

THE CAPTURE OF GENERALS CROOK AND KELLEY

From Cumberland by McNeill's Rangers During the Civil War

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“Lieutenant McNeill and party deserve much credit for this bold exploit.” Thus, asserted General Robert E. Lee in his official report to the Confederate secretary of War. John B. Gordon, one of General Lee's most trusted lieutenants, declared that “in daring and dash it was one of the most thrilling incidents of the entire war.”

Both General Lee and General Gordon were referring to the daring raid during the early morning hours of February 21, 1865 when sixty-three Confederates, led by Lieutenant Jesse McNeill rode into Cumberland, Maryland, and kidnapped Major General George Crook and Brigadier General Benjamin F. Kelley. Cumberland at the time was garrisoned by 7000 Federal troops.

Making Plans

The wish to kidnap Union General “Old Ben” Kelley had originated with Lt. Jesse McNeill's father, Captain John Hanson McNeill, leader of McNeill's Rangers. The Rangers were a guerilla unit consisting largely of men from the Eastern Panhandle of West Virginia and Western Maryland. Bad blood had existed between Kelley and McNeill “ever since Kelley's seizure of Mrs. McNeill in August 1863. Mrs. McNeill, her daughter, and four year old son” had been arrested “while on a visit to West Virginia from Chillicothe, Ohio,” and imprisoned at Camp Chase. When Captain John Hanson McNeill was killed near Mt. Jackson, Virginia on November 10, 1864 the responsibility of fulfilling the intense desire, to avenge his wife's seizure, which he had so keenly felt, would fall to his son, Lt. Jesse McNeill.

In mid-winter of 1865, three months after his father's death, still on crutches from an injury, Lt. McNeill set about devising a plan to kidnap General Benjamin F. Kelley from his headquarters in Cumberland, Maryland.

Needing to have detailed information about Union defenses around the city, Ranger John G. Lynn, Jr., a Cumberland resident before the war, was granted a furlough to return to his home, and while there to assess the situation. He was captured on February 5, 1865, and three days later imprisoned at Fort McHenry, Maryland. He was listed as a “Guerrilla — not to be exchanged during the war.”



General Crook



General Kelley

Not deterred by this initial set-back, Jesse McNeill next sent Ranger John B. Fay, another Cumberland native on a second scouting mission. Fay came to Cumberland twice “to map plans for the abduction.” Through some of his friends he “obtained thorough information as to the number of troops in Cumberland, the location of various headquarters,” and where Union pickets were stationed.

In the meantime, Lt. McNeill was readying his command for the daring mission. Horses were shod, equipment was checked, and rations were issued. On the night of February 19, Sergeant Fay sent Pvt. Cephas R. Hallar, “a sixteen year old Missourian, who (had) come to Cumberland with him on his final reconnaissance, (back) to meet Lt. McNeill and his men near the Hampshire County, West Virginia Poorhouse.” Hallar reported to McNeill the detailed information he and Sergeant Fay had obtained on their fact-finding missions, and gave McNeill a note from Fay, which indicated that “everything was set for the abduction.”

Completing the Mission

The Rangers set out the afternoon of the next day, February 20th, and headed toward the Vance Herriott house, about five miles from Romney, West Virginia, where Fay waited. Jesse knew that in order for the intended mission to be successful the Cumberland garrison would have to be completely surprised.

Arriving at the Herriott House late that same evening, they found Fay waiting. He told McNeill, "his Cumberland contacts reported conditions still favorable for the raid." Upon hearing this, Jesse gathered his men "around him for a briefing on the purpose of the expedition." With the exception of a few to whom he had given his confidence "none of the men had any idea of the nature of the trip." Announcing the purpose and destination of the mission, the men were told by Lt. McNeill that he "wanted them to act voluntarily, and if any wished to go back he could do so without censure." All were willing to go. The Rangers quickly took to the saddle again and started across Knobley Mountain.

