the whole Esperanza garrison might have been captured. Instead, when Washburn's men entered the fort, they found most of the cannons spiked and one dead soldier left unburied. They also found valuable supplies they desperately needed. During this coastal campaign, Washburn's men endured not only supply shortages, but also forced marches and severe weather. Despite his victory at Fort Esperanza, Washburn received no orders to advance.<sup>14</sup>

While some Union regiments advanced up the Texas coast, others stationed at Brownsville launched an expedition up the Rio Grande to capture Fort Ringgold, about

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<sup>13</sup>Barr, "Texas Coastal Defense," 28; ORA, pp. 427-28; Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph, 5 December 1863; Galveston Weekly News, 9, 14 December 1863; Lufkin, Thirteenth Maine, 61; Marshall, Army Life, 318-30, Clark, Life in the Middle West, 106; Shorey, Fifteenth Maine, 65; Silas I. Shearer, Dear Companion: The Civil War Letters of Silas I. Shearer, ed. Harold D. Brinkman (Davenport, Iowa: Privately published by Harold D. Brinkman, 1995), 63.

<sup>14</sup>ORA, pp. 418, 420-23; Clark, Life in the Middle West, 106-7; Lufkin, Thirteenth Maine, 60.

ninety miles west of Brownsville, and seize any cotton the Confederates might attempt to get across the river at that location. The fort was named after Major David Ringgold, killed leading an attack at the Battle of Palo Alto on 8 May 1846. Federal soldiers had abandoned the fort on 7 March 1861, and Confederate forces occupied it off and on throughout the Civil War. Like many settlements on the Rio Grande, the town had a ferry to cross goods over into Mexico. A military road along the north bank of the river linked Fort Ringgold with Fort Brown.<sup>15</sup>

Seven companies left Fort Brown aboard the steamer Mustang. Three other companies marched toward Fort Ringgold by land. One of the officers involved with the expedition was Colonel John Black, commander of the Thirty-seventh Illinois Regiment, also known as the “Fremont Rifles.” The other officer involved was the noted Texas Unionist, Colonel Edmund J. Davis, commander of the First Texas Cavalry Regiment. Davis, who had lived in Texas since 1848, fled the state in 1862 to avoid reprisals for his Unionism. In the fall of 1862, he organized the First Texas Cavalry (U. S.), composed mostly of Texas Unionists. The First Texas had seen action in Louisiana with the Nineteenth Army Corps in the summer and fall of 1863. On 20 November 1863 the First Texas and the Thirty-seventh Illinois regiments advanced upriver toward Fort Ringgold where a force of Confederates was rumored to be stationed. The entire expedition consisted of four hundred men. Capturing the fort would hinder, if not stop, Confederate

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<sup>15</sup>Daddysman, Matamoros Trade, 24; Lillian and J. Lee Stambaugh, The Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas (San Antonio: The Naylor Company, 1954), 88-90; Brian Robertson, Wild Horse Desert: The Heritage of South Texas (Edinburg, Tex.: New Santander Press, 1985), 86-87; Wright, Texas in the Civil War, 146.

trade with Mexico, especially the trade in cotton. Colonel Black, who traveled with his troops aboard the Mustang, reported that the steamer made only ten miles a day. Because the river was shallow and very tortuous, he ran aground several times on sandbars, making it impossible to keep up with Davis and his cavalry. Colonel Black blamed the boat's slow progress on the captain, who was in the employ of "Mexican owners who still operated under the orders from a staunch Confederate."<sup>16</sup>

While the Mustang was being loaded for the expedition upriver, Davis and three companies of the Thirty-seventh Illinois commenced their march toward Rio Grande City. The Illinois soldiers traveled on wagons so as not to impede the progress of the cavalry. Davis and the men of the Fremont Rifles arrived at Fort Ringgold on 25 November without meeting the enemy. An officer with the Illinois troops described the barracks in the fort as "once a fine collection of houses, but the bloody hand had been there and they now stand torn defaced and decapitated [sic]." The officer also observed that there was a one-hundred-foot-high conical mound in the center of the barracks on which a seventy-foot flag staff had stood, flying the "ever glorious stars and stripes." Regrettably, "the revengeful secessionists [had] applied the torch and burnt it to the ground."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Colonel J. C. Black to his mother and sister, 21 and 28 November 1863, J. C. Black Correspondence, United States Military Institute, Carlisle, Pennsylvania; Tom Lea, The King Ranch, 2 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1957), 1:213-14; Frank H. Smyrl, "Texans in the Union Army, 1861-1865," Southwestern Historical Quarterly 65 (October 1961): 235-43; Michael A. Mullins, The Fremont Rifles: A History of the 37<sup>th</sup> Illinois Veteran Volunteer Infantry (Wilmington, N.C.: Broadfoot Publishing, 1990), 244.

<sup>17</sup>Mullins, Fremont Rifles, 245.

Immediately upon his arrival at Fort Ringgold, Colonel Davis sent a courier to locate the Mustang. The messenger found the vessel about thirty miles downriver. Colonel Black responded on the 26<sup>th</sup>, pointing out that a one-hundred-foot sandbar had stalled his progress upriver. Black also learned that the river above the sandbar was “only knee deep.” He informed Davis that he would remain where he was until further notice. He also mentioned that the Mustang had full rations for the land detachment. Upon receiving Black’s response, Davis instructed him to come if he could; otherwise, Davis would march toward the Mustang.<sup>18</sup>

The expedition procured little cotton at Rio Grande City. The cotton that was confiscated fell into Union hands quite by accident. A Southern cotton train, unaware of the Federals’ presence, rolled into town with eighty-three bales of cotton, valued at twelve thousand dollars. The paucity of cotton in the area had to do with the fact that the Confederates were informed of the enemy’s campaign against Rio Grande City. As a result, the cotton crossings were moved upriver to Laredo and Eagle Pass.<sup>19</sup>

After confiscating the cotton, Davis ordered Black to land the Mustang. Once the cotton arrived, Black was to load it on the boat and wait for Davis. The land forces under Davis remained at Fort Ringgold for two days but eventually joined the rest of the

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 246.

<sup>19</sup>Daddysman, Matamoros Trade, 93; Mullins, Fremont Rifles, 246; Muster Rolls of the Thirty-seventh Illinois Volunteer Infantry Regiment stationed at Brownsville, Texas dated December 1863, Compiled Records Showing Service of Military Units in Volunteer Union Organizations, Record Group 94, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Microfilm M594, Roll # 19).

expedition on the 29<sup>th</sup>. The three Illinois companies that came with Davis to Rio Grande City rejoined the rest of their regiment aboard the Mustang. The return trip for the Thirty-seventh Illinois began on 2 December.<sup>20</sup>

Although the voyage downriver was as tedious as the one toward Fort Ringgold, a couple of incidents broke the monotony for a few officers and enlisted men. One occasion involved a dozen officers who accepted an invitation to a fandago at “Old Rijenesa” on the Mexican side of the river. The party was held in a shady grove near the town. One soldier described the dance floor as “mother earth made level,” surrounded by refreshment tables and chairs. The Federal officers, including Colonel Black, had a great time, staying until 3:00 A.M. About thirty “ladies, tastefully dressed, modest and gentle looking” attended the festivities. Colonel Black exclaimed: “oh! such dancers! Gauze and silk, gold and jewels floated and swam through the night.” The Union men left “fully satisfied that a fandago was a big thing.”<sup>21</sup>

On the last evening of the journey, the Mustang stopped six miles above Brownsville. Many of the men went ashore, but with orders not to shoot any cattle since there were ranches in the vicinity. Although a guard was assigned to prevent the soldiers from leaving the vessel with their rifles, the “boys swarmed ashore with guns and without.” Those with guns went after cattle; those without wanted permission to march to Brownsville. The request was denied. Corporal Andrew L. Swap then described how

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<sup>20</sup>Mullins, Fremont Rifles, 246.

<sup>21</sup>Colonel J. C. Black to his sister, 29 November 1863, J. C. Black Correspondence, United States Military Institute, Carlisle, Pennsylvania.



the troops “threw stones at the officers cabin [until] the commanding officer went ashore and gave orders” allowing the men to kill all the beef they wanted. The soldiers, some of them black troops, apparently did pretty well in their search for cattle. Ramijo Garza, who worked on the Latham Ranch near Brownsville, reported that “one hundred and fifty head of horned cattle of the value of six dollars in coin each . . . was taken from the Frank Latham Ranch in Cameron County, Texas, by the U. S. Army commanded by Genls [sic] Banks, Dana, and Herron.” Later in the deposition, Garza stated that “negroes from a steamboat [were] under command of Colonel Black who was on said boat at the time, that he called on Colonel Black three times who sent him to commander in Brownsville, Texas.” Garza never received compensation for the cattle because it was discovered that he had supplied the Confederate forces at Fort Brown earlier in the war.<sup>22</sup>

The Fremont Rifles under Colonel Black arrived in Brownsville on 12 December 1863. Although no great quantity of cotton fell into Union hands, Federal forces showed that their reach extended upriver to Rio Grande City. The campaign also confirmed that Union soldiers could travel by water as far as Rio Grande City. Penetration beyond that point would have to be done by land. Colonel Davis predicted great difficulty in any attempt to occupy the whole river with the small number of troops at Brownsville.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Andrew L. Swap, A. L. Swap in the Civil War (Published by Izora DeWolf, 1914), 21; Petition of Ramijo Garza to the Commissioner of Claims, 11 April 1872, Cases filed for barred and disallowed claims, Records of the U. S. House, Record Group 233, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Microfiche M1407, Fiche# 4451).

<sup>23</sup>ORA, pp. 423-24, 430; Lea, King Ranch, 213-14; Smyrl, "Texans in the Union Army," 235-43; Boatner, Civil War Dictionary, 224; Warner, Generals in Blue, 115; Mullins, Fremont Rifles, 247.

After about a month in Brownsville, Banks's army had confiscated only about 800 bales of cotton. On 2 December 1863 General Dana wrote to his superiors that about 2,500 bales had been crossed over the river within the last two weeks. He concluded in a hopeful manner by stating "that trade is about stopped this side of Laredo." To hinder the cotton trade further, Dana moved outside the realm of military operations. He sanctioned a policy of terrorism on the cotton roads leading to the Rio Grande. In December he wrote a letter to the United States vice consul in Monterrey, "I desire to make the road from San Antonio to Eagle Pass and Laredo so perilous that neither Jew or Gentile will wish to travel it. Please make this known, confidentially only, to good, true and daring men. I wish to kill, burn, and destroy all that cannot be taken and secured."<sup>24</sup>

Not all the military action in the lower Rio Grande Valley took place along the river. Another prime target, located about fifty miles northwest of Brownsville, was El Sal del Rey (The King's Salt), a salt lake in Hidalgo County near present-day Edinburg, Texas. Salt was a valuable commodity for the Confederacy, used primarily in the preservation of food. When Texas Governor Francis R. Lubbock visited President Jefferson Davis in Richmond in 1861, he learned that the Confederacy needed an estimated 6,000,000 bushels of salt per year. Salt was in such high demand that salt and salt works became military targets, and salt workers were exempted from the draft.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>ORA, pp. 830, 843, 865.

<sup>25</sup>Ella Lonn, Salt as a Factor in the Confederacy (New York: Walter Neal, Publisher, 1933), 31, 109; Stambaugh, Lower Rio Grande Valley, 134; Wallace Hawkins, El Sal Del Rey (Austin: State Historical Association, 1947), 45.

In November 1861 the Texas legislature authorized Lubbock to appoint an agent to take possession of El Sal del Rey and sell the salt at the customary price. The revenue would then go into the state treasury. Lubbock appointed Antonio Salinas of Brownsville as agent in charge of processing the salt. Salinas supervised the production of salt for eighteen months until the First Texas U. S. Cavalry plundered the works in November 1863, shortly after the capture of Brownsville. Colonel Davis's cavalry destroyed the equipment and halted salt production.<sup>26</sup>

Another inland target was the King Ranch, an important cotton depot for wagons bound for Brownsville. In a dispatch sent to New Orleans on 15 December 1863, Dana announced his intention to occupy the ranch, and he soon sent a scouting party of eighty men to accomplish this task. He also intended to capture Richard King, owner of the ranch and a loyal Confederate. The raid, led by Captain James Speed, included soldiers from the First and Second (Union) Texas cavalry.<sup>27</sup> King paid for his loyalty to the

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<sup>26</sup>James A. Irby, "Line of the Rio Grande: War and Trade on the Confederate Frontier, 1861-1865" (Ph.D. diss., University of Georgia, 1969), 72; Robertson, Wild Horse Desert, 118-19; Lonn, Salt as a Factor, 109. For some unknown reason, a second raid was ordered against El Sal del Rey in late December 1863. The raid was led by Colonel Henry M. Day of the Ninety-first Illinois Volunteer Infantry Regiment. Although finding no equipment to destroy, one soldier commented that "About seventy serviceable horses and mules were seized and driven in for the use of the Government in accordance with orders." Muster Roll from the Ninety-first Illinois Volunteer Infantry Regiment dated January-February 1864 at Brownsville, Texas, Compiled Records Showing Service of Military Units in Volunteer Union Organizations, Record Group 94, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (M594, Roll # 28).

<sup>27</sup>Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph, 1 February 1864; Jerry D. Thompson, Mexican-Texans in the Union Army (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1986), 10-23; Bruce S. Cheeseman, "'Let us have 500 determined Texans': Richard King's Account of the Union Invasion of South Texas, November 12, 1863, to January 20, 1864," Southwestern

Confederacy when Union cavalry under Captain Speed attacked his ranch on 23 December. Three days prior to the attack, a friend came to the ranch to inform King that the enemy was nearby and an attack was imminent. Not wanting to risk moving his four children and pregnant wife, Henrietta, King believed that if he left the ranch, the ranch people stood a better chance of being left unmolested by the enemy.<sup>28</sup>

At dawn on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, Speed and the Federal cavalry attacked King's ranch house. They rode their horses through the hallway of his home and killed one of his men, Francisco Alvarado, the man King had entrusted to protect his family. The soldiers carried Alvarado's body inside the house and saw that they had killed the wrong man. After an extensive search for King, the soldiers wrecked the interior of the home, terrifying the King family. When the raiders left on the 24<sup>th</sup>, Speed summoned Hiram Chamberlain, King's father-in-law. Speed wanted Chamberlain to give King a warning: "You tell King that if one bale of cotton is carried away from here or burned, I will hold him responsible with his life. Colonel Davis will be paying you a visit soon. When they do, you will think all hell has broke loose." Although they failed to capture King, Union soldiers took some of his cattle back to Brownsville to feed the Federal army. Their departure was hastened by the arrival of Confederate cavalry on the night of the 24<sup>th</sup>. In a

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Historical Quarterly 101 (July 1997): 91. The Military Board of Texas designated King Ranch as an official receiving, storage, and shipping depot for Confederate cotton. Thousands of cotton bales, both government and private, passed through the ranch on their way to the Rio Grande. They came from East Texas, Arkansas, Louisiana, and as far away as Missouri (Lea, King Ranch, 1:182-92).

<sup>28</sup>Cheesemen, "Let us have 500 determined Texans," 78-79; Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph, 1 February 1864; Lea, King Ranch, 218.

letter of 20 January 1864 to Colonel A.G. Dickinson, adjutant general at San Antonio, King mocked the Yankee cavalry, stating that they were “worse frightened than the ladies of the house.”<sup>29</sup>

As Union forces out of Brownsville attacked inland targets, Federal soldiers who had advanced up the Texas coast continued to fortify their positions. Shortly after the raid on the King Ranch, troops under Major General Fitz Henry Warren fought the Confederate Thirty-third Texas Cavalry under Colonel James Duff near Port Lavaca, about 185 miles north of Brownsville. On 26 December six regiments of infantry, supported by two companies of cavalry and a field battery, engaged about forty Confederates at Norris Bridge between the towns of Lavaca and Indianola. Both towns were on the coast, about six to eight miles apart. The Confederates had established a picket station at Norris Bridge to observe enemy activities at Indianola. Federal soldiers first entered Indianola on 13 December 1863 when a Union regiment arrived aboard the vessel Alabama. After a brief skirmish, the Stars and Stripes were raised over the little port. The frightened citizens of Indianola believed that these soldiers were going to destroy the town, a false impression created by Confederate Major General John B. Magruder, commander of the District of Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona. When the

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<sup>29</sup>Lea, King Ranch, 217-18; Robertson, Wild Horse Desert, 117; ORA p. 856; Bruce S. Cheeseman, ““Let us have 500 determined Texans,”” 91; Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph, 1 February 1864.

Federals returned to Fort Esperanza, they not only left the town intact; they left behind a measure of good will among the people.<sup>30</sup>

Forty Confederates under Captain Richard Taylor slowed the advance of about three thousand Union troops under General Warren at Norris Bridge on 26 December 1863. The Union soldiers were on their way to Lavaca to appropriate supplies. Federal artillery lobbed about thirty shells at the Confederates, who retreated in advance of superior numbers and firepower. When Warren and his men came across Norris Bridge, they inquired about the soldiers defending the bridge. Warren commented that they were either very brave or the biggest fools in the whole western hemisphere. Although forced to retreat, the reputation of these forty Confederates did not suffer. A long account of the battle, titled "Desperate Engagement," appeared in the San Antonio Herald and described how Confederate troops hurled back the invaders several times before falling back. The article concluded by saying, "The spirit shown by our troops must convince the authorities at Washington of the utter hopelessness of subjugating a proud and haughty people." After the skirmish at Norris Bridge, Warren marched on to Lavaca, procured supplies, and then burned the business district of the town. Warren then returned to Indianola and on 29 December 1863 officially placed it once again under Federal occupation.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>A. E. Sweet and U. Armory Knox, On a Mexican Mustang Through Texas from the Gulf of Mexico to the Rio Grande (Houston, 1884), 477-83; Winsor, Texas in the Confederacy, 133; ORA, p. 853.

<sup>31</sup>Winsor, Texas in the Confederacy, 133; Sweet, On a Mexican Mustang, 498-99.

In late December, Union land and naval forces from Fort Esperanza sent out reconnaissance missions on the Matagorda Peninsula, not only to ascertain Confederate troop strength but also to probe for weak spots on the Texas coast where Federal troops would be landed. On 29 December two Union scouting parties arrived on Matagorda Peninsula, on the Gulf shore. One landing, involving 100 men of the Thirteenth Maine Infantry Regiment commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Frank Hesseltine, took place opposite the town of Matagorda, situated at the mouth of the Colorado River on Matagorda Bay. They arrived aboard the gunboat Granite City. A second landing, from the gunboat Sciota, was made farther up the coast near a Confederate post called Fort Caney. This second scouting party ran into Confederate soldiers out of Fort Caney and had to be evacuated. The Sciota rescued these men while firing a number of shells at the pursuing Confederates. The Sciota then steamed southward to assist in the landing of the Thirteenth Maine.<sup>32</sup>

The Thirteenth Maine landed at 7 a.m. in small boats through a rough surf. Shortly after debarkation a south wind came up and cut off all communication with the Granite City. Hesseltine sent a detachment to scout north up the peninsula. When this detachment returned, the regiment began a reconnaissance down the peninsula. After marching about seven or eight miles, Hesseltine heard cannon shot exploding behind him. The Granite City had begun firing at Confederate cavalry. Hesseltine reported that “By aid of my glass, I was able to discern the head of a body of cavalry moving down the

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<sup>32</sup>Robert Marmion, A Texas Soldier and Marine During the Civil War, 1861-1865 (Melbourne, Australia, 1985), 16; ORA, p. 482; Lufkin, Thirteenth Maine, 64-65.

Peninsula under a heavy fire from the gunboat. Their line stretched heavily towards us, and without seeing the last of it, I made out a force from eight hundred to a thousand cavalry.” The Confederate First Texas Cavalry under Colonel August Buchel was advancing rapidly toward the Thirteenth Maine. Buchel, described by Magruder as a "gallant, efficient, and meritorious officer," had been assigned to patrol the Matagorda Peninsula since 3 December. Fortunately for Colonel Hesseltine, he located a sand dune and began building a breastwork with the scattered driftwood that had floated ashore.<sup>33</sup>

When the Texas horseman approached the improvised position, they hesitated to launch a direct assault against it. Buchel described the breastwork as formidable, and with only 300 men he believed no military advantage could be gained by attacking it. Other factors also prevented Buchel from attacking. First, a marsh intervened between him and the enemy. Second, Buchel's regiment had been scattered by cannon fire from the Granite City. Finally, the Union gunboats, Sciota and Granite City arrived to provide additional naval support on 30 December. Confederate Private William Kuykendal, Company D, supported his commander's decision not to attack. He described the Union defenses as "a very strong position," and "[with] these natural advantages" and the naval support, it was "not deemed advisable" to attack.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>ORA, pp. 482-85; Stanley S. McGowen, "Augustus Buchel: A Forgotten Texas Patriot," Military History of the West 25 (Spring 1995): 9; Lufkin, Thirteenth Maine, 63.

<sup>34</sup>ORA, p. 485; Marmion, Texas Soldier and Marine, 17-19; Stanley S. McGowen, "Horsesweat and Powdersmoke: The 1<sup>st</sup> Texas Cavalry in the Civil War" (Ph.D. diss., Texas Christian University, 1997), 197-201; Lufkin, Thirteenth Maine, 65-66.



Despite these advantages, Hesseltine was afraid that he would be overrun. Heavy skirmishing ensued for the next two days. Hesseltine later reported that "I knew my men; they were cool; and determined rather than the rebels should meet the first encouragement of this campaign, that they would die there, with as many of their foes lying about them." Land forces as well as Union and Confederate gunboats got into the act. Union naval commanders were unaware that a Confederate gunboat was on the other side of the peninsula. A heavy fog that morning allowed the John F. Carr to sail close to shore. When the fog lifted, the gunboat, under the command of Captain James Marmion, began shelling Hesseltine's position. The distance from the gunboat to the Union troops was about one and one-half miles and about two miles to the Federal gunboats. The shocked commanders of the Union vessels immediately returned fire, and, according to Marmion, "some well-aimed shots [passed] over us and others [fell] short at a distance of about three hundred yards." The naval duel ended at about 3 p. m., but the John F. Carr, according to Hesseltine, "made some very good shots."<sup>35</sup>

After the naval exchange, the Sciota ordered the Granite City back to Fort Esperanza on 30 December for reinforcements. Three Union gunboats (the Monongahela, Estrella, and Penobscot) arrived with reinforcements on 31 December, but severe weather kept them from landing any troops. While waiting for the storm to abate, Union naval commanders received orders to evacuate all Federal troops from the peninsula and return to Fort Esperanza. The Union gunboats carried out this order

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<sup>35</sup>ORA, p. 485; Marmion, Texas Soldier and Marine, 17-19; McGowen, "Horsesweat and Powdersmoke, 197-201; Lufkin, Thirteenth Maine, 64-65.

successfully under very adverse conditions. Although casualties were light on both sides, Colonel Hesseltine received the Congressional Medal of Honor for heroism and saving the men in his regiment. He saved them by marching them out of their original position on the night of 30 December. Enduring bitter cold, the regiment moved twenty miles southward and were finally rescued by the Sciota on 31 December. On the march southward, Hesseltine described how “the sick and exhausted soldiers had been nobly aided by their comrades, so that not a man, musket or equipment was left to the enemy.” Hesseltine later commended not only the officers under his command, but the naval officers involved with this reconnaissance mission.<sup>36</sup>

The expedition gained valuable information. While Union troops were landing on Matagorda Peninsula, the Sciota was ordered to observe the coast as far north as the Brazos River. Naval officers, along with General Ransom, reported strong enemy works at the mouths of the Brazos, Caney, and San Bernard Rivers. At the Brazos River the Confederates had built two forts, Fort Quintana and Fort Velasco. Together, these two installations mounted thirteen cannons. Fort Caney, built on the Caney River, and Fort Bernard on the San Bernard River were also formidable obstacles on the Texas shoreline. The Confederates clearly intended to contest very vigorously any further Union advance up the Texas coast. Despite these powerful fortifications on the Texas coast and the

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<sup>36</sup>Marmion, Texas Soldier and Marine, 19; ORA, pp. 482-84; Lufkin, Thirteenth Maine, 65-66; Muster Rolls of the Thirteenth Maine Volunteer Infantry Regiment stationed at Matagorda Island dated January 1864, Compiled Records Showing Service of Military Units in Volunteer Union Organizations, Record Group 94, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Microfilm M594, Roll # 70).

repulse of Federal forces on the peninsula, Union scouting missions continued well into 1864.<sup>37</sup>

By the end of 1863 Union forces occupied the Texas coast from Brownsville to Indianola. General Banks boasted at the beginning of December that if he was furnished with another division, he could capture Houston and Galveston. He intended to march up Matagorda Peninsula to the mouth of the Brazos, capture Forts Velasco and Quintana, and use them as his base of operations for the final assault against Houston and Galveston. General Washburn had similar aspirations. But as the end of 1863 approached, Union scouts reported that General Magruder had massed a large force of Confederate and state troops on the prairie west of the Brazos to repel the expected Federal invasion of the Texas interior. Confederate soldiers who came into Union lines also reported that Magruder had about six to eight thousand troops in the whole state, but that half of them were Union men and would probably not fight. Despite these conflicting reports, Washburn continued to organize Union forces for an attack up Matagorda Peninsula toward the Brazos. His dispatches throughout December requested additional troops and supplies, but all were slow in coming. Washburn knew that the momentum of victory on the Texas coast should not be allowed to dissipate further. Nevertheless, by the end of December the Union advance had ground to a halt. This allowed Magruder valuable time to fortify positions on the coast<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>ORA, pp. 480-81; Winsor, Texas in the Confederacy, 108, 114; Shorey, Fifteenth Maine, 67.

<sup>38</sup>ORA, pp. 849-60, 416-17; Hackemer, "Strategic Dilemma," 208; Colonel Oran M. Roberts, Confederate Military History, Extended Edition, vol. 15, Texas (Atlanta: The

Other factors also contributed to the Union inactivity on the Texas coast. Throughout the Rio Grande Expedition, Generals Banks and Halleck continued to argue over the proper strategy for conquering Texas. Halleck had never favored the Rio Grande Expedition and held unfavorable opinions about amphibious landings in general. In a telegram of 7 December 1863, Halleck berated Banks for the expedition and the subsequent move up the coast. Halleck then stressed the importance of a Union campaign through central Louisiana and into northeast Texas, a strategy that had become almost an obsession with him. Perhaps the most damaging part of the telegram pointed out that "you must not expect any considerable reinforcements from other departments." When it came to a showdown over strategy in the Department of the Gulf, Halleck was determined to prevail.<sup>39</sup>

Climate, terrain, and the persistent shortage of supplies were other problems faced by Union soldiers fighting in South Texas. The winter of 1863-1864 was extremely harsh. Texas was not the land of milk and honey advertised in antebellum literature. A soldier in the Ninety-sixth Ohio Infantry Regiment stationed on Matagorda Peninsula gave a typical description. He stated that "the rippling waters sighing along either shore gave the location a kind of romantic character, which was counterbalanced by frequent ice-cold winds, that lashed the same shores with angry surges, and sent us to cover, pining

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Confederate Publishing Company, 1899; repr., Wilmington, N.C.: Broadfoot Publishing Company, 1989), 120; Shearer, Letters of Silas I. Shearer, 64.

<sup>39</sup>Hackemer, "Strategic Dilemma," 209-10; ORA, pp. 834-35; General Halleck to General Banks, 30 September 1863, Nathaniel P. Banks Papers, Center for American History, University of Texas, Austin (Microfilm # 786.26, Roll 26A).

for scenes less romantic and more agreeable." Private Clark of the Thirty-fourth Iowa described the severity of the winter storms by pointing out that when a "norther" arrived, it froze water into ice a half-inch thick. To survive, "every soldier would roll himself up in his blankets and lie on his bunk and shiver. I put on all my clothes including mittens and a cap, and rolled myself in my blankets and read Victor Hugo's Les Miserables, the most wonderful of all novels. After that I got a copy of Rollin's Ancient History, and read that with great interest and profit." Union officers in many of their official reports pointed out that despite the harsh climate, the troops endured it without major complaints. Confederates, equally resilient, compared their ordeal during the winter of 1863 to Valley Forge during the American Revolution. One soldier in the First Texas Cavalry Regiment, stationed on the Matagorda Peninsula in December 1863, gave a similar account of this frigid winter on the coast. He pointed out that the regiment had a severe shortage of winter gear, and as a result, "our suffering was necessarily severe."<sup>40</sup>

Shortages of wood and forage plagued the Union army in Texas. Soldiers fighting on the coast often spoke of the great scarcity of wood for campfires. Reuben Scott, a soldier in the Sixty-seventh Indiana Infantry Regiment, gave testimony to this scarcity. Stationed on Matagorda Island, Scott described the difficulty of keeping warm during the severe winter of 1863. No timber grew on the island, and the troops burned driftwood that washed up on the beach. They used the strictest economy by digging small pits in the

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<sup>40</sup>Joseph T. Woods, Services of the 96<sup>th</sup> Ohio Volunteers (Toledo: Blade Printing and Paper Co., 1874), 50; Sweet, On a Mexican Mustang, 479-81; McGowen, "Horsesweat and Powdersmoke," 197; ORA, pp. 418-20; Clark, Life in the Middle West, 107.

sand to cook and warm themselves. Scott also discussed the severity of winter storms in Texas. On one occasion he pointed out that, “This cold, penetrating wind being so unbearable that we retreated to our tents and rolled up in our blankets. But we had not long been rolled up when orders came to march immediately; and this was one of the trying times which tested the nerves of the strongest, to crawl out of our warm blankets into this death chilling wind.” Lack of forage for the animals also hampered the Federals. In a dispatch dated 13 December 1863, General Washburn stated that on Matagorda Island he was losing eight to ten animals a day due to lack of forage. He informed headquarters at New Orleans that they need not send any more animals to the coast because they would eventually die of starvation. General Dana at Brownsville also mentioned a scarcity of forage for his cavalry and recommended a move north to Corpus Christi as a base of operations. With Corpus Christi as a base, the Nueces River Valley would furnish abundant water and grass.<sup>41</sup>

While Union generals awaited orders to advance from Banks, they busied themselves by fortifying the positions they were holding. At Brownsville, soldiers had begun making repairs to Fort Brown, headquarters for commanders in the region. The men dug trenches around the fort, built a large breastwork on the sod embankment, and placed fifteen 12-pounders and five 20-pounder Parrotts on the works. They then constructed a camp about one and one-half miles upstream in the first bend in the river

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<sup>41</sup>Fitzhugh, “Operations on the Texas Coast,” 98-99; ORA, pp. 418-20, 876-77; Winsor, Texas in the Confederacy, 60; Reuben A. Scott, The History of the 67<sup>th</sup> Regiment Indiana Infantry Volunteers (Bedford, Ind.: Herald Book and Job Print, 1892), 67.

above Fort Brown. Their officers believed that a garrison of five hundred men could hold off the attack of five thousand good troops.<sup>42</sup>

Another body of Union soldiers, under Colonel Justin Hodge, was stationed at Point Isabel. They consisted of the First and Second Engineers, Corps d'Afrique, and Sixteenth Infantry, Corps d'Afrique. These men dug an extensive maze of rifle pits from the Point Isabel lighthouse to a point 1,000 yards north on the bay. They also built two redoubts at points along the rifle pits to accommodate artillery. Fortifications sprang up on Brazos Santiago in early 1864, including a military road connecting Boca Chica to the mouth of the river. Brazos Santiago became a principal commissary depot for troops serving on the lower Texas coast.<sup>43</sup>

No other region of Texas was as heavily fortified as Matagorda Island and the surrounding areas. Seven thousand Federal soldiers camped there shortly after the Battle of Fort Esperanza, and they established three principal fronts. The main fortification was Fort Esperanza. Shortly after its capture, General Ransom set up a fortified battery on the other side of Pass Cavallo on the southern end of the Matagorda Peninsula, known as DeCrow's Point. Soldiers from the First and Fourth Divisions of the Thirteenth Army Corps garrisoned this position. In addition to fortifying the entrance to Matagorda Bay, the Thirteenth Army Corps also stationed men in Indianola and built a series of forts and trenches. They occupied the city for several weeks and built five forts capable of

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<sup>42</sup>Winsor, Texas in the Confederacy, 40; Daddysman, Matamoros Trade, 98; Robert L. Kerby, Kirby Smith's Confederacy: The Trans-Mississippi South, 1863-1865 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), 367-68.

<sup>43</sup>Winsor, Texas in the Confederacy, 40; ORA, p. 898.

mounting fifteen heavy guns. Union troops also fortified the township of Saluria, a short distance inland from Fort Esperanza.<sup>44</sup>

By year's end at least 10,000 Federal soldiers camped on the Texas coast from Brownsville to the Matagorda Peninsula. There had also been some shuffling of Union commands. On 24 December 1863 General Banks ordered Major General Francis J. Herron to take command of the Second Division, Thirteenth Army Corps, at Fort Brown. Dana, who commanded the Thirteenth Army Corps, would assume command of Fort Esperanza. Banks gave Herron specific instructions concerning the Brownsville command. Herron must defend the present holdings, maintain cordial relations with those in power in Matamoros, and recruit local citizens for service in the Union army. To this end, Colonel Edmund J. Davis and Lieutenant Colonel John L. Haynes, recruited Unionists, Mexicans, and Confederate deserters into the First and Second Texas Cavalry Regiments. Finally, Herron was expected to link up with other forces that might be later aimed at the capture of Galveston. By New Year's Day the only important coastal positions still under Confederate control were Forts Quintana and Velasco (at the mouth of the Brazos), Galveston, and Sabine Pass.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup>Winsor, Texas in the Confederacy, 40-41; Marmion, Texas Soldier and Marine, 15; ORA, pp. 431, 897; Clark, Life in the Middle West, 107-8.

<sup>45</sup>Kerby, Kirby Smith's Confederacy, 193; ORA, p. 879; Charles Dana Gibson and E. Kay Gibson, Assault and Logistics: Union Army Coastal and River Operations, 1861-1866, 2 vols. (Camden, Maine: Ensign Press, 1995), 2:340; Benjamin F. McIntyre, Federals on the Frontier: The Diary of Benjamin F. McIntyre, ed. Nannie M. Tilley (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1963), 34; Jerry D. Thompson, Vaqueros in Blue and Gray (Austin: Presidial Press, 1976), 84-93.



The Rio Grande Expedition achieved some of its objectives in the first two months of the campaign. Diplomatically, Banks established a Union presence on the Rio Grande as President Lincoln had desired. Economically, the export of Confederate cotton, although not severely crippled, was slowed. Prior to the campaign Banks had predicted that the Federals could procure 50,000 to 100,000 bales of cotton in Texas. After a little more than a month, they had secured only about 800 bales, hardly a brilliant reward for a large military expedition. A Brownsville merchant and Union supporter, Gilbert D. Kingsbury, credited the Union occupation with reducing in half the amount of cotton crossing the Rio Grande. He realized, though, that the Confederates diverted their cotton to Eagle Pass and Laredo, creating greater difficulties for Federal soldiers on the Rio Grande. He astutely observed that it would be impossible for Union forces to occupy the Rio Grande from Brownsville to Eagle Pass. He believed that General Dana should concentrate on occupying San Antonio or Austin, thus blocking the major cotton routes from the interior of Texas.<sup>46</sup>

The Rio Grande Expedition also had a political mission, centered on A. J. Hamilton, military governor of Texas. Hamilton had been authorized to "reestablish the authority of the Federal government in the State of Texas and to provide the means of maintaining the peace and security to the loyal inhabitants of that State until they shall be able to establish a civil government." Much discretion was left to Hamilton in carrying

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<sup>46</sup>Sherrill L. Dickeson, "The Texas Cotton Trade During the Civil War" (M. A. thesis, North Texas State University, 1967), 24-25; Lea, King Ranch, 214; Hackemer, "Strategic Dilemma," 207-8; ORA, pp. 414-15, 830; Gilbert D. Kingsbury to the editor of the New York Herald, 1 March 1864, Gilbert D. Kingsbury Papers, 1855-1874, Center for American History, University of Texas, Austin.

out the assignment, and he was promised the support of the Lincoln administration in whatever he did. Hamilton patiently waited in New Orleans for Banks to occupy some portion of Texas. When Banks readied his troops for the Rio Grande Expedition, Hamilton wanted to join them. Banks believed that if Hamilton joined the expedition and it failed, it would only serve to magnify the loss. Banks insisted that Hamilton stay in New Orleans until he heard of the success of the invading force, and Hamilton consented to his request.<sup>47</sup>

Upon hearing of the capture of Brownsville, Hamilton left New Orleans, arriving in Brownsville on 1 December 1863. In a telegram to Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, Hamilton described how hundreds of refugees had migrated from the interior of Texas to Brownsville. The morale of these refugees was very low. Hamilton's impression from talking to these refugees was that the rebellion in Texas was about to collapse. Rebel commanders had abandoned all idea of defending the country west of the Colorado River. Twenty-five thousand men could seal the fate of Texas in two months. Hamilton also wanted to establish a Federal court at Brownsville to "help settle questions arising under the act of Congress providing for the confiscations of property of persons engaged in the rebellion."<sup>48</sup>

Concerning the proposed court, Hamilton ran into opposition from General Dana. Hamilton had extradited a suspect from Matamoros to be tried for murder. In a telegram

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<sup>47</sup>Smyrl, "Texans in the Union Army," 242; Wright, Texas in the Civil War, 140; ORA, p. 865.

<sup>48</sup>ORA, pp. 865-66.

dated 15 December 1863, Dana pointed out to Hamilton that in an extradition treaty of 1861, when the civil authority in a state is suspended, "the chief military officer in command of such state," shall conduct extradition of criminals. Dana qualified his statement to Hamilton by pointing out that even he was not sure if he could extradite criminal suspects from Mexico or if that power resided with General Banks. In the end, Dana concluded that he wanted no clash of authority, but he asked Hamilton to write the War Department concerning the military governor's authority concerning Mexico.<sup>49</sup>

A far more serious problem concerning Mexico emerged when Hamilton, at a reception in Matamoros, promised American aid to Benito Juarez, resistance leader fighting the French occupation of Mexico. This promise angered President Lincoln and Secretary of State Seward. The Lincoln administration worked diligently to avoid anything that might offend France. General Banks, who received authority from Seward and Stanton to suspend Hamilton, wrote the Texan a friendly note reminding him of the delicate diplomatic situation in Mexico while assuring him of his continued support.<sup>50</sup>

The friction between Dana and Hamilton ended when Dana received orders to command Fort Esperanza in late December and was replaced by General Herron. Despite the decline of military activity in Texas by the end of 1863, Hamilton continued to issue ineffective proclamations and appointed a few civil officers in the Brownsville area. He also made speeches supporting emancipation and the Union. In one address, given on 1

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<sup>49</sup>ORA, p. 859.

<sup>50</sup>William C. Harris, With Charity for All: Lincoln and the Restoration of the Union (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1977), 95; ORA, p. 846.

January 1864, Hamilton made an address “to the people of Texas.” He pointed out that the people of Texas had been deceived by their leaders in the South over such issues as secession and slavery. He then went on to describe the plight of Union men in Texas, defending their actions since the time of the secession of Texas. Despite his appeal for the cause of the Union in Texas, Hamilton probably realized during his brief stay in Brownsville that his political power in Texas depended greatly upon the military conquest of Texas.<sup>51</sup>

Although Hamilton’s political power extended to only to those areas controlled by Federal troops, his presence in Texas had a demoralizing impact on residents living on the Texas coast. In March 1864 inhabitants of Corpus Christi learned that he intended to establish a Federal court in their city. The first session was expected to be held sometime in May. Corpus Christians believed their city was chosen because of an anticipated Federal invasion of the interior emanating from Corpus Christi that spring. Neither the court nor the spring invasion ever materialized. They were only rumors, ever present in wartime. However, there can be no doubt that these stories created a sense of foreboding in the hearts of many loyal Confederates, not only in Corpus Christi, but along the lower Texas coast as well.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup>Harris, With Charity for All, 95; Smyrl, “Texans in the Union Army,” 243; Frank C. Pierce, A Brief History of the Lower Rio Grande Valley (Menasha, Wis.: George Banta Publishing Company, 1917), 47; Andrew Jackson Hamilton, “Address of A. J. Hamilton, Military Governor, to The People of Texas,” Governors’ Papers and Records, Andrew Jackson Hamilton Papers, Record Group 301, Texas State Archives, Austin, Texas.

<sup>52</sup>Texas State Gazette, 23 March and 6 April 1864.

The Rio Grande Expedition, which controlled a large section of the Texas coastline by December 1863, stalled when it failed to penetrate the interior of Texas. The failure to invade deeper into the state can be blamed partly on the differences of opinion over grand strategy between President Lincoln and those military men who controlled the fate of the Department of the Gulf. Lincoln wanted Union forces in Texas to perform primarily a diplomatic function. Halleck, the military purist, wanted to close with the Confederate forces in northwest Louisiana and northeast Texas and give battle. Banks believed that the Rio Grande Expedition could accomplish both its military and diplomatic missions, if properly supported. Unfortunately, this support never came. By January 1864 Halleck had already recruited Major Generals Ulysses S. Grant, William T. Sherman, and Frederick Steele in support of a campaign up the Red River. Banks, who as late as 30 December wanted to continue Texas operations, informed Halleck on 23 January 1864 that he supported the Red River route into Texas. With so much military savvy massed against him, Banks's transformation of attitude can be easily understood. It also meant that if the Red River campaign failed, others besides Banks could share the blame for its failure.<sup>53</sup>

By the end of the year, Federal soldiers on the Rio Grande Expedition, which stretched from the mouth of the Rio Grande to the Matagorda Peninsula, went into winter quarters. Encamped at Brownsville was the second division, on Matagorda Island was the first division, and on Matagorda Peninsula were elements of the first and fourth

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<sup>53</sup>Harris, With Charity for All, 95; Hackemer, "Strategic Dilemma," 211-13; Ludwell H. Johnson, Red River Campaign: Politics and Cotton in the Civil War (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1958), 45.

divisions. Although Union soldiers at first suffered from the harsh winter of 1863-1864, they later established comfortable winter quarters. The Twentieth Iowa built small houses on Mustang Island from lumber that had been torn from deserted homes on the mainland. One soldier stated that these shelters on Mustang Island had “all the comforts of home.” Four companies of the Thirty-third Illinois at Indianola occupied “splendid winter quarters” in a vacated two-story office building. Men of the Twenty-first Iowa set up shop in the Indianola courthouse. The Nineteenth Iowa at Brownsville took up residence in an abandoned warehouse. It appeared on the surface that the Federals were not planning to leave Texas any time soon.<sup>54</sup>

Despite its confinement to the Texas coast, the Rio Grande Expedition caused grave concern for those charged with the defense of the state. The loss of Brownsville, which absorbed the initial brunt of the assault, sent a shock wave throughout Texas as Federal regiments crept up the coast. Confederate authorities adopted countermeasures not only to repel the Union invaders, but also to protect the precious cotton trade with Mexico.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup>Chester Barney, Recollections of Field Service with the Twentieth Iowa Infantry Volunteers; or, What I Saw in the Army (Davenport, Ind.: Gazette Job Rooms, 1865), 258; Marshall, Army Life, 340; George Crooke, The Twenty-first Regiment of Iowa Volunteers (Milwaukee: King, Fowle, & Company, 1891), 125; J. Irvine Dungan, History of the Nineteenth Regiment Iowa Volunteer Infantry (Davenport, Iowa: Luse & Griggs, 1865), 118; J.D. Barnes, What I Saw You Do: A Brief History of the Battles, Marches, and Sieges of the Twentieth Iowa Volunteer Infantry, During Their Three Years of Active Service in the War of the Rebellion (Port Byron, Ill.: Owen & Hall, 1896), 33.

<sup>55</sup>Winsor, Texas in the Confederacy, 7.

