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## ASBOTH'S EXPEDITION UP THE ALABAMA AND FLORIDA RAILROAD

by EDWIN L. BEARSS

**D**URING THE FIRST WEEK of July, 1864, the powerful "Army Group" commanded by Major General William T. Sherman slowly closed in on Atlanta, Georgia. To help loosen the grip of the Confederate Army of Tennessee on Atlanta, Sherman planned to send a fast moving cavalry force, about 3,000 strong, to smash the Montgomery and West Point Railroad. (This railroad linked the defenders of Atlanta with the magazines and supply depots of central Alabama.) Leaving Decatur, Alabama, on July 9, these raiders were expected to strike the vital railroad near Opelika. After tearing up the track and burning the trestles and bridges, the Union cavalry would have to escape the clutches of the aroused Confederates. If the raiders found that it was impossible to rendezvous with Sherman's "Army Group" before Atlanta, they were to head for Pensacola, Florida, which had been occupied by the Union forces since May, 1862.

If the Federal cavalry were to head for Pensacola after wrecking the railroad, the commander at that point, Brigadier General Alexander Asboth, must be alerted. Accordingly, Sherman on July 7 addressed a letter to Major General Edward R. S. Canby, Asboth's superior. Canby, who was commander of the Military Division of West Mississippi, maintained his headquarters in New Orleans, Louisiana. After informing Canby of the projected raid, Sherman asked him to have Asboth look out between July 20 and 25 for the Union cavalry.<sup>1</sup>

Since there were no direct communications between Sherman's and Canby's headquarters, Sherman's letter did not reach New Orleans until the 17th. After perusing the message, Canby incorporated it into a dispatch of his own. This letter Canby then forwarded to General Asboth.

The staff officer bearing Canby's message took passage aboard the steamer *Clyde* from New Orleans for Fort Barrancas where

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1. *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series I, Vol. XXXVIII, pt. V, 84-85. (Cited hereafter as O. R.) General Asboth commanded the District of West Florida.

Asboth maintained his headquarters. The transport entered Pensacola Bay on the 20th and tied up at the navy yard. After he went ashore, the courier delivered the dispatch to Asboth.

Once Asboth had studied Canby's message, which contained the excerpts from Sherman's letter, Asboth decided to organize a strong task force. The next morning this force would move out of the Pensacola perimeter to establish contact with the Union raiders in case they were beading for the Gulf Coast. Simultaneously, orders were issued by the general to have the steamer *Hudson* loaded with commissary stores and forage. As soon as the ship had taken aboard the designated cargo, she would be moored off Pensacola. She would stand ready to proceed at an instant's notice to any point on the coast where Sherman's cavalry might put in an appearance.<sup>2</sup>

After Asboth had issued the instructions for the provisioning of the supply ship, he drafted orders designating the units that would constitute his task force. Following a conference with his staff, Asboth determined to divide his task force into two combat teams - one to be commanded by Colonel William C. Holbrook and the other by Colonel Eugene von Kielmansegge. Holbrook's command would consist of four companies of the 7th Vermont, the 82d U. S. Colored Infantry, and six companies of the 86th U. S. Colored Infantry; Kiehnansegge's included four companies of the 1st Florida Cavalry (dismounted), one section of the 1st Florida Battery, and Company M, 14th New York Cavalry. Before they departed from the Fort Barrancas staging area, Asboth told his subordinates to see that their combat teams were provided with eight days' rations. Two would be carried in haversacks and the rest in the wagons which would accompany the combat team on its projected foray. In addition, the troops would be provided with eighty rounds of ammunition. Forty of these were to be carried in their cartridge-boxes and the remainder in the wheeled vehicles.<sup>3</sup>

By the afternoon of the 21st the men of Asboth's task force, 1,100 strong, had drawn their stipulated rations and ammunition, squared their gear away, and had been mustered in their respective cantonments. As soon as Asboth was informed by Colonels

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2. *O. R.*, Series I, Vol. XXXV, pt. II, 181.

3. *O. R.*, Series I, Vol. LII, pt. I, 569-570. A total of nine wagons were allotted by Asboth for the purpose of transporting the task force's rations and ammunition.

