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and What I Know of It
Paper

Read Before
The Ohio Commandery
Of The
Loyal Legion

October 4th, 1911

By

Brevet Lieutenant-Colonel Charles L. Greeno,
7th, Pa. Vet. Vol. Cav.

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The Capture of Jefferson Davis and What I Know of It

The capture of Jeff Davis has been the subject of much controversy. Much has been written regarding this capture from both a Southern and a Northern point of view.

Having been on the ground at the time and in a measure indirectly connected with it, at the earnest solicitation of Major Thrall and a number of my companions in the Commandery, I will undertake to relate the circumstances of the capture from my own personal knowledge.

On May 7, 1865, our Brigade, which was then in camp near Macon, Ga., was ordered by General Minty, commanding the Division, to proceed down the south side of the Ocmulgee River and to picket same, as it was learned that President Davis and members of his Cabinet, with an escort of Confederate Cavalry, had left Washington, Ga., and were proceeding south along the line of the river, with a view of crossing and going into Texas, where, at this time, the only organization of Confederate forces existed.

In compliance with these orders our Brigade commenced picketing the river a few miles south of Macon. The Seventh Penn. Cavalry, my Regiment, was the first to commence placing videttes some distance apart, with instructions to patrol carefully between same. After the entire Regiment had been placed in this position, Colonel Pritchard, of the Fourth Michigan Cavalry, was instructed to join the Pennsylvania Regiment and continue the same formation further down along the river.

I would state here that the Fourth Michigan and the Seventh Pennsylvania belonged to the same Brigade for about three years. We were so intimately associated that the two seemed almost like one Regiment. Colonel Pritchard was a very intimate friend of mine, as was also Lieutenant Dickinson.

When Colonel Pritchard commenced placing his videttes he was near Abbeyville, which is about seventy miles south of Macon. He there learned that Davis had already crossed the river. He also met there Colonel Hardin, of the First Wisconsin Cavalry, who had been pursuing Davis for a number of days with about seventy men and officers.

It was now near evening, and Colonel Pritchard detailed about one hundred and fifty men and officers, and immediately started in pursuit of Davis. He marched all night, arriving near Irwinsville, Ga., just at the break of day, in the meantime stopping only long enough to feed his horses. Again moving forward, he very soon arrived at the Camp of Davis and at once charged same, no resistance being offered, as it was a complete surprise to the Camp, most of whom were sleeping at the time.

Just at this time a most unfortunate mistake occurred between the Wisconsin soldiers and Colonel Pritchard's Command, each being taken by the other for the enemy. A sharp engagement took place, resulting in the killing of two soldiers and the wounding of one officer of the Fourth Michigan, and also severely wounding three soldiers in the First Wisconsin.

While Colonel Pritchard was engaged in this skirmish in the rear of the Camp, Lieutenant Dickinson, of the Fourth Michigan, took charge of the capture of Davis and all the Confederate escort. Guards were at once placed around the Camp and at each of the tents. Davis came out of one of the tents partly dressed and at once surrendered. He stated to Lieutenant Dickinson that women and children were in the tents and asked that no soldiers be permitted to enter. Lieutenant Dickinson replied that he would certainly do all in his power to protect the women and children and that no soldiers would be permitted to intrude on their privacy. Davis returned to his tent, and soon after an apparently old lady, accompanied by a young lady, came out of the tent. The young lady asked permission of Lieutenant Dickinson to go to the swamp a short distance away to get a bucket of water, she carrying the bucket on her arm. The supposed old lady was wearing a water-proof cloak that came close down to her feet, with her head wrapped in a small plaid shawl. The permission was given. The guard at the front of the tent at the time was Private Andrew Bee, who had been a Crimean soldier. He was not pleased with Lieutenant Dickinson for having permitted them to pass, but, as the privilege was granted, he let them go and kept a close watch on their movements. After they had passed him a few yards, the cloak of the supposed old lady caught on a bush, that lifted it just enough to disclose a pair of cavalry boots and spurs. It did not take Private Bee more than a second to level his seven-shooting carbine at the grandmother. Just at this moment Colonel Pritchard came in sight. Davis threw off his disguise and made a second surrender to Colonel Pritchard.

Just at this point I am reminded of, and perhaps some of my companions present will recall, a cartoon that was published in Harper's Weekly, showing Davis, his hoop-skirt caught on a bush, exposing a large part of his lower extremities, with his hands extended above his head as he looked into a trooper's gun. This cartoon proved very amusing to many people at the time.

After the second surrender, Colonel Pritchard said to Davis: "What and who shall I call you?" Davis replied, "You may call me what and who you please." Colonel Pritchard said, "I will call you Mr. Davis." Davis, then acknowledging who he was, said, "I suppose you think you are doing a brave act in making a raid like this on defenseless women and children."

Colonel Pritchard had no further conversation with Davis at this time, but proceeded at once to take an inventory of his capture, as follows:

Jeff Davis, defunct President of the Confederacy, Mrs. Davis, his wife, and four children.

John H. Regan, Postmaster-General of the Confederacy.

Colonels Johnson and Lubbock, Aids de-Camp to Davis.

Burton N. Harrison, Private Secretary to Davis.

Major Maur, Captain Moody and Lieutenant Hathaway of the Rebel Army, Jeff D. Howell, Midshipman in the Rebel Navy, and thirteen private soldiers.