## CHAPTER 3

### FALL BACK AND SAVE THE COTTON

On 13 July 1863 the commander of the Confederate Trans-Mississippi Department, Lieutenant General Edmund Kirby Smith, issued an invitation to the civilian leaders of the four states within his department.<sup>1</sup> Prompted by the fall of Vicksburg and Port Hudson, Smith asked these leaders to attend a conference in Marshall, Texas, sometime in the middle of August. The loss of the Mississippi had severed ties with Richmond; consequently, Smith realized the Trans-Mississippi “must be self-sustaining and self-reliant in every respect.” Smith also wanted to allay the public's despondency by providing convincing proof of the loyalty and unanimous determination of the Trans-Mississippi's leading men to fight on to ultimate victory. He also desired to relieve popular fears of army despotism by arranging an exhibition of civil government's supremacy over the military. Ironically, the calling together of civilian leaders by a Confederate general seemed to be more of an assertion of military power than civilian.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ezra J. Warner, Generals in Gray: Lives of the Confederate Commanders (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1959), 279-80; Joseph H. Parks, General Edmund Kirby Smith (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1954), 311.

<sup>2</sup>Robert L. Kerby, Kirby Smith's Confederacy: The Trans-Mississippi South, 1863-1865 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), 137; Parks, Kirby Smith, 311;

On 15 August 1863 civilian representatives from Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas, and Missouri met at Marshall to discuss the future of the Trans-Mississippi Department. Texas sent Governor Francis R. Lubbock, Governor-elect Pendleton Murrah, Major Guy M. Bryan, and Confederate Senator W. S. Oldham. The conference examined such topics as Smith's authority, foreign affairs, and the resources of the department. The conferees discussed the problem of securing and disposing of cotton without causing opposition on the part of the people. The delegates stated that "cotton is the only safe and reliable means for carrying on efficient military operations for the defense of the country west of the Mississippi." As a result, Smith was advised to take charge of all cotton in his department except that required to meet the necessities of the people.<sup>3</sup>

Although the Marshall conference had no legal standing, it reaffirmed what Smith already knew: the department had to export cotton in order to obtain war supplies. Prior to the meeting, Smith had established the Cotton Bureau and sixteen other executive and military agencies. The representatives at Marshall gave Smith a vote of confidence to assume extraordinary powers during this crisis. The officials who attended also

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Francis R. Lubbock, Six Decades in Texas: Memoirs of Francis R. Lubbock (Austin: Ben C. Jones and Company, 1900), 493-501; Ralph A. Wooster, Texas and Texans in the Civil War (Austin: Eakin Press, 1995), 101.

<sup>3</sup>Sherrill L. Dickeson, "The Texas Cotton Trade During the Civil War" (M. A. thesis, North Texas State University, 1967), 48-49; Williamson S. Oldham, "Memoirs," 369-70, Center for American History, University of Texas, Austin.



expressed the determination of the trans-Mississippi Confederacy to fight on to the bitter end.<sup>4</sup>

In August 1863 Smith established the Cotton Bureau, which centralized control over the cotton trade in the Trans-Mississippi Department. Smith appointed Lieutenant Colonel W. A. Broadwell to head the bureau, with its main headquarters at Shreveport, Louisiana. Since Texas provided the only viable means of exporting large amounts of cotton through the Brownsville/Matamoros region, the Confederate Trans-Mississippi Department established a Texas Cotton Office in Houston. This office was designated as the purchasing agent of all supplies through the medium of cotton. It had direct authority over all Confederate agents engaged in the purchase of cotton in the state of Texas.<sup>5</sup>

Cotton was vital to the Confederate war effort west of the Mississippi River. A list of purchases made by the Texas Cotton Bureau in December 1864 impressively illustrates the purchasing power of cotton. Over one million dollars worth of ordnance

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<sup>4</sup>Kerby, Kirby Smith's Confederacy, 142-43; newspaper clipping, "To the People of Louisiana, Texas, Arkansas, Missouri and the Allied Indian Nations," dated 16 August 1863, Edmund K. Smith Papers, Ramsdell Collection, Center for American History, University of Texas, Austin (Microfilm # 786.209, Roll 209 A); Florence E. Holladay, "The Powers of the Commander of the Confederate Trans-Mississippi Department, 1863-1865," Southwestern Historical Quarterly 21 (October 1918): 279-98.

<sup>5</sup>Dickeson, "Texas Cotton Trade," 49-52; U. S. War Department, War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, 128 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), series 1, vol. 26, pt. 2, pp. 136, 437-38 (hereafter cited as ORA); Charles W. Ramsdell, "The Texas State Military Board, 1862-1865," Southwestern Historical Quarterly 26 (April 1924): 270; General Edmund K. Smith to Guy M. Bryan, 1 November 1863, Guy M. Bryan Papers, Center for American History.

stores were purchased, including 23,000 rifles, 10,000 percussion caps, 200,000 pounds of gunpowder, 200,000 pounds of nitre, and a varied assortment of cannons, swords, and pistols.<sup>6</sup>

When the first United States vessels appeared near the mouth of the Rio Grande on 1 November 1863, panic enveloped Texas. The first dispatches sent from Brigadier General Hamilton Bee, commander at Fort Brown, clearly illustrated what he considered to be a top military priority. On 2 November he stated that "I have sent out a detachment to turn back all cotton wagons en route for this place." On 3 November, Bee destroyed 600 bales of cotton that would have fallen into the hands of the enemy. That same day his scouts informed him that Union troops were advancing on Brownsville. Later that day Bee and eighty men of the Thirty-third Texas Cavalry left Brownsville, heading for the King Ranch about one hundred miles to the north. On 5 November, Bee sent a dispatch to Major General John B. Magruder, commander of the Department of Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona, informing Magruder that he had destroyed, as ordered, all the cotton at Brownsville and had removed one million dollars worth of supplies. Clearly, Magruder wanted nothing of value, especially cotton, to fall into the hands of the enemy. By stopping at a major cotton depot like the King Ranch, Bee hoped to divert the cotton

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<sup>6</sup>Bill Winsor, Texas in the Confederacy: Military Installations, Economy and People (Hillsboro, Tex.: Hill Junior College Press, 1978), 59.

wagons bound for Brownsville to a point further up the Rio Grande to prevent their capture by the enemy.<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, the idea of diverting the cotton wagons to upriver crossings dawned slowly on Bee during this chaotic time. While at the King Ranch, Bee ordered the burning of twenty-five wagons of cotton recently arrived from Arkansas. John Warren Hunter, a sixteen-year-old teamster, arrived in time to view what he recorded as a “pathetic incident,” but also one of the “rarest spectacles” he had ever witnessed: “the air was yet laden with the odor of burning cotton and the pall of smoke that hung over the landscape. The dismantled wagons, and the half-consumed, yet burning cotton bales, the forlorn and woeful look of the teamsters— all these gave mute evidence of the fearful ravages under the thin guise of expediency. The old men were sitting around as if in a stupor, while the boys wandered aimlessly about, silent, morose, as if trying to comprehend the enormity of the calamity that had engulfed them in general ruin.”<sup>8</sup>

The fall of Brownsville did not come as a complete surprise to Magruder. On 2 November 1863 he informed Governor Murrah that an expedition bound for the Texas coast had already set sail. Magruder believed this expedition to be a diversion; the real

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<sup>7</sup>ORA, series 1, vol. 26, pt. 1, pp. 432-33; James W. Daddysman, The Matamoros Trade: Confederate Commerce, Diplomacy, and Intrigue (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1984), 91-92.

<sup>8</sup>John Warren Hunter, “The Fall of Brownsville on the Rio Grande, November 1863” (Typescript, Arnulfo L. Oliveira Memorial Library, University of Texas at Brownsville, Brownsville, Texas), 19-21.

attack, he believed, would come by way of the Red River Valley. Prudence, however, demanded that the state prepare itself for any possible attack. Magruder went on to state that the scarcity of arms in Texas was one of the greatest impediments to organizing an effective army. Accordingly, he asked Murrah to promote the production of war material within the state. The department commander then requested the cooperation of state troops and an additional 2,000 men to fill a prior requisition made upon former governor Lubbock. Magruder realized that in order to repel an invasion of Texas, the energies of the state and Confederate authorities must be combined. This letter to Murrah also showed the great fear that the Rio Grande Expedition generated throughout the state.<sup>9</sup>

Kirby Smith learned of the fall of Brownsville on 13 November. Although unable to send reinforcements to Magruder, he directed him to order Bee to remain between the Federals and the river crossings at Laredo and Eagle Pass. Bee was also to protect the southern approaches to San Antonio with whatever cavalry he could spare. Like Magruder, Smith believed that the Rio Grande Expedition was a ruse; the real attack would come by way of Louisiana. As a result, Smith sent no reinforcements to Texas. Magruder, realizing that additional troops were not forthcoming, took evasive measures against the Union attack. He wanted nothing of value to fall into the hands of the enemy. He ordered army patrols to drive all livestock north of the Nueces River. These same troops would also move any slaves from areas that might fall under Federal control. Finally, transportation facilities were to be destroyed. The tracks of the San Antonio and

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<sup>9</sup>ORA, series 1, vol. 26, pt. 2, pp. 384-86. (All references to ORA in this chapter will be to series 1, vol. 26, pt. 2, unless otherwise indicated.)

Mexican Gulf Railroad, connecting Victoria and Port Lavaca, were demolished. Port facilities at Aransas Bay, Corpus Christi Bay, and Matagorda Bay had to be destroyed as well. Much of this destruction was done against the protests of prominent citizens living along the coast.<sup>10</sup>

In a letter to President Jefferson Davis on 13 November, Smith defended the actions of Magruder. Smith explained that with the limited number of troops at Magruder's disposal, it would have been impossible to prevent the Federal occupation of Brownsville. Smith also pointed out that even if Magruder had additional forces at his disposal, the remoteness of Brownsville and the difficult terrain between Houston and Brownsville would have made supplying those soldiers a very difficult task indeed.<sup>11</sup>

Magruder also worked to strengthen the morale of Confederate Texans. He realized that the Union invasion of Texas could sap the fighting spirit of the civilian population. Therefore, he ordered Confederate regiments below the Nueces River to make themselves very visible to inspire the confidence of the people. These same forces were also ordered to prevent potential recruits from escaping into Mexico or, worse yet, joining the Union army. In addition, Magruder circulated the rumor that Confederate troops from East Texas were on their way to San Antonio.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>ORA, p. 412; Kerby, Kirby Smith's Confederacy, 192-93; Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph, 20 January 1864.

<sup>11</sup>ORA, p. 411.

<sup>12</sup>Kerby, Kirby Smith's Confederacy, 193.

Raising additional manpower posed the biggest challenge to Magruder in repelling the Yankee invaders. At the time of the Rio Grande Expedition, Magruder had only about 9,000 men to defend the state. To raise additional troops, Magruder adopted every possible expedient. Home guards and invalid reserve companies as far away as Houston were put under arms to relieve regular garrison troops for field service. Magruder then asked Governor Murrah to call up every able-bodied white male between the ages of sixteen and seventy. Murrah failed to act upon this request because state law prevented him from raising additional forces. Magruder instructed post commanders in the invasion areas to enlist anyone who seemed fit enough to hold a rifle. Even men detailed as cotton teamsters were ordered to report to their regiments immediately or be listed as deserters. Even with all these measures in place, Magruder still failed to produce the necessary manpower to stop the Union advance.<sup>13</sup>

The loss of Brownsville meant that cotton would have to be crossed further upriver at Eagle Pass and Laredo. Those Confederate officers charged with the defense of South Texas knew this situation all too well. General Bee, the most prominent of these officers, sent a lengthy telegram to headquarters in Houston on 8 November 1863. The message, sent from Bee's temporary headquarters at the King Ranch, stated that no cotton should be crossed below Eagle Pass and a determined effort should be made to hold that

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 193-94; William C. Nunn, ed., Ten Texans in Gray (Hillsboro, Tex.: Hill Junior College Press, 1968), 129; H. P. N. Gammel, comp., Laws of Texas, 1822-1897, 31 vols. (Austin: The Gammel Book Company, 1898), 5:829-30; Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph, 9 December 1863, 11, 13 January and 29 February 1864; Frank L. Owsley, State Rights in the Confederacy, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1925; repr., Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1961), 61.

position. He then issued orders that all cotton wagons bound for Brownsville be rerouted to Eagle Pass. He requested that Magruder publish this order in the Houston newspapers. Bee then asked for 1,000 cavalry to protect the cotton wagons and to prevent Laredo and Eagle Pass from falling into Union hands.<sup>14</sup>

The following day, Bee sent a dispatch to Major Santos Benavides, commanding about 120 men of the Thirty-third Texas Cavalry. Benavides, a prominent citizen of Laredo, played a crucial role in defending the upriver crossings at Laredo and Eagle Pass. Born in Laredo on 1 November 1821, he had served both as mayor and chief justice of Webb County. At the time of the fall of Brownsville, Benavides achieved the rank of major in the Thirty-third Texas Cavalry. His two brothers, Refugio and Cristobal, also served in the same regiment. The telegram of 9 November 1863 informed Benavides that cotton wagons were now being sent to Laredo and Eagle Pass. Bee clearly wanted an officer familiar to the region in place now that Laredo would become a major cotton crossing. Bee pointed out to Benavides that "there must be an active officer at Laredo to expedite the passage of the cotton across the river, and make the necessary arrangements with the Mexican authorities for its safety after it crosses."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>ORA, p. 396.

<sup>15</sup>ORA, pp. 399-400; Jerry Don Thompson, Vaqueros in Blue and Gray (Austin: Presidial Press, 1976), 12; Marcus J. Wright, comp., Texas in the Civil War, 1861-1865, ed. Harold B. Simpson (Hillsboro, Tex.: Hill Junior College Press, 1965), 121; Gilberto M. Hinojosa, A Borderlands Town in Transition: Laredo, 1755-1870 (College Station, Tex.: Texas A&M University Press, 1983), 85.

That same day Bee sent a message to J. A. Quintero, a Confederate representative living in Monterrey, Mexico, since the fall of 1861. Quintero had established friendly relations with Santiago Vidaurri, who controlled the Mexican border states of Nuevo Leon and Coahuila. Quintero's residence in Monterrey, the capital of Nuevo Leon, placed him in a crucial position to protect the Confederate cotton trade. Bee asked Quintero to use all his influence with Governor Vidaurri to allow the safe passage of cotton across the Rio Grande from Laredo and Eagle Pass. Bee reminded Quintero that the economic benefits to Nuevo Leon and Coahuila would be immense and that Vidaurri should do everything in his power to protect this vital trade.<sup>16</sup>

On 10 November, General Magruder acknowledged Bee's telegram announcing the fall of Brownsville. Magruder reported that two companies of state troops, an artillery battery, and the Thirty-third Texas Cavalry under Colonel James Duff were being sent to Bee to protect his wagon train. Magruder then indicated that if the enemy landed at Corpus Christi in force, Bee must burn all cotton and valuable supplies that could not be carried off. Magruder then recommended that Bee fall back to Goliad, about sixty miles north of Corpus Christi, to await further orders. Magruder clearly did not want anything of value to fall into the hands of the enemy.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>ORA, p. 400; J. Fred Rippy, "Mexican Projects of the Confederates," Southwestern Historical Quarterly 22 (April 1919): 298-99.

<sup>17</sup>ORA, p. 404.



The next day Bee informed headquarters in Houston that 12,000 Federals occupied Brownsville and threatened as far west as Rio Grande City. Anarchy reigned in both Brownsville and Matamoros. Bee knew that this chaotic situation would hold the Federals in place for some time, allowing him time to regroup. He then summarized a message from Major Benavides of the Thirty-third Texas Cavalry. Benavides, and the 120 men he commanded, defended Fort Ringgold near Rio Grande City. When Benavides offered his men the option of a discharge if they chose not to fight, the men replied, "*Viva la confederacion, viva Major Benavides*" When Bee learned of Benavides' loyalty, he ordered all cotton wagons to Laredo, realizing that Benavides had considerable influence in that Texas border town.<sup>18</sup>

Benavides proved to be a valuable military asset. On 12 November he wrote Bee that a considerable amount of cotton (2,600 bales) had accumulated at Rio Grande City. Benavides made arrangements with one Don Rafael Lopez in Camargo (opposite Rio Grande City) to receive the cotton and pay duties on it. The cotton would then be transported to Matamoros. Benavides also sent some of the cotton to Laredo to await later shipment. Like Bee, Benavides planned to move any valuable military stores to either Laredo or San Antonio. He also made arrangements with Juan Cortina, governor of the Mexican state of Tamaulipas, to allow cotton to be transported safely to Matamoros. Benavides eventually withdrew from Rio Grande City in late November. As Union troops moved up the coast, Bee was held in check and could not reinforce the

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 406-407; Milo Kearney and Anthony Knopp, Boom and Bust: The Historical Cycles of Matamoros and Brownsville (Austin: Eakin Press, 1991), 126-27.

outnumbered Benavides. Colonel Edmund J. Davis' Federal cavalry expedition against Rio Grande City failed to capture Benavides, however.<sup>19</sup>

Another prominent South Texan, Richard King, was gravely concerned about the Federal presence in Brownsville. Since March 1862 his ranch, about 120 miles north of Brownsville, had been designated by the Military Board of Texas as an official receiving, storage, and shipping point for Confederate cotton. Thousands of bales, both private and government, arrived at his ranch bound for the Mexican border. When Bee arrived at his ranch on 8 November, King feared that South Texas would be given up without a fight. King sent an urgent letter to Houston on 12 November, pleading for help: "We hope to God this section of the Country not be abandoned without a struggle or at least without giving the people notice that it is to be entirely abandoned, so that we can at least send our families to a place of safety. We think from 2 to 3,000 Cavalry can protect this section against anything the enemy can bring--if cannot get this number, let us have 500 good determined Texans, from whom a good account will be given, and this Country saved from utter destruction--do not abandon us for God Sake!"<sup>20</sup>

As the northern invasion continued to move up the Texas coast, Magruder ordered Bee to remove cotton from any threatened area. By mid-November, Corpus Christi

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<sup>19</sup>ORA, p. 409; Joseph B. Wilkinson, Laredo and the Rio Grande Frontier (Austin: Jenkins Publishing Co., 1975), 283; ORA, series 1, vol. 26, pt. 1, pp.423-24, 430; Corpus Christi Ranchero, 21 January 1864; Hinojosa, A Borderlands Town, 85.

<sup>20</sup>Bruce S. Cheeseman, "'Let us have 500 good determined Texans': Richard King's Account of the Union Invasion of South Texas, November 12, 1863, to January 2, 1864," Southwestern Historical Quarterly 101 (July 1997): 81-83.

became the most vulnerable coastal city. Magruder also wanted Bee to reinforce San Antonio and Eagle Pass to protect the cotton trade. Bee, already short of men, decided to strengthen only Eagle Pass. He ordered his aide at Western Sub-District headquarters in San Antonio, Major A. G. Dickinson, to send a company of soldiers to Eagle Pass. Bee realized that he went against Magruder's wishes in reducing the troop strength at San Antonio, but he had no other choice. Bee realized that troops on the border would not only protect the border crossings, but bolster the confidence of the people as well.<sup>21</sup>

Kirby Smith urged Magruder to keep the Federals bottled up at Brownsville, not allowing them to make any raids in the direction of San Antonio. The cotton routes from San Antonio to Laredo and Eagle Pass had to be protected. Magruder's men in the field (Bee and Benavides) had already implemented measures to protect the cotton trade. What these officers wanted to hear from headquarters were orders to attack the Yankees. Bee realized that constant retreat hurt the morale of his men. He sent Magruder an outline of the measures he proposed to take in stopping the invasion of South Texas. With his temporary headquarters at Corpus Christi, Bee proposed three lines of defense. The first line stretched from Corpus Christi to Laredo. If Corpus Christi fell, the second line of defense would be from Saluria on the coast to Eagle Pass. The last line of defense would be the Colorado River, extending from Austin to the township of Matagorda, located at the mouth of the Colorado. Bee of course needed additional soldiers to make any kind of stand succeed. He requested the First Texas Cavalry under Colonel August Buchel and

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<sup>21</sup>ORA, p. 413; Winsor, Texas in the Confederacy, 7.

the Thirty-second Texas Cavalry under Colonel P. C. Woods. Bee confidentially stated that with more men he could "annihilate Banks on the edge of this desert."<sup>22</sup>

Bold talk, however, could not allay the fears of the civilian population in Texas. Civilian leaders as far north as San Antonio feared that the Rio Grande Expedition would quickly overrun their city. In a letter to Major Dickinson on 16 November, leading citizens of San Antonio expressed not only their loyalty to the Confederate cause, but concern over the safety of their families. The letter stated that "the landing of the Yankees at Brownsville and the depredations along the Rio Grande admonish us that every man should now enter the service. However, a request is made in order that we may, as far as possible, remove our families and dependencies to a place of greater security, or within the lines of the army." Dickinson, charged with the defense of San Antonio, was asked to forward the letter to Magruder to make him aware of the grave concern these civic leaders had for the safety of their city and families.<sup>23</sup>

One of those prominent figures of San Antonio was Mary Maverick, who had four sons in the Confederate Army. One of those sons was Captain Lewis Maverick of the Thirty-second Texas Cavalry Regiment. In one letter to Lewis, Mary pointed out that "The Yankees took Brownsville on the 4<sup>th</sup>. The Federal force is believed to be 12,000. Our knowing men here suppose they are intended to break up our trade with Mexico, or maybe to make a demonstration against French rule in Mexico. I suppose Magruder will

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<sup>22</sup>ORA, pp. 414, 420.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 421.

hurry troops out West or is it true that he declared San Antonio outside his line of defense? Some here censure Duff and Bee for not fighting, but how could they with only 150 men. Possibly these Feds will make raids up this way, if we are not strengthened soon.” In another letter, Mary informed her son Lewis that “if the Yankees advance from the coast, Magruder will meet them and our Texas boys will give them a hostile reception.”<sup>24</sup>

Civilians in the state capital of Austin also expressed similar concern over the safety of their city. They believed that the natural object of the Federal invasion was the state capital. With feelings running high, Austin’s leaders called a meeting of Travis County residents. The assembly condemned the Federals for forcing “a war of the races” upon them because the invading Union army included black troops. These Austinites also exhorted every man and boy capable of holding a rifle to join in repelling the enemy. A few days after the meeting, seventy-three Austin and Travis County residents, who had been exempted from military service, enlisted in a cavalry company to defend the capital. As the Union invaders continued to move up the coast throughout November, panic gripped the city of Austin. “Their purpose is evidently to overrun Texas, and the occupation of the Capital will be their first object,” asserted an Austin newspaper. General Magruder had similar concerns. He ordered that Austin be fortified, appealing to

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<sup>24</sup>Mary Maverick to her son Captain Lewis Maverick, 16 November and 1 December 1863, Maverick Family Papers, Center for American History.

the people of Travis and nearby counties to send half their adult male slaves to the capital to work on fortifications.<sup>25</sup>

In mid-December, Major Getulius Kellersberger, a Confederate engineer, rode into Austin with five hundred slaves to begin work on earthen fortifications. “People stared at us very curiously and our arrival caused a great deal of anxiety,” he recounted later. Slaves continued to arrive in town during the next several days, and construction of defense works on the Austin perimeter continued into early 1864. The proximity of Union forces compelled Travis County’s provost marshal to impose new restrictions under martial law. All civilian and soldiers arriving in or leaving Austin had to carry passports issued by the provost marshal, even if traveling only a short distance. When a prominent Unionist named George Paschal refused to carry a passport, he was arrested and taken to military headquarters in Houston.<sup>26</sup>

An interesting account of Paschal’s arrest and the general anxiety created by the presence of Federal troops in Texas came from Laura P. DuVal, the wife of federal judge and prominent Unionist Thomas H. DuVal. In a letter to her husband, she told him that “Nobody can leave the country on any business of whatever character without being suspected and I hope you will stay in Mexico until things are a little more settled. I want

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<sup>25</sup>Austin State Gazette, 16, 20, 25 November, 2 December 1863; Frank Brown, “Annals of Travis County and of the City of Austin (from the Earliest Times to the Close of 1875),” 24 vols., 23:40-41, Austin History Center, Austin Public Library, Austin, Texas.

<sup>26</sup>Getulius Kellersberger, Memoirs of an Engineer in the Confederate Army in Texas, trans. Helen S. Sundstrom (Austin: 1957), 32; Brown, “Annals of Travis County,” 23:21; Austin State Gazette, 14, 18, 21, 23 December 1863.

to see you terribly as you may well imagine but I am glad you are not at home now and hope you will not come until I advise you to do so. Do not let your anxiety on our account hurry you back. We are doing as well as can be expected and I am sure Mexico is a much pleasanter place to be in than Texas.” Later in the letter, Mrs. DuVal’s concern for her husband became more emphatic: “For Gods sake don’t come back until the fighting is over in Texas. Your health is not robust enough to stand the fatigue of war and if you could stand, I could not the yankee bullets. Don’t come home I charge you until the matter is settled!”<sup>27</sup>

Mrs. DuVal also gave a detailed account of Paschal’s arrest.. Apparently, George Paschal allowed himself to be arrested in order to test the legality of obtaining a pass in order to leave the city of Austin. When Paschal was escorted to his home under armed guard in a wagon to obtain some clothes, Mrs. DuVal described the moment. “A scene that we little expected to see in our once happy country, his little Betty screaming and begging them not to hang her papa, and cousin Marcia alternately shrieking and begging them to tell her where they were going to carry him, which they refused doing.” Paschal was sent to Houston but was released by General Magruder a week later. This incident clearly showed the increased tension created by the enemy forces in Texas, especially in regard to suspicions of treason and disloyalty.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Mrs. Laura P. DuVal to Thomas H. DuVal, 31 January 1864, Diaries of Thomas H. Duval, 1857-1879, Center for American History. At the time of her letter, Thomas DuVal was in Brownsville, having just returned from a trip to Washington, where in a meeting with President Lincoln, he continued to urge aggressive military action Texas.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

Prominent newspapers in Texas contributed to the uneasiness created by the presence of Federal soldiers on the Texas coast. In Austin, the State Gazette gave a detailed account of the fall of Brownsville and General Bee's retreat. In one edition, the paper reported that "Banks is in command of the Federal force, which is near 12,000 strong. In landing, he lost all his artillery, horses as well as many stores, and is by this means too much shattered to attempt to move soon. His expedition is doubtless the one which was planned in Washington, and has probably more reference to Mexican affairs, than those on this side of the river. However matters turn out, it is clear that our trade with Mexico, via Brownsville, is at an end." To punctuate the fear even more, Kirby Smith made an urgent appeal to the people within the Trans-Mississippi Department: "Your homes are now in peril, vigorous efforts on your part can alone save portions of your State from invasion. You should contest the advance of the enemy at every thicket, gully and stream; harass his rear and cut off his supplies. Thus you will prove important auxiliaries in my attempts to reach him in front and drive him from our soil. Determination and energy only, can prevent his destruction of your homes. By a vigorous and united effort you preserve your property, you secure independence for yourselves and children, all that renders life desirable. Time is now our best friend. Endure a while longer, victory and peace must crown our efforts."<sup>29</sup>

Later accounts of the Federal drive up the coast were provided by the Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph. One article informed readers that "The Yankees are advancing to

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<sup>29</sup>"To the People of Arkansas, Louisiana and Texas," Austin State Gazette, 20 November 1863.



this direction, and have effected a foothold at Aransas Pass. On the night of the 16<sup>th</sup> they landed a force supposed to be 3,000 strong in the lower end of Mustang Island, and marched on the fort at the Pass. These troops were conveyed in five sailing vessels (transports). On the morning of the 17<sup>th</sup> they made the attack, with this force and five steamers from the sea cooperating. The engagement lasted two hours and twenty-five minutes, when our troops surrendered, being overwhelmed with numbers. The plan of the enemy appears to be to take such points as he can up the coast, with the view of getting a base near his proposed field of operations. There can be no doubt that he meditates the conquest of the State.”<sup>30</sup>

In a later edition of the Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph, the fall of Fort Esperanza on Matagorda Island also received considerable news coverage. Although the attack on the fort came as no surprise, the writer of the article was clearly displeased at the meager resistance shown by the Esperanza garrison: “We have anticipated an attack on Fort Esperanza, at Saluria, with satisfaction, from the fact that we were led to believe that the Fort was prepared to make a satisfactory resistance to the progress of the enemy. Whether it has made all the resistance it could, we are not prepared to say, but that it has yielded sooner than we anticipated we candidly confess.” In portraying the civilian response to the attack, the article claimed that “the people were preparing to leave Lavaca

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<sup>30</sup>Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph, 23 November 1863.

for the interior. The whole country has become thoroughly aroused, and a determined spirit of resistance everywhere prevails.”<sup>31</sup>

A few days later, the Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph published more critical articles about the fall of Fort Esperanza. One article addressed the amount of provisions in the fort, pointing out that “according to reports of the Commissary General, enough to have lasted the garrison thirty days. Other reports make them equal to a 15 day siege. Be that as it may, there were provisions enough there to have kept the garrison until a force from the mainland could have raised the siege. It was not for the want of provisions that the fort was evacuated.” The same edition also considered the number of soldiers in the fort as well as their leadership. The Telegraph asserted that it was not “a lack of men to have defended it against the assault. It is believed that the fort could have withstood assaults for a month or even longer, as it was well constructed for that purpose.” Concerning the command of the fort itself, the newspaper reported “charges of incompetency against the commanding officer, of which it is not our duty to take cognissance [sic], further than to hope, for his own credit, as well as that of the service, he will at once demand an official investigation into this affair.” The Telegraph believed an investigation into the loss of Fort Esperanza was necessary because of the demoralizing impact it had on civilian morale. The newspaper asserted that “the loss of the fort, which our people had been led to believe was capable of withstanding a siege,

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<sup>31</sup>Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph, 4 December 1863. In their attempt to paint a stoic picture of the fall of Fort Esperanza, the Tri-Weekly Telegraph failed to see a glaring contradiction in their article. If a determined spirit of resistance prevailed everywhere as they claimed, why were people fleeing to the interior?

and would arrest the progress of the invasion, has made the public mind painfully sensitive to the causes of the evacuation. Whatever they are should be set forth officially at the earliest possible moment, since, in the present uncertainty, the popular imagination will inevitably assign the worst reasons, and these, if not denied, can but do injury to the cause dearest to all, both soldier and citizen.”<sup>32</sup>

The Telegraph changed direction a few days later and actually applauded the efforts of Confederate officers in the field. Colonel W. R. Bradfute, ridiculed commander at Fort Esperanza, received praise for his actions during the battle. The paper mentioned that “seeing that he was at any moment to be surrounded and cut off from retreat, [he] evacuated the fort. We consider his foresight in this matter, and his successful evacuation as a great military movement, and consider the gallant Colonel entitled to much credit.” General Bee, the Brownsville commander, also received praise from the Telegraph. “General Bee is spoken of as an able officer, and his late skillful movements have established his fame as a military leader--we honor this gallant officer. He does not forget how to be a gentlemen, although he is a general. He is loved by his troops and the people of Western Texas have unbounded confidence in him. Thousands are flocking to the standard of General Bee.” These statements clearly indicated that the Telegraph wanted to express to their readers their continued confidence in the leadership of the Confederate forces in Texas.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph, 7 December 1863.

<sup>33</sup>Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph, 9 December 1863.

Although the Telegraph tried to instill confidence in the people of Texas, the harsh reality of war sometimes crept into their articles. One journalist pointed out that “We and the entire country in great excitement. The majority of planters have removed their negroes towards the interior, and many families have left them all behind, in fleeing from the perils of invasion. We see families flying in every direction from the coast. The people feel they have nothing to hope for that the scenes of outrage perpetrated in Louisiana will not be re-enacted in Texas.”<sup>34</sup>

As the Rio Grande Expedition continued to advance up the coast, the journalists for the Telegraph realized that Houston might be under enemy attack by the end of the year. As a result, their appeals to all Texans, but especially Houstonians, became more aggressive. One article made this patriotic statement: “Our people now see the Yankee invasion upon their shores. It is advancing upon the heart of the country. Are they ready to meet it? Let the free people flock to the point of danger. The people of Houston are arousing and organizing for the fray. They understand that their city is the tempting bait that is luring the enemy on. In attacking successively Brownsville, Aransas, Esperanza, and Velasco, he is but attacking the outposts of Houston. These were the picket stations. The pickets have fallen back from one after another. The battlefield will take place near the citadel. Houston today is the heart of the Trans-Mississippi Department. It must be defended at all hazards. Every man in the army or out of it must throw himself into the

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<sup>34</sup>Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph, 11 December 1863.

breach. The more volunteers added to our force, the further from the citadel will the decisive battle be fought.”<sup>35</sup>

These types of appeals continued to appear in the Telegraph. Another example was a direct appeal to the people of Houston made by Major W. Hyllested, commanding Houston while Magruder was in the field:

The enemy are advancing upon the soil of Texas--his footsteps are desecrating your land. He is within a few hours travel of your firesides and homes of your families.

The major general commanding is in the field--the men of Texas are rallying to his standard, and he is determined to not only chastise the enemy, but to drive him from the State by compelling him to return to his ships, or submit to ignominious capture.

To do this, it is necessary that every well armed and drilled man should be in the field. I have a company of troops doing Provost Marshall guard duty in this city. I wish to send them to the Major General at the scene of action. I can only do so by having a company of Citizens, who will organize for local defense and tender their services during the present emergency to act in this County. Such Company can relieve the present guard, that they may go and meet the enemy.

Will not the exempts in this city organise [sic] and tender their service at once! Every man who does so will enable me to send a good soldier to the front. The advance of the enemy for a few days would put him in your city. Will you not assist in his discomfiture before he reaches your homes? I feel confident that you only wish to know that you can thus serve the cause, to ensure your prompt action.

While you are reading this, your neighbors between this and the coast are abandoning their homes, sending their wives, children and servants to the interior, and going themselves to join the army in front of the foe. Will you stand idly by and wait until it is too late, or will you act at once!

All good citizens are requested to assist in this matter. The Commandant of the Post will furnish ammunition, arms, and equipment as soon as the company has organised by the election of officers.

W. HYLLESTED  
Major, Commanding Post<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph, 9 December 1863.

The increased Confederate military activity, especially in the Austin/San Antonio area, was confirmed by refugees arriving in Brownsville. Thomas DuVal confirmed this when he pointed out in his diary that “Men occasionally drop in here from the interior. One a German has arrived from Houston via San Antonio leaving the latter place 8 or 9 days ago. Reports that many of the soldiers were frozen near Houston in the late cold spell. They are fortifying San Antonio and Austin, and that from 16 to 50 are being forced into the ranks. No doubt there is a degree of military despotism existing beyond all that has gone before.”<sup>37</sup>

Although friction certainly existed between the state government and General Magruder, overall, state officials supported the war effort and defense of their state. When outgoing governor Francis R. Lubbock addressed the Tenth Legislature on 4 November, he told legislators that there was “no reason to despond or falter” but admitted that the war had “assumed gigantic proportions, demanding sacrifices on the part of all.” With Union forces in Louisiana, Lubbock realized that another invasion of Texas was indeed possible. He closed his address by asking the legislature to do its part to defend the state by making Texas “the grave, not the inheritance, of the invader.”<sup>38</sup>

Even Governor Murrah, who initially defied Magruder, began to make concessions as the enemy continued to advance up the Texas coast. On 16 December, Murrah signed a bill that extended the enlistment of state troops for another six months.

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<sup>37</sup>Entry of 23 January 1864, Diaries of Thomas H. DuVal, 1857-1879, Center for American History.

<sup>38</sup>Patsy M. Spaw, The Texas Senate: Civil War to the Eve of Reform, 1861-1889, 2 vols. (College Station, Tex.: Texas A&M University Press, 1999), 2:39.

The enlistment of many of these militiamen were originally to expire on 31 December 1863. This gave Magruder additional manpower through the spring of 1864. The Texas Senate also expressed a defiant tone to the Yankee invaders. On 16 December they adopted a resolution that declared: "Now that our presumptuous enemy treads our soil in heavy number and menacing attitude, we bid him a proud and scornful defiance. We here record our full confidence in the patriotism and ability of President Davis. We would not exchange him for any citizen of the Confederacy, as the pilot to carry us through the present stormy struggle for liberty as a people, and for independence as a nation."<sup>39</sup>

While Austin and other cities prepared for the worst, San Antonio tried to improve its defenses. Dickinson, Confederate commander charged with the city's defense, understood the importance of San Antonio for the cotton bound for the Rio Grande. With only 129 men, not to mention the additional responsibility of Eagle Pass, Dickinson asked Magruder for additional troops and supplies. Fort Duncan, near Eagle Pass, had only twenty-five men to defend that border crossing. Magruder, however, had to do some considerable juggling of men and supplies during this chaotic period. Bee, Dickinson, and even Kirby Smith made demands on Magruder for men and supplies, yet Magruder had nothing to spare. Smith became so insistent that he told Magruder to take the rifles out of the hands of his men and send the rifles to Shreveport if necessary. These were indeed desperate times for Magruder. As a vital link in the cotton trade, San Antonio had to be held. By 17 November, Magruder, like Bee, determined that the last

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<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 42-49.

line of defense would be the Colorado River. If Bee continued to retreat, troops would be massed at Columbus, about sixty miles west of Houston. Finally, Magruder asked Smith to come to Texas, not only to help him direct the defense of the state, but also to bolster the confidence of the people.<sup>40</sup>

As the Federals continued their advance up the Texas coast, Magruder continued to receive reports of the declining morale of citizens and soldiers in the threatened areas. Bee, attempting to rally his meager forces near Corpus Christi, confirmed this low morale. He reported that state troops near Corpus Christi could not be relied upon to defend the state. These men had families in Corpus Christi and would not leave them at the mercy of the Yankee invaders. The fall of Mustang Island caused this concern because the city was vulnerable to Union raiding from the island. Chaos reigned in Corpus Christi. Local government broke down, and county records were placed in hiding. News of the fall of Fort Esperanza further intensified the fear of invasion in Corpus Christi, resulting in a mass exodus from the town. The local newspaper, the Corpus Christi Ranchero, ceased publication and moved to San Patricio. The Ranchero reported that invasion by Union forces threatened the whole Nueces Strip, and concluded pessimistically, "We are in the hands of God." Bee not only had to contend with enemy troops, but also the fear generated by those troops.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>ORA, pp. 422-25; Paul Horgan, Great River: The Rio Grande in North American History (New York: Rinehart and Company, 1954), 838.

<sup>41</sup>ORA, p. 437; Diary of Thomas J. Noakes, (Confederate rancher who lived near Corpus Christi), 17 November 1863, (original copy, Local History Room, La Retama



Closer to headquarters in Houston, Magruder received disturbing reports from the garrison commander at Galveston, Colonel A. I. Rainey. Rainey took command of Galveston on 24 November. Four days later he sent Magruder a status report of the conditions on the island. Rainey's biggest complaint concerned the scarcity of fuel for heating purposes. He stated that "I would respectfully call your attention to the great scarcity of fuel at this point. I have just received complaints from almost every command on the Island in reference to this subject. The destruction of private property, which has already commenced, will be most fearful unless the troops are supplied with a sufficiency of fuel. I would therefore respectfully ask the quartermaster at Houston to send thirty days supply of fuel." Rainey also expressed concern over the current military situation on the Texas coast: "If Galveston is to stand a siege in the event of the fall of Houston, which I am informed is the policy of the commanding general, it then becomes highly important that the Garrison be supplied in advance with several months supplies of fuel and subsistence stores."<sup>42</sup>

The last week of November saw no let up in the flurry of dispatches between Magruder, Bee, Kirby Smith, and Texas governor Murrah. On 23 November, Magruder warned Murrah of the possibility of Federal cavalry raids on San Antonio and Austin. Magruder sent slaves to both cities to help strengthen their defenses. The following day

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Library, Corpus Christi, Texas), hereafter cited as Noakes Diary; Corpus Christi Ranchero, 17 December 1863

<sup>42</sup>Colonel A. I. Rainey to Captain E. P. Turner, 28 November 1863, Correspondence and Circulars, 1863-1865, Ashbel Smith Papers, Center for American History.

Magruder informed Kirby Smith of the countermeasures he wanted Bee to adopt on the Texas coast. At this time Magruder also received news from Colonel W. R. Bradfute, commanding Fort Esperanza on Matagorda Island. Bradfute reported that the enemy was within striking distance of Saluria, the small town located near the fort. In response, Magruder sent gunboats to the fort, but if they did not arrive in time, Bradfute was to link up with Bee at Victoria. Magruder also sent the Thirty-second Texas Cavalry to Victoria to reinforce Bee. If Victoria fell, Bee would fall back to San Antonio. If that city fell, Bee would retreat toward Houston to Columbus, where the final stand would be taken. Magruder instructed Bee to assure his men and the citizenry west of the Colorado River that Magruder fully intended to defend that country.<sup>43</sup>

Fort Esperanza fell on 30 November, but Confederates succeeded in rerouting cotton into Mexico. The loss of Brownsville and its environs forced cotton traders to cross their cargoes upriver at Laredo and Eagle Pass. Laredo was about 235 miles from Brownsville and Eagle Pass another ninety miles upriver from Laredo. When Bee fell back from Brownsville, he intercepted many cotton wagons and directed them to Laredo and Eagle Pass. These westerly crossings doubled the distance cotton wagons traveled prior to the loss of Brownsville and added 50 percent to the cost of shipping cotton. Customs officers on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande demanded one bale of cotton for every bale landed. Many engaged in the cotton trade complained of the difficulty of

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<sup>43</sup>Minetta A. Goyne, Lone Star and Double Eagle: Civil War Letters of a German-Texas Family (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1982), 110-12; ORA, pp. 443-46; Carl L. Duaine, The Dead Men Wore Boots: An Account of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Texas Volunteer Cavalry, C. S. A., 1862-1865 (Austin: The San Felipe Press, 1966), 46-47.

making profits because of the added time and expense caused by the Federal control of Brownsville.<sup>44</sup>

Testimony from those involved in the trade gave vivid descriptions of the immense quantities of cotton that continued to cross into Mexico despite the loss of Brownsville. Jesse Sumpter, a customs inspector at Eagle Pass, noted in the spring of 1864 that "there was scarcely a day that hundreds of bales were not unloaded and crossed over as fast as possible." A founding citizen of Eagle Pass gave a similar description. He commented that "the whole river bottom from the bank of the river to the edge of town was covered with cotton."<sup>45</sup>

Although the cotton trade continued to be quite heavy at Eagle Pass and Laredo, the distance over which trade items traveled greatly added to the cost of those items. Kirby Smith wrote a gloomy letter to his wife describing the difficulty of obtaining certain trade goods. He warned her that she "must carefully keep [account] of our stock of goods for it now really amounts to a stock, you must not be too liberal in disposing of them--the Rio Grande is in possession of the enemy, the blockade is closed, everything will be dearer and will increase rapidly in value." Colonel P. C. Woods of the Thirty-second Texas Cavalry wrote a similar letter to his wife. Camped with his men on the

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<sup>44</sup>Brian Robertson, Wild Horse Desert: The Heritage of South Texas (Edinburg, Tex.: New Santander Press, 1985), 116-17; John S. Ford, Rip Ford's Texas, ed. Stephen B. Oates (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1963), 342-43; Alvin M. Josephy, The Civil War in the American West (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 187; Kerby, Kirby Smith's Confederacy, 195; ORA, pp. 446-50.

<sup>45</sup>Horgan, Great River, 838; Daddysman, Matamoros Trade, 93-94.