Holbrook and von Kielmansegge that their combat teams were ready to march, he gave the order to move out. Departing from the Fort Barrancas staging area, the task force separated into two columns. The infantry marched along the road flanking Pensacola Bay to Bragg's Bridge. Here they were embarked in scows and ferried across Bayou Grande. The artillery and the wagon train escorted by the cavalry circled the head of the bayou. About dark the two columns rendezvoused at Jackson's Bridge. This structure spanned one of the tributaries of Bayou Chico, two miles north of Bayou Grande.<sup>4</sup>

Following a brief halt, during which the men prepared and consumed their evening meal, the bluecoats again took up the march. Bypassing Pensacola, the Yankees gained the road which paralleled the Alabama and Florida Railroad north of the city. Wanting to take by surprise the Confederate patrols reported to be operating in the Gonzales sector, Asboth had decided to execute a night march. Throughout the short summer night the general, by dint of his constant urging, kept the column on the move. Asboth's strategy apparently paid off when the Federals passed through Gonzales without being challenged. Daybreak found the Federals near Fifteen-Mile Station. The column had marched 30 miles since leaving Fort Barrancas the previous afternoon.

As Asboth's vanguard probed its way cautiously forward toward Fifteen-Mile Station, it was greeted by a brisk fire from an undisclosed number of greyclads. The Southerners were occupying an outpost at the station. After diving for cover, the Yankees deployed as skirmishers and returned the Confederates' fire. While his advance guard and the Rebel pickets banged away harmlessly at one another, Asboth rode forward to make a personal reconnaissance. It was apparent to the general that the Confederate vedettes were retiring upon their main encampment. Consequently, Asboth decided to deploy his entire task force, preparatory to launching an attack on the Southerners' cantonment.

In response to Asboth's instructions, Colonels Holbrook and von Kielmansegge quickly formed their troops for battle. Directly in front of the Rebels' camp and to the right of the railroad, Holbrook massed his combat team in double line of battle. The 7th Vermont and the 82d U. S. Colored Infantry were in advance and

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4. *O. R.*, Series I, Vol. XXXV, pt. I, 413-414, 416-417.

the 86th U. S. Colored Infantry in support. After seeing that the two cannons of the 1st Florida Battery were emplaced on the crest of a hill next to the road, von Kielmansegge formed his command into single line of battle on Holbrook's left. Both the colonels covered their fronts with a strong line of skirmishers. Then they waited for Asboth's signal to advance.<sup>5</sup>

The Confederate force occupying the encampment at Fifteen-Mile Station consisted of Companies E, G, and I, 7th Alabama Cavalry, 360 strong, commanded by Colonel Joseph Hodgson. In anticipation of an early advance by the Yankees, Hodgson had put his men to work throwing up an earthen fort one mile north of his encampment. Hodgson, realizing the urgency of the situation, had instituted round the clock fatigue parties. When completed on the afternoon of the 21st, the fortifications, to honor the colonel, were dubbed Fort Hodgson.<sup>6</sup>

Once Asboth learned that his subordinates had completed their dispositions, he ordered the advance to begin. Pressing forward, the Union skirmishers, closely supported by the bluecoated line of battle, drove the greyclads from their encampment. Colonel Hodgson, taking cognizance of the overwhelming strength of the Yankees, covered his retreat with a few selected snipers. The remainder of Hodgson's small command took refuge in the fortifications.

After quickly and methodically mopping up the Confederate rear guard, the Federals closed in on the fort. Here their advance was brought to an abrupt halt by the vigorous small arms fire delivered by the Alabamans. The Southerners were sheltered, in turn, from the Yankees' fire by their earthworks. To overcome this obstacle, Asboth called for artillery support. In response to the general's summons, the gunners of the 1st Florida Battery hurriedly manhandled their two guns into position. They then began to hammer the fort with shot and shell. Once the artillery had softened up the Rebels' position, the blueclad battle line again surged to the attack. The badly outnumbered defenders of Fort Hodgson realized that if they remained where they were, they would be

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5. *Ibid.* Holbrook covered his front with four companies of skirmishers; von Kielmansegge covered his with two.
  6. *Ibid.*, 413-414, 417. The fortifications had been completed concurrent with the departure of Asboth's task force from Fort Barrancas.

killed or captured. Therefore, when Hodgson gave the word, they vaulted into their saddles and made a hasty retreat.