They passed down Knobley and arrived at the Ren Seymour home. There they gratefully filled their canteens with bourbon and rested briefly. Continuing on they forded the Potomac River near Brady's Mill. Now in Maryland, the partisans made one final stop at the home of Samuel D. Brady. Here they learned that General George Crook was also in Cumberland, and they quickly revised their plans to include the kidnapping of him. The details and part to be played by each man when they reached their intended destination was decided. "To Joe Vandiver was assigned the duty of entering Crook's room and making him a prisoner, and to Joe Kuykendall the same duty as to Kelley, while John Arnold and George Cunningham, of Company F, 7th Virginia Regiment, Rosser's Brigade, were to raid the stable and secure Kelley's horses. To John Fay and John Cunningham was given the task of destroying the telegraph office." Also, faced with "ten grueling miles to travel in the few remaining hours of darkness" the Rebels decided to change their original route to a shorter, more direct route along the more heavily picketed New Creek Road.

Leaving the Brady house the group moved briskly along their new route toward Cumberland. About five miles from their destination, near where the old Circle Inn was once located on what is now Route 220, they were challenged for the first time by pickets manning the outer defenses of the city. Charging boldly the Rangers quickly captured the three Union pickets stationed at the outpost. After threatening to hang one of the guards the countersign being used by the Yankees that night, "Bull's Gap," was obtained.

Armed with this important bit of information, when the Rebels were challenged about one mile from Cumberland, at the inner defense perimeter, where the Dingle Circle is now located, the countersign, "Bull's Gap," was quickly given to the Union picket. Allowed to approach by the guard, the Rangers quickly captured him and five others playing cards before a blazing fire in a make-shift shelter at the side of the road. Told that the city was surrounded, the Rangers took possession of their enemies' muskets, "uncapped them, broke them over the logs," and told the pickets to remain there until morning and "they would be paroled with the rest of the prisoners."

With the last picket line safely behind them the road to Cumberland was now clear. About 3:00 a.m. they approached the city from the west, rode down Greene Street, crossed the iron bridge over Will's Creek, and traveled along Baltimore Street toward the Barnum House. They bandied words occasionally with soldiers in the street.

The head of the column went to the Revere House and the rear of the column stopped at the Barnum House. Others went to the stable and telegraph office. Moving quickly and quietly, without the need for a command, the four pre-selected squads took only ten minutes to carry out their assigned tasks. Joseph Kuykendall with five men entered the Barnum House where General Kelley was sleeping. Going directly to Kelley's room he was aroused from his sleep, and told he was a prisoner-of-war. He was ordered to dress as quickly as possible. Kelley's adjutant, Major Thayer Melvin, was also taken.

At the Revere House where General Crook was sleeping, the Rebel squad designated to abduct him, ran into an unexpected problem. Challenged by a sentinel in front of the hotel, they quickly overpowered him, and then finding the door locked they had to rap loudly in an attempt to gain entrance. The door was finally opened by the hotel's small black servant. Once inside, the squad led by Joe Vandiver, quickly located General Crook's room, and roused him from his sleep. The General still drowsy after having just been awakened from his sleep, was told that he was a prisoner "by the authority of General Rosser of Fitzhugh Lee's division of cavalry." He was also forced to dress rapidly, and then was escorted into the street to join Kelley and Melvin. The abductions took place so quietly that those "who were sleeping in adjoining rooms were not disturbed."

In the meantime, Fay and John Cunningham had entered the telegraph office where they completely destroyed the telegraph equipment and cut the lines linking Baltimore, Winchester, and other Union Outposts. Another squad of partisans visited the military stables where they appropriated several fine horses. One of them was Philippi, a gift to General Kelley from the citizens of West Virginia, in honor of General Kelley's first battle at the town of Philippi, W. Va., in which skirmish he was badly wounded. The captives, who had been riding double, were now mounted on horses of their own, and just twenty-five minutes after entering Cumberland, the Rangers rode out of the city, their mission completed. Unknown to the partisans at the time was "that among the late arrivals in those hotels were Brigadier General Rutherford B. Hayes and Major William McKinley," or they "might have had a larger harvest of generals and two future presidents of the United States."

Escaping Pursuers

Leaving Cumberland the Rangers took a new and different route, following the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal towpath toward Wiley's Ford, West Virginia. Several Union pickets stationed at the canal locks along the way offered little resistance, and were easily captured by the Rebel group. The guards were then paroled and released. A picket stationed at the Canal Bridge about a mile from Cumberland, however, was more vigilant. Challenging the Confederates, he halted their column. Telling the guard "that the odd looking procession was a bodyguard for General Crook, who was going out to meet a force of Rebels converging on Cumberland," the confused guard permitted the Rangers to pass.