Brazos River, Woods warned her that she would have to manage everything at home for "the Yanks are determined to invade us this winter." Woods also instructed her to safeguard their supply of salt and to store enough to last for a year.<sup>46</sup>

December was Magruder's busiest month. The ever-changing situation along the coast forced him to shift Confederate units repeatedly to threatened areas. When the Federals captured Matagorda Island on 1 December, Magruder had troops march from Houston to repel the Yankee invaders. He also changed his last line of defense to the Brazos River just southwest of Houston and gathered nearly five thousand men in that region. Confederate units along the Brazos included the Second Texas Infantry commanded by Colonel Ashbel Smith, the First Texas Cavalry under Colonel Augustus Buchel, and the Third Texas Infantry led by Colonel Philip Lockett.<sup>47</sup>

On 7 December, Magruder moved his headquarters to the plantation home of John C. McNeel, located near the mouth of the Brazos River. Francis R. Lubbock, former Texas governor and now assistant adjutant to Magruder, indicated that Magruder spent most of December in the saddle, inspecting the deployment of his men from Victoria to

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<sup>46</sup>Colonel P. C. Woods to his wife Georgia, 26 November 1863, Unpublished letters of Colonel P. C. Woods and his wife Georgia Woods, *Thirty-second Texas Cavalry Regiment*, Confederate Research Center, Hillsboro, Texas; Kerby, *Kirby Smith's Confederacy*, 195.

<sup>47</sup>Stanley S. McGowen, "Horsesweat and Powdersmoke: The 1st Texas Cavalry in the Civil War" (Ph.D. diss., Texas Christian University, 1997), 196, 198; Wooster, *Texas and Texans in the Civil War*, 134; Elizabeth Silverthorne, *Ashbel Smith of Texas: Pioneer, Patriot, Statesman, 1805-1886* (College Station, Tex.: Texas A & M University Press, 1982), 161.

Velasco. The general expected the enemy to march inland from Matagorda Bay or advance up the Matagorda Peninsula toward Galveston. When Union soldiers landed on the south end of Matagorda Peninsula on 7 December, Magruder ordered Bee at Victoria to fall back toward Columbia on the Brazos River. During the retreat, Bee was to destroy the railroad leading from Indianola to Victoria. Since the evacuation of Brownsville, Bee had continued to implement Magruder's scorched-earth policy, leaving nothing for the enemy.<sup>48</sup>

As the loss of Texas loomed on the horizon, Magruder sent out desperate pleas for reinforcements. Throughout December he asked Texas governor Pendleton Murrah to use his powers to raise additional men. In one letter to the governor, Magruder greatly overestimated the Union strength (about 10,000 men) on the coast. He believed that "the enemy's force on the coast is from 15,000 to 20,000 men, of which 15,000 are at Decrow's Point and Saluria."<sup>49</sup>

Magruder also requested reinforcements from Kirby Smith. Smith, who had to contend with more numerous Federal forces in Louisiana, did not believe that the situation in Texas was as desperate as pictured by Magruder. Smith informed Magruder

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<sup>48</sup>Lubbock, Six Decades in Texas, 528-33; Paul D. Casdorph, Prince John Magruder: His Life and Campaigns (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1996), 262; ORA, 491- 93; Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph, 2, 4, 9, 11 December 1863.

<sup>49</sup>Troops of the Ninety-sixth Ohio serving on Matagorda Peninsula indicated that a Colonel Decrow, who owned most of the peninsula, lived at the south end of it. This is where DeCrow's Point gets its name. Joseph T. Woods, Services of the 96th Ohio Volunteers (Toledo: Blade Printing, 1874), 50; Casdorph, Prince John Magruder, 262; ORA, pp. 487, 515.

on 15 December that "General Banks, in person, had returned to New Orleans." This seemed to indicate that the Union invasion had stalled. Smith also mentioned that, according to his sources, "no more than 6,000 troops had left Louisiana for the coast of Texas," and that no further reinforcements would be sent to Magruder.<sup>50</sup>

During these hectic times Magruder employed every military tool at his disposal. This included the Texas Marine Department, which was assigned the task of defending 385 miles of Texas coastline. By October 1863 the Marine Department included eight small vessels. Most of these served as transports, although some were commissioned as gunboats. The latter, called "cottonclads," used bales of cotton as armor rather than conventional iron plates. Tiers of cotton lashed to the decks of the vessels absorbed the Union shot. Small openings left between the bales allowed Rebel gunners to fire their weapons.<sup>51</sup>

By the time of the Rio Grande Expedition, Commodore Leon Smith commanded the Marine Department. In December 1863 the task of defending Matagorda Bay fell upon Captain James Marmion, commander of the Marine District of Matagorda. His responsibility included the coastline from Corpus Christi to the mouth of the Brazos River, a distance of 120 miles. When his appointment came in December, his jurisdiction

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<sup>50</sup>Casdorff, Prince John Magruder, 262.

<sup>51</sup>Winsor, Texas in the Confederacy, 63-64; Robert Marmion, A Texas Soldier and Marine during the Civil War, 1861-1865 (Melbourne, Australia, 1985), 12; U. S. Navy Department, Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion, 30 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1894-1922), series 1, vol.20, p. 847 (hereafter cited as ORN).

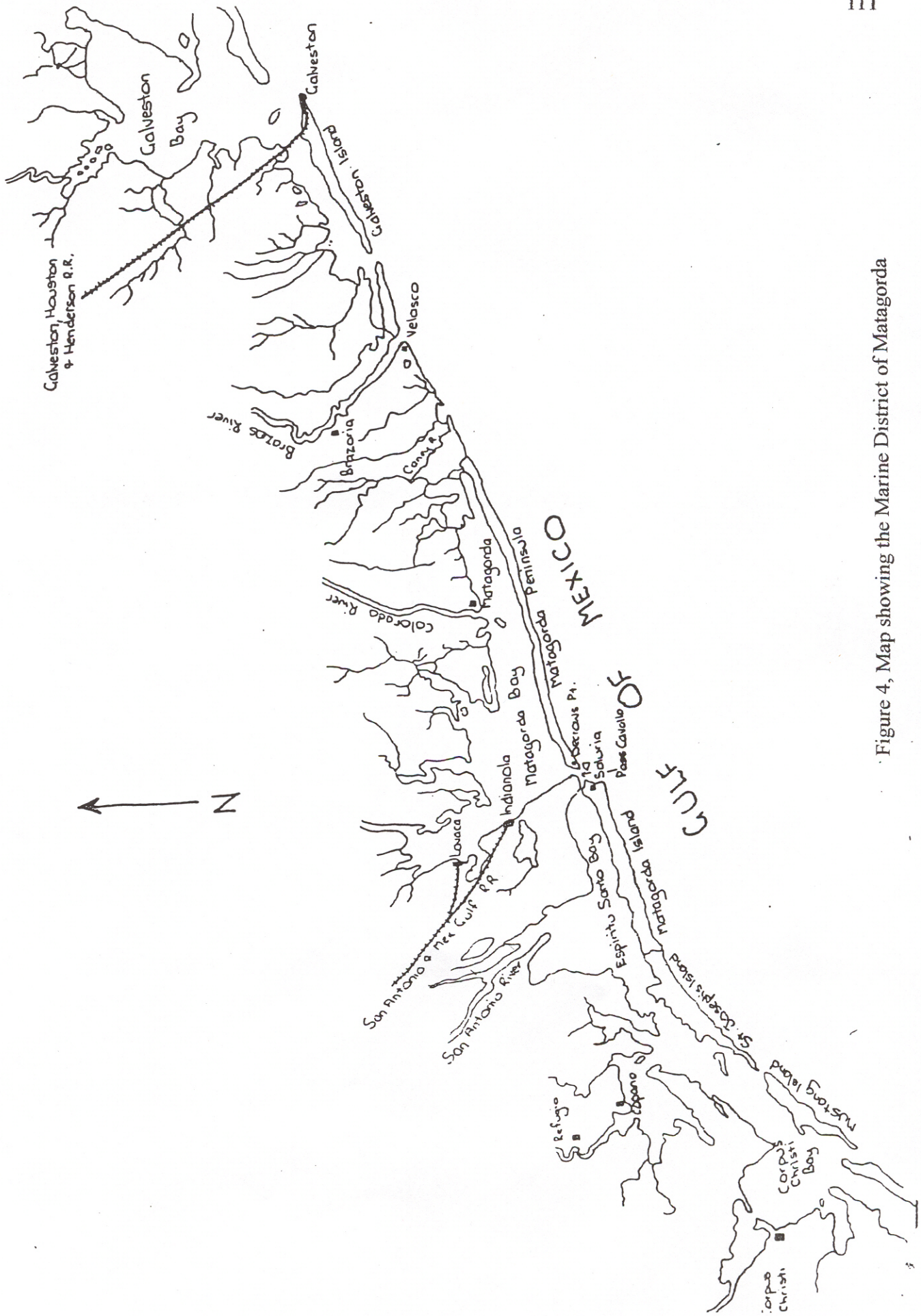


Figure 4, Map showing the Marine District of Matagorda

had shrunk to only Matagorda Bay because of Union victories along the coast. His command consisted of the gunboats John F. Carr and Cora, the armed schooners Buckhardt and Dale, the steamer Mary Hill, and a few transports. In addition, he had small companies of soldiers detached for service as marines and artillerymen.<sup>52</sup>

The shortages of men, boats, and artillery severely hindered Marmion's defense of Matagorda Bay. One natural advantage worked in favor of Marmion, however--the relatively shallow waters of Matagorda Bay, including Pass Cavallo, the entrance to the bay. This kept larger Federal warships from entering the bay and destroying the smaller Confederate gunboats. It also kept Union blockaders from seizing the shallow-draft boats that continued to trade along the coast. On the other hand, the shallow waters of the bay also worked against the Confederates. Union gunboats could stand off safely in the Gulf of Mexico and fire into the bay at their smaller, overmatched adversaries.<sup>53</sup>

The men of the Texas Marine Department performed many valuable services for Magruder during the winter of 1863. Their boats helped transport men and supplies to threatened areas. They also served as scouts, reporting the location and strength of Union forces on the Texas coast. Finally, they provided naval support to the Confederate land

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<sup>52</sup>Marmion, Texas Soldier and Marine, 15; Winsor, Texas in the Confederacy, 65. Matagorda Bay extends approximately forty miles southwest to northeast, roughly parallel to the Texas mainland. It is shielded from the Gulf of Mexico by the Matagorda Peninsula (Frank H. Gille, ed., Encyclopedia of Texas [St. Claire Shores, Mich.: Somerset Publishers, 1982], 367-68); James M. Day, "Leon Smith: Confederate Mariner," East Texas Historical Journal 3 (March 1965): 41-43.

<sup>53</sup>ORN, series 1, vol. 20, pp. 853-54; Winsor, Texas in the Confederacy, 64, Marmion, Texas Soldier and Marine, 15.



forces. In one such engagement, the John F. Carr assisted the First Texas Cavalry in repulsing a Federal scouting party in late December 1863 on Matagorda Peninsula.<sup>54</sup>

Federal landings and raids along the Gulf coast and up the Rio Grande resulted in sagging morale during the winter of 1863. Nothing better depicted low morale than letters written home by soldiers serving on the coast. In a letter to his wife, Jeff Morgan of the Thirty-fifth Texas Cavalry pointed out that the regiment was ordered to leave Houston to fight along the coast. Morgan also wrote that the future looked gloomy and he would not be home for the winter.<sup>55</sup>

Rudolf Coreth of the Thirty-second Texas Cavalry wrote home in late December, describing the poor morale of his regiment: "Confidence in this war has now sunken very much. I talked yesterday with several and they were all in accord with one another that they would rather have mules than Negroes and Confederate money." Colonel P. C. Woods, who commanded the regiment, wrote to his wife on 26 November. He conveyed to her "how much I appreciate home and things at home. There is much to lament in this horrid war. I hope it will close soon, but I see little prospect."<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup>Lubbock, Six Decades in Texas, 172; McGowen, Horsesweat and Powdersmoke, 202; ORA, ser. 1, vol. 26, pt. 1, pp. 482-85; Marmion, Texas Soldier and Marine, 17-18.

<sup>55</sup>Jeff Morgan to his wife, 7 December 1863, Unpublished letters of Jeff Morgan, Thirty-fifth Texas Cavalry Regiment, Confederate Research Center, Hillsboro, Texas.

<sup>56</sup>Goyne, Lone Star and Double Eagle, 115; Colonel P. C. Woods to his wife Georgia, 26 November 1863, Unpublished letters of Colonel P. C. Woods and his wife

The city of Corpus Christi offers an interesting example of the discontent generated by an invading army. As the fear of the arrival of Federal soldiers increased, desertions and disunity became more evident. Local residents who were lukewarm to the southern cause now began to aid and abet the enemy. Major William G. Thompson of the Twentieth Iowa, commander of the Union garrison on Mustang Island, reported that he had obtained information “from a reliable man, direct from Corpus Christi” that hundreds of rebel deserters were hiding near the city awaiting the coming of Federal troops. Some of the Corpus Christians captured on Mustang Island went over to the enemy. Thompson also pointed out that “Some of my prisoners volunteered to go out and help capture two schooners in the bay. They piloted our men straight as a string and seemed tickled as much as the rest of the men over the capture.”<sup>57</sup>

There were accounts, however, that differed somewhat from the happy, converted Confederates depicted by Major Thompson. One such case involved Captain John Anderson, a Corpus Christian, who helped the Union forces. According to his son, the elder Anderson was forced into the role after his boat was blown ashore on Mustang Island. Nevertheless, Anderson became a pilot for Major Thompson and for a time

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Georgia Woods, Thirty-second Texas Cavalry Regiment, Confederate Research Center, Hillsboro, Texas.

<sup>57</sup>ORA, series 1, vol. 26, pt. 1, p. 878; Major William G. Thompson to his wife, 3 December 1863, Unpublished letters of Major William G. Thompson to his wife concerning his tour of duty on Mustang Island, Twentieth Iowa Infantry Regiment, Local History Room, La Retama Library, Corpus Christi, Texas; J. D. Barnes, What I Saw You Do: A Brief History of the Battles, Marches, and Sieges of the Twentieth Iowa Volunteer Infantry, during their three years of active service in the War of the Rebellion (Port Byron, Ill.: Owen and Hall, Publishers, 1896), 33.

commanded the steamer Planter which brought three black regiments from New Orleans to the Corpus Christi area for occupation duty.<sup>58</sup>

The first Union soldiers, members of a scouting party, entered the town on Christmas Day, 1863. The following day, an elated Major Thompson wrote to his wife that “Many were pleased to see us come, but a few cut dirt and run. There are many good Union men in the place and they send me much valuable information, every word of which would hang them if the Rebel leaders knew it. All complain of the barbarities committed by the leading Rebels. The Rebels have left the place.”<sup>59</sup>

Disunity had taken firm root in Corpus Christi. Some of those residents who provided Thompson with information were doubtless local opportunists who saw Federal occupation as a means of bettering their own positions. Others may have been from the rather large immigrant population in the city that had maintained a silent loyalty since the secession crisis. (Other immigrants, members of European nobility such as Charles G. Lovinskiold and Felix Blucher, maintained their allegiance to the Confederacy throughout the war.) Although some of the defections may have been for reasons of sentiment, the terrible winter of 1863-1864, described by one local rancher as the “Bad Times,” may also have been a factor in the growing disunity. Food shortages emerged as a serious problem. The people in town lived off fish or other food they could obtain by trading

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<sup>58</sup>Briscoe, “Narrative of Corpus Christi,” 432-33.

<sup>59</sup>Major William G. Thompson to his wife, 25 December 1863, Unpublished letters of Major William G. Thompson.

their valuables to local Unionists or Federal troops. For whatever reasons, the presence of Thompson's men on Mustang Island gave courage to the local Unionists.<sup>60</sup>

Major Thompson, although serving in enemy territory, could not ignore the suffering of the families still living in the town. He frequently sent food to the starving residents, regardless of their loyalty. He pitied the hungry residents and wrote his wife that he had dispatched provisions to several families "whose names I had as being in destitute circumstances and many more have sent me piteous letters and appeals for help and I cannot refuse to let them have something to eat, notwithstanding I know that a part of their people are in the Rebel army, but I cannot see women and children starve while I can divide."<sup>61</sup>

Despite his pity for the townspeople, Major Thompson continued to arrest Confederate civilians pointed out to him by Union sympathizers or opportunists. One such incident involved the arrest of three citizens identified by a local informant: Dr. George Robertson, who owned a drugstore, a man named John Riggs, and another unnamed resident. U.S. soldiers attempted to arrest the three men and chased them to the home of a Mrs. Swift. She hid Robertson in a closet and pushed a wardrobe in front of the door. This was fortunate for the druggist for he eluded capture. The other two hid under a bed, but they were not as lucky. Federal troopers found the two men because Riggs had such long legs that they were not entirely concealed. Robertson was captured

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<sup>60</sup>Noakes Diary, 21 December 1863; Briscoe, "Narrative of Corpus Christi," 433-34.

<sup>61</sup>Major William G. Thompson to his wife, 3 March 1864, Unpublished letters of Major William G. Thompson.

later, and all three prisoners were taken to Mustang Island. Robertson's luck still held, however, as he managed to escape again a short time after his capture.<sup>62</sup>

Although one area rancher recorded in his diary that the "Yankees made great time in Corpus and that the Union soldiers committed a great many depreations [sic]," the Federals appear to have behaved rather well. There are no available records of actual plundering by Union soldiers, other than the taking of furniture and lumber from homes of civilians who had fled the city. Apparently, there was no physical mistreatment of citizens, although Union troopers continued to arrest prominent Confederate civilians whenever they returned to Corpus Christi to visit relatives. Major Thompson continued this type of activity well into the spring of 1864.<sup>63</sup>

Civilians in the path of the military forces along the Rio Grande also suffered. These deprivations came to light due to the establishment of the Southern Claims Commission, formed by an act of Congress in 1871. This commission allowed loyal southerners to make claims to the government regarding compensation for losses due to wartime activities of Union soldiers. Claims were usually barred or disallowed if the loyalty of the claimant was not proved adequately. Over 22,000 claims were made nationwide, but only 7,092 were actually approved.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup>Eli Merriman, "Memoirs" (typescript copy, Local History Room, La Retama Library, Corpus Christi, Texas).

<sup>63</sup>Noakes Diary, 27 December 1863; Major William G. Thompson to wife, 21 February 1864, Unpublished letters of Major William G. Thompson.

<sup>64</sup>Gary B. Mills, Southern Loyalists in the Civil War: The Southern Claims Commission (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., Inc., 1994), ix-x.

Three barred claims from Cameron County showed that civilians in Brownsville and the surrounding region experienced property loss at the hands of Federal troops. The three petitioners were Pauline V. Butler, Nicholas Champion, and Francisco Solis. All three claimants asserted that they had property in Point Isabel (present-day Port Isabel) that was used by Union forces stationed on Brazos Santiago. They all claimed damages in excess of three thousand dollars. Since there were few permanent dwellings on Brazos Santiago, soldiers allegedly took building materials such as lumber, bricks, and other items. Francisco Solis, who owned a hotel in Point Isabel, asserted that his entire dwelling had been torn down and taken by Federal soldiers to Brazos Santiago. In his petition to the Southern Claims Commission, he stated that “All of said buildings, fence and bricks were taken down by the Army of the United States and carried by said Army from Point Isabel to Brazos Santiago for Quarters and warehouses for said Army under the command of N. P. Banks.” Nicholas Champion reinforced Solis’ claim by pointing out that the United States Army used his 58-foot schooner, Square Nose, to move supplies from Point Isabel to Brazos Santiago. The vessel ran aground and was torn apart by Union troops to build shelters and other structures. All three petitions concluded with consistent statements of loyalty to the United States. The claimants knew each other because these three individuals who filed for damages before the Southern Claims Commission appeared as witnesses on the other two claims. For example, Nicholas

Champion's name appears as a witness on the petition of Francisco Solis, proof of collaboration.<sup>65</sup>

Claims for damages were also made from invaded areas further up the coast. Major William Thompson, commander of the Union garrison on Mustang Island, made many visits to Corpus Christi. Thompson's name appeared in a petition made by Alvin C. Priest, who lived in the town of Flour Bluff on Corpus Christi Bay. Priest asked for three thousand dollars in damages. The damages listed included building materials and livestock. Priest had a good memory, for the details he stated over ten years later were fairly accurate. In his deposition he stated that "The aforesaid property was furnished to and taken by Major Thompson commanding the United States troops then stationed on Mustang Island. Petitioner believes it to have been the Twentieth Regiment of Iowa troops, and that the said property so taken, was removed from said Flour Bluff to said Mustang Island and used for the support and benefit of the United States troops stationed there." Although claiming that he was too poor to send witnesses to Washington to speak on his behalf, he included in his deposition the names of several people who vouched for his loyalty to the United States and for his good character.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup>Petitions of Francisco Solis, Nicholas Champion, and Pauline Victoria Butler to the Commissioner of Claims, 27 September 1871(Solis), 7 October 1871 (Champion), 16 October 1871 (Butler), Cases filed for barred and disallowed claims, Records of the U.S. House, Record Group 233, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Microfiche M1407, Fiche#4737, 4365, 4379 respectively).

<sup>66</sup>Petition of Alvin C. Priest to the Commissioner of Claims, 28 September 1876, Cases filed for barred and disallowed claims, (Microfiche M1407, Fiche# 4677).

Not all cases that came before the Southern Claims Commission were disallowed. One such claim involved Louisa Steinberg of Indianola, Texas, in Calhoun County. Her petition concerned the loss of her home to Federal troops stationed in Indianola during the Rio Grande Expedition. Many southerners who filed claims usually lost them because they could not prove their loyalty to the Union during the war. However, Ms. Steinberg's husband, William, took a loyalty oath to the Union during the Federal occupation. Fortunately, she kept that document and presented it along with other materials to prove her claim. Although Ms. Steinberg started the paperwork for her petition in 1872, she did not obtain any money until 1878. Her claim was for six hundred dollars, but she received only one hundred dollars.<sup>67</sup>

Although general histories of the Civil War sometimes imply that the Lone Star State was untouched by the war of the 1860s, civilians along the Gulf Coast and up the Rio Grande valley experienced some of the same hardships suffered by families in other parts of the Confederacy. Armies, friendly or not, exerted extraordinary stresses on surrounding civilian society, and the people along the coast and in the valley knew that the Civil War did indeed come to Texas.

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<sup>67</sup>Petition of Louisa Steinberg to the Commissioner of Claims, 7 July 1871, Records Settled Case Files for Claims Approved by the Southern Claims Commission, 1871-1880, Records of the Accounting Officers of the Department of the Treasury, Record Group 217, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.



## CHAPTER 4

### THE RED RIVER BECKONS

By the end of 1863, the Rio Grande Expedition had brought few significant results for Major General Nathaniel P. Banks. Galveston, Houston, and Sabine Pass (on the border with Louisiana) still remained in Confederate hands. When Ulysses S. Grant became general-in-chief of all U. S. armies in March 1864, he ordered the abandonment of the entire Texas coast except for the Brownsville area. By that time, even Banks had to admit that the opportunities in Texas did not seem “as large as when we started.”<sup>1</sup>

Yet as late as 30 December, Banks spoke of his desire to continue military operations in Texas. In a letter to then General-in-Chief Henry W. Halleck, Banks continued to object to the Red River Valley as the best route to invade Texas. In a dispatch dated 23 January 1864, however, Banks conveyed to Halleck his change in position on the Red River approach. This change resulted from the fact that Generals William T. Sherman and Frederick Steele would cooperate in a Red River expedition. Banks now stated that “the Red River is the shortest and best line of defense for

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<sup>1</sup>William S. McFeeley, Grant: A Biography (Norwalk, Conn.: The Easton Press, 1981), 157; James M. McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 683; Fred H. Harrington, Fighting Politician: Major General Nathaniel P. Banks (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1948), 133; U.S. War Department, War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, 128 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), series 1, vol. 34, pt. 1, p. 190 (hereafter cited as ORA).

Louisiana and Arkansas. I shall most cordially cooperate with them in executing your orders.” A Union soldier serving with the Fifteenth Maine Regiment on the Matagorda Peninsula offered a somewhat different commentary on General Banks’ support for the Red River campaign. It was well known that General Banks wanted to capture Galveston, he wrote, but “the government was unable to furnish the additional troops deemed requisite” for the attack on that port city. The soldier went on to comment that “like a good soldier, the commander of the Gulf Department could only obey orders, though entertaining very grave apprehensions as to the wisdom of the plan and its probable outcome.”<sup>2</sup>

Politics and cotton also played a role in Banks’s change of mind concerning the Red River campaign. In late January 1864 Banks received news of large quantities of cotton in the Red River Valley. The procurement of thousands of bales of cotton for the northern textile mills would greatly benefit the economy of his home state, not to mention Banks’s own political standing. Politically, Lincoln placed pressure on Banks to restore Louisiana to its proper place in the Union under the terms of the Ten Percent Plan, announced in December 1863. In January 1864 Lincoln informed Banks that he was “master of all” political arrangements in Louisiana. If Banks could capitalize on the military, economic, and political opportunities that Louisiana presented, he would receive

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<sup>2</sup>Harrington, Fighting Politician, 151; Henry A. Shorey, The Story of the Maine Fifteenth (Bridgton, Maine: Press of the Bridgton News, 1890), 70-71; Ludwell H. Johnson, Red River Campaign: Politics and Cotton in the Civil War (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1958), 45; ORA, series 1, vol. 34, pt. 2, p. 133; Paul Casdorff, Prince John Magruder: His Life and Campaigns (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1996), 269; Joseph H. Parks, General Edmund Kirby Smith (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1954), 37.

a boost in a run for the presidency in 1864. Staying in Louisiana certainly offered Banks an opportunity to advance his political career.<sup>3</sup>

Mother Nature, however, prevented an immediate drive into northwest Louisiana. Banks, who began making preparations for the campaign in January, realized that the water level of the Red River would not support Federal gunboats until March. As a result, Banks intended to continue operations on the Texas coast at least until the end of March. By this time, the water level in the Red River would be high enough to begin the march toward Shreveport. Maintaining Federal troops on the Texas coast would hold in place the already nervous Confederate Major General John B. Magruder, who still expected an enemy drive on Houston in the spring of 1864. Banks also realized that a rapid withdrawal from Texas would send a clear signal to the Confederates of a new campaign in Louisiana. The Rio Grande Expedition now became a diversionary chess piece for the Red River campaign, holding the Confederates on the coast and preventing their transfer to Louisiana.<sup>4</sup>

Banks made no secret of his intention to move up the Matagorda Peninsula in the fall of 1863. Throughout January 1864 Federal gunboats shelled Confederate positions

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<sup>3</sup>Roy P. Basler, ed., The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, 9 vols. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 8:89-90 (hereafter cited as CWAL); Johnson, Red River Campaign, 47.

<sup>4</sup>Norman D. Brown, ed., Journey to Pleasant Hill: The Civil War Letters of Captain Elijah P. Petty, Walker's Texas Division, CSA (San Antonio: Institute of Texan Cultures, 1982), 171; T. Michael Parrish, Richard Taylor: Soldier Prince of Dixie (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 320-24; Casdorff, Prince John Magruder, 270; Harrington, Fighting Politician, 152-53; Johnson, Red River Campaign, 47.

between the San Bernard and Caney Rivers, (on current maps of Texas these rivers are actually shown as creeks) at the northernmost end of the Matagorda Peninsula, preparatory to a possible landing. General Magruder ordered Colonel Ashbel Smith of the Second Texas Infantry to garrison Fort Caney at the mouth of the Caney River. Magruder wanted a veteran regiment to command the fort in case the enemy launched an invasion in that region. Brigadier General Hamilton Bee called Fort Caney “the Post of Honor” and said “It appropriately belongs to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Texas.” Kirby Smith and Magruder had considered abandoning Matagorda Peninsula, but Ashbel Smith talked them out of it.<sup>5</sup>

Another veteran regiment also played a crucial role in defending the Texas coast from a Federal invasion, the First Texas Cavalry under Colonel Augustus Buchel. His regiment patrolled the Texas coast between the San Bernard and Caney Rivers. In early January 1864, Magruder ordered Bee to prevent, under any circumstances, an enemy landing in that region. Magruder also ordered Bee to dismount all his cavalry except the First Texas. These men, along with the regular infantry, held the line against the Federal forces that occasionally ventured forth from DeCrow's Point on Matagorda Peninsula. While the infantry manned the forts, the First Texas Cavalry, the only mounted cavalry regiment in the area, patrolled the coast and scouted the beaches for enemy landings. Bee

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<sup>5</sup>Ralph J. Smith, Reminiscences of the Civil War and other Sketches (Waco, Tex.: W. M. Morrison, 1962), 31-37; Elizabeth Silverthorne, Ashbel Smith of Texas: Pioneer, Patriot, Statesman (College Station, Tex.: Texas A&M University Press, 1982), 162; U.S. Navy Department, Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion, 30 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1894-1922), series 1, vol. 21, pp. 23-24 (hereafter cited as ORN).

also issued directives to insure that "not less than 100 men remained in the forts at all times."<sup>6</sup>

The U.S.S. Aroostook commenced shelling Confederate positions on 7 January, firing on Fort Bernard at the mouth of the San Bernard River. Confederate engineer Lieutenant Edward Sandcliffe reported that the Aroostook disrupted the fortifying of Fort Bernard: "I am so much annoyed by gunboats that I can only work in the nighttime. Our work this morning [8 January] literally strewn with fragments of shells, grape, and canister."<sup>7</sup>

On 8 January the Aroostook fired at Fort Caney. Private William Behrends of the First Texas Cavalry was killed. Colonel Buchel reported that the Aroostook lay at anchor all night. The following day the same vessel "commenced shelling them again," at "first light," and fired about forty rounds into the fort, disrupting the work of fortification and silencing one of the fort's guns. Confederates guarding Forts Caney and Bernard believed that the shelling could mean only one thing. A Union invasion was fast approaching.<sup>8</sup>

As the invasion tension mounted, the First Texas Cavalry remained on constant

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<sup>6</sup>ORA, series 1, vol. 24, pt. 2, pp. 899, 913-16, 932; Stanley S. McGowen, Horsesweat and Powdersmoke: The First Texas Cavalry in the Civil War (College Station, Tex.: Texas A & M University Press, 1999), 115-19.

<sup>7</sup>ORN, series 1, vol. 21, pp. 23-24.

<sup>8</sup>Smith, Reminiscences of the Civil War, 34-37; ORN, series 1, vol. 21, pp. 24, 859, 864; ORA, series 1, vol. 26, pt.1, pp. 80-81; Morning Reports, January 1-15, 1864, First Texas Cavalry Regiment, Unit Reports, Box 488, Record Group 109, National Archives, Washington, D. C., (hereafter cited as Unit Reports, First Texas Cavalry).

patrol. But as Federal activity on the coast continued, regimental returns for the First Texas indicated a major reduction in personnel between December 1863 and the end of January 1864. The soldiers listed present for duty dropped from 1,273 to 703. Desertion, casualties, disease, or some combination led to this decline. William Kuykendall, a private in the First Texas Cavalry, regretted that the combination of fatigue and cold weather led to the loss of many men in the regiment. One diary entry by Kuykendall pointed out that the men were "Tired and wet after this adventure [Matagorda fray] I was prostrate by a severe attack of typhoid pneumonia from which I only recovered after many weeks of suffering in the hospital." He also pointed out that "about this time measles broke out in the camp, resulting in many deaths."<sup>9</sup>

The shelling by Federal gunboats during this period had the desired impact on Confederate morale. An account given by Dr. Edward Pye, who served with the Fourth Texas Infantry (State Troops) near the San Bernard and Caney Rivers, described the anxiety created by the enemy's offshore shelling. In a letter to his wife, Pye addressed his children about making resolutions for the New Year. He told them that they should "begin the *New Year* with good resolutions and actions--these are times such as one sees *only once*--When we are all dead and gone many lifetimes hence--they will be spoken of as the "*bloody age*"--the time of horror--of famine--misery-- wretchedness. Think children of the *thousands in camps* all over the land--many badly provided without clothing--without tents. Thousands in bad health not fit for service and the sick in

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<sup>9</sup>William Kuykendall, *Civil War Diary*, Kuykendall Family Papers, 1822-1891, Center for American History, University of Texas, Austin (hereafter cited as Kuykendall Diary), 17; Unit Reports, First Texas Cavalry; ORA, series 1, vol. 26, pt. 2, p. 564.

hospitals--dying hourly--many for the want of comforts such even as you possess--Think of all this--and *resolve* never to *complain* of the little difficulties and troubles that come your way."<sup>10</sup>

In another letter to his wife that December, Pye noted that the shelling dampened the spirits of those who served with him, although he continued to doubt the possibility of a Federal invasion. Pye spoke skeptically of the continued rumors of invasion, instructing his wife to "give them no credit. From all appearances it will be a bloodless campaign-- But we have heard the big guns firing all day within 12 Miles of us. I have two men in the hospital who were at the Mouth of the Bernard when the Yankees shelled us. They say there was a considerable *scattering* among the men." Pye also described the gloom and war weariness created by the shelling:"the poor fellows are mighty gloomy and out of spirits--the most of them abuse old *Magruder and the war*--each one considering himself the worst off of any man in *The Confederacy*. I try to put them in good humor with themselves as well as I can--and we discourse of home, children, and our wives."<sup>11</sup>

The fairly constant bombardment by Union gunboats during this period also resulted in some amusing anecdotes. Ralph Smith, a soldier in the Second Texas Infantry Regiment serving inside Fort Caney, described how a Spanish sailing vessel was run aground during one of the January shellings. The soldiers confiscated the cargo of the ship, which included, among other things, "soothing syrup." As to its effects on the men,

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<sup>10</sup>Frank E. Vandiver (ed.), "Letters from the Confederate Medical Service, 1863-1865," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 55 (January 1952): 381-82.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 384.

Smith wrote, "Meanwhile the boys had tested the various brands of soothing syrup which they found to be exhilarating in its effects. However, after continual sampling they discovered it to be overpoweringly intoxicating. In fact, by twelve o'clock at night the whole command was stretched out on the beach helplessly drunk, except for Major Fly, Sargeant [sic] Bill, and myself."<sup>12</sup>

Federal gunboats continued to harass Confederate positions above Matagorda Bay throughout the month of January. Toward the end of the month, Union soldiers stationed at DeCrow's Point at the south end of the Matagorda Peninsula embarked upon another scouting mission up the peninsula. Brigadier General Thomas E. Ransom commanded the expedition, made up of troops from the First Brigade, Fourth Division, and Third Brigade, Second Division. Ransom began the march up the peninsula on 21 January with the soldiers from the Fourth Division. Meanwhile, the U.S.S. Sciota landed two hundred soldiers of the Thirteenth Maine about ten miles below Fort Caney. For the Thirteenth Maine, this was familiar territory. About one month before, they had tangled with the First Texas Cavalry in the same area. The two Federal units linked up on the afternoon of the 22<sup>nd</sup>. Ransom then sent ahead some mounted men beyond the head of the peninsula and determined that no more information could be gained short of attacking the enemy on the Caney River.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Joseph E. Chance, From Shiloh to Vicksburg: The Second Texas Infantry (Austin: Eakin Press, 1984), 141.

<sup>13</sup>ORN, series 1, vol. 21, pp. 24, 48-51; Edwin B. Lufkin, History of the Thirteenth Maine Regiment (Bridgton, Maine: H. A. Shorey and Son, Publishers, 1898), 68-69.



As a result, Ransom boarded the Sciota in order to make a closer observation of the enemy works on the Caney River. He reported three thousand cavalry, one thousand infantry, and a few pieces of field artillery. One body of cavalry (probably the First Texas), were seen advancing down the peninsula to drive off Ransom's men. This compelled Ransom to return to his men on the peninsula, marching them southward. They returned to Decrow's Point on 24 January after completing their scouting assignment. Although Ransom described the expedition as successful, Major General Napoleon Dana, commanding the Thirteenth Army Corps at Fort Esperanza, described it somewhat differently. Realizing he faced strong enemy works at the head of the peninsula, he requested two regiments of cavalry be sent to the Texas coast. Frustrated, Dana closed his report by pointing out that "chances are being thrown away, which are seriously to be regretted."<sup>14</sup>

During Ransom's scouting mission up the peninsula, General Dana received quite a scare at Fort Esperanza. A rumor developed that a large Confederate force had landed on the south end of Matagorda Island. Their intent was to attack and recapture Fort Esperanza. Dana sent word to the soldiers stationed at Decrow's Point to come over to the fort to help defend against this enemy attack. Troops were ferried across by steamer to Fort Esperanza. One of these regiments, the Fifteenth Maine, was sent out to scout the entire island. During their reconnaissance, no rebels were found. The Maine men returned to the fort very tired and footsore, although glad to report that it was only "a very great scare." The fort remained on high alert for the next week, but by 25 January, the

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

tension subsided, and the Union reinforcements returned to Decrow's Point.<sup>15</sup>

Although most of the military activities on the coast were generated by Union land and naval forces, the Confederates were preparing a major offensive to drive the Federals out of Texas. On 22 December 1863, Colonel John S. "Rip" Ford began preparations in San Antonio for the Confederate Rio Grande Expedition. Ford ordered two companies of his newly formed "Cavalry of the West" to the Nueces River near Corpus Christi to protect that exposed region. Captain James A. Ware commanded the forces near San Patricio. Major Mat Nolan was placed in charge of the troops near Banquete. Ford instructed Ware to arrest any deserters or Union sympathizers in the area. In late December, Ware and his men visited Corpus Christi and arrested a man described as a "traitor and communicating with the Yankees."<sup>16</sup>

Major William G. Thompson of the Twentieth Iowa Infantry Regiment, garrison commander on Mustang Island, promptly received news of Ware's visit to Corpus Christi. He also learned the disquieting news that Mrs. Mat Nolan had shown to her neighbors two U.S. flags and a sword taken by her husband at the battles of Sabine Pass and Galveston. The flags were taken from the U. S. S. Morning Light, which Company G of the Second Texas Mounted Rifles under Nolan's command helped capture. The sword came from the Sachem, a ship captured by the Confederates at Sabine Pass. Although

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<sup>15</sup>Shorey, Fifteenth Maine, 68.

<sup>16</sup>Diary entry of Thomas J. Noakes, 29 December 1863, (original copy, Local History Room, La Retama Library, Corpus Christi, Texas), hereafter cited as Noakes Diary; John S. Ford, Rip Ford's Texas, ed. Stephen B. Oates (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1963), 346-50.

Thompson had shown considerable mercy towards the people of Corpus Christi, he could not tolerate an insult to the Stars and Stripes. As a result, he led what may be termed the first Union invasion of Corpus Christi. On the night of 21 January 1864, three ships and seventy-five men landed at the city wharves. The rebels had left the city, so Thompson put out pickets and went to bed. The next morning he visited the Nolan home, where he found Mrs. Nolan, her mother, and her sister. Upon his request, the sword and flag were delivered up to him immediately and are currently in an Iowa museum. The Iowans remained in the city for a couple of days, but then returned to Mustang Island.<sup>17</sup>

The naval bombardment of the upper Texas coast continued throughout early February. On 6-9 February, Union gunboats shelled Confederate positions at the head of the Matagorda Peninsula near the San Bernard and Caney Rivers. An intense fire fight took place on 6 February when the Aroostook fired some sixty shells at Fort Caney. Rebel gunners returned fire from the fort, inflicting minor damage on the Aroostook. Several muster rolls from the Second Texas Infantry confirmed the severity of the shelling on 6 February. One muster stated that Fort Caney had been “engaged by a Yankee vessel for two hours. Heavy shelling all the time.” Other phrases such as “pretty severely shelled” and “gunboats shelled us several times, once very heavy” also appeared on these muster rolls. On 9 February the Sciota and the Aroostook engaged in a rather fierce, five-hour artillery duel with Confederate batteries near the mouth of the Brazos

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<sup>17</sup>Major William R. Thompson to his wife, 11 and 25 January 1864, Unpublished letters of Major William R. Thompson of the Twentieth Iowa Infantry Regiment concerning his tour of duty on Mustang Island, Local History Room, La Retama Library, Corpus Christi, Texas (hereafter cited as Thompson Letters); Corpus Christi Caller Times, 16 July 1961.

River. The Aroostook took two hits, and three Confederate soldiers were killed and several wounded.<sup>18</sup>

Despite constant harassment by the U.S. Navy throughout February, Confederates along the coast continued to build fortifications, often at night. Colonel Smith, who commanded the Second Texas Infantry, worked diligently to strengthen Fort Caney. Smith, who was under strict orders not to allow an enemy landing on this portion of the Texas coast, submitted plans to improve the fortifications on the Caney River. His plans were approved and construction was carried out under his close supervision. When it was completed, Fort Caney was renamed Fort Ashbel Smith in his honor. To man the improved fortifications, additional soldiers arrived at the mouth of the Caney, Waul's Legion and the Thirty-second Texas Cavalry regiment.<sup>19</sup>

General Dana also worked to demoralize the civilian population of Texas. On 7 February the U.S.S. Queen, under Commander Robert Tarr, sailed to within ten miles of Fort Caney. He sent ashore a small landing party to post proclamations from President Lincoln and Governor Andrew J. Hamilton. These proclamations spoke of granting

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<sup>18</sup>Minetta Goynes, Lone Star and Double Eagle: Civil War Letters of a German Texas Family (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1982), 119; Bill Winsor, Texas in the Confederacy: Military Installations, Economy and People (Hillsboro, Tex.: Hill Junior College Press, 1978), 136; ORN, series 1, vol. 21, pp. 74-76; Muster rolls of the Second Texas Infantry stationed at Camp Sidney Johnston, January and February 1864, Compiled Records Showing Service of Military Units in Confederate Organizations, Record Group 109, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Microfilm M861, Roll #59).

<sup>19</sup>Captain E. P. Turner to General Hamilton Bee, 17 February 1864, Military Order Book, Ashbel Smith Papers, Center for American History; General Hamilton Bee to Colonel Ashbel Smith, 18, 20 February 1864, Hamilton Bee Papers, Center for American History.

conditional amnesty for residents of the middle coast of Texas. Dana wanted to give the impression that Texas was about to be invaded and occupied very shortly. When Iowa troops attacked Lamar near Corpus Christi on 11 February, a citizen made an inquiry into the intention of Federal forces on the Texas coast. An officer leading the raid informed this citizen that Texas would fall in a few months, that all of Corpus Christi had come over to the Union side, and that General Banks, with twenty-five thousand troops, was about to invade Texas by way of the Red River, a force so large that "Texas would be overrun in less than three months." Two weeks after the Lamar raid, Dana issued General Order #14 on 24 February. The order extended conditional amnesty for residents of the middle coast of Texas. The order, however, would go into effect only if Federal forces actually controlled Texas. Banks and Dana clearly wanted to win not only a military victory in Texas, but a psychological one as well.<sup>20</sup>

The presence of the Federal army on the Texas coast in the winter of 1863-1864 coincided with Lincoln's amnesty proclamation announced in December of that year. The proclamation created quite a stir in Texas. Ever since the Rio Grande Expedition had landed in Brownsville in November, some Texans had renewed their allegiance to the Union. The amnesty proclamation also led to false accusations of disloyalty. The most famous of these accusations involved Richard King, whose ranch had served as a cotton depot since 1862. In two January letters King emphatically denied that he had taken a loyalty oath to the Union. King suspected that his accusers were jealous men involved in

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<sup>20</sup>ORA, series 1, vol. 34, pt. 1, pp. 135-36; Winsor, Texas in the Confederacy, 134.

the cotton trade. He also pointed out that his ranch and all of his property were always at the disposal of the Confederacy and that the Yankees had attacked his property in late December 1863. Although King had been cleared of any disloyalty by February 1864, the presence of the enemy on the coast would always arouse suspicions of treason among the civilian population.<sup>21</sup>

The last engagement of February took place on the 13<sup>th</sup> when Federal forces from the Twenty-first Iowa Infantry fought a skirmish with Confederates from the Thirty-third Texas Cavalry near Indianola. Although the Union soldiers stationed in Indianola stayed close to town most of the time, they occasionally made excursions into the countryside to determine enemy strength and secure fresh beef. Thirty-five mounted Iowans were rounding up some cattle about eight miles from town when they came upon a camp of the enemy. Instead of falling back, they amused themselves by attacking the pickets guarding the camp. Suddenly, they were surrounded by fifty-five well-armed Confederate cavalymen. In the ensuing fight fourteen of the Union soldiers fell from their horses, partly because their horses had not been trained to work amid gunfire. The Confederates quickly surrounded the Federals and took them prisoner. They were later sent to a prison camp in Tyler, Texas. When Brigadier General Fitz Henry Warren reported this incident to General Dana at Fort Esperanza, Dana became furious. He exploded to Warren that “such scrapes are very much to be regretted and ought to be carefully avoided, as in addition to the losses and mortification they lay on us, they give great encouragement to

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<sup>21</sup>Bruce S. Chesseman, “‘Let us have 500 good determined Texans’: Richard King’s Account of the Union Invasion of South Texas, November 12, 1863, to January 20 1864,” Southwestern Historical Quarterly 101 (July 1997):81-83.

the enemy.”<sup>22</sup>

The presence of Confederate cavalry near Indianola made General Warren and his men wary of an enemy attack. One soldier of the Twenty-second Iowa Infantry, Jacob C. Switzer, wrote that the regiment was called into line at three o'clock in the morning several times to repel an enemy attack. Switzer also related an amusing story of an incident that happened to him while on picket duty. One night he heard rustling in some nearby bushes. Believing it to be enemy soldiers, he reached for his cap box to put a percussion cap on his rifle. Switzer suddenly realized that he left his cap box back at Indianola. Unable to fire his rifle, he determined that he would at least try to take the enemy prisoner. He got on his stomach and approached the noise, discovering that “my invader was nothing but a cow browsing around in the brush, taking a very early morning meal. You may be sure that I never reported the incident in camp because I did not intend they should learn that I had left my ammunition in camp.”<sup>23</sup>

As Banks began his campaign up the Red River toward Shreveport in March 1864, Confederate regiments serving on the Texas coast noticed a redeployment of Federal soldiers on the coast. Banks wanted to give the impression that an invasion of Texas was also afoot on the Texas coast to hold Confederate forces in place along the

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<sup>22</sup>Jacob C. Switzer, “Reminiscences of Jacob Switzer of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Iowa,” ed. Mildred Throne, Iowa Journal of History, 56 (January 1958): 44-45; Brownson Malsch, Indianola, The Mother of Western Texas (Austin: State House Press, 1988), 176-77; ORA, series 1, vol. 34, pt. 1, pp. 150-51; George Crooke, The Twenty-first Regiment of Iowa Volunteer Infantry (Milwaukee: King, Fowle and Company, Book Printers, 1891), 125.