Since he had only one company of mounted troops (Company M, 14th New York Cavalry), Asboth was unable to make a vigorous pursuit of the fleeing Rebels. After following the grey-clads for about three miles, the Yankees gave up the chase and returned to the captured fort.<sup>7</sup>

In the meantime, Asboth's provost marshal had provided a guard for the seven Rebels (one lieutenant and six enlisted men) captured in the engagement. Next he made an inventory of the public property seized by the bluecoats in the attack on the Confederate camp and fort. Examining this list, Asboth discovered that his task force had captured, in addition to a considerable supply of commissary and quartermaster stores, Colonel Hodgson's papers, a large battle flag, 17 horses with equipment, 18 sabers, 23 carbines, a large supply of ammunition, and 23 head of cattle.

What especially pleased the general was that he had scored this success at the cost of only one man wounded. The Confederates for their part made no report of their losses in this engagement. Asboth was informed by the inhabitants that the grey-clads had taken over 30 wounded with them when they had retreated toward Pollard. In addition, the bluecoats found one 40-day substitute near the fort mortally wounded. After a Union surgeon had dressed his injuries, the prisoner was paroled and left at the nearest farm house.<sup>8</sup>

Questioning one of the prisoners, Private H. L. Knox of Company G, 7th Alabama Cavalry, Asboth was informed that Brigadier General James H. Clanton had engaged the Federal raiding force sent out by Sherman on the 16th at Talladega. After two days' fighting, Knox stated, Clanton had been defeated with the loss of 500 men. Three days later this same force of bluecoats had met and defeated the Alabama militia at Loachapoka and Chehaw on the railroad 40 miles east of Montgomery. After wreaking havoc on the Montgomery and West Point Railroad between Chehaw and Opelika and burning the depots and tax-in-kind warehouses at Loachapoka, Auburn and Opelika, the raiders had

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7. *Ibid.*, 417.

8. *Ibid.* The wounded bluecoat, an enlisted man in the 82d U. S. Colored Infantry, had been shot in the right arm.

rejoined Sherman before Atlanta.<sup>9</sup> (In general, the story told by Private Knox concerning the successes scored by the Union raiding force led by Major General Lovell H. Rousseau was correct.)

Although this intelligence scuttled Asboth's plan to co-operate with the raiders sent out by Sherman, the general decided to push on toward the important railroad junction of Pollard. Asboth had been told by the talkative Private Knox that Pollard was garrisoned by two Confederate regiments - one of infantry and the other artillery. Preparatory to resuming the advance in the morning, Asboth desiring that his troops be allowed to get a good rest permitted them to retire early on the 22d.<sup>10</sup>

At dawn the next day, reveille sounded and the eager troops were mustered. As the first order of business, Asboth detailed a guard to escort a wagon loaded with the sick and wounded and the captured ordnance back to Fort Barrancas. As the next item on his program, Asboth put his troops to work leveling Fort Hodgson. A demolition team then applied the torch to the captured commissary and quartermaster stores and the numerous buildings that comprised the captured Confederate encampment. By 8 A.M. the officers in charge of the demolition squads reported their work completed. The troops were then fallen in and the advance northward renewed.<sup>11</sup>

For the first six miles, the march of the task force was uneventful. But as the Union vanguard neared Cooper's, the bluecoats learned from the inhabitants that a strong Confederate outpost was stationed at the forks of the Pollard and Perdido Railroad Station roads. In response to this information, Asboth sent Lieutenant Herman Karber with a detachment from Company M, 14th New York Cavalry, to eliminate the Rebels. Sweeping forward, the New Yorkers, in a wild charge, scattered the greyclads, capturing three members of the 7th Alabama Cavalry - a sergeant and two privates.

Like Private Knox, these Alabamans proved to be quite talkative. Besides corroborating Knox's statement regarding Rousseau's raiders, they told Asboth that Hodgson, to check the bluecoats' advance, had destroyed the bridge across Pine Barren Creek. After wrecking the bridge, Colonel Hodgson had deployed his command,

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9. *Ibid.*, 414, 417.

10. *Ibid.*, 417.