The partisans proceeded to Wiley's Ford, crossed the Potomac River there, and headed toward Romney, West Virginia. As they crossed the River they heard artillery blasts back in Cumberland. They knew that Union forces there were now fully aware of the happenings during the night and would soon be in pursuit.

Indeed, shortly after the abduction of the two generals and Major Melvin, the alarm was given in Cumberland, and within an hour a cavalry force had departed from there in an attempt to catch the kidnapers. By 6:00 a.m. the damaged telegraph had been repaired, and Assistant Adjutant General, Major Robert P. Kennedy, sent a hasty



*An Unknown
Confederate Trooper*

message from Cumberland to Major General Philip H. Sheridan, commander of the Middle Military Division, who was in Winchester, Va., informing him of the kidnapping. The military post in Cumberland at the time was part of the Middle Military Division. In the dispatch Kennedy explained that he had sent about fifty cavalry from Cumberland in pursuit of the Rebels. In addition, he reported that, "I have ordered all the cavalry from New Creek after them. I will send a regiment of infantry to New Creek at 7 o'clock to replace the cavalry sent out from there." Kennedy pleaded with Sheridan, "Cannot parties be sent out from the Valley to intercept them?"

In another communiqué to Sheridan one-half hour later, at 6:30 a.m., Kennedy disclosed that Captain Botsford had just returned to Cumberland, and reported that the Rebels, "about sixty in number" were riding very fast toward Romney via Springfield.

By 7:10 a.m. things were in motion at the Union post in nearby New Creek, West Virginia. Major Troxel left New Creek with 150 cavalry, headed for Romney, hoping to intercept the Rebels there. A second Union force had been dispatched from New Creek, headed to Moorefield, West Virginia, in case the Rebels got that far.

Riding toward Romney the Rangers followed the Old Furnace Road. Just beyond Romney they "turned onto the Trough Hollow road, a long abandoned road which paralleled the course of the South Branch river on its way to Moorefield." Two miles south of Romney, the Federal cavalry detachment from Cumberland, overtook the fugitives. A brief skirmish ensued. Lt. Welton of the Rangers was ordered by Lt. McNeill to form a rear guard to delay the Yankees until the main Confederate column could reach safer territory. From "a strong position on a low ridge overlooking the road" Welton contained the Federal force for over an hour, allowing the main Rebel column to safely ride south with their captives.

Continuing on, the main force of partisans arrived at "the northern end of the Moorefield Valley" in the early afternoon. They skirted the town when "their old adversaries, the Ringgold Battalion" who "had ridden hard from their base at New Creek," was sighted across the South Branch river. The Ringgold cavalry was the 22nd Pennsylvania, commanded at the time by Colonel Greenfield, and who

on previous occasions had engaged in several lively tilts with the partisans. However, after the long and tiring ride from Cumberland, the Rangers at that point were in no mood for a confrontation with their old enemies.

Turning off the road they had been following, the Rangers took a trail east into the mountains several miles before stopping to rest at 4:00 p.m. Less than an hour later they moved six miles further up the South Fork to a safer position. There they built campfires and settled in for the evening. The Rangers, with the exception of two brief stops, “had been in the saddle for more than twenty hours.”

Meanwhile, the Ringgold cavalry spent the night near Moorefield. The next morning, February 22, they decided it was useless to attempt pursuit of the Rebels in the West Virginia mountains, and started to make preparations to return to New Creek.

In Winchester, after receiving Major Kennedy’s message from Cumberland about the abduction, General Sheridan had immediately dispatched troops from that place to intercept the Rebels. The Winchester force, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel E.W. Whitaker, headed for Moorefield and arrived there at 1:30 p.m. on the 22nd. When they arrived in Moorefield, Colonel Whitaker “learned that the enemy, with important prisoners, had crossed the Moorefield and Winchester pike, two miles from the town at about 1:00 p.m. the 21st, and that a party of Federal cavalry from New Creek were in the town immediately after, but had returned.”