<sup>23</sup>Switzer, “Reminiscences of Jacob Switzer,” 45.

coast. A Confederate scout sent down the Matagorda Peninsula reported in late February that enemy strength on the peninsula had greatly diminished. People living on the peninsula also noticed that the enemy intended to abandon the peninsula; the Federals were moving all their stores south to Fort Esperanza on Matagorda Island. Rumors circulated about the purpose of this move. One rumor was that the troops were bound for New Orleans to join Banks. Another rumor stated that a Union invasion of Texas from Indianola was afoot to support Banks's drive up the Red River. Magruder believed the latter story and readied his men for a possible Union thrust from Port Lavaca into the Texas interior.<sup>24</sup>

Magruder's fears, however, lessened somewhat upon receiving reconnaissance reports of troop strength near Indianola. He received these reports from Colonel James Duff of the Thirty-third Texas Cavalry, camped near Texana, less than fifty miles from Port Lavaca. On 18 March, Duff reported that "The U.S. forces evacuated Indianola on the 15<sup>th</sup> instant and, as the citizens report, have gone to Saluria." Toward the end of March, Duff reported the beginnings of a Federal withdrawal from the Texas coast. After visiting Indianola on 28 March, Duff told his superiors that "The impression left on the minds of the citizens from conversations overheard was that the main part of the command was destined for Louisiana, and the invasion of Texas would be from that direction." Duff also reported that "On the 25<sup>th</sup>, there were five steamers inside the bar and one outside, twelve sails inside and four outside. This looks as if they intend

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<sup>24</sup>Joseph T. Woods, Services of the 96<sup>th</sup> Ohio Volunteers (Toledo: Blade Printing, 1874), 50-51; Malsch, Indianola, 178-180; Johnson, Red River Campaign, 89-95.



removing at least a portion of the forces there.”<sup>25</sup>

Despite the beginnings of a Union withdrawal from the Texas coast in March 1864, heavy skirmishing between Union and Confederate forces continued near Corpus Christi. Most of this fighting was related to the Confederate Rio Grande Expedition, organized in San Antonio under Colonel Ford. The combined forces in the first of these skirmishes added up to about 160 men. On 13 March 1864, sixty-two Confederate troopers under Major Mat Nolan charged into about one hundred Union cavalrymen, forcing Captain Cecilio Balerio’s horsemen to retreat after a desperate fight. After the shooting ended, Nolan found five enemy soldiers killed but estimated from the blood trails that a dozen more were killed. The Confederates lost three killed and five wounded. Nolan did not pursue because Balerio, in his hasty retreat, left behind some papers indicating that he was about to be reinforced. As a result, Nolan requested that Colonel Ford send him reinforcements to secure the coastal region near Corpus Christi.<sup>26</sup>

Three days after the Balerio incident, Major Nolan learned that Federal soldiers from Mustang Island had landed on the outskirts of Corpus Christi to procure some confiscated Confederate cotton. Nolan, accompanied by seventy of his men, rode to the home of W. S. Gregory, where he discovered a slave and two Texans loading wagons with bales of cotton. The cotton was to be delivered to Major Thompson’s forces on

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<sup>25</sup>Switzer, “Reminiscences,” 45-46; Malsch, Indianola, 180; ORA, series 1, vol. 34, pt. 2, pp. 1058, 1097; Ralph A. Wooster, Texas and Texans in the Civil War, (Austin: Eakin Press, 1995), 135.

<sup>26</sup>John Salmon Ford, “Memoirs of John S. Ford and Reminiscences of Texas History from 1836-1888,” 8 vols., Center for American History; San Antonio Weekly Herald, 19 March 1864; ORA, series 1, vol. 34, pt. 1, pp. 638-39, 653.

Mustang Island. One of the Texans informed Nolan that ninety-three U.S. soldiers arrested Gregory and took him, along with sixty-seven bales of cotton, to Corpus Christi. Nolan sent a courier to Captain James Ware, who commanded a company of men on San Fernando Creek, to aid him in attacking the Yankees at Corpus Christi. Meanwhile, Nolan proceeded with his men toward Corpus Christi, spotting the enemy pickets around noon. By this time, Nolan's courier had returned with the distressing news that no immediate reinforcement should be expected.<sup>27</sup>

As Nolan and his men approached the outskirts of the city, they noticed that the main body of Iowa troops were stationed along the wharf on present Water Street. At dusk three U.S. vessels approached the wharves and discharged about seventy-five Union sailors while the Confederates watched from their place of concealment. Outnumbered almost two to one, Nolan decided not to attack the main force. Instead, a little before noon on the following day, he led a charge of nine men on the Union pickets. As with any Civil War fight, two different versions of what happened next were told by the principal officers in charge. Nolan reported that the pickets were driven into the city by his men. The Confederates killed one picket and wounded another. Nolan's force suffered only one wounded. Nolan's counterpart, Major Thompson, who was not present during the skirmish, reported that his sentries held off twenty charging Rangers, his appellation of Nolan's troopers. When the shooting started, Federal soldiers rushed to the aid of the pickets and drove the rebels away from the city. Thompson, in his official report, stated that one Confederate was killed and three wounded, but that "Not one of my

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<sup>27</sup>ORA, series 1, vol. 34, pt. 1, pp. 543-44.

men got a scratch.”<sup>28</sup>

In any case, the Confederates were driven back into the brush surrounding the city and helplessly watched the loading of southern cotton aboard Federal ships. Major Nolan must have had an excellent watch, for he reported that the entire Union force left the city at “exactly” 10:00 A.M. and took with them the families of several city residents who had joined the enemy. The list of residents who left included John R. Peterson (former sheriff of Nueces County), E. Fitzsimmons (listed as a deserter from the Eight Texas Infantry and serving Thompson’s forces as a sutler), F. Pettle, Chris Dunn, Melinda Rankin, and Frank Edwards, to name a few. Nolan must have been wary of an enemy ambush of some kind because he and about twenty of his men did not emerge from their cover until the following day. Residents told him that his home and others had been searched by Union soldiers. The angry Nolan was also informed that his sister-in-law had been mistakenly arrested by the enemy, believing that she was Mrs. Nolan. She was released shortly thereafter when the Federals realized their mistake. Realizing he could accomplish nothing further in the city, Nolan ordered his forces to return to Banquete that evening.<sup>29</sup>

Nolan and Thompson continued their game of cat and mouse. On 3 May, Thompson received at his headquarters on Mustang Island two men from Nolan’s command. They gave Thompson a note stating that the Confederates could not provide

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<sup>28</sup>Major William R. Thompson to his wife, 22 March 1864, Thompson Letters; ORA, series 1, vol. 34, pt. 1, pp. 543-44, 653.

<sup>29</sup>Texas State Gazette, 23 March and 6 April 1864; ORA, series 1, vol. 34, pt.1, pp. 543-45.

supplies for the people of Corpus Christi. Therefore, the undiplomatic Nolan gave Thompson “permission” to send food to the city without any hindrance from his soldiers. Thompson, who was generous by nature, was extremely irritated by Nolan’s suggestion that he needed permission from the “Rebels” for anything. In a letter to his wife, Thompson conveyed to her that “a not very modest proposition when I have went [sic] to Corpus whenever I pleased in spite of them and sent them word that I intended to do as I had done. Supply friends without asking their permission to do so. And that I would hold them as enemies whenever I found them armed against the government and should treat them accordingly.”<sup>30</sup>

While the Texans and the remnants of Bank's invading army skirmished in February and March, homefront civilians experienced great suffering. Harvey C. Medford, a private stationed near Galveston, wrote a detailed diary account of the hardships endured by both soldier and civilian near Galveston. In one diary entry of mid-February 1864, Medford’s anger and sarcasm about army life came forth vividly. He first attacked the scarcity and poor quality of rations the army received. To remedy this, the citizens of Galveston had to turn over a tenth of all they made to help feed the army. Despite this tax, the shortage of rations continued and Medford suspected mismanagement. In one statement he pointed out that “I am afraid our country will never prosper where there is so much fraud and perfidy practiced upon the private soldier by the functionaries of the government. I am the last one to [mutiny] or desert; but if there are any justifiable causes for such things, it is here in our army.” In his diary entry for 10

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<sup>30</sup>Major William R. Thompson to his wife, 7 May 1864, Thompson Letters.

March, Medford stated that nearly two hundred families in Galveston were drawing rations from the government. The quantity of rations received by Galveston citizens must have been scanty also because Medford mentioned that “small children frequently come to our camps and beg for something to eat; and take away every scrap that we throw away.”<sup>31</sup>

In late March a Union blockader fired seven times at Fort Velasco on the Brazos river. Confederate batteries fired fifteen shells in return, but neither side inflicted any damage. This shelling created the illusion of a possible Federal landing near the Brazos. Naval bombardment held in place some Confederate units on the Texas coast that might have been transferred to Louisiana to Banks’s Red River campaign.<sup>32</sup>

The final military expedition on the Texas coast happened in mid-April 1864. Two Federal vessels, the Estrella and the Zephyr, were sent up Matagorda Bay, formed by the Matagorda Peninsula running up the coast from Port Lavaca to the township of Matagorda. The ships were to obtain information about two rebel gunboats, the Carr and the Buckhardt. On 12 April these four ships exchanged a few shots but inflicted no damage. The Union gunboats sailed on to Indianola and captured three vessels and burned another. The expedition then landed at Port Lavaca, about twenty miles west of Indianola. Going ashore to obtain lumber, Federal troops encountered enemy pickets,

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<sup>31</sup>Rebecca W. Smith and Marion Mullins (eds.), “The Diary of H. C. Medford, Confederate Soldier, 1864,” Southwestern Historical Quarterly 34 (October 1930): 121-23; Alwyn Barr, “The “Queen City of the Gulf” Held Hostage: The Impact of the War on Confederate Galveston,” Military History of the West 27 (Fall 1997): 124-25.

<sup>32</sup>Casdorff, Prince John Magruder, 279; ORA, series 1, vol. 34, pt. 1, pp. 652-53.

killing one of them. As the Union soldiers prepared to leave, a fire accidentally broke out in the town. Ordered ashore, the Federals fought bravely to put the fire out. Lieutenant S. C. Jones of the Twenty-second Iowa Infantry boasted that “The soldiers labored manfully to put it out, for which they gained the thanks and admiration of the citizens, though they were mostly our enemies.”<sup>33</sup>

The Federal probes along the Texas coast served only to heighten the anxiety of General Magruder. As late as 20 May--in the final days of the Red River campaign--Magruder warned Shreveport “that the troops left in the State of Texas are totally inadequate to its defense in case General Banks should move upon our coast as I believe he will do.” Magruder also warned that it would take over a month for Texas units to return to Texas. At the time, he had only about two hundred men posted between Matagorda Bay and San Antonio. Yet despite the shelling and raids on the coast, no Federal invasion force ever landed.<sup>34</sup>

By early May, Union troop strength declined dramatically. Prior to the Red River campaign, ten thousand Federals were stationed in Texas, from Brownsville to Matagorda Bay. This number dropped to a little more than four thousand by May 1864. Colonel George W. Bailey of the Ninety-Ninth Illinois submitted a report on 15 June describing the withdrawal from Matagorda Bay. All valuables, including the heavy guns captured at

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<sup>33</sup>S. C. Jones, Reminiscences of the Twenty-second Iowa Volunteer Infantry (Iowa City, Iowa, 1907), 64; Switzer, “Reminiscences,” 46, ORA, series 1, vol. 34, pt. 1, pp. 885-86.

<sup>34</sup>Alwyn Barr, “Texas Coastal Defense, 1861-1865,” Southwestern Historical Quarterly 65 (July 1965): 29; Casdorff, Prince John Magruder, 279; ORA, series 1, vol. 34, pt. 3, pp. 779, 833-34.

Fort Esperanza, were removed. Bailey then ordered the fort to be blown up. The following day Captain James Marmion, who commanded a small fleet of gunboats that patrolled Matagorda Bay, dispatched the John F. Carr to take possession of Saluria, the small town just west of the fort. By July, Matagorda Bay and its environs were under Confederate control. The only position still held by the Federals in Texas was Brownsville, occupied by about three thousand men.<sup>35</sup>

One can only contemplate the possibilities associated with the Rio Grande Expedition. Some of the Union generals associated with the campaign believed that golden opportunities were lost and that Texas would have fallen in 1864. General Dana, who assumed command of the Thirteenth Army Corps in January 1864, supported more offensive action in Texas. On 9 February 1864 he stated that “the inactive policy which has prevailed in Texas since its occupation, both here and on the Rio Grande, has resulted in the loss of good opportunities, and tended, in some degree, to impair the impetuosity of this fine body of troops, and has decidedly increased the morale and confidence of the rebels.”<sup>36</sup>

Texas Unionist Gilbert D. Kingsbury of Brownsville also became frustrated at the lack of offensive action undertaken by the Federal forces on the coast. In a lengthy letter to the editor of the New York Herald, Kingsbury stated that “Some of our Loyal Texans feel disheartened that the Army does not occupy the interior this winter. It is known that

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<sup>35</sup>Marmion, Texas Soldier and Marine, 25; ORA, series 1, vol. 34, pt. 1, pp. 189, 1011; ORA, series 1, vol. 34, pt. 4, p. 686.

<sup>36</sup>ORA, series 1, vol. 34, pt. 2, pp. 278-280.

if a force was to be thrown into San Antonio or Austin from Indianola or Saluria, and either of those places held and the line from the coast to the place thus occupied be kept open, nearly the whole of the people of Western Texas would take the stand of loyalty which they have desired to do for months.” Later in the same letter, Kingsbury became more emphatic: “Great God if we could occupy a place in the interior like San Antonio-Austin or any other place where would our spoils of returning loyalty end. From Indianola or Saluria, both in our possession, the distance is 150 miles. That is of course the point from which the State should be pierced. Now a line of our Army from Indianola or Saluria to Austin or San Antonio, this 150 miles of rich country would restore all Western and Northern Texas.”<sup>37</sup>

Another prominent Texas Unionist, Thomas H. DuVal, a former federal judge from Austin, also became demoralized at the lack of offensive action. Living in Brownsville with other Texas refugees, DuVal wrote that “I am heartsick and weary. There is no sign of advance into the interior. On the contrary 4 regiments have been taken to Louisiana from Indianola and one has gone from here North on furlough. Texas is evidently abandoned for months to come, except for a point or two on the Coast. To divert sad thoughts, I am deep in the mysteries of Les Miserables.” About a week later, DuVal became more dejected: “I am suffering, mentally, the torments of the damned, and feel that death would be welcome in spite of all darkness and mystery beyond it. How gladly I would take my place with a force marching towards Austin, and fight to get back

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<sup>37</sup>Gilbert D. Kingsbury to the editor of the New York Herald, 1 March 1864, Gilbert D. Kingsbury Papers, 1855-1874, Center for American History.



home.”<sup>38</sup>

Dana, fearing that the rebels might take the offensive, believed Union inactivity had allowed the Confederates to fortify the middle Texas coast. As a result, Federal positions on the coast needed to be strengthened. Dana also mentioned that as a matter of honor, the Union points on the coast should be held because some Texans in occupied areas had taken the oath of allegiance to the United States. To abandon these people would place their lives in peril. When the Federals pulled out of Indianola in March 1864, General Warren announced to the citizens of that town that if they sought the protection of the Federal government, they would need to leave with the evacuating troops.<sup>39</sup>

Dana’s concern for the declining fighting spirit of his men was indeed well-founded. Many of the regiments serving in the Rio Grande Expedition had fought in some of the major campaigns of the war. The recent idleness and inactivity led to two notable incidents. One event took place at Fort Esperanza on Matagorda Island. It involved the Fourteenth Rhode Island Regiment of the Corps d’ Afrique. On 30 March 1864 the Twenty-second Iowa was ordered to guard the Fourteenth Rhode Island because they had threatened to mutiny. The main cause of the mutiny was that black troops were paid seven dollars a month compared to thirteen dollars for white soldiers. Another cause for the unrest was the long stretches that soldiers went without pay. One Iowa soldier

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<sup>38</sup>Diary entries of Thomas H. DuVal, 23, 29 February 1864, *Diaries of Thomas H. DuVal, 1857-1879*, Center for American History.

<sup>39</sup>ORA, series 1, vol. 34, pt. 2, pp. 278-280; Malsch’s Indianola, 287.

stationed at Fort Esperanza noted that it was not until March that he had finally received four months of back pay. Although most of the Fourteenth Rhode Island returned to duty, fifty to sixty of them were court-martialed and sentenced to short jail terms at Fort Jefferson in the Tortuga Islands off the southern tip of Florida. Thirteen of the ringleaders were hanged at Fort Esperanza on 5 June 1864.<sup>40</sup>

Another incident occurred at Fort Brown in Brownsville. This event involved desertion by a Federal soldier. The soldier, Pedro Garcia, was part of the First Texas Cavalry Regiment. Since their arrival in the fall of 1863, the lack of discipline in the cavalry regiments, but especially the Second Texas Cavalry, was the talk of the Union army at Brownsville. The creator of the regiment, Colonel Robert L. Haynes, a Brownsville resident, had recruited most of the regiment from Mexico. They were Mexican-Texans who had fled across the river because of the Confederate occupation of Brownsville. An estimated 958 Mexican-Texans fought for the Union, most of them serving in the Second Texas Cavalry.<sup>41</sup>

An estimated two hundred men deserted from the Second Texas Cavalry in the first half of 1864. Several problems explain the high desertion rate: the lack of supplies, especially uniforms; months of inactivity; and rumors that Texas cavalry regiments were

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<sup>40</sup>Jones, Reminiscences of the Twenty-second Iowa, 62; Winsor, Texas in the Confederacy, 135; ORA, series 1, vol. 34, pt. 3, p. 804.

<sup>41</sup>Edward G. Miller, Captain Edward G. Miller of the 20<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin: His War, 1862-1865 (Fayetteville, Ark.: Washington County Historical Society, 1960), 22; Benjamin F. McIntyre, Federals on the Frontier: The Diary of Benjamin F. McIntyre, 1862-1864 ed. Nannie M. Tilley (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1963), 355-360; Jerry D. Thompson, Vaqueros in Blue and Gray (Austin: Presidial Press, 1976), 81-89.

to be sent to Louisiana. In addition, many of the soldiers served close to home and wanted to visit their families.<sup>42</sup>

Some believed that the court-martial of Private Garcia would curtail the desertion problem. On 10 May 1864 Garcia, while on sentry duty, left his post before being properly relieved. Another incident, which occurred on 26 May, reported Garcia as deserting "from Scout" while part of the Independent Company, Partisan Rangers, attached to the First Texas Cavalry. As a result, Garcia was arrested and charged with desertion. The presiding officer of the court-martial, Captain Edward G. Miller of the Twentieth Wisconsin, stated that because of "the great number of desertions from the Texas Cavalry Volunteers and the large amount of government property lost," an example should be made of Garcia. Found guilty of desertion, he was sentenced to be "shot to death with musketry." The date of the execution was set for 27 June 1864.<sup>43</sup>

Descriptive accounts of the execution were given by Captain Miller of the Twentieth Wisconsin and Lieutenant Benjamin F. McIntyre of the Nineteenth Iowa Infantry Regiments. Miller, who presided over the court-martial, pointed out that "The

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<sup>42</sup>Thompson, Vaquerso in Blue and Gray, 91-92.

<sup>43</sup>Miller, Captain Edward G. Miller of the Twentieth Wisconsin, 22; Tilley, Federals on the Frontier, 355-56; Thompson, Vaqueros in Blue and Gray, 90-91; Robert I. Alotta, Civil War Justice: Union Army Executions under Lincoln (Shippensburg, Pa.: Beidel Printing House, Inc., 1989), 115, 205; List of Soldiers Executed by United States Military Authorities during the late war, 8-9, Proceedings of U.S. Army Courts-Martial and Military Commissions of Union Soldiers Executed by Military Authorities, 1861-1866, Record Group 94, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Microfilm M1523, Roll #1); Muster Roll, Company E, First Texas Cavalry, Compiled Service Records of Volunteer Union Soldiers Who Served in Organizations from the State of Texas, Record Group 94, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Microfilm M402, Roll #3, frame 889).

ceremony was well-conducted and impressive. The man met death like a soldier--deserter that he was. I believe that it is characteristic of the Mexican people that when death is inevitable, they meet it with unconcern." McIntyre gave a less noble description of the execution. He stated, "The word was given. Make ready. Aim. A dozen rifles were aimed at his breast. It was a moment of painful suspense and was felt by the vast throng--a moment and a human life would be ended. Each one who gazed upon the spectacle I doubt not felt the cold blood curdling in his veins and would prefer never again to witness an alike exhibition." The troops at Fort Brown were ordered to march by and view the body. Private Warner Dewhurst of the Thirty-eight Iowa Infantry Regiment reflected after viewing the body that "It was a sight no man delights in seeing."<sup>44</sup>

Perhaps the most unusual case of desertion from the Union army involved a former Confederate soldier named Adrian Vidal. In the fall of 1863, Vidal commanded a Confederate unit called Vidal's Partisan Rangers, serving under General Bee in the lower Rio Grande Valley. Bee ordered Vidal's men to sentry duty at the mouth of the Rio Grande. Bee then sent two men to order Vidal and his men back to Fort Brown. Only one of these men returned, reporting to Bee that Vidal and his men had mutinied. When Bee heard of this, he feared that Vidal and the sixty men he led would plunder Brownsville. Bee waited for three days, but an attack never materialized. Vidal instead bypassed Brownsville, plundering ranches further up the Rio Grande. By 29 October

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<sup>44</sup>Tilley, Federals on the Frontier, Miller, Captain Edward G. Miller of the 20<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin, 22; Allan C. Ashcraft, "The Union Occupation of the lower Rio Grande Valley during the Civil War," Texas Military History 8 (No. 1, 1970): 18-19.

1863 Vidal and his rangers killed ten people.<sup>45</sup>

Bee, while waiting in Brownsville for Vidal's attack, sent couriers out on the 26<sup>th</sup> to recall three companies of the Thirty-third Texas Cavalry. They arrived on the 29<sup>th</sup> and Bee ordered them to pursue Vidal. Vidal, however, had crossed over into Mexico. It was believed that Vidal joined with the infamous Mexican bandit Juan Cortina. Cortina, though, under orders from Tamaulipas governor Manuel Ruiz, captured twenty of Vidal's men, but Vidal eluded capture.<sup>46</sup>

Vidal's mutiny occurred for several reasons. Since the summer of 1863, Vidal had requested various supplies for his men, but he had never received them. In addition, Vidal had formed some sort of alliance with Texas Unionists in Matamoros and perhaps tried to seize Brownsville in anticipation of the landing of the Union Rio Grande Expedition. Finally, some argue that Vidal wanted only to plunder the nearly one million dollars in supplies at Fort Brown, knowing that the garrison had only about nineteen men. Whatever his motives, they were frustrated by the return of the Thirty-third Texas Cavalry. Thus ended the Confederate phase of Vidal's military career.<sup>47</sup>

Three weeks after the Federal occupation of Brownsville, Vidal joined the ranks

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<sup>45</sup>Marcus J. Wright, comp., Texas in the Civil War, 1861-1865, ed. Harold B. Simpson (Hillsboro, Tex.: Hill Junior College Press, 1965), 163; Robert Hoekstra, "A Historical Study of the Texas Ports during the Civil War" (M.A. thesis, Texas Agricultural and Industrial College, 1951), 90; Milo Kearney and Anthony Knopp, Boom and Bust: The Historical Cycles of Matamoros and Brownsville (Austin: Eakin Press, 1991), 126; ORA, series 1, vol. 36, pt. 1, pp. 447-49.

<sup>46</sup>ORA, series 1, vol. 36, pt. 1, p. 449; Thompson, Vaqueros in Blue and Gray, 75.

<sup>47</sup>Wright, Texas in the War, 163; ORA, series 1, vol. 36, pt. 1, p. 449; Thompson, Vaqueros in Blue and Gray, 72-75; Kearney and Knopp, Boom and Bust, 126.

of the United States Army with the rank of captain. His men, about ninety in all, were now called Vidal's Independent Partisan Rangers. They were attached to the Second Texas Cavalry. On 30 May 1864 Vidal resigned from the army. Vidal was not bothered by life in the cavalry but by the constant paperwork associated with the job of being a company commander. Not being able to speak or read English made that part of his job nearly impossible. Colonel Haynes, commander of the Second Texas Cavalry, recommended that Major General Francis Herron, commander at Fort Brown, accept Vidal's resignation. On 9 July department headquarters in New Orleans approved Vidal's resignation. Before Vidal received news of his honorable discharge, he deserted to Mexico with sixty men on 19 June. As a result, the army revoked his honorable discharge.<sup>48</sup>

Of the ninety men serving with Vidal, only twenty-three served for the remainder of the war. A shoot-on-sight order was issued for Vidal. While hiding in Mexico, Vidal joined the Juaristas. The Imperialists finally captured, court-martialed, and executed the young captain. Because of the civil wars in both the United States and Mexico, Vidal came into contact with four armies, compiling one of the most unusual military records in the annals of the Civil War.<sup>49</sup>

Although supply shortages and low pay contributed to desertions, mutiny, and low

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<sup>48</sup>ORA, series 1, vol. 34, pt. 4, p. 685; Thompson, Vaqueros in Blue and Gray, 77-78.

<sup>49</sup>Frank H. Smyrl, "Texans in the Union Army, 1861-1865," Southwestern Historical Quarterly 65 (October 1961): 240; Thompson, Vaqueros in Blue and Gray, 78-79.

morale in general, news from the battlefield also affected a soldier's fighting spirit. One soldier in the Twenty-third Iowa Infantry Regiment, Silas A. Shearer, received discouraging news from home while stationed at Fort Esperanza. In one letter to his wife, he discussed his concern about his three brothers fighting with General Grant in Tennessee: "I expect that Elias and Barty was in that fight that General Grant had. The news is here that a part of the fifth Iowan was taken Prisoners [sic] and they were all in one Division. If you know how they got threw [sic] or anything about the fifth I want you to let me know." About a week later, Shearer wrote another letter to his wife in which he conveyed to her a family tragedy: "I received a letter from Elias today and it was Sorrowful news to me. It announced the death of Barty and George M. Shearer. It appears as though my brothers has [sic] bad luck. He has fought the Rebs at a great many places and was wounded once. From all accounts he was a brave soldier there. Devis made a charge and was repulsed by a flank movement. The Rebs masked the forces on the right and the right fell back. Then when the two boys was killed Lias said they had to fall back to the support or be gobbled. Enough on this subject for it nearly brakes [sic] my heart to think of it."<sup>50</sup>

The collapse of the Red River campaign in Louisiana also had a notable impact. One Union soldier in Brownsville made this analysis on 21 May 1864: "Since the retreat of General Banks's army to Alexandria, and the reported retreat of General Steele's forces toward Little Rock, the rebel traders here, have taken new life, and are sending

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<sup>50</sup>Silas I. Shearer, Dear Companion: The Civil War Letters of Silas I. Shearer, ed. Harold D. Brinkman (Davenport, Iowa: Harold D. Brinkman, 1995), 65-66.

enormous quantities of goods to Texas through Eagle Pass and Laredo. Goods find their way into Texas by the upper river crossings as they formerly did through Brownsville.” Following this depressing news came uplifting rumors on 29 May that General Ulysses S. Grant had captured Richmond, taking nearly three thousand Confederates prisoner. This latter report was typical of the false rumors that appear in wartime. Finally, news arrived to the Federals in Brownsville that Lincoln had been nominated for a second term as president. One Wisconsin soldier, greatly encouraged by this news, wrote in his diary the word “Bueno.”<sup>51</sup>

Lincoln’s faith in the expedition’s mission on the lower Rio Grande was reinforced by a proclamation ending the Union blockade of Brownsville. Announced on 18 February 1864, it did not reach Brownsville until 2 April. Lincoln named Charles Worthington as collector of customs for the port of Brownsville. Two days later Major General John A. McClernand, new commander of the Thirteenth Army Corps, stopped in Brownsville on an inspection tour of Union forces on the Texas coast. McClernand spoke to the men of Second Division in Brownsville, relating that he “felt proud of so noble a body of men and so gallant a line of officers.” The actions of both Lincoln and McClernand seemed to give the Federals on the Rio Grande a sense of permanency in their expedition on the Rio Grande.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup>Ashcraft, “Union Occupation of the lower Rio Grande Valley,” 17; Miller, Captain Edward G. Miller of the 20<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin, 22; Tilley, Federals on the Frontier, 357.

<sup>52</sup>Basler, CWAL, 7: 192-93; Tilley, Federals on the Frontier, 320-25; General Banks to General Halleck, 6 March 1864, Nathaniel P. Banks Papers, Center for American History, (Microfilm # 786.26, Roll 26B).



Despite this sense of permanency, the Rio Grande Expedition, at least the military portion of it, became anticlimactic after 1 January 1864. They controlled the Texas coast from the mouth of the Rio Grande to the Matagorda Peninsula. Although these soldiers did not have to worry about ducking minie balls, they occupied themselves with soldier-related activities. The Federals spent their time gathering wood for shelters, building a railroad from Brownsville to the coast, helping Unionists refugees, and distributing pamphlets that offered amnesty to repentant Rebels. On at least one occasion, a detachment of the Twentieth Wisconsin crossed the Rio Grande into Matamoros to protect the United States Consulate from warring Mexican factions.<sup>53</sup>

Since the occupation of Brownsville, hundreds of Texas refugees, including Texas Unionists, made their way to the Rio Grande. As previously mentioned, A. J. Hamilton established a provisional government in Brownsville. Judge J. B. McFarland established a provisional court, which convened at the Episcopal Church. Other refugees like Federal District Judge Thomas H. DuVal and well-known legislator John Hancock recruited troops for the Federal army and prodded Union authorities to launch an invasion of the Texas interior. The refugees also created a chapter of the Loyal League--an offshoot of the Republican Party--that met every Saturday at Brownsville's Market Hall. At one

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<sup>53</sup>Leonard Pierce to William Seward, 16 January 1864, Consular Despatches, Matamoros, Vol. 7, Consular Correspondence, 1864-1865, 150-51, Record Group 59, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; Simeon Barnett, A History of the Twenty-second Regiment Iowa Volunteer Infantry (Iowa City, Iowa: N. H. Brainerd, 1865), 14; Chester Barney, Recollections of Field Service with the Twentieth Iowa Infantry Volunteers (Davenport, Ind.: Gazette Job Rooms, 1865), 266-73; James M. Beverly, A History of the 91<sup>st</sup> Illinois Infantry, 1862-1865 (White Hall, Ill.: Pearce Print Company, 1913), 27; John A. Bering, Forty-eighth Ohio Veteran Volunteer Infantry (Hillsboro, Ohio: Highland News Office, 1880), 116; Miller, Captain Edward G. Miller of the 20<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin, 21.

meeting of the Loyal League, held on 11 February, members predicted the establishment of a loyal state government under Lincoln's Ten Percent Plan. They also endorsed the appointment of A. J. Hamilton as military governor of Texas.<sup>54</sup>

The Union soldiers also performed other duties as well. Units cleaned their rifles, drilled, stood guard, repaired their uniforms, policed their camps, and went on scouting expeditions. Being so close to the coast, many of them enjoyed, some for the first time, the leisure activities of living so close to the ocean. Private James Clark of the Thirty-fourth Iowa Regiment, stationed near Fort Esperanza on Matagorda Island, spoke of how he took his "company to the beach near by and made a charge on the surf. Bathing in the sea is very delightful. The salt water is more buoyant than fresh water, more cleansing, and a greater tonic to blood and nerves." Clark also loved "to ride up and down the beach on horseback on the hard, smooth beach. The sand packed hard and smooth by the beating of the surf makes a perfect course for riding." Two Ohio regiments spent much of their free time, like tourists today, collecting seashells and fishing for "mysterious looking animals from the brimy [sic] deep."<sup>55</sup>

The men who served with the Rio Grande Expedition occupied themselves with fairly typical vices as well as more spiritual activities. The proximity to water actually encouraged a religious revival among many of the regiments. W. H. Bentley of the

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<sup>54</sup>Loyal National Union Journal, 12 March, 21 May 1864 (hereafter cited as Union Journal), Thompson, Vaqueros in Blue and Gray, 84-93; New Orleans True Delta, 17 February 1864; Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph, 4 March 1864.

<sup>55</sup>James S. Clark, Life in the Middle West: Reminiscences of J. S. Clark (Chicago: Advance Publishing Company, 1916), 107-8; J. T. Woods, Services of the Ninety-Sixth Ohio Volunteers (Toledo: Blade Printing, 1874), 50-51; Bering, Forty-eighth Ohio, 116.

Seventy-seventh Illinois Infantry Regiment wrote that “It is a great mistake to suppose that soldiers, as a rule, have no respect for religion or religious teachers. On the contrary, a conscientious, God-fearing, faithful chaplain, is regarded by saint and sinner alike, as a great acquisition to any regiment.” Bentley also discussed the activities of one Reverend L. S. Chittenden of the Sixty-seventh Indiana Infantry Regiment. He became the spiritual leader for the soldiers in the Matagorda Bay region. The chaplain held a series of revival meetings which “resulted in the conversion of about five hundred.” Bentley then described the baptism of twenty-five Illinois soldiers in Matagorda Bay. “With the Chaplain at their head,” Bentley wrote, “the candidates joined hands and marched into the gently deepening water, perhaps a hundred yards from the shore, and there, while thousands of spectators sang an old familiar hymn, the rite of baptism was performed, after which the company rejoined hands and came singing to the shore.”<sup>56</sup>

Other soldiers spent their free time in less spiritual pursuits. Men of the Forty-eighth Ohio took advantage of their quartermaster’s ingenuity and drank homemade whiskey. Soldiers of the Twentieth Iowa, stationed at Brownsville, often went to Matamoros, where they met enemy soldiers “who seemed to congregate there for the purpose of gambling.” Most of the Union soldiers “imitated their example in this, and the monte tables were nightly surrounded by eager crowds of Federal, Confederate, and Mexican soldiers, who staked, lost, won, drank, quarreled and sometimes fought all night,

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<sup>56</sup>W. H. Bentley, History of the 77<sup>th</sup> Illinois Volunteer Infantry (Peoria, Ill.: Edward Hine, 1883), 240-41.

parting in the morning after losing all their ready money.”<sup>57</sup>

In addition to these moral and occasionally amoral activities, the men of the Thirteenth Army Corps published newspapers, a common practice among many Civil War units. At least two papers were printed by Union soldiers of the Rio Grande Expedition. The first one appeared in Indianola in December 1863 when Federal forces took over the town. It was called the Horn Extra and was published by E. M. Berry of the Thirty-third Illinois Infantry Regiment after his regiment discovered an abandoned printing press. A two-page paper that survived for at least four printings in late 1863 and early 1864, it was, according to Berry, “published semi-occasionally on the first full moon before hog-killing time.” The paper’s comical tone emerged through its presentation of camp news and reports of hardships in Confederate Texas. Other features included the regiment’s roster, an invitation to a temperance meeting, and information on where readers could get good cigars and edible fruit.<sup>58</sup>

The second paper, the Loyal National Union Journal, resembled the Horn Extra in many ways, except that it had a four-page format and a longer lifespan--twelve issues, of which at least eight have survived. Three men contributed to the publication of the Union Journal. G. G. Carman’s name appeared as editor on every issue, but E. F. Clewell and Theodore Steever also helped to produce what they mistakenly claimed to be “the first

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<sup>57</sup>Barney, Recollections of Field Service, 282; Bering, Forty-eighth Ohio, 116.

<sup>58</sup>Albert O. Marshall, Army Life: From a Soldier’s Journal (Joliet, Ill.: Chicago Legal News Company, 1884), 349-51; Bell I. Wiley, The Life of Billy Yank: The Common Soldier in the Civil War (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1952), 179-83; James Marten, “For the Army, the People, and Abraham Lincoln: A Yankee Newspaper in Occupied Texas,” Civil War History 39 (June 1993): 131.



# The Loyal National Union Journal.

G. G. CARMAN,

EDITOR.

Vol. 1

Brownsville, Texas, March 5, 1864.

No. 1

## The Union Journal,

Published at Brownsville, Texas, every Saturday.

Terms:—Single copies five cents. A liberal deduction made to Regiments, Companies and Dealers; taking one hundred or more copies. A limited amount of advertisements will be received.

We have started a paper which shall be devoted, so far as we can make it, to the interests of the army, the people, and the election of ABRAHAM LINCOLN to the next Presidency of our noble Republic.

We shall publish such official news and notices as will be permitted by the Major General Commanding.

We will give the latest dispatches that we can get from other papers.

Such attention will be paid to the local department, as will make the JOURNAL a welcome visitor in every camp, and of sufficient interest to warrant the soldier in sending it home.

We will puff nobody without sufficient cause.

We will publish short communications on interesting subjects.

We are in favor of the Union, the Constitution and the war.

We are in favor of reconstruction, and reduction in the price of tobacco.

We think Gillmore ought to take Charleston, and everybody ought to take the JOURNAL.

With the few introductory remarks as Vulliamy said after speaking five hours, we submit the paper for your approval, and shall measure our efforts in the future by your half-bushel of appreciation.

### A CHANGE OF BASE.

Had our most intimate friend, in 1860, told us that in 1864 we should be publishing a Lincoln paper in Texas,

at the most stubborn facts or imposing inconsistencies of time; so we are like mortar ground up in a mud mill and pressed through the little hole at the bottom into the moulder's hands. If we refuse to be crushed out we can stick to the side of the mill and dry there, and remain a clod of dead dirt. But unless we pass through the moulder's hands we shall never adorn an imposing edifice, never be part of an immortal monument or spire or arch, never find ourselves a momentary perch for the shadow of time. Now, will we be clods of dirt or regular bricks?

Bricks, you say. Then bricks be it. And corner-stones, key-stones, front-cos and arches will the great voluntee corps be in the new temple of free government—a house made with noble heads and loyal hearts, imperishable as truth and right.

In wisdom first appears the present tense; an hour which is not mere transition, but something for itself. We have fallen upon that hour. From the great past the inheritance of men's imaginations comes up to us in prophecy. So the ancients lived, in fact, but not in their own age, their minds were cast forward to the great to be. They were bodies climbing the earth, their souls wandering in the future. We can count the decades past in which men have as pertinaciously closed their eyes to the future and clamored for the glories of the dead past, and here again were men whose bodies cumbered the present, and whose souls were groping amid the funeral paraphernalia and gloom of buried centuries. But we can thank God that our souls and bodies live now. No departed grandeur of yesterday, no hopeful prophecy or pleasing delusion of to-morrow can turn our

ness of their flexible nature, life without honor. But the great think the cheery system of life and its noble examples worthy to be continued. This day leading a better—hour crowning hour with something higher—might and mind; the ushers, to each moment, of right and humanity's religion, this embodiment of purpose, this solid increment of hard won power—of what other stuff should our futurity be woven?

A new government formed is but the reflection of the spirit of the age; an old government is the controlling power of the age. It shapes the destinies, moulds the minds and forms the characters of its subjects. It is important, then, that the government be firm in honor, equal in justice, full of mercy, slow to anger, never revengeful, always willing to forgive, doing naught in malice. Such a government we have under President LINCOLN.

All his actions have been timely and well considered, never impulsive or premature. A tangled web of antagonisms, conflicting ideas and interests, the gathered hate and prejudice of years culminated at last in a mighty revolt was thrown into his hands three years ago. His courage, zeal, patriotism and never flagging energy have well nigh unravelled the heterogeneous mass, and from its perplexities he will bring a political system which shall be the model government of the world.

He shall be his own successor, and may the pleasurable labor of harmonizing the conquered elements of strife, in forming a more perfect Union atone, at least in part, for the soul-harrowing experiences of four years of war.

A Mexican news paper announces the arrival in Havana, of Maj. Gen. Preston of the confederate army. It was understood at Havana that he was on his way to Mexico, charged with a special mes-

Figure 5, Front page of the first edition of the Loyal National Union Journal



loyal paper in Texas.” Of the three men, only Clewell appeared on any roster of regiments occupying Texas. He served with the Nineteenth Iowa. It is not clear whether these three men were printers in civilian life, but the Union Journal certainly exhibited high journalistic standards. The printing supplies probably came from General Herron, commander at Fort Brown. An aide to the general sent his wife a New Year’s card “struck off by our boys on the General’s press.” Published weekly, the paper cost five cents a copy, and group rates were available for those regiments buying at least one hundred copies.<sup>59</sup>

Those items that appeared in the Union Journal reflected the desires and concerns of soldiers who had time on their hands and little to fear from battle. From the very first sentence in the first issue of the newspaper, the editors’ showed their determination to publish “a paper which shall be devoted to the interests of the army, the people and the election of ABRAHAM LINCOLN to the next Presidency of our noble Republic.” Within the parameters of this bold motto emerged three themes addressed by the writers. First, the paper recognized the contributions of the soldiers, defined their role in the war, and promoted their interest. Secondly, the paper had a political agenda that reflected the pro-Lincoln, prowar, and antislavery sentiment of its readers. Finally, the paper entertained the troops with funny stories about women, southerners, and other topics such

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<sup>59</sup>Union Journal, 5 March 1864; Marten, “Yankee Newspaper,” 132. The New Orleans Times, which copied some articles from the Union Journal, commented on the newspaper’s long name, but also pointed out that the Indianola Horn would contest its claim to being the first loyal paper in Texas. See also Jacob D. Brewster to Louisa Brewster, 31 December 1863, Brewster Papers, Center for American History.

as the weather, the people, and the usual camp gossip.<sup>60</sup>

The first issue promised to write such “official news and notices as will be permitted by the Major General commanding” as well as war news from more active areas such as Tennessee, Virginia, and New Orleans. The editors copied much of the war news from newspapers that arrived at the Fort Brown headquarters. The actions of General Grant, both militarily and socially, were covered closely. Soldierly conduct, both good and bad, received attention by the publishers. The editors complimented the “good work” of a young soldier serving as health officer for the Fort Brown garrison. Favorable comments were also made of Reverend F. B. Wolf, who distributed Bibles to the soldiers, thus encouraging the “deep religious feeling that pervades every regiment.” An important story that appeared in April mentioned the escape of seven soldiers of the Nineteenth Iowa from a Confederate prison in Tyler, Texas.<sup>61</sup>

One aspect of the military scene that the troops loved to read was bad news concerning the Confederacy. Stories appeared in the first issue that discussed fleeing refugees from besieged Charleston and soldiers deserting from Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia. Nearly five hundred Confederate prisoners “acknowledged the rebel cause hopelessly lost.” The following week the Union Journal mentioned the rumors that Jefferson Davis and his family were so destitute that they were forced to eat leather. The article concluded by pointing out that the Confederate president “has become drunken and

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<sup>60</sup>Union Journal, 5 March 1864.