11. *Ibid.*

reinforced by a four gun battery, behind the creek. The Confederates, the prisoners stated, were ready to dispute the crossing and were confident that the impassable swamps on either side of their position would prevent the Federals from flanking their position.<sup>12</sup>

This information caused Asboth to change his plan of operations. While Captain Adolph Schmidt took Company M, 14th New York Cavalry and demonstrated in the direction of the burned Pine Barren bridge, Asboth with the remainder of his task force turned into the Perdido Station road. Asboth's objective was to cut the telegraph and break the Mobile and Great Northern Railroad below Perdido Station. After destroying the trestle near Perdido Station, Asboth planned to move into the country between Mobile Bay and the Perdido River. Here, the Federals proposed to smash the salt works located on Bon Secour Bay and burn the two Rebel cantonments (Powell and Withers) located in that area. Following the successful completion of this sweep, Asboth was prepared to recross the Perdido at Nuenec's Ferry and return to his Fort Barrancas base. To facilitate the crossing of the Perdido at Nuenec's Ferry, Asboth sent a dispatch to Captain Benjamin J. F. Hanna, the district quartermaster. Hanna was instructed to have the necessary boats at the ferry on the 26th.<sup>13</sup>

As soon as the courier had departed for Fort Barrancas with the message for Captain Hanna, the march for Perdido Station was commenced. Hardly had the troops hit the road before the rain started to pour in torrents. After a trying seven mile march over roads that were churned into liquid mud, the column reached the Levin farm.

At this point, Asboth learned from what he considered to be an unimpeachable source that the Rebel brass in Mobile, alarmed by his rapid thrust up the Alabama and Florida Railroad, were rushing all their available reserves to the threatened area to intercept his task force. These sources indicated that Colonel Henry Maury with his hard riding regiment - the 15th Confederate Cavalry (1,300 strong) reinforced by a light six gun battery had already reached Pollard from Mobile. Upon evaluating this information, Asboth decided that, since it was no longer possible to effect a junction with Rousseau's raiders, and with his task force

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12. *Ibid.*, 415, 417-418.

13. *Ibid.*, 415, 418.



being closely observed by a foe with a decided superiority in cavalry, it would be best to return to his base immediately. Retracing their steps, the Federals spent the night of the 23d bivouacked on the Swan Plantation which was located at the junction of the Pollard and Perdido Station roads.<sup>14</sup>

In response to Colonel Hodgson's plea for reinforcements on the 22d, the Rebel command at Mobile had issued instructions for Colonel Maury to proceed to Pollard. Long before daybreak on the 23d, Maury had succeeded in ferrying his command (the 15th Confederate Cavalry and Tobin's Tennessee Battery) from Mobile to Tensas Station. Next, Maury entrained his men on waiting cars of the Mobile and Great Northern Railroad. By dusk all of Maury's striking force had reached Pollard. Maury spent the next day (the 25th) organizing a strong punitive column totalling about 2,000 officers and men with which to give battle to the foe.

At dawn on the 25th Maury, satisfied with his preparations, rode out of Pollard. The colonel held high hopes of overtaking and destroying Asboth's task force. At Fifteen-Mile Station the Confederates, to their disgust, learned from the inhabitants that the bluecoats had fallen back toward Fort Barrancas on the previous day. Maury remained at Fifteen-Mile Station until the next morning. At that time the Confederate authorities at Mobile, having received reports that a strong Union amphibious force had gone ashore at Pascagoula, Mississippi, recalled Maury's command. Leaving three companies of the 7th Alabama Cavalry to hold Fifteen-Mile Station, Maury returned to Pollard on the 26th.<sup>15</sup>

On the 24th, while Maury was organizing his command, Asboth's task force evacuated Swain's plantation at an early hour. After a rugged march in the hot Florida sun, the Federals camped for the night on the north shore of Bayou Grande near Jones Point. The next morning the bluecoats forded the bayou near its mouth and returned to the Fort Barrancas staging area. Asboth could well afford to be satisfied with the conduct of his command. In less than four days it had marched 72 miles and engaged in two brisk skirmishes with the Confederates. During the expedition, the Federals had only one combat casualty. More remarkable, not a single soldier had been lost as a result of straggling.<sup>16</sup>

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14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*, 416, 418; *O. R.*, Series I, Vol. XXXIX, pt. II, 703.

16. *O. R.*, Series I, Vol. XXXV, pt. I, 418.