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Katharine Jackson Willis

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## ENCOUNTER AT THE AUCILLA, 1862

by KATHARINE JACKSON WILLIS AND WILLIAM WARREN ROGEBS

**T**HE Civil War was more than dramatic sieges, heroic charges, and bloody encounters. There were numerous isolated and little-publicized acts of valor and triumph on both sides. If such affairs did not directly influence the outcome of the war, they hid a special poignance of their own. For Southerners who increasingly learned to endure the painful news of costly mistakes, defeats, and reversals, such individual triumphs were particularly welcome. One example of courage and success occurred on June 2, 1862, in a remote theatre of the conflict: Florida.

The incident involved a man bearing the patriotic name of George Washington Scott. He was born in Alexandria, Pennsylvania, on February 22, 1829. Unhealthy as a young man, he made a trip to Florida in 1850, seemed to improve, and moved to the state permanently in 1851. He and his Pennsylvania-born wife settled first at Quincy and shortly afterward moved to Tallahassee. There Scott established a successful mercantile business which he combined with the operation of a plantation just south of town.<sup>1</sup>

As the sectional crisis which would result in a civil war deepened, Scott strongly defended the southern position. On March 5, 1861, he entered a local military company, the Tallahassee Guards, as a sergeant. Later the Tallahassee Guards were mustered into Confederate service, and Scott became a second

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Katharine Jackson Willis lives in Tallahassee and is a graduate student in history at Florida State University. William Warren Rogers is professor of history, Florida State University.

1. For accounts of Scott see Marion B. Lucas, "Civil War Career of Colonel George Washington Scott," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, LVIII (October 1979), 129-49; Clifton L. Paisley, "How to Escape the Yankees: Major Scott's Letter to His Wife at Tallahassee, March 1865," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, L (July 1971), 53-61. For Tallahassee and Leon County see Bertram H. Groene, *Ante-Bellum Tallahassee* (Tallahassee, 1971); Clifton L. Paisley, *From Cotton to Quail: An Agricultural Chronicle of Leon County, Florida, 1860-1967* (Gainesville, 1968); and Julia Floyd Smith, *Slavery and Plantation Growth in Antebellum Florida 1821-1860* (Gainesville, 1968).

lieutenant in Company D, Second Florida Cavalry. The unit was officially organized in early March 1862, and was commanded by Captain Peres Bonney Brokaw of Tallahassee.<sup>2</sup> The entire Second Florida Cavalry was comprised of ten companies and was active in defense of Confederate stores and supplies around Jacksonville. Brokaw resigned in May 1862, and was succeeded by Scott as captain. Although still called the Tallahassee Guards, the men were also known as "Scott's Company."<sup>3</sup>

There were various reorganizations in the months that followed. By 1863, Scott was a lieutenant colonel and commanded "Scott's Cavalry," Fifth Battalion. He would see extended service in defense of Florida. The activities of the battalion have never been adequately recorded, but it contained eight companies and operated in the back country and marshy stretches of middle and eastern Florida. Highly mobile, Scott's men were stationed in such places as Marianna, Chattahoochee, Quincy, and Tallahassee.<sup>4</sup>

Part of being a citizen-soldier was being a citizen, and even during the fighting Scott continued to farm and manage his business. He purchased slaves in 1862 and 1863, and engaged in the profitable but risky business of making salt. He and Peres B. Brokaw, his old companion in arms, formed a partnership and established a salt works at the small port town of Newport, located on the St. Marks River about twenty miles south of Tallahassee. St. Marks, another port, was nearby. Down river several miles from both towns at Apalachee Bay was St. Marks lighthouse. Because the whole area was a center of salt manufacturing and blockade running, it drew the close attention of the East Gulf Coast Blockading Squadron.<sup>5</sup>

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2. Lucas, "Civil War Career of Scott," 130; Michael Schene, "Peres Bonney Brokaw: Tallahassee Entrepreneur," *Apalachee*, VIII (1971-1979), 35; Confederate Muster Rolls Survey, Florida, III, n. p., bound volumes of typescript in Florida State University Library, Tallahassee; Mary W. Keen, compiler, "Some Phases of Life in Leon County During the Civil War," *Tallahassee Historical Society Annual*, IV (1939), 33-41.
  3. *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington, 1880-1891), XXVIII, Pt. II, 470, 604; XLVII, Pt. II, 1073 (hereinafter cited as *O.R.*); Confederate Muster Rolls Survey, Florida, III.
  4. *O.R.*, Ser. IV, III, 45; Lucas, "Civil War Career of Scott," 130.
  5. A good study is Stanley L. Itkin, "Operations of the East Gulf Blockade Squadron in the Blockade of Florida 1862-1865," (Master's thesis, Florida State University, 1962). See also Jerrell H. Shofner, *Daniel Ladd: Merchant*

Out of these circumstances grew the episode on the Aucilla River. A smaller stream than the St. Marks, the Aucilla flowed south and emptied into the Gulf at Apalachee Bay. The East Gulf Squadron maintained a blockade off the coast and made sporadic sorties on the lighthouse and points on the mainland.