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*, 5, 12, 19, 26 March, 2, 9 April, 21 May 1864; Marten, “Yankee Newspaper,” 133.

desperate.” An article that appeared in a May issue continued to report the deteriorating Confederate war effort. Refugees and deserters from Texas reported that “every man and boy capable of doing any kind of duty in the army” were impressed into the military, and that “the soldiers are sadly disheartened.” The article concluded by stating that “the last dollar and the last man have nearly come.”<sup>62</sup>

The editors of the Union Journal wanted to represent the interests of soldiers in more meaningful ways than just passing on war news. G. G. Carman waxed philosophic when he described history as a metaphorical structure built of human bricks. The Civil War offered the opportunity for Union soldiers to be “bricks--and corner-stones, key-stones frontices and arches will the great volunteer corps be in the new temple of free government--a house made with noble hands and loyal hearts, imperishable as truth and right.” Important work needed to be done: “We can thank God that our souls and bodies are alive now. To live now is to have lived forever. To be true now is to have been a peer of the nobles of all ages. To be false now is worse than never to have been born.”<sup>63</sup>

The men in the Union armies were, of course, the foundation of the war effort. The Union Journal pointed out that “the common soldier defended the great principles of government, and maintained the conditions on which all law and order is based.” They protected freedom of religion and ensured that “the children shall be taught--the people educated.” Federal troops suffered “cold and hunger and disease and death” in order that everyone in the United States “may be secure and happy.” For this, the nation owed the

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<sup>62</sup>Union Journal, 5, 12 March, 21 May 1864.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 5 March 1864.



common soldier a “debt of honor” which included treating the soldiers and their families, especially the widows and orphans, with respect and generosity.<sup>64</sup>

The Union Journal regularly reported the pride the men maintained in themselves, despite the fact that they were the Union’s most distant and isolated fighting force. On 19 March the Union Journal ran an emotion-filled article that described a flag-raising ceremony that occurred during the dedication of a soldiers’ cemetery at Brownsville. Brigade Commander John McNulta of the Ninety-fourth Illinois exclaimed, “Thus floats aloft the flag of our country, emblem of civilization and liberty. Protected by the blessings of Heaven and the stout hearts and strong arms of freemen, thus it shall ever float oer the bones of America’s Heroes!” During “peal after peal” of an artillery salute, “stern, silent and immovable, but with the lighting of enthusiasm sparkling like fire, in their eyes, stood the brave old veterans.” The troops then gave three cheers for the “stars and stripes” and three more for General Herron, their commanding officer. “This was all of it,” proclaimed the Journal. “Every man returned more loyal and patriotic.” Although there were civilian spectators at the ceremony, the article emphasized, in exaggerated terms, the deeper meaning the ceremony had for the soldiers. They were a distinct breed of men who deserved more respect than even the most patriotic citizens.<sup>65</sup>

The Union Journal promoted the political ideals of the Lincoln administration,

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<sup>64</sup>Ibid., 19 March 1864.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid; Muster Rolls of the Ninety-fourth Illinois Volunteer Infantry Regiment stationed at Brownsville, Texas dated April 1864, Compiled Records Showing Service of Military Units in Volunteer Union Organizations, Record Group 94, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Microfilm M594, Roll # 28).

especially in the area of emancipation. The fact that black troops served with the Rio Grande Expedition, and received praise from some of the men, was mentioned in several articles in the paper. The rhetoric in these articles about black soldiers hoped to convince the readers of the justice and inevitability of freeing the slaves.<sup>66</sup>

The paper also mentioned that this most controversial war aim was making progress in the North and even in occupied Louisiana--"the entire Union has undergone the process of inoculation" to the principles of emancipation and "negro equality." In two March articles, the Union Journal took a bold step, identifying with the newly freed slaves. In an article titled "Utopian," the writer explained that if he could be "transmuted from an editor to any other animal, all things considered," he "should choose a contraband." It would be, he reasoned, "commensurate with having the world cast at your feet in undisputed ownership," the "monarch of hidden possibilities which human prescience has never surveyed." The recent emancipation of the slaves was viewed as a rebirth by the paper for "a whole race of full grown men, women and children" who had been "born in a single day." The delights of their new freedom, but also beginning their lives anew, "who can think of all these things being new and fresh to his mind, without

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<sup>66</sup>Attached to the Rio Grande Expedition were the First Engineers and Sixteenth Infantry of the Corps d'Afrique. A private in the Thirty-seventh Illinois, describing the November landing of his regiment on Brazos Santiago, commented on the actions of black troops during the landing. The private observed the black troops and commented that the men were "waist, and often neck deep," as they struggled to carry equipment and supplies through the rough surf. The private noted that "the scales dropped from the eyes of some of the most rabid nigger-haters, and they had to acknowledge that a negro was just as good for soldiering." Michael A. Mullins, The Fremont Rifles, A History of the 37<sup>th</sup> Illinois Veteran Volunteer Infantry (Wilmington, N.C.: Broadfoot Publishing, 1990), 239-40.

envying the Freedmen?"<sup>67</sup>

Northerners who did not support the war effort, such as "Copperheads" and speculators, received considerable criticism in the Union Journal. One article stated that "The coppers are an accidental growth from some stray mental guano. Five years from now they will be as scarce as Egyptian mummies, and about as respectable." The last surviving issue of the paper attacked Northern speculators in Mexico who were illegally trading for cotton with the enemy. These men "stand without excuse before the bar of public opinion of the world. Oblivious to the dictates of law, honor and patriotism; acting upon the pretext that if they did not sustain the rebellion by supplying its commercial necessities somebody else would, they have bought from and sold to traitors as if they were loyal men." Such men ought to be punished; "they have bartered on, they have sold their principles, which to a well constituted mind, are beyond all money price, for lucre."<sup>68</sup>

Another group of Texas natives criticized by the Union Journal were those who joined the Federal troops in Brownsville to escape service in the Confederate army, persecution by Confederate authorities, or the worsening conditions on the Confederate homefront. Some of these refugees were quite prominent, and hundreds of Texans, white and Mexican, joined the First and Second Texas Cavalry Regiments. Although this latter activity seemed loyal and patriotic, soldiers who read the Union Journal regarded these refugees as Southerners first and as allies second. One correspondent for the Union

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<sup>67</sup>Union Journal, 12, 26, March 1864; Marten, "Yankee Newspaper," 135.

<sup>68</sup>Union Journal, 12, 19 March, 9 April, 21 May 1864.

Journal stated that “the best and meanest of mankind are in Brownsville. Here is the sneak in the most profound perfection, who deserted the rebels, and, of whom, he was the most blatant and persistent, now cringing and willing to take any oath. Everybody is a refugee, or, as they more properly say, renegade. Some have fled from the Southern Confederacy, some from their wives, some from their husbands, many from justice and all from a better country.” An editorial on 9 April derided Confederate deserters in Mexico who “continue to try to talk in favor of the rebellion,” but were really looking to make a quick dollar in the cotton trade. These deserters/refugees were accused of creating fabrications such as military success of the Confederacy or European recognition of the Confederacy. Overall, the paper believed that those who fled into Union lines did so for ulterior motives only.<sup>69</sup>

The Loyal National Union Journal was indeed a soldiers’ paper. The only civilians mentioned were the copperheads, refugees, Mexicans, and women, none of whom were making any significant contributions to the northern war effort. In contrast were the actions of the paper’s soldier-audience, who had fought and died for the ideals of emancipation and Union. In order to solidify the soldiers’ separate identity, the Union Journal attacked their enemies, from Northern traitors (copperheads) to the Confederate soldier in the field. The paper also supported the soldiers’ best friend, President Lincoln. The humor that appeared in the paper centered around life in camp to former battles, which indicated that only soldiers could poke fun at themselves; everyone else had to

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<sup>69</sup>Union Journal, 12, 19 March, 9 April, 7 May 1864; Frank H. Smyrl, “Texans in the Union Army, 1861-1865,” Southwestern Historical Quarterly 65 (October 1961):234-50.

respect and honor their contributions.<sup>70</sup>

Not everyone welcomed the publication of this newspaper. One loyal Texas Unionist commented that “The first No. of a paper, 6 to 10, called the “Loyal National Union Journal” with G. G. Carman’s name at its head. Who he is, or whence he came, I know not. But of all wretched and impotent attempts, in the form of a newspaper, that ever I saw, it takes the lead. It is to be hoped that this first No. will never reach the interior of the State. It is calculated to make loyal men desperate. It will give them the most erroneous impressions about the good sense and intelligence of the officers and soldiers composing the U.S. forces at this point. We must unite in a memorial to General Herron to suppress Carman, and put somebody else forward as his exponents of public sentiment and sense in Brownsville.”<sup>71</sup>

By June 1864 the Thirteenth Army Corps ceased to exist. Regiments of that corps were dispersed, mostly throughout the Nineteenth Army Corps. The failed Red River campaign had diminished the prestige of the Thirteenth Army Corps as it participated in the fourth and final attempted invasion of Texas. After that campaign, Banks still commanded the Department of the Gulf, but military operations were now under the jurisdiction of Major General E. R. S. Canby, who headed the new Union Trans-Mississippi Department, covering Texas, Arkansas, and Louisiana. Banks handled civil

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<sup>70</sup>Union Journal, 19 March 1864.

<sup>71</sup>Diary entry of Thomas H. DuVal, 5 March 1864, *Diaries of Thomas H. DuVal, 1857-1879*, Center for American History. By March 1864 DuVal had become exasperated at the lack of offensive action in Texas by Federal forces. This diary passage clearly shows that continuing frustration.

functions only.<sup>72</sup>

The appointment of Canby came as a relief to some loyal Texans. Thomas H. DuVal expressed relief at Banks' dismissal: "I went down there [Brownsville] with the most confident expectation of soon being home again. But instead of the invasion being made from that quarter, General Banks thought proper to employ all the forces he had in the late ill advised expedition up the Red River. Its disastrous consequences are well known to you. I was gratified to find that General Canby has been appointed to the supreme military command west of the Mississippi. With this I am satisfied, and so will the Union men of Texas be, for General Canby is well and favorably known to them as a gallant soldier and gentleman. I feel every confidence that success will attend him."<sup>73</sup>

In March 1864, Confederates in Texas sent an expedition to the lower Rio Grande Valley to drive the enemy from their state. The momentum of the war in Texas now turned in favor of the Confederates.

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<sup>72</sup>Harrington, Fighting Politician, 159-160; ORA, series 1, vol. 34, pt. 4, p. 610; Max L. Heyman, Jr., Prudent Soldier: A Biography of Major General E. R. S. Canby, 1817-1873 (Glendale, Calif.: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1959), 206; New Orleans Times, 18 May 1864.

<sup>73</sup>Thomas H. DuVal to James Guthrie, 30 May 1864, Diaries of Thomas H. DuVal, 1857-1879, Center for American History.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE CAVALRY OF THE WEST

On 22 December 1863, Major General John B. Magruder wrote a letter to the conscript officer in Austin, Colonel John S. “Rip” Ford. The letter suggested that Ford undertake a secret campaign to drive the Federals out of Brownsville and restore the cotton trade through that city. Magruder wanted Ford to make a feint toward the coast, thus creating confusion among the enemy as to his true objective, Brownsville. Ford and Magruder had received appeals from Brownsville citizens to come to the rescue. With this public pressure, in mind, Magruder relieved Ford of conscript duty and ordered him to San Antonio to begin organizing the “Cavalry of the West.”<sup>1</sup> Ford had, in the words of a biographer, “a brilliant though erratic career.” He arrived in Texas in 1836 shortly after the Texas Revolution. For the next thirty years he served as a doctor, lawyer, journalist, surveyor, leader of the Texas annexation movement, adjutant in the Mexican War, Texas Ranger captain, and colonel in the Confederate cavalry. During the Mexican War, Ford

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<sup>1</sup>John Salmon Ford, “Memoirs of John S. Ford and Reminiscences of Texas History from 1836-1888,” 8 vols., Center for American History, University of Texas, Austin, 5:1007-1008 (hereafter cited as “Memoirs”); Bruce S. Cheeseman, ““Let us have 500 good determined Texans’: Richard King’s Account of the Union Invasion of South Texas, November 12, 1863, to January 20, 1864,” Southwestern Historical Quarterly 101 (July 1997): 86; James Irby, Backdoor at Bagdad: The Civil War on the Rio Grande (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1977), 30; U.S. War Department, War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, 128 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), series 1, vol. 36, pt. 2, pp. 525-35 (hereafter cited as ORA).

acquired his nickname “Rip” while serving as a surgeon for a Texas Ranger regiment under Colonel John C. Hays. During the campaign against Mexico City, he signed death certificates, putting “Rest in Peace” after the deceased soldier’s name. As the number of dead increased, he shortened it to “R.I.P.” From then on Ford was called “Rip.”<sup>2</sup>

An example of the public pressure placed upon Magruder is clear in an article that appeared in an Austin newspaper. The Austin State Gazette stated that “The paper learns from a gentleman who left Laredo last Saturday that things are quiet in that vicinity. Roma was sacked by Mexican robbers and not by Abolition soldiers. Laredo is considered safe, and large quantities of cotton are being crossed there. Benavides is in good spirits, determined to defend Laredo at all hazards; but is extremely anxious to be re-inforced. It is the prevailing wish on the Rio Grande that Col. Ford should be sent there; his presence, it is said, would infuse confidence and new life into soldiers and civilians.”<sup>3</sup>

By late December 1863, Magruder still thought the Federals remained committed to the offensive in Texas. The inactivity of the enemy possibly meant that they were

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<sup>2</sup>William John Hughes, Rebellious Ranger: Rip Ford and the Old Southwest (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964), 243-45; Stephen B. Oates, “John S. “Rip” Ford, Prudent Cavalryman, C.S.A.,” Southwestern Historical Quarterly 64 (January 1961): 290-91.

<sup>3</sup>Austin State Gazette, 23 December 1863. The man the article referred to was probably Henry Clay Davis, founder of Rio Grande City and a resident of Roma. San Antonio resident Mary Maverick wrote a letter to her son Lewis in which she stated that “H. Clay Davis an old friend of ours and resident at Roma passed thro [sic] here to Austin to get Ford to go down and join Benavides on the Rio Grande.” Mary Maverick to Lewis Maverick, 13 December 1863, Maverick Family Papers, Center for American History (hereafter cited as Maverick Family Papers).



waiting for the arrival of reinforcements. Fearing a possible spring offensive, Magruder boldly decided that he would take the offensive. He needed an officer with battlefield experience, organizational skills, and a knowledge of South Texas. Ford, who accepted the surrender of Fort Brown in 1861, seemed the logical choice. On 27 December, Ford received orders from Magruder to organize the Confederate Rio Grande Expedition to drive the enemy out of Brownsville. When Ford arrived in San Antonio, he began recruiting from among conscript-exempt Texans. To insure that Ford had sufficient men for the expedition, Magruder gave Ford command of all troops at San Antonio, including those soldiers to the south and west of that city.<sup>4</sup>

Ford immediately issued a proclamation to the people of Texas, imploring them to come to the front and aid in expelling the enemy from the soil of Texas:

Persons desiring to go into service will report to me at San Antonio, without delay, where they will be subsisted and their horses foraged. Those not belonging to companies will be organized here. Companies already organized are requested to report for duty immediately.

It is highly important that the expedition be organized and placed in the field at once.

The people of the West are invited to turn out. They will be defending their own homes. Shall it be said that a mongrel force of abolitionists, negroes, plundering Mexicans, and perfidious renegades have been allowed to murder and rob us with impunity? Shall the pages of history record the disgraceful fact, that Texans have tamely and basely submitted to these outrages, and suffered the brand of dishonor to be inflicted upon an unresisting people? For the honor of the state, for the sake of the glorious memories of the past, the hopes of the future, you are called upon to rally to the standard and to wash out the stains of invasion by the blood of your ruthless enemies.

John S. Ford

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<sup>4</sup>Ford, "Memoirs," 5:1010, 1035; Oates, "John S. Ford," 299; ORA, series 1, vol. 26, pt. 2, pp. 525-26.

Colonel, Commanding<sup>5</sup>

Ford believed the force that would rally to him would make him the Confederate David who would march into the Rio Grande Valley to slay the Union Goliath. Men quickly responded to Ford's proclamation, and his army grew daily. Even women grew enthusiastic over the upcoming military expedition. Citizen groups in San Antonio gathered supplies to give to the chief quartermaster of the campaign, Captain C. H. Merritt. Ford's assistant, Major A. G. Dickinson, went to nearby towns to gather arms and ammunition. Contributions were collected in Austin to help fund the expedition. An article in an Austin newspaper had an article titled "Contributions towards Col. Ford's Expedition."<sup>6</sup>

Besides the volunteers that responded to his call to arms, Ford also had under his command two ranger battalions from Blanco County, Colonel S. B. Baird's Fourth Arizona Cavalry. Despite its name, most of the men from this regiment were from Texas. Once the expedition got under way, Ford would be joined by two companies near Corpus Christi. Major Mat Nolan of the Second Texas Cavalry and Captain A. J. Ware of San Patricio would join Ford as he moved south. Once Ford reached the Rio Grande, soldiers

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<sup>5</sup>Ford, "Memoirs," 6:11; John Salmon Ford, Rip Ford's Texas, ed. Stephen B. Oates (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1963), 344. The "mongrel force of abolitionists, negroes, plundering Mexicans, and perfidious renegades" Ford referred to was the column that invaded Brownsville, which included two black regiments and the First Texas Cavalry led by Edmund J. Davis. This regiment contained Mexicans and Texas Unionists, including Davis. T. R. Fehrenbach, Lone Star: A History of Texas and Texans (New York: American Legacy Press, 1983), 378.

<sup>6</sup>Ford, "Memoirs," 6:11; Ford, Rip Ford's Texas, 344; ORA, series 1, vol. 36, pt. 2, pp. 540-41; Jerry Don Thompson, Vaqueros in Blue and Gray (Austin: Presidial Press, 1976), 102; Austin State Gazette, 23 December 1863.

under Captain George H. Giddings at Eagle Pass and Colonel Santos Benavides at Laredo would join him.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the help from regular Confederate units in the field, the bulk of Ford's command came from men exempt from conscription. These men enlisted for short terms with the understanding that they would not be ordered to serve outside the state. In enlisting men for his campaign, the colonel stated that he would enlist any man he could without violating "law and propriety." His view of both narrowed as enthusiasm for the campaign began to wear off. One officer sarcastically stated, "Fifty-seven children have joined my battalions." Ford set the lower age of recruitment at fifteen but did not question good-sized youngsters about their age. In thirty days, the Cavalry of the West had in its ranks some thirteen hundred men and boys. Ford wrote Magruder that he anticipated another thousand to join before taking the field.<sup>8</sup>

Until mid-March 1864, Ford immersed himself in the concurrent tasks of supply procurement, staff organization, and operations of the units under his command already in the field. He sent orders to Colonel Benavides at Laredo to limit his activities to defensive operations and create the impression that the forces gathering at San Antonio were to be sent to Indianola on the coast. Benavides was then directed to gather supplies at Fort Merrill (on the Nueces River) or further south near Sal del Rey, a salt lake located about fifty miles northwest of Brownsville. Benavides responded by pointing out that he

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<sup>7</sup>Ford, Rip Ford's Texas, 346; Hughes, Rebellious Ranger, 213; ORA, series 1, vol. 26, pt. 1, pp. 529-31.

<sup>8</sup>Oates, "John S. Ford," 299; Fehrenbach, Lone Star, 378; Hughes, Rebellious Ranger, 213; ORA, series 1, vol. 26, pt. 1, pp. 525-26.

had no specie with which to purchase supplies, but if Ford sent his chief commissary officer with funds, he could easily procure the supplies in Mexico.<sup>9</sup>

Benavides reported a serious obstacle, supply shortages and insufficient funds to obtain them. He complained that not only were his horses starving, but his men had not been paid in eighteen months. The starvation he mentioned was due to the severe drought that hit Texas in 1863. Richard King, whose ranch near Corpus Christi became a center of military activity, informed Ford that he would supply the Rio Grande Expedition with all the beef it needed. King went on to point out that “The grass is as bad as it gets here. We Western people are, in fact, in a starving condition.”<sup>10</sup>

As the winter of 1863 became the spring of 1864, the initial enthusiasm for the enterprise declined. As supplies became scarce, many recruits deserted. Despite the desertions, Ford remained optimistic. He continued to urge the people to have faith and support them “in the name of patriotism, of liberty, and all that is dear to man.” He then offered fifty dollars apiece to any man who would enlist to “defend their homes and property, their wives and their little ones against the brutal assaults of an enemy who respects neither age, sex or condition, who plunder the homestead.” Ford stemmed the desertion problem and by mid-March had nearly thirteen hundred poorly armed troops ready to march south. “With the help of God,” he hoped to drive the Yankees into the

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<sup>9</sup>Orders from Colonel John S. Ford to Colonel Santos Benavides, San Antonio, 28 December 1863, Collection of Military Correspondence, Daughters of the Confederacy Museum, Austin, Texas (hereafter cited as Military Correspondence); Ford, “Memoirs,” 6:1039-42; ORA, series 1, vol. 53, pt. 1, p. 922.

<sup>10</sup>Richard King to Colonel John S. Ford, San Patricios, Texas, 30 January 1864, Military Correspondence; Irby, Backdoor at Bagdad, 31; Hughes, Rebellious Ranger, 215.

Gulf.<sup>11</sup>

Ford recounted the difficulties he had in regard to his inability to take to the field sooner: “I regret not having been able to take to the field. I have had serious obstacles to surmount. Exhausted resources, a population almost drained of men subject to military duty, oppositions from rivalry, and the nameless disagreeable retardations incident to an undertaking of this character are all well known to the major general commanding.” The rivalry Ford referred to involved Colonel S. B. Baird of the Fourth Arizona Cavalry. This regiment was assigned to the Cavalry of the West, but Baird, who held a regular commission in the Confederate army, believed he outranked Ford and refused to serve under him. Baird eased the situation by obtaining a transfer, and command of the unit fell to Lieutenant Colonel Daniel Showalter.<sup>12</sup>

On 17 March 1864, the men and boys of the Cavalry of the West mounted their horses and rode through the sun-baked plaza in front of the Alamo. Old Rip was in the lead, wearing a black hat and sword sash. When it became public knowledge that most of the thirteen hundred cavalymen were draft exempts, old men and young boys, a newspaper reported that “Old Abe will find that he has undertaken an almost endless task

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<sup>11</sup>San Antonio Weekly Herald, 19 March 1864; Ford, “Memoirs,” 6:11-12; ORA, series 1, vol. 34, pt. 2, pp. 946-47, 1074-75.

<sup>12</sup>Ford, “Memoirs,” 6:1036; Fehrenbach, Lone Star, 378-79; Hughes, Rebellious Ranger, 215; ORA, series 1, vol. 34, pt. 2, pp. 961-62. Although Ford was always addressed as “Colonel,” he was never commissioned by the Confederate War Department with that rank. For some reason he twice refused to hold regimental elections that would have made him colonel. Nevertheless, he claimed throughout the war the rank of colonel of cavalry, C.S.A., and his superiors recognized him as such. Ford, Rip Ford’s Texas, 346.

to exterminate the seeds of the rebellion. As fast as he kills one rebel, a dozen spring from his ashes.”<sup>13</sup>

A descriptive account of the anxious months prior to the start of the Confederate Rio Grande Expedition can be found in the letters of a San Antonio resident named Mary Maverick. Mary had four sons serving in the Confederate army, but many of the letters were addressed to one of them, Captain Lewis Maverick of the Thirty-second Texas Cavalry Regiment. In one letter Mary mentioned that “Col. Ford is still here, expecting to get off every day. We hear nothing from the Rio Grande below except that they expect an attack and are fortifying very strongly. The Yankees beat us with the pick and spade, don’t they? Col. Ford told me that he had never positively ascertained whether the enemy were 2 or 5000 strong at Brownsville, accounts so conflict.”<sup>14</sup>

Although Mary’s early letters were a bit lighthearted in nature, they gradually became more serious in tone. In February, Mary stated that “Our town was thrown into great excitement by an express from Benevides to the effect that 1800 cavalry of the enemy had left Brownsville, probably for this place. Meetings were called and it was determined to barricade the streets, and money was raised to defend the city, but nothing has yet been done, and the enemy must have gone elsewhere. It may be towards Victoria or only to steal beef. Which way do you think the Yankees intend to move? They have

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<sup>13</sup>Houston Daily Telegraph, 13 February 1864; Ford, Rip Ford’s Texas, 352; Fehrenbach, Lone Star, 379; Hughes, Rebellious Ranger, 216; Ralph A. Wooster, Texas and Texans in the Civil War (Austin: Eakin Press, 1995), 136.

<sup>14</sup>Mary Maverick to Lewis Maverick, 15 January and 2 February 1864, Maverick Family Papers.

caught 8 deserters and two were taken to Goliad.”<sup>15</sup>

A couple of weeks before the Cavalry of the West left San Antonio, the secrecy of their mission had been exposed by some San Antonio residents. B. F. Dye, a friend of Lewis Maverick, pointed out in a letter that “Judge Stribling, Fisk and Peyton Smith left this place three or four weeks since pretending to have business in Mexico but last evening a gentleman received a letter from Matamoros stating that Stribling and others had joined the federals at Brownsville and that Stribling told the Yankees that Ford was in San Antonio with four or five hundred men and also gave them other information in regard to our expected movements.” Mary Maverick confirmed Dye’s account of Stribling’s activities in Brownsville: “Stribbling has been heard of in Brownsville advising the enemy to take this place, and that they would not have over 400 men to fight and that many of our troops would desert to join them upon their advance into this country. Benevides sent an express 2 days ago to say that 2500 of the enemy were advancing up the Rio Grande for Eagle Pass.” A week later, Mary continued to describe traitorous activities: “Stribbling has gone to New Orleans, suppose to insist on the authorities sending a force to take this place, and this western country.”<sup>16</sup>

Despite the lack of secrecy, Ford’s men were still in high spirits. As they marched south, the Confederate cavalry began singing “The Yellow Rose of Texas.” As they moved into the drought-ridden Texas countryside, dust from the column choked away the

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<sup>15</sup>Mary Maverick to Lewis Maverick, 7 February 1864, Maverick Family Papers.

<sup>16</sup>B. F. Dye to Lewis Maverick, 4 March 1864; Mary Maverick to Lewis Maverick, 6, 13 March 1864, both in Maverick Family Papers.

singing. Fortunately for the Texans, Ford's chief of staff was Major Felix Blucher, grandnephew of Field Marshal Blucher of Waterloo fame. Ford had requested Blucher's service because "He has been surveyor for many years in the country between the Nueces and the Rio Grande, and is thoroughly acquainted with the geography and topography of that section." With these qualifications, Blucher found with remarkable skill the very scarce grass and water of South Texas and became a valuable asset to the expeditionary force.<sup>17</sup>

The line of march for the Confederates carried them to a point near Pleasanton, about forty miles south of San Antonio. The soldiers then moved on to the meandering Atascosa River to its confluence with the Frio and the Nueces. After a week of marching, Ford arrived at Camp San Fernando on the Nueces, about 140 miles south of San Antonio, near Corpus Christi. Major Mat Nolan of the Second Texas Cavalry commanded this camp. While Ford's men moved south, cotton had been stored along the route at different points for the purpose of financing the campaign. Cotton could be sold for cash, and cash could buy the Confederates what they needed to fight a long campaign.<sup>18</sup>

While at Camp San Fernando, Ford received a courier from Colonel Benavides at Laredo. Laredo served as a vital trade link with Mexico at this time, especially for the export of cotton. The courier reported a Federal raid on Laredo on 19 March by elements

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<sup>17</sup>Ford, Rip Ford's Texas, 350; Irby, Backdoor at Bagdad, 32; Fehrenbach, Lone Star, 379.

<sup>18</sup>Oates, "John S. Ford," 300; Fehrenbach, Lone Star, 378; Ford, Rip Ford's Texas, 349; Wooster, Texas and Texans, 136.



of the First and Second Texas Cavalry (Union) regiments.<sup>19</sup>

Although Benavides had patrols around Laredo, the approach of two hundred enemy cavalry on the 19<sup>th</sup> clearly surprised him. The Federals achieved this surprise by crossing into Mexico, then re-crossing the Rio Grande just a few miles south of Laredo. As a result, they eluded Benavides' scouts. Alerting Laredo to the danger of the enemy was an excited cowboy named Cayetano de la Garza. Known as the "Paul Revere of Laredo," de la Garza told Benavides that a Union cavalry force numbering one thousand was approaching Laredo from downriver. Benavides, who was ill at the time, doubted the accuracy of the report but sounded the alarm anyway. The Battle of Laredo was about to commence.<sup>20</sup>

The Laredo colonel had only seventy-two men to defend the city. Forty-two of these men were in two companies under the commands of Captains Cristobal and Refugio Benavides, both brothers of Santos Benavides. They waited behind a large corral on the east side of the city. The corral provided both cover and a clear field of fire for the Confederates. The other thirty men, mostly state militia, would defend the interior of the town. Colonel Benavides gave strict orders to his brother Cristobal: "There are five thousand bales of cotton in the plaza. It belongs to the Confederacy. If the day goes against us, fire it. Be sure to do the work properly so that not a bale of it shall fall into the

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<sup>19</sup>Jerry Don Thompson, "Santos Benavides and the Battle for Laredo," Civil War Times Illustrated 19 (August 1980), 27-28; Wooster, Texas and Texans, 136; Joseph B. Wilkinson, Laredo and the Rio Grande Frontier (Austin: Jenkins Publishing Company, 1975), 295-96; ORA, series 1, vol. 34, pt. 1, pp. 647-49.

<sup>20</sup>Wilkinson, Laredo and the Rio Grande Frontier, 295-96; Thompson, "Battle for Laredo," 30; Wooster, Texas and Texans, 136; Ford, Rip Ford's Texas, 355-56.

hands of the Yankees. Then you will set my new house on fire, so that nothing of mine will pass to the enemy. Let their victory be a barren one.”<sup>21</sup>

The battle began at about three o’clock in the afternoon and lasted for nearly three hours. The Federals made three heavy assaults but were repulsed each time. The Confederates suffered no deaths and sent a scouting party to inspect the Federal camp the next day. The rebels found many blood stains and blood-soaked rags. Clearly the Union horsemen suffered some casualties, although no exact number has been determined. Later reports on the 21<sup>st</sup> confirmed that the enemy Federals were still retreating downriver.<sup>22</sup>

Federal cavalry retreated from Laredo because on 20 March, Benavides received reinforcements, most notably 150 men from Eagle Pass under the command of Lieutenant Colonel George H. Giddings. The citizens of Laredo rejoiced with “the ringing of church bells and the blowing of trumpets.” Despite driving the Yankees from Laredo, Benavides believed that they might be falling back to re-group and launch another attack. To prevent this, Benavides urged Ford to move his cavalry to the Rio Grande and attack the Union rear. This would put the Yankee invader in “a bad fix.” Ford, although anxious to help Benavides, had to wait for additional men and supplies from San Antonio. Moreover, the country between the Nueces and the Rio Grande was not conducive to a

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<sup>21</sup>Gilberto M. Hinojosa, A Borderlands Town in Transition, Laredo, 1755-1870 (College Station, Tex.: Texas A&M University Press, 1983), 85-86; ORA, series 1, vol. 34, pt. 1, p. 649.

<sup>22</sup>Oates, “John S. Ford,” 300; Wilkinson, Laredo and the Rio Grande Frontier, 296; Hinojosa, A Borderlands Town, 86; ORA, series 1, vol. 34, pt. 1, p. 649.

fast march. The drought of 1863 made the region a virtual wasteland in which very little water and grass existed. Ford relayed to Benavides that for the time being, Laredo must be protected without the help of the Cavalry of the West.<sup>23</sup>

Despite Ford's inability to march immediately toward Laredo, he praised the efforts of Benavides and his men. Outnumbered nearly three to one, the handful of men behaved like veterans during that hazardous period. The Unionists went away without plunder, without cotton, and without success. After the battle Benavides collapsed from fatigue, saying that he could rise from bed only "at the hazard of his life." Ford, upon hearing of Benavides' condition, urged him to allow "some officer in rank" to take command of his troops. As a result, his brother Refugio took command of the Laredo defenders. Colonel Santos Benavides certainly lived up to this appraisal made by Ford: "You have added to the reputation you and your command have already acquired."<sup>24</sup>

The last week in March passed with the situation growing worse for the Cavalry of the West. Desertions, supply shortages, and the Federal attack on Laredo compelled Old Rip to hold a council of war with his officers. They decided to continue the march to the Rio Grande. On 26 March, they left Camp San Fernando, his men cheering loudly. Four companies under Major Nolan were left near Corpus Christi to protect his left flank and supply lines. Colonel Showalter and four companies of the Fourth Arizona Cavalry caught up with the expedition on 30 March. On 15 April eighteen hundred men of the

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<sup>23</sup>Ford, "Memoirs," 6:13-14; Wooster, Texas and Texans, 136; Wilkinson, Laredo and the Rio Grande Frontier, 296.

<sup>24</sup>Ford, Rip Ford's Texas, 357; Thompson, "Battle for Laredo," 33.

Cavalry of the West reached Laredo.<sup>25</sup>

Back on the border at Laredo, Ford grew concerned about keeping the movements of his cavalry a secret. The element of surprise, however, was still on his side. Union intelligence reports stated that he had only 650 men, too small a force to constitute any real threat to the garrison at Brownsville. The Union commander at Fort Brown, Major General Francis J. Herron, discredited news of Ford's movements as mere rumor.<sup>26</sup>

After about a week in Laredo, Ford moved downriver to his next objective, Fort Ringgold, at Rio Grande City. Soldiers from Laredo under Captain Refugio Benavides joined the campaign. For the next ten days, torrential rains fell in South Texas, greatly relieving this parched region of the state. Around 22 April, Ford arrived at Fort Ringgold and discovered that the enemy had evacuated that position. At Rio Grande City, Ford established his headquarters for the Cavalry of the West. Here he consolidated the different portions of his command, which included more soldiers from Laredo and the Fourth Arizona cavalry. More important, he made final preparations for the assault on Brownsville.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>James A. Irby, "Line of the Rio Grande: War and Trade on the Confederate Frontier, 1861-1865" (Ph.D. diss., University of Georgia, 1969), 152; Ford, "Memoirs," 6:1036-1040; Brian Robertson, Wild Horse Desert: The Heritage of South Texas (Edinburg, Tex.: New Santander Press, 1985), 119; Fehrenbach, Lone Star, 379-80; Ford, Rip Ford's Texas, 358.

<sup>26</sup>Wooster, Texas and Texans, 136; Hughes, Rebellious Ranger, 220-21; Ford, Rip Ford's Texas, 362-63; ORA, series 1, vol. 34, pt. 3, pp. 176.

<sup>27</sup>Benjamin F. McIntyre, Federals on the Frontier: The Diary of Benjamin F. McIntyre, ed. Nannie M. Tilley (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1963), 329; Ford, Rip Ford's Texas, 360; Robertson, Wild Horse Desert, 119; Irby, Backdoor at Bagdad, 33; Fehrenbach, Lone Star, 383.

The occupation of Rio Grande City caused grave concern for the Union forces in Brownsville. Because of the Red River campaign in Louisiana, General Herron's troop strength had declined dramatically. One soldier at Fort Brown noted in his diary on 27 April that "There seems to be some uneasiness manifested among our officers regarding a force of rebels which are marching upon some point in this vicinity. Every precaution has been taken against surprise—the first brigade slept on their arms all night. Our generals were out at an early hour this morning and passed around our picket lines. 400 cavalry have been sent out as scouts."<sup>28</sup>

Activities in Louisiana also affected the Rio Grande Expedition's march upon Brownsville. Men and supplies destined for the Rio Grande were sent to Louisiana. The campaign against Fort Brown stalled at Rio Grande City for six weeks. Ford's problems included supply procurement, troop transfers, and short-term enlistments. Concerning the supply problem, Ford used cotton bales picked up in his march to the Rio Grande. He sold the bales in Mexico and used the money to purchase supplies for his men. While in Mexico, he established contacts with Matamoros, not only to promote the Confederate cause in that city but also to obtain information about Union forces at Fort Brown. Two of these contacts were Lieutenant Colonel J. J. Fisher and Colonel John M. Swisher. Both men supplied Ford with valuable information and much needed supplies. Swisher sent drawings of Fort Brown and estimated the troop strength at five thousand.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Tilley, Federals on the Frontier, 332.

<sup>29</sup>Colonel J. M. Swisher to Colonel John S. Ford, Matamoros, Mexico, 25 May and 10 June 1864, Military Correspondence; Fehrenbach, Lone Star, 383-84; Ford, Rip Ford's Texas, 361; Hughes, Rebellious Ranger, 218-19.

During the six-week stay at Fort Ringgold, everything was placed in a state of readiness for the final advance on Brownsville. During that time, Old Rip suffered from a severe fever. It required almost superhuman strength for Ford to continue making preparations. Ford's hard work, despite his fever, won the hearts of all the men in his command. A captain serving under Ford wrote that the troops respected their colonel and would follow him to hell.<sup>30</sup>

June brought news from Ford's spies downriver that the Federals might be planning a general evacuation of Brownsville. One Confederate informant wrote that "about 600 men left Brownsville this morning on the steamer Mustang and Matamoros for New Orleans on the Clinton. I am told three companies of Mexican cavalry—say Vidals, Falcons, and Martines—were the one that left. Four companies of infantry on the boats with them. General Herron is ordered to New Orleans. His successor is Fitz Hugh Warren, an old man and no account. Change will be beneficial to us."<sup>31</sup>

The news of a general evacuation of Fort Brown prompted Ford to make an immediate forward movement in the direction of Brownsville. He decided to make a reconnaissance in force to test the validity of the information he had received from his spies. While most of the cavalry moved directly overland, Ford and sixty men followed the river and arrived at the ranch of John McAllen, near Edinburg, on 21 June. Ford now felt confident that his campaign would be a success. He stated that "now is the first time I

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<sup>30</sup>Ford, Rip Ford's Texas, 361-62; Fehrenbach, Lone Star, 384

<sup>31</sup>Agent #2 to Colonel John S. Ford, Matamoros, Mexico, 21 June 1864, Military Correspondence.

can with truth say this country is practicable. The rains have been abundant the grass is becoming plentiful. I can now operate; before it was quite an impossibility.”<sup>32</sup>

Ford left the McAllen ranch on 22 June. By this time his main force was about thirty miles west of Brownsville. He then brought his men to the Las Rucias Ranch, about twenty-four miles west of Brownsville. The movement of the Confederate cavalry, however, did not go undetected. A Union sympathizer named John Webber sent one of his sons to Fort Brown to warn the Federals of the enemy’s advance. The son told Herron that Ford himself had only about sixty men. Webber did not realize that Ford intended to link up with a portion of the Fourth Arizona cavalry under Colonel Showalter at Como se Llama, where there was a dependable water well, on 25 June. Ford’s scouting force now numbered about 250 men. In response, General Herron ordered Captain Phillip E. Temple to take two companies of the First Texas Cavalry (U.S.) to Las Rucias Ranch. Presumably, Temple would thus have the element of surprise and deal a mortal blow to the expeditionary forces.<sup>33</sup>

On 23 June, Ford met Colonel Showalter and his men at Como se Llama. The next day they dried beef for emergency rations. At dawn on 25 June, the Confederates advanced toward Las Rucias Ranch. Union forces at the ranch under Captain Temple numbered about one hundred men. Temple made a tactical error by failing to station sufficient men along the road leading to Brownsville. He expected the Confederates to

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<sup>32</sup>Ford, Rip Ford’s Texas, 362; ORA, series 1, vol. 53, pt. 1, p. 1001;

<sup>33</sup>Ford, “Memoirs,” 5:1013; Tom Lea, The King Ranch, 2 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1957), 1:225; Irby, Backdoor at Bagdad, 30; ORA, series 1, vol. 34, pt. 1, p. 1053.

attack from the west. Instead, Old Rip arrived from the south and caught the enemy by surprise when the battle began.<sup>34</sup>

The Confederate advance party, led by Captain James Dunn, came upon the Federals sooner than expected. When fired upon, Dunn charged with his men and was killed. Two officers with Dunn, Captain Cristobal Benavides and Lieutenant C. B. Gardiner, had their horses shot out from under them. Two men under Benavides were also killed. On the Union side, Captain Temple was wounded in the bloody first exchange.<sup>35</sup>

As the fighting became more general, Temple and the Union cavalry took refuge in a brick building that served as ranch headquarters. Some took up positions behind a pile of adobe bricks and a large lagoon. They were driven from every position. The brief but fierce battle ended in a complete rout of the Federals. Union cavalry fought fiercely during the battle, believing that since they were Texas Unionists, the Confederates might execute them as traitors. Union casualties were twenty killed, twenty-five wounded, and thirty-six taken prisoner. The Cavalry of the West suffered three killed and four wounded. The Confederates also captured two wagons, twenty-eight horses, and a

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<sup>34</sup>Frank C. Pierce, A Brief History of the Lower Rio Grande Valley (Menasha, Wis.: George Banta Publishing Co., 1917), 48-49; Ford, "Memoirs," 5:1014; Robertson, Wild Horse Desert, 120.

<sup>35</sup>ORA, series 1, vol. 34, pt. 1, pp. 1053-56; Thompson, Vaqueros in Blue and Gray, 114-15; Ford, Rip Ford's Texas, 362-63; Hughes, Rebellious Ranger, 220; Tilley, Federals on the Frontier, 358.



number of saddles which they desperately needed.<sup>36</sup>

After the Confederate victory at the Battle of Las Rucias, the Cavalry of the West anticipated that a larger enemy force would come out to meet them. Ford's men advanced to within five mile of Brownsville, but the Federals did not come out to offer battle. Old Rip's expectation of a Union attack were remote, however. Among the items captured at Las Rucias were official papers indicating that more soldiers were leaving Fort Brown for New Orleans. In addition, General Herron at Fort Brown estimated enemy strength at well over a thousand men. He therefore decided to let the rebels attack him.<sup>37</sup>

Although it seemed like an opportune time to attack Brownsville, Ford had no accurate estimate of enemy strength at Fort Brown. As a result, he exercised caution and fell back to Fort Ringgold to regroup. For three weeks, Ford hesitated to launch an assault for a variety of reasons: the drought, insufficient supplies, and additional desertions. On 27 June five regiments under General J. E. Slaughter arrived from San Antonio, offsetting the desertions. The persistent drought provided little forage for a large cavalry force. Finally, Governor Juan Cortina of Tamaulipas issued orders preventing the crossing of Mexican goods below Edinburg. It would now take longer for

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<sup>36</sup>Robert Hoekstra, "A Historical Study of the Texas Ports in the Civil War" (M.A. thesis, Texas A&I University, 1951), 96; Irby, "Line of the Rio Grande," 160-61; Pierce, Brief History, 49; Tilley, Federals on the Frontier, 358; Ford, Rip Ford's Texas, 362-63; Milo Kearney and Anthony Knopp, Boom and Bust: The Historical Cycles of Brownsville and Matamoros (Austin: Eakin Press, 1991), 133.