Seeing the campfires of the Federal cavalry force from New Creek about five miles out of town, Colonel Whitaker immediately sent an officer to confer with Colonel Greenfield of the New Creek force. Colonel Greenfield sent word back to Colonel Whitaker that he had seen the enemy with prisoners the previous day, but not being sure of their numbers had decided that an attack on them too hazardous. Greenfield indicated his desire to assist Whitaker, if the troops from Winchester planned to pursue. But, by this time with the trail of the rebels over twelve hours old, his horses exhausted “in breaking a foot of snow over the mountains,” and with little prospect of catching the Confederates before they “reached assistance in the Valley,” Lt. Colonel Whitaker decided it prudent to terminate his rescue efforts. Reluctantly the Winchester force turned homeward. Thus, the first phase of the bold raid of Lt. McNeill had been concluded successfully. Now all that remained for the partisans was to get their prisoners to Richmond.

Taken to Richmond

Lt. Welton and a small squad of Rangers were chosen to escort the captives to the Rebel capitol. On February 22nd, with only “a few hours rest and scant rations,” Lt. Welton and his small group, along with the prisoners, mounted fresh horses and “proceeded up the South Fork of the South Branch of the Potomac.” They rode all day, and then with night coming on “they camped near Raleigh Springs, twelve miles west of Harrisonburg.”

Lt. Welton and his squad arose early the next morning, on February 23rd, and with their prisoners rode into Harrisonburg. A short stop was made at Hill’s Hotel there for breakfast, prior to their departure for Staunton. With the long exhausting horseback ride beginning to show its effect on the two generals, an old stage coach was borrowed in Harrisonburg to transport Crook and Kelley up the Valley Pike to Staunton. That night the two captives “spent part of the evening dining with (Confederate) General Early, discussing the war,” and then retired to the luxury of a soft bed. The following morning the captives and their guards boarded a train for the final leg of their journey to Richmond. Colonel John S. Mosby, who was aboard the same train, sought out the Rangers. He congratulated them on their accomplishment and laughingly mused, “This surpasses anything I have ever done, to get even with you boys, I’ve got to go into Washington and carry Abe Lincoln out.”

“Arriving in Richmond, the prisoners were turned over to Confederate authorities.” Lt. Welton and his group “spent only one night in Richmond before returning to their command.” Prior to leaving the Confederate capitol they stopped to see their former captives for a final time. They gave the generals “a pint of whiskey which they had purchased with \$65 of their own money.”

Later Events

Although there was little military significance to the capture of the two generals by McNeill’s Rangers, the event did shed “a ray of sunshine for the Confederacy in the otherwise gloomy winter of 1865.” A short time after their delivery to Richmond, Crook and Kelley were both paroled, but not before some concessions were obtained from Union officials.

Some of McNeill’s men “were in prison at Fort McHenry.” They “were treated as guerillas and not as prisoners of war, being confined in a dungeon.” Lt. Welton requested the Confederate War Department “to hold

Crook and Kelley as hostages for them.” He was told this could not be done, but Rebel officials were able to secure better treatment for McNeill’s men. The guerillas were accorded the same treatment as other prisoners of war confined at Fort McHenry, and removed to better quarters. After Crook and Kelley were released by Confederate authorities, “The (United States) Secretary of War was at first strongly minded to dismiss both generals, but General Grant was unwilling that this should be done,” and both men were returned to duty.

After the war, General Kelley married Clara Bruce of Cumberland. He held a succession of different federal positions, and died in Oakland, Maryland in 1891. He is buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

General Crook married Miss Mary T. Daily following the war. She was the “daughter of the proprietor of the Revere House” where he was captured, and a sister of Chas. J. Daily, the member of McNeill’s Rangers “who had a conspicuous part in his capture.” He continued in the service of his country, and died in Chicago in 1890. He was buried initially in the Daily family plot in Oakland, Maryland. Later, he was reburied in Arlington.



Harold L. Scott, Sr. Cumberland, Maryland was author of numerous Civil War and historical books. Mr. Scott’s story “The Battle at Folck’s Mill” appeared in the Fall/Winter 2004-2005 edition of Mountain Discoveries. We regret Mr. Scott’s passing this past May 8, 2005; he will be missed.



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