In May 1862, Scott's Company was camped in Wakulla County which lay directly south of Leon County and extended to the sawgrass marshes of the coast. Deciding to scout the east bank of the Aucilla River, Scott took fourteen men and five days' provisions. They left at three o'clock on Friday afternoon, May 30. At seven the following evening the small band arrived at the edge of the Aucilla swamp. Summer had already set in, and the men spent a restless night fighting mosquitoes and flies. On Sunday, June 1, the party picketed their horses, secured the services of Jacob Chancy as a guide, and at 1:30 in the afternoon entered the swamp along an old trail. Chancy, a native of Taylor County, was one of few people knowledgeable enough to traverse the seemingly impenetrable swamp.<sup>6</sup>

The men carried three-days' provisions on their backs. On the orders of Scott, who wanted to get as close as possible to the coast, Chancy led the unit across a morass of bog to a point about two miles from the mouth of the Aucilla River. The site, which they reached at seven that night, was nine miles from their horses and sixty-five miles from the company's camp. Their march had been difficult, and, according to Scott, the men had "waded most of the way through mud and water."<sup>7</sup>

Even after the soldiers made camp, there was still light. Examining the area near the Aucilla, the Confederates found evidence of Union forces having been there. Scott left the squad in charge of Sergeant W. G. Lester, took Chancy and a soldier, and moved forward to reconnoiter the river bank. Shortly, the three Southerners saw smoke, and, moving slowly, came upon a Federal camping ground. It had only recently been abandoned because several fires still smoldered. They discovered some stacks of

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*Prince of Frontier Florida* (Gainesville, 1978), 116-30, and Lucas, "Civil War Career of Scott," 131.

6. Captain George W. Scott to Brigadier General Joseph Finegan, June 4, 1862. His official report does not appear in *O.R.* but is published in *Tallahassee Florida Sentinel*, June 10, 1862. Hereinafter cited as "Scott's Report."

7. "Scott's Report."

sawed wood ready to be loaded, and scattered around were a number of Boston and New York newspapers. What seemed less than tight security really was not because, as the Union soldiers explained later, they felt completely secure from discovery, let alone attack.<sup>8</sup>

The expedition had discovered a spot used by the East Gulf Squadron to secure wood and water. For over a month, craft from the Union gunboat *King Fisher* had made irregular trips to the area which had been uninhabited for many years. Usually two or three small cutters containing armed seamen and a pilot carried out the assignment.<sup>9</sup>

Realizing that the Federals would soon return, Scott decided to launch a surprise attack. His men were up early on June 2. Captain Scott placed pickets half a mile down river to watch for the boats. At twelve noon they reported that three boats were approaching, and each soldier took his post, already designated by Scott, "so that he could be into it at a moment's warning."<sup>10</sup>

Scott knew that his position was precarious. His escape trail into the swamp was two miles above the Confederate position. If one of the boats succeeded in getting by, the Southerners would be cut off. With no way of knowing how many men the cutters carried, Scott realized that it was imperative to halt the first boat. The soldiers were instructed to wait until Scott fired his pistol and then release a volley.

Half a mile below the point of planned attack the river made a broad bend. A few days later Scott remembered that soon the first cutter "rounded the curve and came up beautifully her large sail hanging so low that it was impossible for me to tell how many men she had."<sup>11</sup> Earlier that morning the Union boats had left the *King Fisher*. The thirteen men and a pilot were under the command of Master and Acting Second Lieutenant Samuel Curtis. The trip promised to be routine, and the relaxed pilot hung back at the river's mouth in order to fish. The two other cutters moved upstream.<sup>12</sup>

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8. Ibid.

9. *War of the Rebellion: Official Records Union And Confederate Navies*, 30 vols. (Washington, 1894-1922), Ser. I, XVII, 254-55 (hereinafter cited as *O.R.N.*).

10. "Scott's Report."

11. Ibid.

12. *O.R.N.*, Ser. I, XVII, 255-56.

When the first vessel got within twenty feet of the concealed Scott, he rose, aimed, and the noise of his pistol was lost in the louder reports of almost simultaneous rifle fire. The Federals were taken by surprise, but instinctively dropped to the deck for cover. Next, the Confederates saw four muskets raised over the boat's edge. When two of the weapons opened fire, the Southerners replied with another fusillade. Scott ordered his men to cease firing, and at that the boat quickly surrendered. No Confederate had been hit.