<sup>37</sup>Kearney and Knopp, Boom and Bust, 133; Ford, "Memoirs," 6:1080-85; Wooster, Texas and Texans, 136; Austin Weekly State Gazette, 29 June 1864; ORA, series 1, vol. 34, pt. 1, pp. 1054-56.

Ford to receive supplies from Matamoros.<sup>38</sup>

The Confederate victory at Las Rucias put the Federals on alert. Herron wrote that Ford's intentions were "to keep us in as close quarters as possible, which he can do to a certain extent owing to our want of cavalry or horses to mount infantry." Union soldiers in Fort Brown were placed on high alert, ready to respond to an alarm at a moment's notice. Especially disturbing for northern soldiers was the rumor that the Confederate flag would be flying over Fort Brown by the Fourth of July.<sup>39</sup>

A military change was indeed about to occur at Fort Brown, but it had nothing to do with Confederate activity in the region. Major General Edward R. S. Canby, commander of the newly formed Military Division of Western Mississippi, ordered the evacuation of Brownsville. Union troops were ordered to fall back to the island of Brazos Santiago on the coast. Confederate spies operating out of Matamoros knew of the evacuation almost as soon as General Herron.<sup>40</sup>

Despite the news, Herron seemed to be in no particular hurry to withdraw from Brownsville. Confederate spies reported that all artillery and quartermaster stores were being taken down to the river for shipment to the coast. To hasten the departure of Federal troops, one spy suggested to Ford that he not "leave without some demonstration

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<sup>38</sup>Ford, "Memoirs," 6:1009, 1102; ORA, series 1, vol. 41, pt. 2, p. 1001; Robertson, Wild Horse Desert, 120-21.

<sup>39</sup>Allen C. Ashcraft, "The Union Occupation of the lower Rio Grande Valley in the Civil War," Texas Military History 8 (No. 1, 1970):18-19; Tilley, Federals on the Frontier, 360-61; Daddysman, Matamoros Trade, 98-99.

<sup>40</sup>Agent "No. 2" to Colonel John S. Ford, 5 July 1864, Matamoros, Mexico, Military Correspondence; ORA, series 1, vol. 41, pt. 2, p. 46.

against them. If you do, it may injure you—but at the same time be careful. In a stand up fight and open ground, you can do nothing with them— they will move with 3400 infantry, 250 cavalry and two Baltines. Close down on them as soon as you can—don't let them get away without seeing you.”<sup>41</sup>

Finally, on 19 July, the Cavalry of the West left Fort Ringgold and began the one-hundred-mile march toward Brownsville. After two days, they arrived at Carricitos Ranch, about twenty-two miles west of Brownsville. Ford outran his supply line and thus had to wait two days at the ranch to be re-supplied. By 25 July the Confederates were at the outskirts of Brownsville, and they drove Union pickets into town. The most advanced Confederate position had the ghoulish name of Dead Man's Hollow, about half a mile above the western edge of town. Old Rip advanced no further, wanting to stay out of artillery range. A couple of days of outpost firing followed.<sup>42</sup>

As the Confederates closed in on Brownsville, the civilian population of that city expected the worst. Hundreds of Brownsville citizens had taken the oath of loyalty to the Union. They now feared that with the Federal evacuation of Brownsville, Confederates would look upon them as traitors. Private Benjamin F. McIntyre of the Nineteenth Iowa Infantry regiment gave vivid descriptions of the panic that gripped the people of

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<sup>41</sup>Agent “No. 2” to Colonel John S. Ford, 15 July 1864, Matamoros, Mexico; Military Correspondence; Irby, Backdoor at Bagdad, 36.

<sup>42</sup>Edward G. Miller, Captain Edward G. Miller of the 20<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin: His War, 1861-1865 (Fayetteville, Ark.: Washington County Historical Society, 1960), 23; Ford, “Memoirs,” 6:1009, 1102; ORA, series 1, vol. 41, pt. 2, p. 1001; Keith Guthrie, Texas Forgotten Ports, 3 vols. (Austin: Eakin Press, 1993), 2:240; Hughes, Rebellious Ranger, 221-22; Kearney and Knopp, Boom and Bust, 136.

Brownsville: “The citizens generally are very much excited. I pity them—all have taken the loyalty oath. We have given them protection and very many aids and secured them every privilege a free people could ask and a bright future seemed dawning upon them. They now feel that their hopes and expectations are blasted—the future to them is dark and dreary with not a ray of light to dawn upon them with a single hope. They cannot remain, for certain death awaits them—if they leave they go as beggars for they must sacrifice every possession of home and the comforts surrounding it.”<sup>43</sup>

Federal officers, aware of the danger many Brownsville citizens faced, offered free passage to New Orleans. Reporting to headquarters on 23 July 1864, Herron reported that 250 refugees, two hundred sick, and a number of ladies had gone or would be going to New Orleans. “Brownsville has been entirely evacuated by the citizens,” Herron wrote, “not one single family remaining.” Despite Herron’s formal language, the tension in Brownsville increased day by day as many citizens fled to Matamoros for safety. Private McIntyre harbored a sense of guilt as he witnessed this mass exodus to Mexico: “The stampede to Matamoros continues—the landings upon both sides of the river is piled up with household goods of every description. The numbers of people fleeing from those who have compelled them to take the oath who after offering protection and security now leaves them to an uncertain fate. Our forces withdrawing every promise made them—now they are rewarded for their loyalty.”<sup>44</sup>

On the afternoon of 28 July, thirty to forty Confederates out of Matamoros crossed

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<sup>43</sup>Quoted in Tilley, Federals on the Frontier, 371-72.

<sup>44</sup>ORA, series 1, vol. 41, pt. 2, pp. 352-53; Tilley, Federals on the Frontier, 372.

the river to confirm rumors that the enemy had left Brownsville. They learned that the last troops had left at nine o'clock that morning. Once the Union soldiers left, there was almost a repeat of the ransacking and looting that followed Confederate General Hamilton Bee's evacuation in the fall of the previous year. Fortunately, this small group of Confederate volunteers prevented such activities. One of the volunteers, Major E. W. Cave, sent out scouts to look for Colonel Ford and the Expeditionary Forces. Two days later, the advance guard of the Cavalry of the West arrived to take possession of Brownsville. Confederate forces once again controlled Brownsville.<sup>45</sup>

Ford and the remainder of his cavalry arrived later that day and were met by jubilant citizens. In a letter to his superior, General Slaughter, Ford wrote that "Confidence has been restored, our people are returning to their homes, and commerce is being reestablished, and our relations with Mexican authorities are of the most friendly character."<sup>46</sup>

After capturing Fort Brown, Ford learned that Herron's men were only about

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<sup>45</sup>Report by Major E.W. Cave to Colonel John S. Ford, Brownsville, Texas, 31 July 1864, *Military Correspondence*; Guthrie, *Texas Forgotten Ports*, 240; Walter W. Hildebrand, "The History of Cameron County, Texas" (M.A. thesis, North Texas State College, 1950), 49; Margaret Petrovich, "The Civil War Career of Colonel John Salmon 'RIP' Ford" (M.A. thesis, Stephen F. Austin State College, 1961), 90; Muster Rolls of the Ninety-first and Ninety-fourth Illinois Volunteer Infantry Regiments stationed at Boca Chica, Texas and Mobile Point, Alabama respectively, Both rolls dated July-August 1864, Compiled Records Showing Service of Military Units in Volunteer Union Organizations, Record Group 94, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Microfilm M594, Roll #28).

<sup>46</sup>*ORA*, series 1, vol. 41, pt. 2, p. 989; Petrovich, "Civil War Career, Ford," 91; Kearney and Knopp, *Boom and Bust*, 134; LeRoy P. Graf, "The Economic History of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, 1820-1875" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1942), 593.

eighteen miles below Brownsville. He therefore detached a force under Colonel Showalter to pursue and harass. When Showalter discovered a body of Federals on 2 August, he sent Captain Refugio Benavides to feel them out. Benavides exceeded the order and attacked this party of Union soldiers, plunging into the main body of them before breaking off. Despite this harassment, the Federals made their way safely to Brazos Santiago, where many waited to board ships bound for New Orleans. At Brazos, Herron left behind Colonel H. M. Day and fifteen hundred men of the Sixty-second Colored Infantry regiment and the Second Texas Cavalry to garrison and fortify the island. Although not a very reliable force, the island was almost impregnable to anything except an amphibious landing. On the other hand, as long as the Federals stayed where they were, no harm would come to them. Now that Brownsville was again in Confederate hands, the lucrative cotton trade resumed, and that was of course the primary objective of the Confederate Rio Grande Expedition.<sup>47</sup>

The Union withdrawal from Brownsville marked the lowest point in the Union's Rio Grande Expedition. Federal soldiers, at one time numbering ten thousand, controlled for a time a large section of the Texas coast. Now they held only Brazos Santiago at the mouth of the Rio Grande. After the failure of the Red River campaign, not to mention the need for troops east of the Mississippi, Halleck directed Banks to break off his Texas operations. Halleck realized that the continued need to impress the French still justified

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<sup>47</sup>Ford, Rip Ford's Texas, 365-68; Graf, "Economic History," 593-94; Lillian and J. Lee Stambaugh, The Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas (San Antonio: The Naylor Company, 1954), 119-20; Wilkinson, Laredo and the Rio Grande Frontier, 298; Thompson, Vaqueros in Blue and Gray, 118; Tilley, Federals on the Frontier, 371.

keeping soldiers on the Rio Grande, but he believed this goal could be accomplished “if a single point is held” in Texas.<sup>48</sup>

Despite Ford’s successful campaign against Brownsville, a return of the status quo did not automatically ensue. The cotton trade resumed slowly, many Texans still fearful of the Union troops on Brazos Santiago. The greatest problem, however, concerned General Juan Cortina, the rogue of the Rio Grande. The military situation on the lower Rio Grande allowed him to play a game of cat and mouse with Union, Confederate, and French forces. An international powder keg was about to explode, and Cortina was going to light the fuse.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>ORA, series 1, vol. 41, pt. 2, p. 46; Kerby, Kirby Smith’s Confederacy, 194-95.

<sup>49</sup>Kearney and Knopp, Boom and Bust, 134-35.

## CHAPTER 6

### TROUBLES SOUTH OF THE BORDER

“The French invasion of Mexico was so closely related to the Rebellion as to be essentially a part of it,” commented General-in-Chief Ulysses S. Grant to Major General Phillip H. Sheridan on the relationship between the American and Mexican wars. The Union Rio Grande Expedition in November 1863 was designed partly to provide a buffer against the French presence in Mexico and the civil unrest generated by it. As the Federal presence in South Texas was reduced to only twelve hundred men on the island of Brazos Santiago by August 1864, incidents at the mouth of the Rio Grande increased. The river served not only as an international boundary; the mouth of the Rio Grande also became a bustling center of commerce for nations supplying these two wars.<sup>1</sup>

The Imperialists and their leader, Emperor Maximilian, had the support of the French under Napoleon III until 1867. The Liberals, led by Benito Juarez, established a provisional government in the city that now bears his name. Juarez’s agenda included land reform, heavy restrictions on the church, and the suspension of payments to European creditors. Beginning in 1863, the French controlled Mexico City, and the United States, preoccupied with its own war, could do nothing but condemn the French

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<sup>1</sup>Phillip Sheridan, Personal Memoirs of P.H. Sheridan: General U.S. Army, 2 vols. (London: Chatto and Windus, Piccadilly, 1888), 2:210.



presence in Mexico.<sup>2</sup>

Three important military figures played major roles in the Brownsville/Matamoros region. The first was Colonel Henry M. Day, commander of the remaining Union forces on the island of Brazos Santiago. Day, who led the Ninety-first Illinois Infantry Regiment, was one of the original soldiers who occupied Brownsville. Day's forces on the island included the Ninety-first Illinois, the Thirty-fourth Indiana, the First Texas Cavalry, and the Sixty-second and Eighty-first Colored troops. Day later would be replaced by Brigadier General William A. Pile. Here the Federal forces dug in, determined to hold at least one plot of Texas soil.<sup>3</sup>

The other two figures were Colonel John S. "Rip" Ford and his old adversary, General Juan Cortina, who was also governor of the Mexican state of Tamaulipas. Ford, who served Texas in many capacities, led the Confederate Rio Grande Expedition that liberated Brownsville in July 1864. With Brownsville under Confederate control once again, Ford immediately went to work improving Confederate relations in Matamoros. This meant coming to amicable terms with Cortina. Cortina's influence in the region cannot be underestimated. He was born in Camargo, Mexico, on 16 May 1824. His

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<sup>2</sup>Kevin R. Young, To the Tyrants Never Yield: A Texas Civil War Sampler (Plano, Tex.: Wordware Publishing, 1992), 150; Gabriel Saldivar, Historia Compendiada de Tamaulipas (Mexico City, 1945), 314-15. For more information on the French occupation, see Albert and Kathryn Hanna's Napoleon and Mexico: American Triumph Over Monarchy (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

<sup>3</sup>U.S. War Department, War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, 128 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), series 1, vol. 41, pt. 4, pp. 366, 449, 978 (hereafter cited as ORA); James M. Beverly, A History of the Ninety-first Regiment Illinois Volunteer Infantry, 1862-1865 (White Hall, Ill.: Pearce Printing, 1913), 12.

mother was an heiress to a disputed 260,000 acres, which included Brownsville. The grant was involved in controversy because many, including the city of Matamoros, made claims to the land. As a result, true ownership was blurred, which led to legal actions and violent disagreements. It was the land-grant controversy that took Cortina on a path of raiding in the Brownsville/Matamoros region. He believed the land had been stolen from his family, and he therefore made a career of trying to get it back. Ford, who as a Texas Ranger pursued Cortina in 1859, wrote in 1864 that “Cortina hates Americans; particularly Texans. He has an old and deep seated grudge against Brownsville.” Not surprisingly, Cortina used the volatile environments in both Texas and Mexico to try to reclaim the lost land for his family. As a result, during the years of the Civil War, Cortina sided with any power that could help him achieve this goal.<sup>4</sup>

During the Federal occupation of Brownsville, Cortina sided with the Juarez faction in Mexico. Prior to the Federal invasion of Brownsville in November 1863, the Juarez government in Mexico had been plagued by the actions of a group of Maximilian adherents situated in Brownsville. Under the leadership of Jose M. Cobos, they conspired to capture Matamoros for the Imperialists. Apparently, Juarez sent Cortina to Brownsville to infiltrate this group of Imperialists and kill Cobos. When the Federals moved into Brownsville to occupy it, Cortina crossed over into Matamoros with Cobos

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<sup>4</sup>Colonel John S. Ford to Acting Adjutant General, Captain J. E. Dwyer, Brownsville, Texas, 3 September 1864, Collection of Military Correspondence, Daughters of the Confederacy Museum, Austin, Texas (hereafter cited as Military Correspondence); Brian Robertson, Wild Horse Desert: The Heritage of South Texas (Edinburg, Tex.: New Santander Press, 1985), 98-106; Jerry D. Thompson, Juan Cortina and the Texas-Mexico Frontier, 1859-1877 (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1994), 49.

and helped him capture the city. On 7 November 1863 Cortina had Cobos shot and installed Jesus de la Serna as governor of the Mexican state of Tamaulipas. Eventually, in January 1864, Cortina proclaimed himself governor and military commandant of Tamaulipas. He held this position throughout the Union occupation of Brownsville.<sup>5</sup>

Even after the Union retreat from Brownsville, heavy skirmishing continued between Federal and Confederate troops throughout the month of August. This fighting, however, was only a sidelight to the power struggle south of the border between the Mexicans and the French. By late August rumors of a major Imperialist movement against Matamoros were circulating in the border region. These rumors became reality when four hundred French legionnaires landed at Bagdad at the mouth of the Rio Grande. Another Imperialist force under General Tomas Mejia was advancing from the interior north to Matamoros. The French troops at Bagdad drove back Cortina's Republican troops towards Matamoros. Ford, realizing that Matamoros would soon be under French control, sent couriers to Bagdad to learn of French attitudes towards the Confederates on both sides of the river. These couriers met with Captain A. Veron, who commanded French forces at Bagdad. He assured Ford's representatives that supplies moving through Matamoros would not be hindered in any way. Veron also assured Ford that the Confederate flag and those seeking protection under it would be "the object of his particular care in Matamoros."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>ORA, series 1, vol. 26, pt. 1, pp. 882-85; Frank C. Pierce, A Brief History of the Lower Rio Grande Valley (Menasha, Wis.: George Banta Publishing, 1917), 44-45.

<sup>6</sup>Captain A. Veron, Corps expeditionnaire de la Marine Francais a Bagdad, 25 August 1864, Military Correspondence; Austin State Gazette, 7 September 1864; Leonard

Ford's meeting with Veron caused grave concern for Cortina. He feared that Ford was in collusion, if not in an actual alliance, with the French. Even Ford believed that French non-interference in the region meant French recognition of the Confederacy. Cortina's worries were not unfounded. He complained to Ford that whenever the French engaged the Mexicans in battle, Confederates had fired at the Mexicans. Cortina also suspected that the French at Bagdad supplied the Confederates with weapons and ammunition. Ford of course denied all of Cortina's charges, but there is little doubt that the Confederates occasionally fired on Cortina's men across the river. They saw Cortina and his men as nothing more than bandits, a scourge to both the Confederates and the French.<sup>7</sup>

Cortina's suspicions meant that he and the Federals had a common enemy in the French. This in turn encouraged him to see the American consul in Matamoros, Leonard Pierce. On 31 August 1864 Cortina met with Pierce and informed the consul of worsening relations with the French and the Confederates, expecting open warfare with both groups very shortly. At this meeting Pierce initiated a conspiracy that had as the

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Pierce to William Seward, 1 September 1864, Consular Despatches, Matamoros, Vol. 7, Consular Correspondence, 1864-1865, Record Group 59, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; Hubert H. Bancroft, History of the North Mexican States and Texas, 2 vols. (San Francisco: The History Company, 1890), 2:468; ORA, series 1, vol. 41, pt. 2, pp. 1088-89.

<sup>7</sup>General Juan N. Cortina to Colonel John S. Ford, Matamoros, Mexico, 8 September 1864 and Colonel John S. Ford to General J.N. Cortina, Brownsville, Texas, 8 September 1864, Military Correspondence; William J. Hughes, Rebellious Ranger: Rip Ford and the Old Southwest (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964), 225-26; Richard T. Marcum, "Fort Brown, Texas: The History of a Border Post" (Ph.D. diss., Texas Technical College, 1964), 171; Austin State Gazette, 28 September 1864.

ultimate objective the capture of Brownsville by Cortina. Pierce wrote Colonel Day on 1 September to explain the details of his plan. The day of attack was set for 6 September. The plan was that Cortina would cross some of his men downriver from Brownsville, drawing Ford away from Fort Brown. Prior to Cortina's crossing, Colonel Day would clear any rebels out of the region to insure the safety of the crossing. Another body of Cortina's men would cross above Brownsville and then attack Fort Brown once Ford left. As an additional inducement to gain Cortina's help, Pierce offered a commission in the U.S. Army as a brigadier general if he captured Brownsville. With the Confederates out of Brownsville, Day would be in a good position to offer hidden support to Cortina to fight the French. Pierce saw Cortina as a tool to maintain the Monroe Doctrine.<sup>8</sup>

A few days after the meeting, on 3 September 1864, Cortina initiated hostilities by closing river traffic to the Confederates. He then wheeled his cannons into place, pointing them directly at Brownsville. The combined U.S./Mexican operations against Brownsville had begun. These actions by Cortina, however, were not entirely unexpected. An American doctor and Confederate sympathizer in Matamoros, a Dr. Combe, informed Colonel Ford of Cortina's plan to attack Brownsville. Ford realized

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<sup>8</sup>Leonard Pierce to William Seward, 1 September 1864, Consular Despatches, Matamoros, Vol. 7; Milo Kearney and Alfred Knopp, Boom and Bust: The Historical Cycles of Matamoros and Brownsville (Austin: Eakin Press, 1991), 135-36; U.S. Navy Department, Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion, 30 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1894-1922), series 1, vol. 21, pp. 652-53; James A. Irby, "Line of the Rio Grande: War and Trade on the Confederate Frontier, 1861-1865" (Ph.D. diss., University of Georgia, 1969), 177-78; ORA, series 1, vol. 41, pt. 3, p. 102; Margaret W. Petrovich, "The Civil War Career of Colonel John Salmon 'RIP' Ford" (M.A. thesis, Stephen F. Austin State College, 1961), 123-26.

that if Cortina attacked from upriver and Union forces from downriver, other Cortina men would swarm across the river from Matamoros. On the appointed day of the crossing, 6 September, Colonel Day and nine hundred Federal troops marched west toward Palmito Ranch, fifteen miles from Brazos Santiago. They engaged a Confederate outpost under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Dan Showalter. Cortina supported Day by firing his cannons at the Confederates from across the river. Showalter, who had been drinking heavily that day, was unnerved by the attack. The Federal commander reported his foe as “flying in confusion.” Fortunately, Ford had expected an attack from the coast and sent reinforcements to Palmito. These soldiers, under Captain G. H. Giddings, relieved Showalter and established a new defensive position that prevented Day’s column from advancing any farther west.<sup>9</sup>

On the south bank of the Rio Grande, Cortina ran into some difficulties. To prevent French interference, Cortina attacked the four hundred French at Bagdad at the mouth of the river. Cortina, with eight hundred men, was defeated by the French and retreated to Burrita Hill, opposite White Ranch on the American side about ten miles from the mouth of the river. It was here that Cortina crossed three hundred of his men on 6 September, including himself. Colonel Day offered these men the protection of the

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<sup>9</sup>John Salmon Ford, “Memoirs of John S. Ford and Reminiscences of Texas from 1836-1888,” 8 vols., Center for American History, University of Texas, Austin, 5:1023 (hereafter cited as “Memoirs”); Kearney and Knopp, Boom and Bust, 136, ORA, series 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, p. 742; Stephen B. Oates, “John S. “Rip” Ford, Prudent Cavalryman, C.S.A.,” Southwestern Historical Quarterly 64 (January 1961): 306; Hughes, Rebellious Ranger, 227; Petrovich, “Civil War Career, Ford,” 123-26, 129. Although the ranch’s name was often spelled Palmetto in many official battle reports, local usage favored the spelling Palmito. The Texas State Historical Association also used that spelling in its historical marker near Brownsville.

United States government. Although Cortina got his men safely across, Day's attack on Showalter at Palmito Ranch failed to draw Ford away from Fort Brown. This meant that the prospects for a successful attack from upriver by Cortina's men were greatly diminished.<sup>10</sup>

While Confederate soldiers fought east of Brownsville, Ford prepared the city for an attack. Having only three hundred men, Old Rip kept them on the move, which gave the impression that he had more men than he actually commanded. Ford also kept himself in constant view of the Mexicans across the river, knowing an attack would come if he left the fort. The Confederates had hostile forces on three sides and feared being overrun. As a result, Ford asked for reinforcements from General John G. Walker, newly appointed commander of Texas. Instead of reinforcements, Walker sent instructions that if Cortina was captured, he was to be treated as "a robber and a murderer, and executed immediately." Ford even sought aid from the French, who politely told him, "Our position of perfect neutrality towards the United States as well as towards the Confederacy prevents us from doing the service you request."<sup>11</sup>

The Confederates expected the Mexicans to attack Brownsville at dawn, 7 September. The attack never materialized. One reason was that a heavy rainfall the night before raised the level of the river to flood stage, preventing the Mexicans from crossing.

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<sup>10</sup>J. Lee Stambaugh and Lillian J. Stambaugh, The Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas (San Antonio: The Naylor Company, 1954), 120; Robertson, Wild Horse Desert, 122; Kearney and Knopp, Boom and Bust, 136.

<sup>11</sup>San Antonio News, 3 September 1864; Ford, "Memoirs," 5:1026; Colonel John S. Ford to Captain A. Veron, Brownsville, Texas, 6 September 1864, Military Correspondence; Oates, "John S. Ford," 307; ORA, series 1, vol. 41, pt. 2, p. 972.

Another reason was a near mutiny among Cortina's officer corps. His ranking colonel, Servando Canales, flatly refused to lead his men against Brownsville. Canales also knew Ford prior to the war and considered him a friend. Three other high-ranking officers also refused to fight with Cortina. To make matters worse, French troops under General Tomas Mejia were fast approaching Matamoros from Monterrey.<sup>12</sup>

As the plans to capture Brownsville rapidly deteriorated for Cortina, a delicate international situation unfolded for Colonel Day near Palmito Ranch. On 7 September, Captain A. Veron, commander of the French units at Bagdad, sent an inquiry to Day concerning the status of the three hundred Mexicans who crossed the river the day before. Day assured Veron that he would demand the surrender of the arms of these troops and that he desired nothing but harmonious relations with the French.<sup>13</sup>

On 8 September, Day addressed a letter to Cortina, demanding the surrender of his arms to U.S. forces. Day sent a detachment of the First Texas Cavalry under Major E. J. Noyes to meet with Cortina. Day informed Noyes that Cortina must surrender his arms to him. Once this had been accomplished, the Mexicans were considered refugees under the protection of the United States government. Day also told Noyes that if attacked by the Confederates, the Mexicans were to resume control of their weapons. On 9 September,

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<sup>12</sup>Official Statement of the Officers who defied General Cortina to Colonel John S. Ford, Brownsville, Texas, 4 October 1864, Military Correspondence; Kearney and Knopp, Boom and Bust, 136; Marcum, "Fort Brown, Texas," 171-73; John S. Ford, Rip Ford's Texas, ed. Stephen B. Oates (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1963), 371; Joseph B. Wilkinson, Laredo and the Rio Grande Frontier (Austin: Jenkins Publishing Company, 1975), 298-99.

<sup>13</sup>ORA, series 1, vol. 41, pt. 3, pp. 100-1.



six hundred Confederates attacked the Federals at Palmito Ranch. As a result, the Mexicans were given their rifles and helped repulse two advances before falling back two miles. Union troops fell back to White Ranch on the 11<sup>th</sup>, where Day arrived with two hundred men and some artillery. The Confederates made a third attack at White Ranch, but Day had the advantage of position and firepower and successfully drove off the assault. Union soldiers finally returned to Brazos Santiago with their Mexican refugees on 12 September. Corporal James Beverly of the Ninety-first Illinois reported that twenty rebels had been killed and that Union forces suffered only two wounded.<sup>14</sup>

Colonel Day's grant of asylum to Cortina's men was approved by the Department of the Gulf. Day was advised, however, that Cortina's continued presence on American soil would not be tolerated. If Cortina tried to wage war against the French from the American side of the river, Day had orders to attack and if possible capture Cortina. Major General Edward R. S. Canby, commander of the Military Division of West Mississippi, forwarded reports of Day's activities at Brazos Santiago to Major General Henry W. Halleck, Chief of Staff.<sup>15</sup>

The lack of French intervention during these tension-filled weeks greatly bothered Ford at Brownsville. He reminded the French commander at Bagdad, Captain Veron, that Napoleon III and Maximilian declared the Juarez government null and void. As a result,

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<sup>14</sup>Robert Hoekstra, "A Historical Study of the Texas Ports during the Civil War" (M.A. thesis, Texas A&I University, 1951), 97-98; Ford, "Memoirs," 6:1137; Young, To the Tyrants Never Yield, 158; ORA, series 1, vol. 41, pt. 3, pp. 184-85; Beverly, History of the Ninety-first Illinois, 12.

<sup>15</sup>ORA, series 1, vol. 41, pt. 3, pp. 184-85, 198.

Cortina became the responsibility of the French government. He also reminded Veron that when Mexican forces fired on them on 6 September, they violated Confederate neutrality. Ford also warned the French that the Mexicans would cross the river and join the Federals.<sup>16</sup>

By 11 September, Colonel Day's troops were back at Brazos Santiago. Cortina's plan to attack Brownsville no longer seemed feasible. The high water level of the Rio Grande, the defection of his officers, and the convergence of French soldiers on Matamoros forced Cortina to abandon any plan for attacking Brownsville. The next move was up to Cortina. Confederate sources seemed to indicate that he would seek the protection of the Union steamer Matamoros, anchored at the mouth of the Rio Grande. Ford warned the French at Bagdad to expect such a move. Cortina, however, returned to Matamoros after the aborted attack on Brownsville. On 23 September, Cortina invited Ford to Matamoros to discuss the resumption of commercial and political intercourse between the two governments. Ford's men feared treachery and discouraged him from going. Old Rip went to the meeting heavily armed, and as extra protection, placed men with rifles on the roofs of buildings overlooking the Matamoros ferry, where the meeting was to take place. When the two commanders met, they agreed to resume their former amicable international relationship.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Colonel John S. Ford to Captain A. Veron, Brownsville, Texas, 8 September 1864, Military Correspondence; Ford, Rip Ford's Texas, 373.

<sup>17</sup>Colonel John S. Ford to Captain A. Veron, Brownsville, Texas, 13 September 1864, Military Correspondence; Ford, "Memoirs," 5:1028-29; Petrovich, "Civil War Career, Ford," 124-29; Fehrenbach, Lone Star, 386-87.

Within a week, however, a new situation emerged across the river that erased the agreement. Cortina, aware of the Confederates' need for artillery, invited Ford to Matamoros on 29 September to discuss the sale of his cannons. Using his artillery as bait, Cortina hoped to snare Ford by having him in Matamoros during its occupation by Imperial troops. Ford's capture would satisfy Cortina's need for revenge on his old adversary. Secretly, Cortina had promised to surrender Matamoros to the Imperialists under certain conditions. One condition was that the city be occupied by Mexican soldiers only. In addition, French forces must leave Bagdad at the mouth of the river. Cortina then pledged his allegiance to the Imperialists in exchange for a commission in the Imperialist army. Captain Veron, representing the French, agreed to Cortina's terms. Although on the surface it appeared as if Cortina betrayed the Juarez cause, apparently during this time he secretly communicated with Juarez, assuring him that he would reassert his control over Matamoros at the first available opportunity. On 29 September, General Tomas Mejia occupied Matamoros. Ford, assured by Cortina that the city would not be occupied until the 30<sup>th</sup>, barely escaped capture. With Matamoros occupied, many Juaristas fled to the protection of Brownsville. That evening, the forces of Emperor Maximilian paraded triumphantly through the streets of Matamoros. By the end of September, the Confederate flag flew over Brownsville, the French Imperialist flag over Matamoros and Bagdad, and the Stars and Stripes over Brazos Santiago.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Austin State Gazette, 12 October 1864; Young, To the Tyrants Never Yield, 158; Oates, "John S. Ford," 309; Ford, "Memoirs," 6:1143-44; Kearney and Knopp, Boom and Bust, 136-37; ORA, series 1, vol. 41, pt. 3, p. 722; Marcum, "Fort Brown, Texas," 171-73.

The Imperialist occupation of Matamoros brought a return of the cotton trade through Brownsville. Mexican refugees told Union commander Day that a Confederate flag flew over Matamoros and that Confederate officers were received with great cordiality by Mejia. Even before the Imperialist occupation, Colonel Ford, who visited Matamoros in late August, reported “millions of dollars of merchandise in the place.” Even the American consulate reported that “large quantities of merchandise now cross the river for the interior of Texas.” In October and November alone, an estimated 600,000 pounds of ordnance were transported from Matamoros to Brownsville. What the Union Rio Grande Expedition hoped to stop a year before was now restored by the Confederate Rio Grande Expedition.<sup>19</sup>

The Union army in Texas, at one time nearly ten thousand strong, was now reduced to a 950-man force on Brazos Santiago. Colonel Day made sporadic reports throughout October, describing the still volatile situation at the mouth of the Rio Grande. On 14 October 1864 Day’s men fought a small skirmish near Boca Chica, near the mouth of the Rio Grande. The Confederates, fifty in number, were turned away by cannon fire from the Federals. Two weeks later Day reported that Juaristas under General Ortega were advancing on Matamoros. In the last week of October, Juaristas and Imperialists skirmished near Matamoros, but the Imperialists still held the city.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>ORN, series 1, vol. 21, pp. 652-53; Dallas Times Herald, 15 October 1864; ORA, series 1, vol. 41, pt. 3, p. 722; Ford, Rip Ford’s Texas, 403, Fehrenbach, Lone Star, 388; Daddysman, Matamoros Trade, 182; Kearney and Knopp, Boom and Bust, 136-37.

<sup>20</sup>ORA, series 1, vol. 41, pt. 1, p. 888; Kearney and Knopp, Boom and Bust, 137; Daddysman, Matamoros Trade, 182.

In November a change of command occurred on Brazos Santiago. On 1 November, Brigadier General William A. Pile arrived on the island, relieving Colonel Day. Regiments under Pile's command included the Ninety-first Illinois and the Sixty-second and Eighty-first U.S. Colored Troops. Pile's first official report described the dilapidated condition of his command. He immediately asked for supplies, especially lumber, to build a suitable hospital to protect the wounded against the oncoming winter. The post hospital at the time was constructed of tents. If properly supplied, Pile believed he could render the Brazos garrison efficient in four weeks.<sup>21</sup>

Pile clearly wanted Brazos Santiago to be an effective military post. He continued his negative reports throughout the month of November. In one report, he described how valuable military supplies were damaged because there were only tents in place to store them. He also requested that three companies of heavy artillery plus one battalion of cavalry be sent to Texas. To add insult to injury, he blamed the former commander, Colonel Day, for the sorry condition of the post. Believing that headquarters was ignoring him, Pile eventually asked to be transferred to a more active command.<sup>22</sup>

A change of command also took place among the Confederates in Texas. Magruder was replaced by General John G. Walker on 4 August 1864. Magruder, who took credit for the success of the Confederate Rio Grande Expedition, was appointed to the Arkansas District by Kirby Smith. Smith, who wanted a good combat officer to head the district, was planning a new offensive against the Federals in Arkansas, who

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<sup>21</sup>ORA, series 1, vol. 41, pt. 4, pp. 366, 449.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., pp. 555, 675, 746.

controlled the northern half of the state. Magruder, in a farewell address to Texas, exhibited his usual panache, “I found your State in danger, I leave it in security. I found the people in despondency, I leave them in hope. I found traitors exultant; I leave patriots triumphant.”<sup>23</sup>

Magruder’s transfer stirred mixed emotions in Texas. Some saw him as an administrative tyrant with “an utter disregard for the law.” Others thought of him as a dependable warrior, who perhaps had done more than anyone to repel the Yankee invaders since the fall of 1863. Would Walker be as effective? Many Texans believed that as long as the enemy maintained a strong garrison on Brazos Santiago, another invasion would surely come. As Confederate defeats mounted in the winter of 1864, invasion jitters developed into a statewide paranoia.<sup>24</sup>

In Brownsville the Confederate command structure was also reorganized. Brigadier General James E. Slaughter was assigned to command the Western Sub-District, replacing Major General Hamilton Bee. Slaughter made Fort Brown his headquarters and arrived there around the first of November. Ford resented the appointment of Slaughter, who, in his opinion, had done little for Texas or the

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<sup>23</sup>Stephen B. Oates, Visions of Glory: Texans on the Southwestern Frontier (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970), 134-35; Paul D. Casdorff, Prince John Magruder: His Life and Campaigns (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1996), 282-83; ORA, series 1, vol. 34, pt. 2, pp. 868-70; Robert L. Kerby, Kirby Smith’s Confederacy: The Trans-Mississippi South, 1863-1865 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), 334.

<sup>24</sup>Joseph Blessington, The Campaigns of Walker’s Texas Division (New York: Lang, Little & Co., 1875), 73-74; Oates, Visions of Glory, 135; Casdorff, Prince John Magruder, 282.

Confederacy. Old Rip's jealousy stemmed from the fact that he desired the command of the sub-district, based upon the success of his Rio Grande Expedition. As a result, Slaughter and Ford feuded constantly. They argued over such things as military strategy, Mexican policy, even who should command patrols and where they should operate. If the Federals had launched an invasion during this period, Confederate disaster would surely have followed.<sup>25</sup>

It was the Confederates, however, who went on the offensive in the last months of the war. Slaughter and Ford decided to remove the final Union threat to Texas by moving against the Federal garrison stationed at Brazos Santiago. On 17 November about fifteen hundred Confederates gathered at Palmito Ranch, about twelve miles from Brazos. For the next two days, a severe norther hit the lower Rio Grande, hampering operations. The attack called for part of the Confederate force to cross the Boca Chica inlet at night and attack the southern end of the island. Another group would assault the northern part of the island. The harsh weather canceled the offensive from the south. As a result, only the attack from the north was carried out. Although no exact date for the battle was recorded, it probably occurred around 20 November.<sup>26</sup>

The Federals were ready for an attack and fired their artillery at the enemy advancing from the north. General Pile reported two Confederates killed and several wounded. Pile wanted to counterattack, perhaps even make a raid into Brownsville itself,

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<sup>25</sup>John P. Felgar, "Texas in the War for Southern Independence" (Ph.D. diss., University of Texas, 1935), 198; Ford, Rip Ford's Texas, 386; Hughes, Rebellious Ranger, 231-32; Wilkinson, Rio Grande Frontier, 300.

<sup>26</sup>Ford, Rip Ford's Texas, 386-87; Wilkinson, Rio Grande Frontier, 300.

but he hesitated because he was outnumbered and without cavalry. Like other Union commanders, Pile also wanted to capture Brownsville to stop the extensive cotton trade occurring right under his nose. He reported that “large quantities of cotton pass out through Mexico and immense quantities of supplies pass in by the same route.” If no effort was to be made to stop this trade, Pile again requested to be transferred to another command.<sup>27</sup>

General Pile certainly sensed that as the war was drawing to a close, his chances for military glory in Texas were remote. His constant requests for reinforcements led to a sharp rebuke from his superior at New Orleans, Major General Canby. He informed Pile that no reinforcements would be sent before Christmas. He also informed the general that it is “the first duty of an officer to do the best he can with the means at his command, and not to ask to be relieved because his superior may find it impracticable or inexpedient to increase his resources.”<sup>28</sup>

By the year’s end Union regiments on Brazos consisted of the Thirty-fourth Indiana, the Sixty-second and Eighty-first U.S. Colored Troops, and a detachment of the First Texas Cavalry. These soldiers would serve primarily as a watchdog, keeping an eye on the still turbulent situation in Mexico. The Union high command rejected another invasion of Texas in favor of more tenable objectives in the East. Another reason for the defensive posture was the fact that the Union Rio Grande Expedition had failed to stop the cotton trade along the Rio Grande. As a result, the small Brazos garrison remained

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<sup>27</sup>ORA, series 1, vol. 41, pt. 4, p. 768; Ford, Rip Ford’s Texas, 386-87.

<sup>28</sup>ORA, series 1, vol. 41, pt. 4, p. 768.



inactive for the remainder of the war.<sup>29</sup>

As the year 1864 came to a close, Confederates in South Texas found their economic situation along the Rio Grande vastly improved. The streets of Brownsville were churned to dust as cotton wagons by the hundreds rolled toward the river. The twin cities of Brownsville/ Matamoros once again became a thriving center of commercial activity. An almost feverish trade in cotton resumed. This occurred for two reasons. One was the backlog of business due to the earlier Federal occupation of Brownsville. Second, many feared that the favorable trade situation would not last long. Although their numbers were greatly reduced, Union troops had only withdrawn to Brazos Santiago. The Mexican side of the river was even more uncertain. Although the Imperialists controlled the cities of Matamoros, Camargo, and Monterrey, bands of Juaristas roamed the countryside undisturbed.<sup>30</sup>

The Cavalry of the West was also reduced in strength with the return of the status quo in Brownsville. The border was so peaceful that two-thirds of Ford's men were either transferred or furloughed by Ford's superior, General Slaughter. Although friction continued between Ford and Slaughter, it was Ford who received the admiration and respect of Brownsville citizens. On 20 November 1864 several Brownsville citizens

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<sup>29</sup>James A. Irby, "Line of the Rio Grande: War and Trade on the Confederate Frontier, 1861-1865" (Ph.D. diss., University of Georgia, 1969), 189; Young, To the Tyrants Never Yield, 158; ORA, series 1, vol. 41, pt. 4, p. 978.

<sup>30</sup>Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph, 9, 12, 16 December 1864; Charles D. Dillman, "The Functions of Brownsville, Texas and Matamoros, Tamaulipas: Twin Cities of the Lower Rio Grande" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1968), 66; LeRoy P. Graf, "The Economic History of the lower Rio Grande Valley, 1820-1875" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1942), 594-95.

expressed their gratitude to Ford, stating that “We your undersigned friends and acquaintances take great pleasure in presenting to you the accompanying valise as a small token of our admiration of you as a true patriot and soldier and our high esteem of your important services rendered to the Rio Grande Country, as well as the entire cause. We have the honor to be your friends.”<sup>31</sup>

By the start of 1865, the cause of Confederate nationalism seemed to be on a steady decline. Confederate armies faced defeat on all fronts. Although the military situation for the Lincoln administration had vastly improved by 1865, the international situation was still very complicated. In 1864 France had installed Maximilian as the leader of Mexico. Rumors circulated that Kirby Smith was negotiating with Maximilian. Someone had to be sent to the Trans-Mississippi Department to try to convince the Confederates in those states, but especially Texas, that the Confederate cause was lost and that events in this region could not alter the outcome of the war.<sup>32</sup>

Fortunately, Lincoln did not have to look very far to find the right man for the job. He chose another political general for the job, Major General Lew Wallace of Indiana. Suspected of dilatory tactics at Shiloh in 1862, Wallace received an appointment to the Union’s Middle Department, headquartered at Baltimore. Ever since the Mexican War,

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<sup>31</sup>Ford, Rip Ford’s Texas, 387 Austin State Gazette, 28 September 1864; Kerby, Kirby Smith’s Confederacy, 371; Kearney and Knopp, Boom and Bust, 138; Petrovich, “Civil War Career, Ford,” 135.

<sup>32</sup>J. Fred Rippy, “Mexican Projects of the Confederates,” Southwestern Historical Quarterly 22 (April 1919): 308-9; Alfred and Kathryn Hanna, Napoleon III and Mexico, 164; Lew Wallace, Lew Wallace: An Autobiography (New York: Harper and Brother Publishers, 1906), 812.

Wallace had maintained a keen interest in the affairs of Mexico. He saw in the war between Juarez and Maximilian, not to mention the Confederate reoccupation of Brownsville, an opportunity to negotiate a political settlement that would enhance his reputation. If his plan worked, Wallace hoped to restore Texas to the Union, perhaps the whole Trans-Mississippi as well, and at the same time provide a joint Union-Confederate task force to aid Juarez in driving Imperial troops from northern Mexico.<sup>33</sup>

General Wallace, therefore, devised a plan to bring about an honorable peace for the Trans-Mississippi Department. Wallace received inspiration for his scheme from an old schoolmate, S. S. Brown, a refugee from Texas then living in Monterrey, Mexico. Brown sent Wallace a letter in January 1865, relating to him the importance of Brownsville and Matamoros as a great financial center, “feeding and clothing the rebellion, arming and equipping, furnishing it materials of war and a specie basis of circulation in Texas that had almost entirely displaced Confederate money.” These twin cities on the Mexican border, Brown wrote, sustained not only the Trans-Mississippi Department, but the entire Confederacy. Brown also informed Wallace that many people in Texas were secretly opposed to the French in Mexico. If properly approached and offered the right incentives, the Confederates west of the Mississippi might be persuaded to join the United States in driving the French out of Mexico.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>Irving McKee, Ben-Hur Wallace, The Life of General Lew Wallace (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1947), 90; Wallace, Autobiography, 812-13; Ezra Warner, Generals in Blue: The Lives of the Union Commanders (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964), 535-36.

