

March 14, 1862 - Skirmishes at Big Creek Gap [Hawkins County]^{Note 1}



MARCH 14, 1862.-Skirmishes at Big Creek Gap and Jacksborough, Tenn.

REPORTS.

No. 1.-Col. James P. T. Carter, Second East Tennessee Infantry, U. S. Army.

No. 2.-Maj.-Gen. E. Kirby Smith, C. S. Army.

No. 1.

Report of Col. James P. T. Carter, Second East Tennessee Infantry, U. S. Army.

HDQRS. SECOND EAST TENNESSEE VOLUNTEERS, Camp at Flat Lick, March 23, 1862.

GEN.: In obedience to your order of the 8th instant to proceed to Big Creek Gap and Jacksborough, Campbell County, Tennessee, and capture or rout the rebel forces which were reported to be in that vicinity blockading roads and molesting the persons and property of Union citizens, I left with my command on the morning of the 10th instant, accompanied by Lieut. Col. James Keigwin, of the Forty-ninth Indiana Volunteers, and marched to Big Creek Gap via Boston. My force consisted of the Second East Tennessee Regt. Company A, of the First East Tennessee Regt., Capt. Cooper; Company B, of the Forty-ninth Indiana Regt., Capt. Thompson, and a detachment of Lieut.-Col. Munday's First Battalion Kentucky Cavalry.

We arrived at the foot of the Cumberland Mountains, on the north side, on the 13th instant, at 6 o'clock p. m. I then learned that two companies of the First Tennessee Regt. rebel cavalry were encamped at Big Creek Gap. Finding the road completely blockaded, I detached the cavalry, and sent them around by another road, with orders to meet the main body of the command at a certain point on the opposite side of the mountain. Procuring the services of a guide, I divided my command, placing one portion under charge of Lieut.-Col. Keigwin. We took up the line of march at 9 o'clock p. m., intending to meet at a point on the opposite side of the mountain about daybreak. The distance we had to march was about 9 miles, yet so difficult was the ascent of the mountain that it was only by the superhuman exertions, as it were, of the men that the march was made. The men, however, bore it patiently, and moved on "eager for the fray."

Having to pass through narrow ways in single file, and the night being very dark, a portion of the infantry got lost, and did not arrive in time to take part in the skirmish. About 1,300 of the infantry came upon the camps of the rebels, under command of Lieut. Col. John F. White, at about 6 o'clock a.m. of the 14th instant, and after a sharp skirmish of about five minutes the rebels were completely routed. The rebel loss was 5 men killed, 15 wounded, and 15 taken prisoners, among whom were Lieut.-Col. White and Lieut. Hoyl.

We captured 86 horses (27 killed), 7 mules, and several wagons, a large amount of camp and garrison equipage, a quantity of powder, and a large



amount of quartermaster and commissary stores-a sufficient amount of the latter to supply the command during their stay. It being impossible to bring off the quartermaster stores I caused them to be burned and the powder destroyed. Owing to the darkness of the night and the impassability of the roads the cavalry did not arrive till after the skirmish. Had the troops been able to get up in time I am satisfied that we could have succeeded in capturing the whole force. On the arrival of the cavalry we marched to Jacksborough, distance 5 miles, and there overtook the rear guard of the cavalry; killed 1 man and captured Capt. Edward Winston, of the Corps of Sappers and Miners. We hoisted the Stars and Stripes over the town, and on the 15th instant marched to Fincastle, and from thence to Woodson's Gap, where we encamped a few days.

Learning that there was a manufactory of saltpeter in the neighborhood, I sent a detachment of cavalry with orders to destroy the same. They destroyed about 1,000 pounds of saltpeter, broke up the kettles, burned up the shed, and destroyed about 11,000 pounds of bacon and 20 sacks of flour. Our loss was 1 wounded-Lieut. Myers, Company H, Second East Tennessee Volunteers. His wound, however, is not dangerous.

Officers and men behaved admirably, and proved that they are ready and willing at all times to meet the rebels. The people through the section of country over which we passed are truly loyal in their sentiments and hailed the advent of our troops with unbounded enthusiasm. Everything they had was freely tendered to us. We found forage and provisions abundant on the route after we left Boston. The position we had at Woodson's Gap was a very strong one, and could have been held against a large force, and had we been permitted to remain we would no doubt have had an opportunity of meeting the forces at Cumberland Gap which had been sent out to attack us, but on the 19th instant I received an order from you to report at headquarters with my command at the earliest possible moment. I accordingly took up the line of march for this place on the 20th instant, and arrived here on the 23d instant without the loss of a single man.

Your obedient servant,

JAS. P. T. Carter, Col. Second East Tennessee Volunteers.

No. 2.

Report of Maj.-Gen. E. Kirby Smith, C. S. Army.

HDQRS. DISTRICT OF TENNESSEE, Knoxville, March 15, 1862.

GEN.: I have the honor to report that the enemy, having passed the Cumberland Mountains, yesterday surprised and captured, without the fire of a gun, I believe, the larger number of two companies of the First East Tennessee Cavalry near Jacksborough. Their force consisted of a regiment of infantry.

Couriers who arrived last night bring the intelligence that they are moving in this direction. I have ordered forward to Clinton two Alabama regiments, the Third Regt. Tennessee Volunteers, a battalion of North Carolina Volunteers, a



section (two pieces) Third Maryland Artillery, and a portion First East Tennessee Cavalry (an aggregate of 2,000 men), the whole under the command of Col. D. Leadbetter, who had received such instructions from me as I thought necessary for the exigency.



From what I have learned of the character of the troops from East Tennessee in our service, of their strong Union proclivities, greatly increased by their near relationship to and from intimate association with many citizens who have fled the country and espoused the Federal cause, I am satisfied the capture near Jacksborough was the result of treachery. Pickets detailed from them cannot be relied on, and even officers are not free from suspicion of more fidelity to the Federal than to our service. It is not an individual opinion that some of the regiments from this section are disloyal, but it is the conviction of many of our friends, who know the public sentiment prevailing in those counties in which they were raised and the strong personal ties which would influence them to become so. There is a want among them of that confidence in the loyalty of each other which would make them faithful in the discharge of their duty to their fellow soldiers and to the country, and this is aggravated, too, by the opinion, which exists to some extent, that East Tennessee cannot be defended by the force we have in the field, and must be abandoned upon the advance of the Federal Army.



I cannot, therefore, too strongly urge upon the Department the propriety, if not the necessity, of removing these troops to some other point, where they cannot prove traitors, either by purchase or from love to the Federal Government, and where, if they do not make efficient soldiers, they cannot be tampered with by the enemy. If this be done, and their numerical strength be supplied by troops from other States, I am persuaded it would in every respect be to the advantage of the service.

Very respectfully, your obedient servant,

E. KIRBY SMITH, Maj.-Gen., Cmdg.

OR, Ser. I, Vol. 10, pt. I, pp. 19-21.

Note 1: The following reports are from both the Union and Confederate sources. The Union victory was the result of treachery claimed Confederate Major-General E. Kirby Smith. Colonel James P. T. Carter (U. S.), an East Tennessean loyal to the Union, however, claimed victory due to good soldiery and the pro-Union sentiment in the country.