Two Union men were wounded and two more were killed. It was ironical that the casualties were all foreigners. Wounded were Charles Milton, born in the Sandwich Islands but brought up by a Massachusetts shipowner and a veteran whaler of twenty years, and Charles Hood, an Englishman. A rifle ball broke Milton's wrist, and Hood was slightly wounded in the hip. Dead were a German, Anton Faulkner of Bremen, and Anton Euphrates, a native of "the Western Islands." Some unknown set of circumstances had brought the two seamen into the United States Navy and to their deaths in an isolated Florida wilderness.<sup>13</sup>

Losing no time, Scott detailed Sergeant A. C. Croom and three men to march the northern prisoners into the swamp, and he prepared to confront the remaining boats. By now the Confederates had moved further down the Aucilla, and when the next vessel came in sight, they observed eight men on board. When the unsuspecting crew steered the craft to within a few feet of him, Scott stepped to the river bank and demanded an immediate surrender. The Union seamen reacted by suddenly dropping down, but the force and weight of their move capsized the boat. Men, arms, and casks tangled together and emptied into the Aucilla's warm water. Lieutenant Curtis called out that he surrendered, but the other Federals began swimming for the opposite shore. Ordered to return or be shot, they reconsidered and gave themselves up.<sup>14</sup>

The tide was running out, and the Confederates watched as it carried casks, oars, seats, and various objects downstream. The pilot, alone in the third boat, encountered the evidence of disaster, and, perceiving the danger, escaped to the other shore.

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13. Tallahassee *Florida Sentinel*, June 10, 1862; *O.R.N.*, Ser. I, XVII, 257-58.

14. "Scott's Report."

Out of range of the Confederate fire, he lingered to observe developments.<sup>15</sup>

Withdrawal by the Confederates would be difficult under normal circumstances, and now there were eleven prisoners. Since the return was through miles of thick swamp along a broken trail, Scott ordered a pullout before dark. Without shovels that could be used to dig graves, the Confederates managed to cover the dead bodies, place them in one of the boats, and run it into a narrow creek. The other boat and the captured supplies were secured and hidden. Exhausted, the Confederates and their prisoners emerged from the swamp before nightfall. Scott arranged for Chancy to return later, bury the dead, and bring the boats to a place of safety.<sup>16</sup>

After the Confederates departed, the pilot moved his boat in to investigate. He was unable to find the first cutter, but managed to right the capsized boat, tie it to a tree, and he even rolled some casks up a hill. Seeing recent breastworks, he hurriedly returned to the *King Fisher* and reported what had happened to the commander, Acting Volunteer Lieutenant Joseph P. Couthouy. Somewhat incredulous, Lieutenant Couthouy sent Master's Mate Charles E. Sloan back with the third cutter to confirm the debacle. Based on the reports of the pilot and Sloan, Couthouy took action in the next few days to do what he could for his men.<sup>17</sup>

There was jubilation in Tallahassee. The *Florida Sentinel* boasted, "This expedition will teach the marauders on our coast the penalty of their lawless raids."<sup>18</sup> The two wounded seamen were placed in a hospital at Tallahassee, and the other ten prisoners were lodged in the city jail. It seemed fitting to locals that the captured men had recently left graffiti on the walls of the St. Marks lighthouse. They had boldly scrawled their names to a statement denouncing the "damned rebels" as cowards who were afraid to fight.<sup>19</sup>

Shortly after the episode, Lieutenant Couthouy entered into a series of meetings and agreements with Confederate authorities.

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15. *O.R.N.*, Ser. I, XVII, 256.

16. "Scott's Report."

17. *O.R.N.*, Ser. I, XVII, 257-58.

18. Tallahassee *Florida Sentinel*, June 10, 1862.

19. *Ibid.*

The Union forces were permitted to rebury the dead seamen and mark their graves by the Aucilla and to furnish the prisoners with clothes, provisions, and even some money. The negotiations between the two enemy forces were courteous, practical, and humane. Still later the prisoners were exchanged.<sup>20</sup>

Scott and his men continued the struggle. They participated in other battles, including that of Natural Bridge on March 6, 1865, which turned a Union invasion away from St. Marks and Tallahassee.<sup>21</sup> After the war Scott unsuccessfully attempted to resume his business and planting interests. Briefly entering politics, he ran as the Conservative candidate for governor in 1868 but was defeated by his Republican opponent, Harrison Reed.<sup>22</sup> With little reason to stay in Florida, Scott moved to Atlanta, Georgia, where he became a successful businessman. He endowed a college that was later named Agnes Scott for his mother. Scott retired and died on October 3, 1903, at the age of seventy-four.<sup>23</sup>

Scott was a man of ability and courage. Although not a professional soldier, he served the Confederacy well. The modest commander was not engaging in patriotic rhetoric when he described the performance of his men at the Aucilla River on June 2, 1862. The soldiers had proved, Scott wrote, "that they were men worthy to enjoy the liberty for which they are struggling."<sup>24</sup>

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20. *O.R.*, Ser. II, III, 648-50, 658-59, 899-90.

21. *Ibid.*, XXXV, Pt. II, 614; Edwin C. Bearss, "Federal Expedition Against Saint Marks Ends at Natural Bridge," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XLV (April 1967), 369-90; Mark F. Boyd, "The Joint Operations of the Federal Army and Navy Near St. Marks, Florida, March 1865," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XXIX (October 1950), 96-124; William Miller, "The Battle of Natural Bridge," *Apalachee*, IV (1950-1956), 76-86.

22. Paisley, *From Cotton to Quail*, 20-22; Jerrell H. Shofner, *Nor Is It O'er Yet: Florida in the Era of Reconstruction 1863-1867* (Gainesville, 1974), 190-92.

23. Lucas, "Civil War Career of Scott," 149.

24. "Scott's Report."