<sup>34</sup>Wallace, Autobiography, 812-13; McKee, Ben-Hur Wallace, 91.

On 14 January 1865 Wallace sent a letter to General Grant at City Point, Virginia. Wallace relayed to Grant the pertinent information concerning the Brown letter. Under the guise of making an inspection tour, Wallace wanted to go to Brownsville to observe firsthand whether the economic and international situation Brown described was actually true. If the situation proved correct as Brown had stated, then he could offer the Confederates at Brownsville an honorable means to re-enter the Union. Wallace told Grant that the Confederates would be informed of a plan to aid Benito Juarez in driving the French out of northern Mexico. If the Brownsville negotiations were successful, Wallace, at the very least, could shut down the port of Brownsville with no loss of life on either side. At the very most, he might procure the surrender of the whole Trans-Mississippi Department. If the negotiations fell through, however, then Grant could dispatch troops to Wallace and shut the port down by force if necessary. Wallace was so confident of success that he bet Grant a month's pay he could get the Confederates to support his plan. Grant believed Wallace's plan had merit and on 22 January ordered him to the Rio Grande region of Texas to assess the situation.<sup>35</sup>

Driving the French out of Mexico in defense of the Monroe Doctrine was not an idea unique to General Wallace. On 28 December 1864 Francis P. Blair of Maryland received permission from President Lincoln to visit President Jefferson Davis at Richmond. Although the mission was classified as unofficial, Lincoln wanted to learn the attitude of the Confederacy toward proposals of peace. Blair met with Davis on 12

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<sup>35</sup>Rippy, "Mexican Projects," 296-97; Irby, "Line of the Rio Grande," 198; Wallace, Autobiography, 813-14; ORA, series 1, vol. 46, pt. 2, p. 201; McKee, Ben-Hur Wallace, 91.

January 1865. His main proposition was the end of hostilities and the union of military forces for the purpose of maintaining the Monroe Doctrine. Blair pointed out to Davis that Napoleon III intended to conquer the continent of North America. The American Civil War, as long as it continued, would help the French realize that dream. If an armistice was reached, Davis could “transfer such portions of his army as he deemed proper to the banks of the Rio Grande.” Here he would join up with the Liberals under Juarez and help drive the French out of Mexico. If necessary, northern forces would also join in the enterprise. Once the French were driven out, Davis could bring these conquered Mexican states into the Union as new American states. Davis, who realized an alliance with the French at this stage of the war was hopeless, and moved also by an old sense of patriotism, seemed sympathetic to Blair’s proposals. The Lincoln administration, however, did not support the proposal because, in the words of one historian, “the government councils at Washington were not ruled by the spirit of political adventure.”<sup>36</sup>

General Wallace left Washington immediately and proceeded directly to Brownsville. He arrived at Brazos Santiago on 5 March 1865 aboard the steamer Clifton. That same day he wrote a letter to his wife describing the immense number of foreign ships he saw at the mouth of the Rio Grande. Wallace also wasted no time in arranging a peace conference with the commander of Confederate forces at Brownsville, General James E. Slaughter, and his second in command, Colonel Ford. Wallace, through a

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<sup>36</sup>Rippy, “Mexican Projects,” 295-96; Jefferson Davis, The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government (New York, 1881), 614-17.

civilian intermediary, Charles Worthington, arranged to meet with Slaughter and Ford on 9 March at the town of Point Isabel (present-day Port Isabel). A severe storm hit that day and the conference was delayed until 11 March.<sup>37</sup>

The Point Isabel conference began on 11 March and lasted late into the afternoon of the next day. At the outset, both sides in the negotiations stated that they were not acting in official capacities for their respective governments and that anything agreed upon by both parties would be passed along to higher authorities. Wallace presented ambitious and optimistic proposals to Slaughter and Ford concerning not only Brownsville, but the entire trans-Mississippi region. First, the Confederates of the trans-Mississippi would cease all opposition to the United States. If the Confederates took an oath of allegiance to the United States, they would receive amnesty. Second, the Monroe Doctrine would be enforced and the Federals and former Confederates would join together to aid Juarez in driving the French out of northern Mexico. Third, ignoring the Emancipation Proclamation, Wallace proposed that the issue of slavery would be decided by the United States at a later date. Finally, there would be a cessation of hostilities in the region, for it was doubtful that the battles in south Texas could alter the outcome of the Civil War.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>Wallace, Autobiography, 820-21, 828; Ford, Rip Ford's Texas, 388; McKee, Ben-Hur Wallace, 93; Rippey, "Mexican Projects," 297; Petrovich, "Civil War Career, Ford," 144; Ford, "Memoirs," 6:1030-31; ORA, series 1, vol. 48, pt. 1, pp. 1276-79; Hughes, Rebellious Ranger, 233.

<sup>38</sup>Wallace, Autobiography, 828-30; Ford, Rip Ford's Texas, 388; Irby, "Line of the Rio Grande," 198-99, Kearney and Knopp, Boom and Bust, 138; Hughes, Rebellious Ranger, 234.

Wallace emerged from the Point Isabel conference with high expectations. He forwarded a letter to General Grant on 14 March 1865 explaining that both Slaughter and Ford agreed heartily to the Mexican project. Slaughter pointed out that the best way for officers in his situation to get honorably back into the Union was to cross the Rio Grande, conquer two or three Mexican states from the French, and eventually annex them to the United States. Both Confederate officers, however, doubted that such a project would ever be approved by the Confederate government. Privately, Ford told Wallace that he believed Kirby Smith was already negotiating with Maximilian, possibly with a view to the Imperial annexation of Texas. Wallace asked Ford what he would do if such a situation arose. "Old Rip" responded without hesitation: he would lead a counterrevolution against Kirby Smith. Yet despite these rumors, both Slaughter and Ford agreed to forward a copy of the Point Isabel negotiations to General Walker, commander of the Department of Texas, and Kirby Smith. Before Wallace left Brazos Santiago, all three officers (Wallace, Slaughter, and Ford) agreed to a temporary truce on the lower Rio Grande. They also selected Ford to go in person to carry the propositions to Kirby Smith.<sup>39</sup>

The Point Isabel meeting concluded one stage in Wallace's mission. The next stage was for Wallace to meet Ford in Galveston. Ford was to arrange the landing of Wallace and Brigadier General E. J. Davis, commander of the First Texas Cavalry. Wallace wanted Davis along because Kirby Smith and Davis were lifelong friends.

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<sup>39</sup>Wallace, *Autobiography*, 821-22, Ford, *Rip Ford's Texas*, 389; Hughes, *Rebellious Ranger*, 235; *Houston Post*, 25 June 1922; *ORA*, series 1, vol. 48, pt. 1, pp. 1167, 1277-79; Oates, "John S. Ford," 310.

Davis's presence, Wallace believed, might help persuade Smith to accept Wallace's proposals. An unfortunate turn of events sabotaged this stage of the negotiations. Ford could not leave Brownsville because Slaughter, for reasons not officially known, absented himself from Brownsville shortly after Wallace departed. As a result, Ford sent Wallace's proposals "under the seal of secrecy" to Kirby Smith by a courier named Colonel Fairfax Gray. Gray was to deliver the sealed letter to Walker, who in turn would deliver it to Smith.<sup>40</sup>

When Gray reached district headquarters in Houston, Walker ignored the seal and made the proposals public. Wallace arrived in Galveston on 29 March 1865 aboard the steamer Clifton and informed Walker the following day of his arrival. By this time Walker had already looked over the terms and conditions of the Point Isabel conference. Walker, an officer of the "last ditch school," sent Wallace a very firm rebuke regarding his peace mission:

It would be folly of me to pretend that we are not tired of a war that has sown sorrow and desolation over our land; but we will accept no other than an honorable peace. With three hundred thousand men yet in the field, we would be the most abject of mankind if we should now basely yield all that we have been contending for the last four years—namely, nationality and the rights of self-government. With the blessings of God, we will yet achieve these, and extort from your government all that we ask. Whenever you are willing to yield these, and to treat as equal with equal, an officer of your high rank and character, clothed with the proper authority from your government, will not be reduced to the necessity of seeking an obscure corner of the Confederacy to inaugurate negotiations.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>McKee, Ben-Hur Wallace, 94; Irby, "Line of the Rio Grande," 199-200; Hughes, Rebellious Ranger, 236; Wallace, Autobiography, 831-32; Rippey, "Mexican Projects," 297.

<sup>41</sup>Wallace, Autobiography, 832-37; Ford, "Memoirs," 7:1181; T.R. Fehrenbach, Lone Star: A History of Texas and Texans (New York: American Legacy Press, 1983),



Needless to say, Wallace was taken aback by the rather terse letter of Walker, especially the implication that he was a sneak. In a sharp rebuttal, Wallace informed Walker that he fully expected the conditions of peace that he proposed would be passed along to Kirby Smith. With a hint of sarcasm, Wallace told Walker that it was unfortunate that “all of the sane men of your Confederacy are located in its obscure corners.” Wallace also implied that Walker had no right to decide the fate of the Confederates in Texas and prodded him to send his peace conditions on to Smith for final deliberation. Wallace then left for New Orleans, leaving Walker with instructions to forward any response from Kirby Smith to that location.<sup>42</sup>

Wallace, dejected and demoralized from his communications with Walker, left Galveston for New Orleans. He arrived in that city on 5 April 1865 and spoke to Union General A. S. Hurlbut, then commanding the Department of the Gulf. Wallace relayed to Hurlbut the events of the last month, but especially the rude reception he received from Walker in Galveston. Wallace explained to Hurlbut his eventual goal of speaking to Kirby Smith concerning the surrender of the Trans-Mississippi Department. Wallace also told Hurlbut that Walker might still present his peace proposals to Smith. If Smith replied, they would be forwarded to New Orleans according to the instructions Wallace had given to Walker. But Wallace expected no positive action to be taken by Smith. Wallace reasoned (correctly, as it later turned out) that the higher up he went in the

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388; Irby, “Line of the Rio Grande,” 200; Ralph A. Wooster, Texas and Texans in the Civil War (Austin: Eakin Press, 1995), 172.

<sup>42</sup>Ford, “Memoirs,” 7:1181; ORA, series 1, vol. 48, pt. 2, pp. 457-58; Hughes, Rebellious Ranger, 236; Wallace, Autobiography, 834-35.

Confederate chain of command, the greater the defiance. As a result, he left the unfinished project in the hands of General Hurlbut and returned to Washington.<sup>43</sup>

Before Wallace left New Orleans, he sent a letter on to Slaughter and Ford at Brownsville. He informed them that the project of peace they had discussed at Point Isabel had stalled. He pointed out the rejection of peace by Walker at Galveston, and assured them that if further bloodshed occurred in Texas, they (Wallace, Slaughter, and Ford) would not be responsible. Wallace then stated that regardless of the turn of events in Texas, he would always regard Slaughter and Ford as honorable men, seeking nothing less for Texas than an honorable return to the Union.<sup>44</sup>

As late as 19 April 1865, Wallace remained optimistic concerning the surrender of the Trans-Mississippi Department. On that date, he wrote a letter to General Grant pointing out that he believed Kirby Smith would surrender “without a shot fired.” This optimism was shattered when on 21 April, Smith issued a proclamation to the troops in his department urging them to continue the struggle against the United States. Smith eventually replied to Wallace on 7 May. He expressed his desire for an honorable peace, but he regretted that he had no authority to act on Wallace’s plan of peace. The letter from Smith to Wallace was very courteous, but it clearly implied that as long as Jefferson Davis had not been captured, the struggle would continue.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup>Rippy, “Mexican Projects,” 297; Wallace, Autobiography, 835-36; ORA, series 1, vol. 48, pt. 2, pp. 120-22.

<sup>44</sup>ORA, series 1, vol. 48, pt. 2, p. 463; Wallace, Autobiography, 834.

<sup>45</sup>Shreveport Semi-Weekly News, 22 April 1865; Wallace, Autobiography, 840-41; ORA, series 1, vol. 48, pt. 2, pp. 122, 1283; Joseph H. Parks, General Edmund Kirby

Despite the fact that Wallace failed to procure the surrender of the entire Trans-Mississippi Department, a minor accomplishment had been achieved from the Point Isabel negotiations. During the conference, it was agreed by mutual consent that further fighting along the lower Rio Grande would not affect the outcome of the war. For two months, then, as Robert E. Lee endured his final agony in Virginia, a gentleman's agreement kept the peace in South Texas.<sup>46</sup>

In war, especially a conflict as bloody as the Civil War, peace often appears as an elusive goal for both combatants. Those who undertake campaigns for peace appear even stranger since glory often goes to the warriors, not the peacemakers. Wallace offered a very optimistic solution not only to Texas, but the whole Trans-Mississippi Department. Slaughter and Ford knew the situation for the Confederacy was untenable. Stubborn and defiant higher Confederate authorities refused even to consider the olive branch offered by Wallace. In hindsight, even Ford believed that rejection of Wallace's peace overtures had cost the South dearly: "The days of reconstruction as things occurred in the South, were terrible proofs of the evils arising from the contrary course. Better it would have been for the Confederate States to have accepted the terms proposed by General Wallace than to have disbanded its armies, surrendered at discretion, and become the prey of unprincipled men."<sup>47</sup>

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Smith, C.S.A. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1954), 456.

<sup>46</sup>Ford, "Memoirs," 7:1174-81, 1185-86, 1189.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

## CHAPTER 7

### THE WAR ENDS IN TEXAS

Despite the failed efforts of Major General Lew Wallace to obtain the surrender of the Trans-Mississippi Department, he did procure a two-month truce between Union and Confederate forces on the lower Rio Grande. The truce ended on 13 May 1865 when opposing troops clashed at Palmito Hill, about ten miles east of Brownsville. This was the last battle of the Civil War, fought nearly five weeks after General Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox.<sup>1</sup>

News of Lee's surrender, however, failed to dampen the fighting spirit of the leaders of the Trans-Mississippi Department. The commander of the department, Lieutenant General Edmund Kirby Smith, issued a proclamation on 21 April, encouraging southerners to fight on despite Lee's surrender. Major General John B. Magruder, again in command of the Texas district, issued a stirring appeal to his troops to stand firm and resist the enemy. One of these soldiers, William Heartsill, stationed near Houston, believed the Trans-Mississippi could hold out indefinitely if the people truly united.

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<sup>1</sup>John S. Ford, "Memoirs of John S. Ford and Reminiscences of Texas History from 1836-1888," Center for American History, University of Texas, Austin, 7:1178-89 (hereafter cited as "Memoirs"); T. R. Fehrenbach, Lone Star: A History of Texas and Texans (New York: American Legacy Press, 1983), 388-89; Ralph A. Wooster, Texas and Texans in the Civil War (Austin: Eakin Press, 1995), 172; James A. Irby, "Line of the Rio Grande: War and Trade on the Confederate Frontier, 1861-1865" (Ph.D. diss., University of Georgia, 1969), 201.

Political and civilian leaders also worked hard to maintain high morale. Texas governor Pendleton Murrah called upon the people of Texas to continue the struggle. On 27 April, Murrah warned, “Look at the bloody and desolate tracks of the invader through Georgia and South Carolina and see what awaits you. Rally around the battle scarred and well known flag of the Confederacy and uphold your state government in its purity and integrity—There is no other hope of safety for you and yours.” E. H. Cushing, editor of the Houston Daily Telegraph, encouraged Texans to resort to guerrilla warfare if necessary to defeat the enemy.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the brave front presented by both military and civilian leaders of the Trans-Mississippi, the everyday soldier and civilian knew that the end was near. One Confederate soldier stationed near Shreveport observed the reaction of many soldiers after Kirby Smith’s proclamation to continue the struggle. He observed that “the effect of the order upon the troops was marked in the extreme. The men instantly became dejected. Mutiny and wholesale desertion was talked of. This soon gave way to a general apathy and indifference, but through all could be seen by a close observer that the Army of the Trans-Mississippi was in spirit crushed.” A young woman in Tyler, Texas, wrote that “anarchy and confusion reign over all. Jayhawking is the order of the day. The

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<sup>2</sup>W. Buck Yearns, ed., Confederate Governors (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985), 214; Shreveport Semi-Weekly News, 22 April 1865; Joseph H. Parks, General Edmund Kirby Smith, C.S.A., (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1954), 456-59; Wooster, Texas and Texans, 179; Emory Thomas, “Rebel Nationalism: E. H. Cushing and the Rebel Experience,” Southwestern Historical Quarterly 73 (January 1970): 349; W. W. Heartsill, Fourteen Hundred and 91 Days in the Confederate Army; or Camp Life, Day by Day, of the W. P. Lane Rangers from April 19, 1861 to May 20, 1865, ed. Bell I. Wiley (Marshall, Tex.: W. W. Heartsill, 1876; repr., Jackson, Tenn.: McCowat-Mercer Press, 1954), 239.

soldiers are disbanding throughout the Department and seizing Government property wherever they can find it. All work is over and all who can are going home.”<sup>3</sup>

More bad news continued to reach the Trans-Mississippi. In the second week of May, Texans learned that General Richard Taylor had surrendered his forces to Union General E. R. S. Canby at Citronelle, Alabama, on 4 May. This convinced many Texas soldiers that the war was over and that it would be foolish to fight on. More and more soldiers in Texas began to leave their units and head home. On 8 May, Colonel John T. Sprague, chief of staff for Union General Pope, who commanded the Federal district of Missouri, was allowed to pass through Confederate lines to meet with Kirby Smith at Shreveport. Sprague brought a letter from Pope stating that had been authorized by Grant to offer terms of surrender to Smith similar to the ones offered Lee at Appomattox. As a result, Smith called together another conference of governors of his department at Marshall, Texas, to discuss Pope’s proposals. The conference was attended by Governors Thomas C. Reynolds of Missouri, Harris Flanagin of Arkansas, Henry W. Allen of Louisiana, and Colonel Guy M. Bryan, representing Texas (Murrah was ill at the time). On 13 May these state executives adopted a series of proposals. They stated that since resistance was futile, the army would be disbanded without parole, state governments would continue to operate until state conventions established new governments, and

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<sup>3</sup>Parks, Kirby Smith, 457; John Q. Anderson, ed., Brokenburn: The Journal of Kate Stone, 1861-1868 (Baton Rouge, 1955), 347-48; William T. Windham, “The Problem of Supply in the Trans-Mississippi Confederacy,” Journal of Southern History 22 (May 1961):160-68.

states would keep sufficient troops under arms to maintain order.<sup>4</sup>

The resolutions adopted by the Trans-Mississippi governors were unrealistic considering the existing military situation. Colonel Sprague pointed out that neither he nor General Pope could approve anything of a political nature as presented by the governors. As a result, Sprague returned to St. Louis on 15 May, having failed in his mission of securing a surrender from Kirby Smith. Before he left, however, Smith advised Sprague that “Many examples of history teach that the more generous the terms proposed by a victorious enemy, the greater is the certainty of a speedy and lasting pacification, and that the imposition of harsh terms leads invariably to subsequent disturbances.” When Sprague reported to Pope, he conveyed that the general attitude among civil and military officials was that more lenient terms were merited.<sup>5</sup>

As Kirby Smith delayed the inevitable, the final battle of the Civil War was about to take place near Brownsville. The reasons for this last encounter are not altogether clear, but seem strongly related to the personal ambitions of a minor Union officer and the pent up frustrations of the Confederates following the terrible news from

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<sup>4</sup>Yeans, Confederate Governors, 106, 205; Wooster, Texas and Texans, 180; Parks, Kirby Smith, 468-69; Kevin R. Young, To the Tyrants Never Yield: A Texas Civil War Sampler (Plano, Tex.: Wordware Publishing, 1992), 186; U.S. War Department, War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, 128 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), series 1, vol. 48, pt. 1, p. 189 (hereafter cited as ORA).

<sup>5</sup>Robert L. Kerby, Kirby Smith's Confederacy: The Trans-Mississippi South, 1863-1865 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), 418-19; Parks, Kirby Smith, 468-70; ORA, series 1, vol. 48, pt. 1, pp. 188-93; Paul D. Casdorph, Prince John Magruder: His Life and Campaigns (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1996), 294-95; Wooster, Texas and Texans, 180.

Appomattox. On Brazos Santiago, the Federal garrison was commanded by Colonel Theodore H. Barrett of the Sixty-second Colored Infantry regiment. Barrett assumed command in the absence of the post commander, Brigadier General E. B. Brown. Other units on Brazos included the Thirty-fourth Indiana, the Morton Rifles (a New York regiment), several dismounted companies of the Second Texas Cavalry, and several artillery companies. Barrett had seen little combat in the Civil War and seemed obsessed with a desire “to establish for himself some notoriety before the war closed.” Barrett requested permission from department headquarters to make a demonstration against Fort Brown, but headquarters denied his request. Despite having his request denied, Barrett resolved to attack the Confederates at Fort Brown anyway. The image of being labeled the “Victor of Brownsville” must have inspired Barrett to make this attack.<sup>6</sup>

As for the Confederates, it is hard to accept the standard explanation that is given concerning the last battle of the Civil War. One of the major figures in that battle, Colonel John S. Ford, argued that they did not know that the war was over until they took some prisoners who supplied them with the news. A more plausible explanation would be that although the Confederates may not have “known” that the war was over, to say that they had not “heard” of Lee’s surrender would be untrue. Erroneous reporting of war news from the eastern front was so common that it had conditioned Texas Confederates to doubt any news from that theater, especially news as important as Lee’s surrender.

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<sup>6</sup>New York Times, 18 June 1865; Noah A. Trudeau, Out of the Storm: The End of the Civil War, April-June 1865 (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1994), 298-310; William J. Hughes, Rebellious Ranger: Rip Ford and the Old Southwest (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964), 237; Wooster, Texas and Texans, 180; Young, To the Tyrants Never Yield, 190; Fehrenbach, Lone Star, 389.



Missionary Melinda Rankin, who arrived in the Mexican town of Bagdad at the mouth of the Rio Grande shortly after Lee's surrender, recorded conversations of Confederate sympathizers who had heard of Lee's surrender, but doubted its authenticity. One man stated that "It can not be possible that our righteous cause can fail! Justice and right must and will prevail." Another rebel believed that "It is an act of strategy on the part of General Lee. He is feigning to evacuate Richmond, and going to withdraw his army to cut off Sherman and the whole host of Yankees."<sup>7</sup>

This devotion to Lee cannot be underestimated. Since 1862 Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia had come to symbolize the cause of Confederate nationalism. Noted Lee historian Gary Gallagher, pointed out that in all of the Confederate states, civilians equated Lee's importance in the Civil War to that of George Washington in the American Revolution. Although President Jefferson Davis created a government on paper, it was Lee who instilled a sense of patriotism throughout the Confederacy. A typical statement of Lee's importance came from Virginian Mary Jones in 1862. She stated that "the head of our army is a noble son of Virginia, and worthy of the intimate in which he stands connected with our immortal Washington."<sup>8</sup>

News of Lee's surrender reached Brownsville around 1 May 1865. One Confederate officer at Fort Brown mentioned that the New Orleans Times ran headlines

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<sup>7</sup>San Antonio Express, 10 October 1890; Melinda Rankin, Twenty Years Among the Mexicans (Cincinnati, Ohio: Chase and Hall, 1875), 116-18; Irby, "Line of the Rio Grande," 194, 202.

<sup>8</sup>Gary W. Gallagher, The Confederate War (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 85-89, 146-47

of Lee's defeat and surrender at Appomattox. The officer stated that "The news was soon known to all the troops, and caused them to desert, by the score, and to return home; so that on the morning of the 12<sup>th</sup> of May 1865, there was not more than three hundred men at and below Brownsville." Many of Ford's men also deserted because they had not been paid in over a year. Lee's surrender and no pay caused Ford to believe that his men might ransack Brownsville, seizing the cotton that had begun to pile up because of declining international demand. Much of this cotton, though, belonged to the steamboating firm of King, Kenedy & Stillman of Brownsville, the chief contractors for the government after 1864. Ford, who had friendly relations with this company, especially Richard King, was not going to allow this valuable commodity to fall into the hands of the enemy, much less his own men should they decide to mutiny. Ford's sense of loyalty to his friends meant that he would fight to protect their property. Ford also realized that allowing his men to attack the enemy might allow them to release some pent up tension and resentment.<sup>9</sup>

The orders to move on Brownsville were issued by Colonel Barrett on 11 May. Two hundred fifty men of the Sixty-second Colored Infantry regiment were selected for the operation. These men stood quietly at the Brazos Santiago landing, each loaded down with one hundred rounds of ammunition and rations for five days. The officers leading these men were Lieutenant Colonel David Branson and acting assistant adjutant general Lieutenant I. B. Bush. The plan called for moving the regiment by steamboat to Point Isabel on the mainland, then marching overland to Brownsville. Unfortunately, the

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<sup>9</sup>Ford, "Memoirs," 5:1031-33; Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph, 16 June 1865; Leroy P. Graf, "The Economic History of the Lower Rio Grande Valley" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1942), 600; Irby, "Line of the Rio Grande," 203-5.

steamboat assigned to ferry the men to Point Isabel broke down and no one knew when it would be operational. As a result, Branson, could either cancel the operation, wait, or find another way to get the men to the mainland. Because of technical difficulties, Barrett issued new orders to Branson. He would march his men to the southern end of Brazos Santiago, crossing the Boca Chica bridge from the southern end of the island. Barrett also bulked up the raiding party by adding fifty men of the Second Texas Cavalry, unmounted. By 9:30 p.m. Branson crossed all his men to Boca Chica, despite a blinding rainstorm that suddenly came up.<sup>10</sup>

The Federals' first target was a small Confederate outpost at White's Ranch on the Rio Grande, about six miles inland from the coast. Branson hoped to surprise the rebel position and therefore took what he later described as a "long circuitous" route to this objective. As they came close to the ranch, Branson divided his column, sending Company F under Captain Fred Miller about three quarters of a mile north of the ranch before they doubled back to attack the ranch from below. Branson anticipated capturing about sixty Confederates and some much needed cattle and horses. As Branson and Miller closed in on the ranch, they discovered no enemy troops and reasoned that they probably moved upriver to Palmito Ranch, about twelve miles from Brownsville. To

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<sup>10</sup>Annual Circular, No. 6, of the Sixty-second Regiment United States Colored Infantry (Minerva, Ohio: Weaver Bros. Steam Printing Works, 1872), hereafter cited as Annual Circular, No. 6; ORA, series 1, vol. 48, pt. 1, pp. 267-68; Irby, "Line of the Rio Grande," 205; Wooster, Texas and Texans, 180; Reports of Lieutenant Colonel David Branson and Colonel Theodore H. Barrett, Sixty-second U.S. Colored Troops, Expedition from Brazos Santiago, Texas, 18 May 1865, 10 August 1865, Regimental Books and Papers USCT, 62<sup>nd</sup> USCT Papers, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1780's-1917, Record Group 94, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (hereafter cited as 62<sup>nd</sup> USCT Papers).

preserve some element of surprise, Branson set up camp in a thicket about one mile above White's Ranch in order to conceal his men. Companies H and G under Captain Harrison Dubois were on sentry duty while the rest of the men slept.<sup>11</sup>

Branson lost the element of surprise the following morning when he reported that "persons on the Mexican shore seeing us started to give the alarm to the rebels." At about six in the morning, the lieutenant colonel continued his march toward Palmito Ranch, deploying Company F as skirmishers. About an hour later, the skirmishers reported that they had encountered enemy pickets near Palmito Ranch. These rebels belonged to a Confederate cavalry battalion under Captain W. N. Robinson. The two sides fought for about an hour before the Confederates retreated through the underbrush, leaving a few horses and some cattle. At noon the rest of the Union soldiers arrived and set fire to the ranch. While Robinson and his men retreated upriver, he sent a dispatch to Fort Brown, informing his superiors that he had engaged the enemy at Palmito Ranch. Colonel Ford told Robinson to hold his position. Robinson then counterattacked at about three in the afternoon, forcing the Federals to retreat back to White's Ranch. Upon reaching White's Ranch, Branson requested instructions from Colonel Barrett at Brazos Santiago.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Annual Circular, No.6; ORA, series 1, vol. 48, pt. 1, pp. 267-68; Young, To the Tyrants Never Yield, 190; Stephen B. Oates, "John S. "Rip" Ford, Prudent Cavalryman, C.S.A.," Southwestern Historical Quarterly 64 (1960-1961): 310; 62<sup>nd</sup> USCT Papers.

<sup>12</sup>John S. Ford, Rip Ford's Texas, ed. Stephen B. Oates (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1963), 389; Annual Circular, No. 6; ORA, series 1, vol. 48, pt. 1. pp. 267-68; Margaret W. Petrovich, "The Civil War Career of John Salmon 'RIP' Ford" (M.A. thesis, Stephen F. Austin College, 1961), 146-54; Walter W. Hildebrand, "The History of Cameron County, Texas" (M.A. thesis, North Texas State College, 1950), 49; 62<sup>nd</sup> USCT Papers.

While Branson waited for instructions at White's Ranch, the Confederates at Fort Brown were organizing their forces. When "Old Rip" received word from Captain Robinson that the enemy was advancing toward Brownsville, he immediately sent out couriers that night to gather all his cavalry that were scattered about twenty miles from Brownsville. That night, Ford ate dinner with his superior, Brigadier General James E. Slaughter, to discuss a plan of action. When Ford asked Slaughter what he intended to do, the general replied, "Retreat." Ford replied, "You can retreat and go to hell if you wish. These are my men, and I am going to fight." After Ford composed himself, he said that "I have held this place against heavy odds. If you lose it without a fight the people of the Confederacy will hold you accountable for a base neglect of duty." Slaughter decided to stay and join Ford in this last battle of the war. While Slaughter concentrated the scattered forces at Brownsville, Ford left the fort at 11:00 a.m., 13 May. With him were 250 men, including six pieces of artillery. Ford led the Cavalry of the West toward the sound of gunfire in the direction of Palmito Ranch and the last engagement of the Civil War.<sup>13</sup>

As Ford commenced his march, Union forces under Colonel Barrett arrived at White's Ranch at daybreak, 13 May, to reinforce Colonel Branson. Barrett brought with him two hundred men of the Thirty-fourth Indiana Volunteer regiment. Barrett ordered his men forward. As Union troops approached Palmito Ranch, sharp skirmishing ensued

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<sup>13</sup>Ford, Rip Ford's Texas, 389-90; Oates, "John S. Ford," 311; Fehrenbach, Lone Star, 389; Milo Kearney and Anthony Knopp, Boom and Bust: The Historical Cycles of Matamoros and Brownsville (Austin: Eakin Press, 1991), 140; James H. Thompson, "A Nineteenth Century History of Cameron County, Texas" (M.A. thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 1965), 99.

with Confederate pickets, but by noon, the ranch was again under Federal control. A halt was made at the ranch to burn enemy supplies that escaped destruction the day before. While at the ranch, Barrett ordered a small detail of men back to Brazos Santiago, consisting of “all the disabled men, and those not able to make a heavy march, with the wounded men, horses and cattle.” Barrett apparently wanted to weed out the slowest moving elements of his expedition before making an aggressive thrust toward Brownsville. Barrett deployed his men as follows: the Thirty-fourth Indiana took up a position on the river near Palmito Hill; a company from the Second Texas cavalry held the Union center; the Sixty-second Colored infantry held the Union right. Early that afternoon, as Union forces advanced westward, they were involved in what Barrett described as a “sharp engagement” about a mile west of Palmito Hill, but suffered only light casualties. Apparently, this engagement indicated to Barrett that the enemy was being reinforced; therefore, he pulled back his regiments to Palmito Hill to begin a general retreat to Point Isabel.<sup>14</sup>

At around 3 p.m., Confederate reinforcements under Ford arrived to help Captain Robinson who had taken up a position two miles north of Palmito Hill. Although somewhat nervous about the number of enemy troops opposing him, Ford nonetheless decided to attack. He had at his disposal a force of about 360 men, including six pieces of artillery on loan from the French along with several French cannoneers. (Ford’s

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<sup>14</sup>62<sup>nd</sup> USCT Papers; Ford, “Memoirs,” 5:1031-33; John H. Brown, History of Texas from 1685-1892, 2 vols. (St. Louis: Becktold and Company, 1893), 2:436; ORA, series 1, vol. 48, pt. 1, pp. 265-69; New York Herald, 29 May 1865; Frank C. Pierce, A Brief History of the Lower Rio Grande Valley (Menasha, Wis.: George Banta Publishing Co., 1917), 54.

artillery commander, Captain O. G. Jones, had accepted the offer of an Imperialist artillery company, who volunteered their services to the Confederates that day. They played a crucial role in the upcoming battle.) After about an hour of forming his men in a perpendicular line to the Rio Grande, the Confederate colonel rode along his main line, exhorting his men before the battle, “Men, we have whipped the enemy in all our previous fights!” he bellowed. “We can do it again.” The soldiers responded, shouting “Rip! Rip!”, and Ford gave the command “Charge!” Three hundred horseman surged forward, shooting everything that moved.<sup>15</sup>

A shell that landed and hit near Barrett’s men on Palmito Hill cracked the Federal line. According to one Union officer, this first artillery burst cause “some confusion and disorder” in the ranks of the Thirty-fourth Indiana. Realizing the rebels had cannon, Barrett that “our position became untenable.” Turning to the officers around him, Barrett said, “Very well then; we will retreat in good order, and good order let it be. Men keep your ranks. They can’t hurt you; we’ll get out of this yet.” When Barrett decided to retreat, he ordered the Sixty-second Colored Infantry to form a skirmish line to cover the retreat. With shells exploding around them, one officer commented how “the entire regiment moved back with great precision.” Trying to retreat in good order, the Federal units became entangled near Palmito Ranch, but they soon managed to unscramble themselves and retreat with some semblance of order. Three times during the withdrawal,

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<sup>15</sup>New York Times, 18 June 1865; Colonel Oran M. Roberts, Confederate Military History, Extended Edition, vol. 15, Texas (Atlanta: The Confederate Publishing Company, 1899; repr., Wilmington, N.C.: Broadfoot Publishing Company, 1989), 126-27; Brown, History of Texas, 432, 436; Ford, Rip Ford’s Texas, 390; Young, To the Tyrants Never Yield, 194.

Union soldiers made temporary stands, but they were dislodged each time by Ford's artillery. Three hours later, Barrett's column reached the safety of Brazos Santiago. Clearly the French artillery made a significant impact in forcing the Federals to retreat during the battle.<sup>16</sup>

During the confusion of that day's fighting, both armies experienced some embarrassing incidents. On the Confederate side, Colonel Ford, in ordering his artillery into battle formation, did not realize that some of these men were French and could not understand a word of English. When finally informed of their nationality, Ford used his limited French vocabulary and shouted "Allons!" Meanwhile, a steamboat from the firm of M. Kenedy & Company was chugging up the river during the height of the fighting. Fearing that it might be a Yankee gunboat, the gray gunners fired two shells at it, but fortunately they missed. The vessel was finally able to identify itself as a nonbelligerent before more shells were fired. On the Union side, during their withdrawal to Brazos Santiago, the Thirty-fourth Indiana regiment lost both the United States flag and the state flag of Indiana, normally objects of great pride for any regiment. The Thirty-fourth Indiana had the unfortunate distinction of losing the last regimental battle flag in the Civil War.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>62<sup>nd</sup> USCT Papers; Hondon B. Hargrove, Black Union Soldiers in the Civil War (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1988), 202; Irby, "Line of the Rio Grande," 207; ORA, series 1, vol. 48, pt. 1, pp. 266-69; Roberts, Confederate Military History, 127; Ford, "Memoirs," 5:1031-33; Oates, "John S. Ford," 312; Trudeau, Like Men of War, 447-50; Hughes, Rebellious Ranger, 239.

<sup>17</sup>Roberts, Confederate Military History, 128; Ford, Rip Ford' Texas, 390-91; New York Times, 18 June 1865; Young, To the Tyrants Never Yield, 195; San Antonio Express, 10 October 1890; ORA, series 1, vol. 48, pt. 1, p. 269; Trudeau, Like Men of



Ford's Texans pursued the Federals for seven miles, but knowing that both men and horses were spent, Ford called off the pursuit. Ford said to his men, "Boys we have done finely. We will let well enough alone and retire." At this time General Slaughter arrived with a battalion under the command of Captain W. D. Carrington. Both Ford and Slaughter exchanged heated words over whether to resume the attack. Ford insisted that his men were too tired to continue fighting. Ford also pointed out that it was almost dark and that the garrison on Brazos Santiago was probably on high alert. Slaughter disagreed and led Carrington's battalion to Boca Chica to continue harassing the Federals as they retreated to Brazos Santiago. By the time Slaughter arrived at Boca Chica, the Union soldiers had already made it safely across the marshy inlet to Brazos Santiago. Out of frustration, the general rode into the bog and emptied his pistol at the retreating enemy, some three hundred yards away. At dusk, as the two exhausted armies faced each other in the marshes off Brazos Santiago, one last artillery shell burst near a young Confederate soldier. Swearing loudly and shaking his fist—which delighted the old veterans—the young rebel fired his rifle at the shadows of Brazos Santiago, the last shot of the last battle of the Civil War.<sup>18</sup>

Accounts of the Battle of Palmito Hill have disagreed on the number of casualties for both sides in the engagement. Ford reported only five wounded among the

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War, 448-50; Irby, "Line of the Rio Grande," 208.

<sup>18</sup>Ford, "Memoirs," 5:1032-33; Brown, History of Texas, 431-36; New York Times, 18 June 1865; Roberts, Confederate Military History, 128-29; San Antonio Express, 10 October 1890; Oates, "John S. Ford," 312-13; ORA, series 1, vol. 48, pt. 1, p. 267.

Confederate forces. However, another Confederate officer, Captain Carrington, later stated that the Confederates took time to bury their dead. The Federals suffered 101 captured, 9 wounded, and 2 killed. Although no exact numbers were given for Confederate casualties, their losses approximated those of the Federals. Among the Union soldiers captured, 77 were from the Thirty-fourth Indiana, 22 from the Second Texas Cavalry, and 2 from the Sixty-second United States Colored Troops. Most of these soldiers were skirmishers, and when the order to retreat was given, they never received it. Due to the expense of feeding these prisoners, the Confederates paroled them, letting them return to Brazos. The black troops of the Sixty-second were “agreeably surprised when they were paroled and permitted to depart with the white prisoners.” They were surprised because early in the war the Confederate government, through various proclamations, stated that black troops captured in battle faced either re-enslavement or possible execution.<sup>19</sup>

The fate of Texans in the Union ranks captured during the battle remains unclear. Twenty years later, with an eye toward posterity, Ford wrote that “Several of them were from Texas. This made no difference in their treatment. Most of these were allowed to escape during the march to Brownsville. The Confederate soldiers were unwilling to see them tried as deserters. There was no disposition to visit upon them a mean spirit of revenge.” The paroled Union soldiers told another story. When they reached Brazos

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<sup>19</sup>New York Times, 18 June 1865; Joseph T. Glatthaar, Forged in Battle: The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers (New York: The Free Press, 1990), 202; Trudeau, Like Men of War, 451-52; Ford, “Memoirs,” 7:1197; Brown, History of Texas, 433-35; Hughes, Rebellious Ranger, 240.

Santiago on 17 May, they reported that “There was a company of Texans (the Second Texas) made up mostly of deserters from the rebels. As fast as these were captured they were shot down. Neither would the deserters surrender, for they knew it would be death, and so died fighting.”<sup>20</sup>

Both sides displayed a sense of history as the final confrontation of the Civil War ended. Lieutenant I. B. Foster, who commanded Company I of the Sixty-second Colored Infantry, claimed the honor of having given the “last command to fire at Confederate troops in this last battle of the war.” Lieutenant Colonel Branson, who commanded the Sixty-second, wrote in 1883 that he had given the final Union command when he ordered his men to cease fire. With a sense of melodramatic finality, Branson allegedly turned to an officer next to him and said, “That winds up the war.” Both of these commands were given near dark as the last of the Union soldiers retreated to Brazos Santiago while the Sixty-second provided cover for the retreating Union troops. The last soldier to die in the Civil War was believed to be Private Bill Redman of the Sixty-second Colored Infantry, who died on 4 June 1865 at the post hospital on Brazos Santiago after being wounded in the Battle of Palmito Hill. The victorious Texas Confederates gathered up souvenirs from the Palmito Hill battlefield throughout 14 May.<sup>21</sup>

Both combatants also told different stories about what actually brought on the Battle of Palmito Hill. Colonel Barrett, who commanded Union forces on Brazos, in his

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<sup>20</sup>Ford, “Memoirs,” 7:1197; New York Times, 18 June 1865; Irby, “Line of the Rio Grande,” 210.

<sup>21</sup>National Tribune, 10 May 1883; ORA, series 1, vol. 48, pt. 1, pp. 267-69; Hargrove, Black Union Soldiers, 202; Trudeau, Like Men of War, 450-52.

first official report after the battle claimed to have sent some of his men to the mainland to procure forage and horses rumored to be in the direction of Brownsville. Many years after the battle, Colonel Branson, who commanded the Sixty-second Colored Infantry, seemed to confirm Barrett's intentions. Branson commented that Barrett had been motivated by a desire to "stop the clamoring of the troops generally, for fresh beef to eat and lumber to build barracks and for horses to ride while scouting for future supplies." Considering the fact he had unmounted members of the Second Texas Cavalry on Brazos Santiago, Barrett's need for horses seems legitimate. Finally, a Federal soldier captured by the Confederates informed them that Union forces advanced upon Brownsville not to do battle, but expecting Confederate capitulation since Lee had surrendered at Appomattox a month before.<sup>22</sup>

The Confederates, Rip Ford specifically, denied that they had ever heard of Lee's surrender and insisted that the Yankees came off Brazos looking for trouble, and certainly found it. Ford also stated that he saw the advance of Union troops on Brownsville as a violation of the truce he had worked out with Major General Lew Wallace two months before the battle. Ford insisted that he first learned of Lee's surrender from a Union prisoner on day after the battle of Palmito Hill. The Yankee prisoner then went on to state that they were moving on Brownsville to occupy it, not to engage the Confederates in a battle. Ford and his officers denied that version of the story. To this day, the motives behind the last battle of the Civil War have never been settled to the satisfaction of both

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<sup>22</sup>New York Times, 18 June 1865; San Antonio Express, 10 October 1890; Annual Circular No. 6; Ford, Rip Ford's Texas, 396.

sides. Whatever brought on the final battle was insignificant as the last chapter of the Civil War came to a close in South Texas. But until Kirby Smith surrendered, the Confederates remained at their posts in and around Brownsville.<sup>23</sup>

If Colonel Barrett undertook the campaign against Brownsville for a last chance at military glory, he was destined to be disappointed: Brownsville was not Richmond, Vicksburg, or Gettysburg. Barrett, in an effort to deflect responsibility from himself, brought charges against Lieutenant Colonel Morrison of the Thirty-fourth Indiana for his alleged poor performance during the battle. Participants in the battle testified later and found Morrison not guilty of any wrongdoing. In hindsight, it is hard to absolve Colonel Barrett of his responsibility for the poor results of the Brownsville campaign. When they encountered strong enemy resistance at Palmito Ranch on 12 May, he sent the Thirty-fourth Indiana to reinforce them. When this veteran regiment failed to drive the enemy back to Brownsville, subsequent charges against its commander were not surprising. If Barrett intended only to search for supplies as he once indicated in an official report, why send reinforcements? A prudent officer would have pulled his men back to prevent further casualties. Moreover, if the Federals intended only to occupy Brownsville, why not send a courier to Brownsville under a flag of truce to inform the enemy of peaceful intentions?<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Ford, Rip Ford's Texas, 396; San Antonio Express, 10 October 1890; Hughes, Rebellious Ranger, 241; Roberts, Confederate Military History, 129; Wooster, Texas and Texans, 181.

