

May 12, 1863 - Descent on Linden, razing courthouse and dispersal of conscripts^{Note 1}



Report of Lieutenant-Commander Phelps, U. S. Navy, commanding Tennessee Division on combined expedition to Linden, Tenn., May 12, 1863.

U. S. Gunboat *Champion*

Tennessee River, May 14, 1863



Sir:



On the 5th instant I left Paducah with the *Covington*, *Queen City*, *Argosy*, *Silver Cloud* and this vessel (*Champion*) and proceeded up this river, destroying on the way every kind of boat that could serve the rebels to cross the river. On the 11th we were at Cerro Gordo, and I then sent the *Covington*, *Argosy*, and *Silver Cloud* to Eastport, the highest navigable point at this stage of water, and myself dropped down a few miles to communicate, by previous appointment, with Lieutenant-Colonel W.K.M. Breckenridge. Along the river I heard of detachments of rebel cavalry at various points, whose occupation chiefly consisted in plundering, in carrying off Union men, and in taking conscripts. At Linden, in Perry County, Tenn., there was a rebel force of this kind posted. I arranged with Colonel Breckenridge to cross his small force and cover different points with the gunboats, places to which he could retreat if need be, while he should attempt to surprise Linden. The boats above rejoined me on the 12th, having found all quiet above, and at night I dropped down the river to the landing for Decaturville, where I found the colonel with but 55 men of his regiment, all he had with him. Some from a Michigan regiment that were to join had failed to come in. We at once took the cavalry on board, crossed it over with little noise, and the boats took their positions at intervals along the river some miles above and below. Colonel Breckenridge's movements were timed so that his arrival at Linden-12 miles from the river-should be just at daybreak, and he completely surprised the place. The rebel pickets fired upon him and dispersed. Only some 20 of the 118 rebels at muster the evening before had time to reach the rendezvous at the court-house before it was surrounded. The little party returned with Lieutenant -Colonel [W.] Frierson, 1 captain, 4 lieutenants, 1 surgeon 30 regular rebel soldiers, 10 conscripts, 50 horses, 2 transportation wagons, arms, etc. With the court-house were burned a lot of arms and supplies. Three of the enemy were killed. Our loss none; only 1 horse killed.

Colonel Breckenridge's men are Tennesseans (First West Tennessee Cavalry Regiment), are perfectly familiar with the people and country, and are admirably calculated for this kind of service, while the colonel himself is just the man. I should be glad if General Grant would direct that he, with a battalion of his regiment, say 300 men, should operate on the Tennessee. I can easily provide for his transportation when necessary, at no cost, using flatboats, and can cooperate with him effectually for the good of the service on these waters. I have brought the prisoners to deliver at Cairo. The conscripts took the oath and went home.



From the best information I can gather, the rebels are concentrating their forces about Rosecrans. Van Dorn's force is reported at Spring Hill and Columbia, and the general [i.e., Van Dorn] is said to have been assassinated by a jealous surgeon on his staff. The force that was about Duck River has gone to Spring Hill. The captured colonel reports that he should have left Linden for the same destination one hour later. The rebels are concentrating, it would seem, every available man about General Rosecrans.

I left three gunboats below Duck River to watch that stream, and I have come down to take up a new boat with her some flats and light barges, in which we can transport coal over the shoals for our use. None of the boats carry coal for such voyages. What General Rosecrans is doing I have not been able to learn. Van Dorn's division lies between him and the Tennessee, cutting off communication. Till a battle has decided the fate of Middle Tennessee, I apprehend there will be no rebel movement upon this river. If the enemy is successful, he is not doubt prepared to move for the immediate possession of the river. Secessionists report that the plan is to recapture Fort Henry, and to fortify also Carrollville.

I am, respectfully, your obedient servant.

S.L. Phelps, Lieutenant Commander.

Navy OR, Ser. I, Vol. 24, pp. 669-670.

Note 1: *Dyer's Battle Index for Tennessee* refers to this event as "Skirmish, Linden."

Report of Lieut. Commander S. Ledyard Phelps, U. S. Navy.

CAIRO, ILL., May 15, 1863.

Following telegram just received from Paducah, May 14, 1863:

Capt. PENNOCK, U. S. Navy, Capt., Cmdg. Station, Cairo:

Am just down from Tennessee River. Have on board prisoners captured at Linden, Tenn., on the night of the 12th. Took on board gunboats 55 men and horses of First West Tennessee Cavalry, under command of Lieut. Col. William K. M. Breckenridge; landed them on the east side of the river. Sent gunboats to cover all landings above and below. Col. Breckenridge dashed across the country to Linden; surprised the rebel force more than twice his number, capturing Lieut.-Col. [W.] Frierson, 1 captain, 1 surgeon, 4 lieutenants, 30 rebel soldiers, 10 conscripts, 50 horses, 2 army wagons, arms, &c. The court-house, which was a rebel depot, was burned, with a quantity of arms and supplies. The enemy lost 3 killed. Our force, none; only 1 horse killed.

Col. Breckenridge, after his exploit, reached our vessels in safety and recrossed the river. Will send prisoners to Cairo.

S. L. PHELPS, Lieut., commanding Tennessee Division, Mississippi Squadron.

OR, Ser. I, Vol. 23, pt. I, p. 331.