<sup>24</sup>Supplement to the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, 81 vols. to date (Wilmington, N.C.: Broadfoot Publishing Company, 1994-), 10:131;

A much greater problem presented itself to the Union forces on the Rio Grande than the Confederate victory at Palmito Hill. Many high-ranking Confederates were making their way to Mexico as the last days of the Civil War were coming to an end. The Federal government feared a Confederate resurgence out of Mexico, knowing all too well that the French had been sympathetic to the Southern cause. The Confederate exodus to Mexico had to be stopped. To solve this problem, the Department of the Gulf, under Major General Nathaniel P. Banks, assigned Brigadier General Egbert B. Brown to take command of U.S. forces at Brazos Santiago on 3 May 1865. By the time of Brown's appointment, he had been twice wounded in fighting at Springfield, Missouri, on 8 January 1863. His later military appointments included commands of military districts within Missouri.<sup>25</sup>

Brown's biggest task concerned the capture of the Confederacy's highest ranking official, President Jefferson Davis. In a dispatch to Brown, Banks stated that "As a matter of special and important interest your attention is called to the probability of the passage of Jeff Davis, the fugitive President of the Confederacy, across the Mississippi into Texas, with a view to entering Mexico by that route. We have rumors here today that he is at Shreveport. His escape from Texas into Mexico should be prevented. The Government of the United States has offered a reward of \$100,000 dollars for his capture." Banks then went on to point out the possible need of occupying the lower Rio

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Trudeau, Like Men of War, 451.

<sup>25</sup>Mark M. Boatner, The Civil War Dictionary (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1959), 90; Wooster, Texas and Texans, 181-83; ORA, series 1, vol. 48, pt.2, p. 300; Young, To the Tyrants Never Yield, 195-97.

Grande Valley as far as Rio Grande City to prevent the escape of Davis and his associate officers. Liberal forces under Juarez controlled the Rio Grande as far north as Piedras Negras, opposite the town of Eagle Pass. Banks ordered Brown not to start offensive operations against Brownsville, however, unless he could prevent the escape of Davis. Banks closed his orders to Brown by pointing out that “I have the highest confidence in your faithful discharge of the duties assigned you at that important post, which may become the theater of important events in the progress of the war now near its close.”<sup>26</sup>

General-in-Chief Ulysses S. Grant also grew concerned over the possible continuation of the war west of the Mississippi. As long as Confederate General Kirby Smith had not surrendered, Grant made military preparations to continue the war in the West until those states had formally surrendered. Grant also feared that as long as the French were still in Mexico, the possibility of collusion between the French and escaped Confederates meant the possible expansion of the war south of the Rio Grande. Grant assigned one of his most trusted generals, Major General Philip H. Sheridan, to terminate hostilities west of the Mississippi as quickly as possible. Grant told Sheridan that “Your duty is to restore Texas, and that part of Louisiana held by the enemy, to the Union in the shortest practicable time, in a way most effectual for securing permanent peace. In case of an active campaign, a hostile one, I think a heavy force should be put on the Rio Grande as a first preliminary. The 25<sup>th</sup> Corps is now available and to it should be added a force of White troops say those now under Major General Steele.” With added emphasis,

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<sup>26</sup>ORA, series 1, vol. 48, pt. 2, pp. 381-83.

Grant closed the dispatch by informing Sheridan that “I think the Rio Grande should be strongly held whether the forces in Texas surrender or not and that no time should be lost in getting them there. If war is to be made, they will be in the right place: if Kirby Smith surrenders they will be on the line which is to be strongly garrisoned.” Later, in a private conversation with Sheridan, Grant stated that he believed that the destruction of secession would never be complete until “the French were compelled to quit the territory of our sister republic” in Mexico. With regard to that matter, Grant urged Sheridan to exercise great caution in the use of troops on the Rio Grande, not wanting to involve the United States in a war with the French.<sup>27</sup>

As Sheridan prepared to move to his new command, the commanding officer at Brazos Santiago, Brigadier General Brown began making reports to the Department of the Gulf concerning the military and international situation on the lower Rio Grande. On 23 May, Brown sent two dispatches to headquarters in New Orleans. The first telegram gave a rather unflattering description of the post at Brazos Santiago. As with previous commanders, what Brown described at Brazos was not unusual. He requested rations of beef and other supplies for the troops. He then asked for three hundred horses, one battery of artillery, and another regiment of cavalry. The second dispatch gave an evaluation of the military and international situation. Around 20 May, Brown sent six officers under a flag of truce to Brownsville to scout the enemy position. They reported

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<sup>27</sup>Ulysses S. Grant, The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant, ed. John Y. Simon, 18 vols. to date (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 15:43-45 (hereafter cited as Papers of USG); Philip H. Sheridan, Personal Memoirs of P. H. Sheridan: General U.S. Army, 2 vols. (London: Chatto and Windus, Piccadilly, 1888), 2:210.



Confederate strength at one thousand, plus six pieces of light artillery. These officers also learned that General Slaughter, the commander of Fort Brown, was pro-French. Colonel Ford, second in command, along with most of the men at Fort Brown supported the Liberal government of Juarez. In general, the Union officers reported that the majority of men at Fort Brown were eager for peace. Brown's report also stated that cotton was being moved across the river as quickly as possible to prevent its seizure by the Federals. In closing his dispatch, Brown reported a meeting of arch-traitors on the 18<sup>th</sup> in Austin that was supposedly attended by Jefferson Davis.<sup>28</sup>

On a somewhat lighter note, Rip Ford discussed a cordial gathering with six Union officers. One of these officers, a major, was invited to Ford's home for a glass of eggnog. As the guest smacked his lips over this welcome beverage, he commented, "If my wife knew that I was at the house of a Confederate colonel, and accepting his friendly hospitality, she would be so mad she would hardly speak to me." To provide his guests further entertainment, Ford took them across the river into Matamoros to observe a review of Imperial troops under General Tomas Mejia. This mixed group of blue and gray uniforms stationed themselves directly across from the reviewing stand of General Mejia. Ford recalled with amusement how the Imperial soldiers, when they marched by, could not resist staring at this group of American army officers, who were supposedly enemies. Ford continued to arouse suspicion by taking these Federal officers to breakfast at a restaurant where French officers were known to dine on a regular basis. When Ford's

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<sup>28</sup>ORA, series 1, vol. 48, pt. 2, pp. 564-65.

party arrived at the restaurant, many of the French jumped to their feet to engage the American enemies in friendly discourse. When exiting the restaurant, the French besieged Ford, wanting to know the meaning of his visit. Old Rip assured them that nothing north of the Rio Grande had changed. He was only entertaining a few friends. Ford had indeed sprung a diplomatic surprise. As long as the American Civil War continued, the French remained confident of non-involvement by the United States in Mexico. Ford, resentful of the fact that France never recognized the Confederacy, wanted to deliver a last parting shot at the French before the war officially ended.<sup>29</sup>

The Confederacy breathed its last in Texas. The last two weeks of the war were hectic ones for the Trans-Mississippi Department. As mentioned earlier, its commander, Kirby Smith called a final meeting of the governors of his department. On 13 May, as the Battle of Palmito Hill was being fought, the governors of the Trans-Mississippi met in Marshall, Texas. Although Smith did not attend the conference, they recommended that Smith consult U.S. authorities “with view to making a complete pacification of the Trans-Mississippi Department.” The terms of the surrender, however, had to be ones of honor and not humiliation. On 15 May, Smith wrote a letter to Colonel John Sprague, a Union officer sent to Shreveport from New Orleans to feel Smith out for his surrender. In the letter Smith charged that the Federal authorities at New Orleans sought to humiliate, not conciliate, the Confederates west of the Mississippi. Smith told Sprague that the United States must offer more generous terms if they expected the surrender of the Trans-

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<sup>29</sup>Ford, “Memoirs,” 7:1197-99.

Mississippi Department.<sup>30</sup>

On 16 May, Smith received a frantic telegram from General Magruder, commander of the Department of Texas. Magruder stated, “For God’s sake act or let me act! I have excited myself more than I ever did to instill a spirit of resistance into the men, but in vain. I but make myself antagonistic to the army and an object of their displeasure.” He also mentioned that on the night of 14 May, four hundred soldiers left en masse from the garrison at Galveston. Upon hearing this distressing news from Texas, Smith announced that on 18 May that he was moving his headquarters from Shreveport to Houston. Before Smith left Shreveport, he appointed Generals Simon Buckner, Sterling Price, and J. L. Brent to meet with Major General E. R. S. Canby, Union commander of the Military Division of West Mississippi in New Orleans, to negotiate more favorable terms of surrender.<sup>31</sup>

Smith left Shreveport on 20 May. As he made his way to Texas, Magruder continued to send Smith gloomy reports of the worsening military situation in Texas. Rioting occurred in Galveston and Houston as soldiers, whose pay was in arrears for over a year, looted government buildings. The lawlessness and rioting spread to other cities like Austin, San Antonio, La Grange, Gonzalez, and Henderson. General Slaughter,

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<sup>30</sup>B. P. Gallaway, ed., Texas, The Dark Corner of the Confederacy: Contemporary Accounts of the Lone Star State in the Civil War (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 255; Casdorph, Prince John Magruder, 295; Parks, Kirby Smith, 470; ORA, series 1, vol. 48, pt. 1, p. 189; ORA, series 1, vol. 48, pt. 2, p. 1293.

<sup>31</sup>Casdorph, Prince John Magruder, 295-96; Parks, Kirby Smith, 472; Wooster, Texas and Texans, 182; Boatner, Civil War Dictionary, 118.

commanding the Western Sub-district at Brownsville, sent word to Houston that his men were leaving in droves. Slaughter went on to comment, “They say we are whipped. It is useless for the Trans-Mississippi Department to accomplish what the Cis-Mississippi has failed to do.” Despite the worsening situation in Texas, Smith ordered Magruder to abandon Galveston but to concentrate as many soldiers as possible near Houston, his new headquarters. Smith reached Houston on 27 May to find he had no army to command. Little did he realize that at the St. Charles Hotel in New Orleans on 26 May that the Trans-Mississippi Department ceased to exist.<sup>32</sup>

Smith’s despondency over the end of the war was reflected in the dispatches he continued to send at the end of May. On 30 May he wired Governor Pendleton Murrah of Texas: “I found on my arrival here that the Troops of this District had disbanded and were making their way home. That they had possessed themselves of the public property; that much of this had been scattered here, and there over the State; and that some of it in the shape of ordnance stores, artillery, etc., remains unmolested.” Smith went on to urge Murrah to use state troops to protect what Confederate property he could. Smith then sent a message to General John Sprague, who commanded Federal forces along the Red River in North Texas. Two weeks before, Sprague approached Smith concerning the

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<sup>32</sup>Parks, Kirby Smith, 472-73; ORA, series 1, vol. 48, pt. 2, pp. 1038, 1313-14; Casdorff, Prince John Magruder, 296-97; Max L. Heyman, Prudent Soldier: A Biography of Major General E. R. S. Canby (Glendale, Calif: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1959), 235; Charles W. Ramsdell, “Texas from the Fall of the Confederacy to the Beginning of Reconstruction,” Quarterly of the Texas State Historical Association 11 (January 1908): 205-207; Wooster, Texas and Texans, 182; John S. Bowman, ed., The Civil War Almanac (New York: Gallery Books, 1983), 268-69.

surrender of the Trans-Mississippi Department. With no department left, Smith stated, “When I gave you, at Shreveport, a memorandum which I hoped might be the basis of negotiations with the United States Government, I commanded an army of over 50,000 and a department rich in resources. I am now without either.” With nothing to command, Smith concluded, “The department is now open to occupation by your Government. I plan to go abroad until future policy of the United States Government is announced.” This last statement clearly suggested that Smith and other officers that served with him in the department intended to join Maximilian south of the Rio Grande in Mexico.<sup>33</sup>

On 2 June 1865 Smith, accompanied by Magruder, went aboard the Union steamer Fort Jackson off Galveston harbor and signed the articles of surrender. In signing the agreement, Smith understood that “officers observing their parole are permitted to make their homes either in or out of the United States.” Smith then ordered Magruder to appoint commissioners for various districts within the Department of Texas to carry out the parole of those troops that had remained to surrender. For the Western Sub-District, which encompassed the region from San Antonio to the lower Rio Grande, Magruder appointed Colonel Ford as commissioner. Ford received the appointment because the former commander of the sub-district, General Slaughter, transferred command of the

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<sup>33</sup>ORA, series 1, vol. 48, pt. 1, pp. 193-94; Parks, Kirby Smith, 474-76; Galveston Tri-Weekly News, 5 June 1865; Casdorph, Prince John Magruder, 297-98; Kerby, Kirby Smith’s Confederacy, 425-26; Papers of USG, 15:60, 96-97; Ten Texans in Gray, ed. William C. Nunn (Hillsboro, Tex.: Hill Junior College Press, 1968), 133.

sub-district to Ford on 26 May.<sup>34</sup>

After the surrender, Smith and Magruder headed for San Antonio, with plans to cross over into Mexico. When they arrived at the Menger Hotel, Smith checked in under the name William Thompson. By mid-June the Menger Hotel in San Antonio became the meeting place for other Confederates, civilian and military, bound for Mexico. The civilian arrivals included three governors, Henry W. Allen, last Confederate governor of Louisiana, Thomas Reynolds of Missouri, and Texas governor Pendleton Murrah. Confederate generals at San Antonio besides Smith and Magruder included Brigadier General Joseph Shelby, who commanded the “Iron Brigade” of Missouri Cavalry. Other arrivals included Major General Sterling Price and Major General Cadmus M. Wilcox, one of Lee’s lieutenants. On 26 June, Shelby’ Brigade, Governors Reynolds and Allen, and Generals Smith and Magruder arrived at Eagle Pass on the Rio Grande. Before crossing into Mexico, five colonels of Shelby’s Brigade took out their last battle flag, attached weights to it, and lowered it into the muddy water of the Rio Grande. With tears in their eyes, this last organized force of the Confederacy crossed the river, closing the final chapter of the Civil War. They now marched straight into the middle of someone else’s fight.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>Ford, “Memoirs,” 7:1212; Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph, 20 June 1865; Papers of USG, 15:349; Sheridan, Memoirs, 2:211; ORA, series 1, vol. 48, pt. 2, pp. 727-28.

<sup>35</sup>John N. Edwards, Shelby’s Expedition to Mexico (Austin: Steck and Co., 1964), 17-18; Alexander W. Terrell, From Texas to Mexico and the Court of Maximilian (Dallas: Book Club of Texas, 1933), 3-10; Parks, Kirby Smith, 481-82; Daniel O. Flaherty, General Jo Shelby: Undefeated Rebel (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1954), 243-45; Boatner, Civil War Dictionary, 668, 918; W. C. Nunn,

In the last days of Confederate authority in Brownsville, the rebel commander, General Slaughter, made plans to join the Imperialists in Mexico. Needing personal funds, Slaughter sold the artillery he had at Fort Brown to the Imperialist general in Matamoros, Tomas Mejia. Before Slaughter completed the transaction, his second in command, Colonel Ford, intervened on 25 May. The soldiers at Brownsville had not been paid for well over a year, and Ford used these troops to confine Slaughter to his tent until he paid them twenty thousand in silver. Once this was done, Slaughter crossed over into Mexico, transferring the Brownsville command to Ford. On the following day, 26 May, Ford moved his family to Matamoros. Ford and Mejia had been on cordial terms during the war, and as a result Mejia allowed Ford's family to take up residence in Matamoros. Before leaving, Ford left a home guard in Brownsville to prevent looting and rioting. Although a few cases of rioting occurred, there was not the mass hysteria that gripped Brownsville citizens prior to General Hamilton Bee's evacuation in November 1863. On 29 May 1865, eighteen hundred Union troops under Brigadier General Brown occupied Brownsville.<sup>36</sup>

That same day, Philip H. Sheridan assumed command of the newly created Military Division of the Southwest, headquartered in New Orleans. Sheridan was amassing a large Federal force in Texas for the primary purpose of policing the still

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Escape from Reconstruction (Fort Worth: Leo Potishman, 1956), 31-32.

<sup>36</sup>Papers of USG, 15:147; Ford, "Memoirs," 7:1211; New York Times, 18 June 1865; Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph, 16 June 1865; James R. Crews, "Reconstruction in Brownsville" (M.A. thesis, Texas Tech University, 1969), 61-64; Ford, Rip Ford's Texas, 401.

volatile situation along the Rio Grande. With the exodus of so many prominent Confederates into Mexico, not to mention the menacing presence of Imperial forces in northern Mexico, the United States was taking no chances of a possible Confederate resurgence out of Mexico. An estimated fifty thousand soldiers were under Sheridan's command. Thirty thousand of these were to be stationed in Texas. Most of these thirty thousand were elements of the Fourth and Twenty-fifth Army Corps. The Fourth was stationed at San Antonio while the Twenty-fifth, composed of black troops, occupied a line from Indianola to Brazos Santiago. Sheridan believed it absolutely necessary to assemble a large body of soldiers in Texas to have "an army strong enough to move against the invaders of Mexico if occasion demanded."<sup>37</sup>

Perhaps the greatest proponent of assertive action against the French in Mexico was General Grant. In a letter to President Andrew Johnson, Grant wrote that a truly permanent peace for the United States would not be a reality until the French were driven from Mexico. This peace must be secured while "we still have in service a force sufficient to insure it." As a result, Grant urged that Union armies not be mustered out right way until the French danger in Mexico subsided. Grant also pointed out to Johnson that ever since the Maximilian empire in Mexico had been established, the Rio Grande region had been pro-Confederate. In this letter to Johnson, Grant specifically mentioned the lower Rio Grande Valley, pointing out that "Matamoros and the whole Rio Grande

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<sup>37</sup>Sheridan, *Memoirs*, 2:213; Gallaway, *Dark Corner of the Confederacy*, 255; Alfred J. Hanna and Kathryn A. Hanna, *Napoleon III and Mexico: American Triumph Over Monarchy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971), 238; Trudeau, *Like Men of War*, 458; *Papers of USG*, 15:148.



has been an open port to those in rebellion against this government. It is notorious that every article held by the rebels for export was permitted to cross the Rio Grande and from there go unmolested to all parts of the world and they in turn to receive in pay all articles, and arms, munitions of war.”<sup>38</sup>

Sheridan also supported stronger actions to be taken against the Imperialists in Mexico. He arrived at Brazos Santiago on 26 June to investigate firsthand the international situation. Sheridan observed that Matamoros supplied the Imperialists with large amounts of supplies. Consequently, he ordered Major General Frederick Steele, Union commander at Brownsville, to “make demonstrations along the lower Rio Grande,” believing that “a formidable show of force, created much agitation and demoralization among the Imperial troops.” Sheridan thought that his presence on the border plus the increasing number of troops in Texas would cause the Imperialists to pull back from the Rio Grande into the interior of Mexico.<sup>39</sup>

With no significant Imperial movement away from the Rio Grande, Sheridan staged a second demonstration along the border. In late September, Sheridan made very public inspection of the Fourth Corps stationed at San Antonio. He wanted to give the impression that these soldiers were being prepared for an invasion of northern Mexico. Sheridan then proceeded southward toward Fort Duncan near Eagle Pass to open negotiations with Juarez. Upon his arrival at Fort Duncan, he sent a staff officer across

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<sup>38</sup>Papers of USG, 15:156-57.

<sup>39</sup>Sheridan, Memoirs, 2:214-15.

the river to Piedras Negras to open communications with Juarez, “taking care not to do this in the dark.” Sheridan’s posturing in Texas had the desired impact on the Imperialists in northern Mexico. Sheridan later commented that his actions in Texas were “spreading like wildfire, the greatest significance was ascribed to my action, it being reported most positively and with many specific details that I was only awaiting the arrival of troops, then under marching orders at San Antonio, to cross the Rio Grande in behalf of the Liberal cause.” Sheridan’s actions caused the Imperialists to pull their forces back as far as Monterrey, with the exception of a stubborn force at Matamoros under General Mejia.<sup>40</sup>

Sheridan also spoke of how the Liberal forces in northern Mexico received material aid from the United States forces on the lower Rio Grande. It became common practice to leave guns and ammunition at selected points along the north bank of the Rio Grande, knowing that Juaristas would come along to procure these precious supplies. Liberal troops under General Mariano Escobedo received an estimated thirty thousand rifles from an arsenal in Baton Rouge. When news of Sheridan’s active sympathy reached Washington, the French minister protested vigorously to Secretary of State William Seward. The French minister pointed out that Sheridan’s truculence at Brownsville and other points along the Rio Grande violated the strict neutrality Washington agreed to observe concerning the affairs in Mexico. As a result of the French

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., Carl C. Rister, Border Command: General Phil Sheridan in the West (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1944), 18-19.

protest, Seward directed Sheridan to observe a strict neutrality along the Rio Grande.<sup>41</sup>

Although Sheridan felt handcuffed by State Department policy, he proved himself to be quite a shrewd geo-politician. He believed that the immense show of force on the north bank of the Rio Grande gave Juarez and the Liberals renewed confidence in their war against the French. All of northern Mexico supported Juarez, and the last Imperialist stronghold, Matamoros, was about to fall. In late September 1865 Sheridan wrote two letters to Grant expressing his concern over the possible recognition of Maximilian by the United States. One stated that, "I consider the Liberal cause as in better condition than at any other period since the advent of Maximilian. I further say that nearly the whole of Mexico is against Maximilian in feeling and that if the government recognizes the power of Louis Napoleon and not the will of the Mexican people." In another telegram he pointed out the impact of the United States Army on the events in northern Mexico. He stated that, "The liberals are anxious that the United States Government refuse to recognize the Empire; they are now beginning to realize that they can accomplish the work themselves. The appearance of our large force in Texas has dispelled their despondency, now they know we are strong and think our people sympathize with them."<sup>42</sup>

Liberal forces indeed increased their activity against Matamoros shortly after the Federal occupation of Brownsville in May 1865. From May through November 1865, the

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<sup>41</sup>Hanna, Napoleon III and Mexico, 238-39; Sheridan, Memoirs, 2:216-18, 223-26; Rister, Border Command, 19.

<sup>42</sup>Papers of USG, 15:367.

Juaristas made three separate attacks on Matamoros, trying to dislodge the Imperialist General Mejia. These attacks continued to weaken the Imperial hold on Matamoros. In one dispatch to General Grant, Sheridan pointed out the importance of Matamoros. On 25 October he told Grant that “Should the liberals get Matamoros, northern and eastern Mexico, will pass into the hands of the Liberals.” One incident that confirmed a decline of Imperial power near Matamoros was an incident that involved American troops. On 5 January 1866, soldiers of the One Hundred Eighth United States Colored Infantry stationed at Clarksville, near the mouth of the Rio Grande, crossed the river and entered the town of Bagdad. A small group of adventurers claiming to be anti-Imperialists had seized the town. They looted and terrorized Bagdad for about five days, resulting in the death of twenty people. Order was restored on 10 January when additional American troops, under orders, entered Bagdad and restored peace until proper Mexican authority could be established. Evidence given at a later court of inquiry suggested that some of the soldiers joined these adventurers, attracted largely by the prospect of booty. Although the Imperialists demanded reparations, the U.S. military claimed that these soldiers were no longer soldiers and had been mustered out of service. As a result, no damages were paid. Regardless of the causes of the Bagdad raid, Liberal forces saw it as a sign that Imperial power in the region had definitely waned.<sup>43</sup>

What plagued the Liberal forces in the spring of 1866 was the lack of a leader

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<sup>43</sup>Papers of USG, 15:367-68; John C. and Virginia K. Rayburn, Century of Conflict, 1821-1913: Incidents in the Lives of William Neale and William A. Neale, Early Settlers in South Texas (Waco: Texian Press, 1966), 93-98.

behind whom they could unite their various factions into one command. Sheridan telegraphed Grant about this problem and Grant suggested General Jose M. Carvajal, the exiled governor of the Mexican state of Tamaulipas. Since April 1865 Carvajal had been in Washington seeking financial and military support for the Liberal cause. He had been assisted in this matter by Major General Lew Wallace of Indiana, keenly interested in the republican cause in Mexico. Sheridan spent much of the spring at Fort Brown, convincing the Liberal Generals Juan Cortina and Servando Canales to accept Carvajal's leadership in the spirit of Juarista unity. In mid-June 1866 a Liberal offensive was launched against Matamoros. On 23 June, Imperialist forces under General Mejia surrendered Matamoros to General Carvajal. The Liberals under Juarez now firmly controlled northern Mexico.<sup>44</sup>

By November 1866 Napoleon III announced that French soldiers were to be withdrawn from Mexico in six-month intervals. A few months later on 19 June 1867, Maximilian was executed by his enemies in the city of Queretaro. Sheridan always believed that the presence of a large American army on the Rio Grande delivered a death blow to the Imperialists in Mexico. He stated that "I doubt very much whether such results could have been achieved without the presence of an American army on the Rio Grande, which, be it remembered, was sent there because, in General Grant's words, the French invasion of Mexico was so closely related to the rebellion as to be essentially a

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<sup>44</sup>Sheridan, Memoirs, 2:219-21; Robert E. and Katherine Morseberger, Lew Wallace: Militant Romantic (New York, 1980), 195-98; Richard T. Marcum, "Fort Brown, Texas: The History of a Border Post" (Ph.D. diss., Texas Technological College, 1964), 186; Papers of USG, 15:154.

part of it.<sup>45</sup>

Thus, from 1861-1867, two sister republic fought their own bloody civil wars, one to preserve republican principles, the other to throw off the yoke of monarchy. In the end, the sustained occupation of Texas soil, begun by the Union Rio Grande Expedition in November 1863, helped Juarez to achieve victory over the French.

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<sup>45</sup>Hanna, Napoleon III and Mexico, 272, 300; Sheridan, Memoirs, 2:227-28.

## CHAPTER 8

### CONCLUSION

#### WAR AND THE LOWER RIO GRANDE VALLEY

Texas, especially the lower Rio Grande Valley, has a distinctive place in American history. The first battle of the Mexican War was fought in the lower Valley. The last engagement of the Civil War took place in the same region. In the Mexican War, the Rio Grande served as a disputed boundary between the United States and Mexico. In the Civil War, the Rio Grande divided not only two nations, but two nations engulfed in civil wars. Texas was the only rebelling Confederate state that bordered a foreign country. Mexico, with the French occupation, presented a complicated international and military problem for the United States. In President Abraham Lincoln's strategy, the Confederacy must not be recognized or sustained by a foreign power. The French presence in Mexico thus represented a threat.

During the Civil War, President Lincoln concerned himself with anything that might allow the Confederacy to sustain its war effort. Texas presented two problems to the federal government: a potential French alliance and the Confederate cotton trade in the Brownsville/Matamoros region. The Lincoln administration sought to neutralize both dangers by occupying Texas. The task was left up to General Nathaniel P. Banks, commander of the Department of the Gulf. Banks eventually launched four expeditions

toward Texas. All four hoped to establish a sizable Union force in Texas, partly to intimidate the French in Mexico. The third, the Rio Grande Expedition, also had the formidable task of blocking the lucrative Confederate trade.<sup>1</sup>

The campaign began with an unopposed landing at the mouth of the Rio Grande on 2 November 1863. By the end of December, the Federals controlled the Texas coastline from Brownsville to the Matagorda Peninsula. Prior to moving up the coast, Banks contemplated linking up with Brigadier General James H. Carleton, commander of Union forces in New Mexico. This move would have given the Federals control of the Rio Grande from Brownsville to El Paso. Distance, however, made such a project impractical. Guarding 804 miles from Brownsville to El Paso would require many more regiments than the Union could spare. Even a daring commander would hesitate to launch such an operation in the drought-stricken, semi-arid region along the Rio Grande. Banks opted for coastal operations because he knew the Texas coastline was more vulnerable than the Rio Grande border. He then expected to penetrate the Texas interior, capturing cities like Houston, San Antonio, Austin, and Galveston, thus crushing civilian and military resistance. This would accomplish the diplomatic and economic goals of the Rio Grande Expedition. Unfortunately for Banks, his vision of conquering Texas from the coast was not shared by his superior, General-in-Chief Henry W. Halleck. Halleck,

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<sup>1</sup>Kevin R. Young, To the Tyrants Never Yield: A Texas Civil War Sampler (Plano, Tex.: Wordware Publishing, Inc., 1992), 150; Ronnie C. Tyler, "Cotton on the Border, 1861-1865," Southwestern Historical Quarterly 73 (April 1970): 477; Ludwell H. Johnson, Red River Campaign: Politics and Cotton in the Civil War (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1958), 34; Ezra J. Warner, Generals in Blue: Lives of the Union Commanders (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964), 17-18.



who opposed the Rio Grande expedition, pressured Banks in January 1864 to switch to the Red River route into Texas.<sup>2</sup>

Despite Halleck's reluctance to push deeper into Texas from the coast, the Rio Grande Expedition had already achieved some of its objectives. Diplomatically, Banks established a significant Union presence in Texas for the French to consider. Second, the export of Confederate cotton, though not severely crippled, was slowed. The Confederates were forced to divert cotton to the upriver ports of Laredo and Eagle Pass. Cotton traffic continued to be quite heavy at Eagle Pass and Laredo, but the distance over which trade items traveled greatly added to the costs of those items. This caused considerable distress for Confederate commanders waiting to receive valuable supplies. Lieutenant General Edmund Kirby Smith, in a gloomy letter to his wife, described the difficulty of obtaining certain trade goods. He warned her that she "must carefully keep [account] of our stock of goods for it now really amounts to a stock, you must not be too liberal in disposing of them—the Rio Grande is in possession of the enemy, the blockade is closed, everything will be dearer and will increase rapidly in value." Politically, the expedition placed into power A. J. Hamilton, the Union's governor of Texas. Hamilton, appointed by Lincoln in November 1862 as the military governor of Texas, was perhaps

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<sup>2</sup>Fred H. Harrington, Fighting Politician: Major General Nathaniel P. Banks (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1948), 133; General Halleck to General Banks, 30 September 1863, Nathaniel P. Banks Papers, Center for American History, University of Texas, Austin (Microfilm# 786.26, Roll 26A); Kurt Hackemer, "Strategic Dilemma: Civil-Military Friction and the Texas Coastal Campaign of 1863," Military History of the West 26 (Fall 1996): 209-13; ORA, series 1, vol. 26, pt. 1, pp. 834-35; William C. Harris, With Charity for All: Lincoln and the Restoration of the Union (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1997), 95; Johnson, Red River Campaign, 45.

the strongest civilian advocate of a Union occupation of the Lone Star State. He arrived at Brownsville in December 1863 to begin his duties. With Federal forces occupying only the Texas coastline, however, his political power did not extend to the major population centers of the state.<sup>3</sup>

The presence of Federal troops on the Texas coast had a sobering impact on the civilian and military population of Texas. Texans believed that the heavy hand of war they had read about in other theaters had finally come to their state. Texas newspapers, especially the Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph, wrote about the great fear and anxiety generated by the invasion. One account described the situation on the middle Texas coast: "We and the entire country in great excitement. The majority of planters have removed their negroes towards the interior, and many families have left them all behind, in fleeing from the perils of invasion. We see families flying in every direction from the coast. The people feel they have nothing to hope for [and hope] that the scenes of outrage perpetrated in Louisiana will not be re-enacted in Texas." Anxiety also developed as far inland as Austin, where the newspaper reported that "Their purpose is evidently to overrun Texas, and the occupation of the capital will be their first object."<sup>4</sup>

Confederate soldiers too were discouraged during this operation. Nothing

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<sup>3</sup>Robert L. Kerby, Kirby Smith's Confederacy: The Trans-Mississippi South, 1863-1865 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), 195; Basler, CWAL, 5:357; Harris, With Charity for All, 87-89; Frank H. Smyrl, "Texans in the Union Army, 1861-1865," Southwestern Historical Quarterly 65 (October 1961): 240; Sherrill L. Dickeson, "The Texas Cotton Trade During the Civil War" (M. A. thesis, North Texas State University, 1967), 48-59.

<sup>4</sup>Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph, 11 December 1863; Austin State Gazette, 16, 20, 25, November, 2 December 1863.

illustrates this better than their letters. One trooper of the Thirty-second Texas Cavalry wrote that “Confidence in this war has now sunken very much. I talked yesterday with several and they were all in accord with one another that they would rather have mules than Negroes and Confederate money.” Another soldier warned his wife that the future looked uncertain and that he would not be home for the winter.<sup>5</sup>

Morale, with a few exceptions, was never a serious problem among the Federal soldiers in Texas. Since the summer of 1863, Union armies had achieved great victories, and this instilled a sense of pride in all of the Federal units. A good example of this pride appeared in a newspaper published by soldiers at Brownsville, the Loyal National Union Journal. The paper regularly reported the pride the men maintained in themselves, despite the fact that they were the Union’s most distant and isolated fighting force. The paper also pointed out that the men in the Union armies were the foundation of the war effort. Their work, even though by the spring of 1864 it was primarily occupation duty, was still a major contribution to the eventual defeat of the Confederacy. In their own eyes, they were a distinct breed of men who deserved the respect and admiration of a grateful nation.<sup>6</sup>

Although soldiers in Union ranks maintained relatively high morale, some of the generals associated with the expedition became decidedly uneasy by the spring of 1864.

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<sup>5</sup>Minetta A. Goynes, Lone Star and Double Eagle: Civil War Letters of a German-Texas Family (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University, 1982), 115; Jeff Morgan to his wife, 7 December 1863, Thirty-fifth Texas Cavalry Regiment file, Confederate Research Center, Hillsboro, Texas.

<sup>6</sup>Loyal National Union Journal, 5, 19 March 1864.

Many of them believed all of Texas could have fallen in 1864. Major General Napoleon J. T. Dana, who briefly commanded the Thirteenth Army Corps, supported more aggressive military action in Texas. He believed that the inactive status of Union troops on the Texas coast caused these veteran soldiers to lose their fighting edge. Another prominent general associated with the expedition, Major General C. C. Washburn, also wanted to continue the successful march up the Texas coast, requesting additional troops and supplies. Unfortunately for the Union, by the end of December 1863, the Rio Grande Expedition had ground to a halt. Federal operations on the Texas coast would not be expanded.<sup>7</sup>

Standing in the way was General Halleck's insistence that the Red River was the best route for an expedition into Texas. The death blow to the Rio Grande campaign came in March 1864 when the new general-in-chief of all U.S. armies, Ulysses S. Grant, ordered the abandonment of the entire Texas coast except for the Brownsville area. As long as the French were in Mexico, Lincoln wanted a Union force kept in Texas, even a small one. Banks, not wanting to tip his hand to the enemy, actually kept Federal soldiers on the Texas coast until June, thus preventing an immediate transfer of some Confederate troops from Texas to Louisiana. This move, he hoped, would increase the chances of military success in Louisiana.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>ORA, series 1, vol. 34, pt. 2, pp. 278-80; ORA, series 1, vol. 26, pt. 1, pp. 849-60, 416-17; Colonel Oran M. Roberts, Confederate Military History, Extended Edition, vol. 15, Texas (Atlanta: The Confederate Publishing Company; 1899; repr., Wilmington, N.C.: Broadfoot Publishing Company, 1989), 120; Hackemer, "Strategic Dilemma," 208.

<sup>8</sup>William S. McFeeley, Grant: A Biography (Norwalk, Conn.: The Easton Press, 1981), 157; James M. McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era

Unfortunately for the Union, the Red River campaign failed, and Banks, as the commander of the Department of the Gulf, had another defeat marked against him. After his important victory at Port Hudson, nothing went right for him. The strike at Sabine Pass and the Texas Overland Expedition had both failed in their attempts to penetrate into Texas in 1863. When he successfully occupied the lower Texas coast in the fall of 1863, his immediate superior, General Halleck, refused logistical support for continued operations. Halleck's obsession with the Red River route into Texas undermined the possible success of the Rio Grande Expedition. A common criticism leveled against many Union generals during the Civil War was their failure to follow up their victories by relentlessly pursuing the enemy army until it was destroyed completely. When Banks attempted to follow up his success in Texas, Halleck refused any further support for the Rio Grande operation. Banks had generals under him who not only had good combat records, but were confident of victory in Texas. General Dana, in particular, knew South Texas fairly well, having been stationed near Corpus Christi during the Mexican War.<sup>9</sup>

Another reason for the failure of the Rio Grande Expedition was Halleck's low opinion of political generals. Halleck told General Sherman that "Banks's operations in

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(New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 683; Harrington, Fighting Politician, 133, 152-53; ORA, series 1, vol. 34, pt. 1, p. 190; Johnson, Red River Campaign, 47; ORA, series 1, vol. 34, pt. 4, p. 686.

<sup>9</sup>James G. Hollandsworth, Jr., Pretense of Glory: The Life of General Nathaniel P. Banks (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), 257; Hackemer, "Strategic Dilemma," 208-13; ORA, vol. 26, pt. 1, 14, 47, 416-17, 526-27, 546-49, 554-55, 849-60, ORA, vol. 34, pt. 2, 278-80; Harris, With Charity for All, 95; Johnson, Red River Campaign, 45; U.S./Mexican War. Alexandria, Va.: PBS documentary, 1998-1999. 4 videocassettes.

the West are about what should have been expected from a general so utterly destitute of military education and military capacity. It seems but little better than murder to give important commands to such men as Banks, Butler, McClelland, Sigel, and Lew Wallace, and yet it seems impossible to prevent it.” Halleck also suggested in May 1864 that Grant petition Lincoln to replace Banks as a military necessity. Halleck knew that Banks was a political asset to Lincoln but realized that a request from Grant for a reorganization of Union command west of the Mississippi would carry more weight. Even before Grant received the letter, he had suggested to Halleck on 25 April that Banks be replaced by Major General Joseph Reynolds, then commander of the defenses of New Orleans. The petitions for Banks’s removal by Grant and Halleck forced Lincoln to make a politically difficult decision. On 8 May 1864 he appointed Major General Edward R. S. Canby to command the newly created Division of West Mississippi, which encompassed the Department of the Gulf and the Department of Arkansas.<sup>10</sup>

The failed Red River campaign finished Banks’s military career. His removal became official when General Canby took command on 19 May 1864. Banks was then little more than a head clerk under Canby. His duties dealt primarily with the political sphere, but even in that area Canby did not hesitate to overrule him. In the fall of 1864, Banks traveled to Washington to visit with Lincoln in a desperate attempt to have his

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<sup>10</sup>Halleck, quoted in Hollandsworth, *Pretense of Glory*, 205-6, 257; Philip Sheridan, *Personal Memoirs of P. H. Sheridan: General U.S. Army*, 2 vols. (London: Chatto and Windus, Piccadilly, 1888), 2:208; Gideon Welles, *Diary*, ed. Howard K. Beale, 3 vols. (New York, 1960), 2:26; *ORA*, series 1, vol. 34, pt. 3, pp. 244-46, 331-33, 408-9, 490-92; Ulysses S. Grant, *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant*, ed. John Y. Simon, 18 vols. to date (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967-), 15:43-45 (hereafter cited as *Papers of USG*).

powers restored. Lincoln, recently elected to a second term, refused to give Banks his old command. With the crucial presidential election behind him, Lincoln could afford to be firm.<sup>11</sup>

Banks's adversary on the Rio Grande, Hamilton P. Bee, also suffered as a result of the Red River campaign. At Monett's Ferry, Louisiana, on 22 April 1864, he angered his superiors by retreating at a critical moment. A similar situation had occurred at Brownsville, Texas, in November 1863 when Bee had retreated from a numerically superior force. In both instances he was censured but later exonerated for his actions. Bee could do little to redeem his name after Monett's Ferry since operations against Texas ceased after the Red River campaign. After the war ended, however, the spirit of the Lost Cause embraced all its defenders as gallant and courageous heroes.<sup>12</sup>

After the war, nearly thirty thousand Federal soldiers were sent to Texas, in part to monitor the ever turbulent situation in Mexico. They were there to uphold the Monroe Doctrine. Many of them were stationed in South Texas. Some of these thirty thousand had been part of the Rio Grande Expedition. Without official permission, these soldiers provided war material to the Juaristas in northern Mexico. The United States never officially intervened in Mexico, but the strong presence of Federal soldiers in Texas clearly indicated to the French that the United States could still mobilize a large army and

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<sup>11</sup>Basler, 8:121; Welles, Diary, 2:26; Johnson, Red River Campaign, 283-84.

<sup>12</sup>ORA, series 1, vol. 34, pt. 1, pp. 610-12; Johnson, Red River Campaign, 221-29; Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph, 2 May 1864, Fredericka Meiners, "Hamilton Bee in the Red River Campaign," Southwestern Historical Quarterly 78 (July 1974): 23-38, 44; Kerby, Kirby Smith's Confederacy, 192; ORA, series 1, vol. 26, pt. 1, pp. 399-401, 405.

move into Mexico if necessary. It also encouraged the forces under Juarez to continue the struggle against the French. In the end, the occupation of Texas, achieved first by the Union Rio Grande Expedition, affected events not only in Texas, but in Mexico as well.<sup>13</sup>

The extensive cotton trade across the Rio Grande, the primary cause of the military activity in Texas, collapsed shortly after the war ended. Like a western boom town when the source of the town's livelihood disappeared (for example, a vein of gold running out), the town collapsed as well. Thousands who had swarmed to the lower Rio Grande Valley to take advantage of the wartime cotton boom now quickly departed. All that remained was the vague memory of a period of abounding financial opportunity that the Mexicans called Los Algodones, the time of the cotton.<sup>14</sup>

The cotton trade in the lower Rio Grande Valley helped some Texans thrive financially after the Civil War. Richard King, Mifflin Kenedy, and Charles Stillman had operated a steamboat company on the lower Rio Grande since 1850. Their steamboat company made enormous profits during the Civil War years, much of that in gold. Both King and Kenedy went on to invest their profits in cattle and other enterprises, and both men became rich and powerful in South Texas after the war.<sup>15</sup>

The Union Rio Grande Expedition, an often overlooked chapter of the Civil War,

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<sup>13</sup>Sheridan, Memoirs, 2:213-15, 223-26; Papers of USG, 15:148, 156-57.

<sup>14</sup>Daddysman, Matamoros Trade, 187-89; Irby, Backdoor at Bagdad, 52; Windham, "Problems of Supply," 167.

<sup>15</sup>Stephen A. Townsend, "Steamboating on the Lower Rio Grande River" (M.S. thesis, Texas A & I University, 1989), 54-59.



led to the only sustained occupation of any part of Texas. The Federal army disrupted the cotton trade, discouraged French meddling in the war north of the Rio Grande, and installed a military governor, Andrew J. Hamilton. In the postwar period, many of these Federals served with the occupation forces along the Rio Grande. The expedition also created a fear among soldiers and civilians that the ravages of war had now come to the Lone Star State. Civilians along the Gulf coast and up the Rio Grande valley definitely knew that the Civil War had come to Texas.

Of Banks's four campaigns against Texas, only the Rio Grande Expedition led to any significant Federal presence on Texas soil for an extended period of time. Although most of Texas remained unconquered during the Civil War, the blame should not fall on the soldiers of the Department of the Gulf. Most were seasoned veterans. The men associated with the Rio Grande Expedition did their duty well despite the fact they were not led by a successful general or involved in a famous battle. Dispute over strategy between Banks and Halleck doomed the Rio Grande campaign. And even though General Grant ordered the abandonment of Texas operations in the spring of 1864, he did maintain a thousand-man force on Brazos Santiago until the end of the war. When the war in the East ended, Grant's only major concern west of the Mississippi was the presence of the French in Mexico. He feared a continuation of the war south of the Rio Grande since so many Confederates had fled to Mexico. As a result, the garrison at Brazos Santiago provided a valuable service to Grant at this time. They monitored an international border and could report any suspicious activity to the Union high command.

In the final analysis, the sustained occupation of Texas, achieved only by the Rio Grande Expedition, warned against French flirtations with the Confederacy out of Mexico. By planting the American flag in Texas and keeping it there until the end of the war, the Lincoln administration could concentrate on defeating Confederate forces east of the Mississippi.

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