Miss Howell, sister of Mrs. Davis, the young lady who represented Davis as her grandmother.

Together with ambulances, wagons and a complete camp outfit.

After allowing time for the prisoners to breakfast, the column was formed and they started at once on the march to Macon, Ga. A courier had been dispatched to our headquarters, arriving soon after. The balance of our Brigade, of which I was Assistant-Inspector-General, serving on the Staff of General Minty, met Colonel Pritchard with his capture near Hawkinsville, and gave him the information we had received a few hours previous to this, that the Government had offered a reward of one hundred thousand dollars for the capture of Davis. This was Colonel Pritchard's first knowledge that a reward had been offered.

This large sum was paid by the Government, and the distribution of it was referred largely to Colonel Pritchard. He advised that it be divided in modest amounts among those directly concerned in the capture. A liberal sum was given to the families and relatives of those men who were killed and wounded in the skirmish that took place by mistake between the First Wisconsin and the Fourth Michigan. I believe the soldiers in both Regiments shared equally. This was the current report at the time of the distribution of the reward, but I cannot verify it from my own personal knowledge.

On the arrival at Hawkinsville, I was introduced to President Davis and all his officials by Colonel Pritchard. Davis and I stepped to one side and had quite a talk together. He seemed somewhat nervous, but talked pleasantly. He was attired in a neatly-fitting gray suit, cut in military style, plain black buttons, but with no insignia of rank, and wore high-top cavalry boots. He was a very distinguished-looking man, a man who would be noted among a thousand for his striking personality. I had no

conversation with either Mrs. Davis or her sister, Miss Howell, but was near them frequently. Mrs. Davis was a large woman, not particularly good looking, but Miss Howell was a very beautiful woman. They appeared very much distressed, apparently undergoing a severe nervous strain.

The other officers who were with Davis were jolly men, and did not seem very much disturbed over the condition of affairs. I had pleasant conversation with all of them at different times. I think they were quite well satisfied that the conditions with them were as favorable as they were.

In my conversation with Davis, he said, "Major, what do you think they will do with me when we get to Macon? I suppose they will string me up." I replied, "There is no thought of that. You need have no fears. You will be protected as a prisoner until you can have a fair trial. What the result of that trial may be, I cannot say." I also said to him, what I believed to be true, that there was not a man in the Command who had any thought of doing him harm. This, I believe, was true. While oft-times during the War we heard soldiers express a desire to get a sight of Davis and they would shoot him on the spot, and make other like threats, yet there was not the slightest move to carry out this, nor do I think there was a soldier in the Command who would have carried out the threats had opportunity offered.

No insult was offered Davis, other than the bands of the Division continually played the National airs, such as, "The Star Spangled Banner," "Yankee Doodle," "Hail Columbia," etc., which I have no doubt grated harshly on his nerves.

Mr. Davis asked me which was my native State. I replied, "Pennsylvania." He responded, "That is a fine State. I have passed through it a number of times on my way to Washington. This part of Georgia does not compare favorably with your State." This was true, as the part of Georgia in which we were at the time, was one of the most desolate portions of our country I was ever in. Davis added, "This is not the pleasantest part of Georgia by any means." I said to him, "I love my native State," to which he smilingly replied, "I suppose you do, and I wish you had loved it well enough to have always remained there." I replied, "We expect now, our work being over, we will return to our homes, and I shall have no desire to again return to this part of Georgia at least."

Soon after this, two of the little children of the President, a girl about six years of age and a boy perhaps four, were near us playing, and I separated from Davis to have a little amusement with the children. They were remarkably bright and intelligent children and I was greatly impressed with their beautiful black eyes. While I was talking with them, the little boy spied a bug at his feet and called to his sister, "Sister, kill that bug. Don't you see it? Kill it." His sister said, "No, brother, you do not want to kill the bug." He said, "Yes I do. Kill the bug."

I was relating this little incident to an Aid on the Staff, named O'Rourke. He was a thoroughbred Irishman, and always went by the name of Teddy. He was very bitter towards the South and Southern people. As I related the incident, he said, "That is just like the old man. Think how many lives he has been the cause of being sacrificed, and this little devil has the same blood in him, always wanting to kill something."

I have met Teddy several times since in Cleveland, where he established a merchant tailoring business and apparently quite prosperous, but his feeling towards the South had not changed. He was the same Teddy still.

The young Davis boy, after he grew to manhood, went to Memphis and during the scourge of yellow fever took the fever and died. The little girl was the Winnie Davis, whose name so often appeared before the public, and who died a comparatively short time ago.

I next met Postmaster-General, Regan, and was very favorably impressed with him. He seemed an honorable, high-toned gentleman. I had quite a lengthy conversation with him, during which he said, "Our cause is lost, and it is now my desire to see our country restored to its normal condition, and I shall make every effort possible to effect this end." He returned to Texas, as you all know, and was afterward elected United States Senator, serving in that office until his death.

After a short rest the entire Command was formed and the return march to Macon was resumed. The entire Davis capture was in charge of Colonel Pritchard and they hurried forward. The balance of the Command made a leisurely march and arrived in Macon about the 14th or 15th of May. There the Command went into Camp. Many of the soldiers were discharged and soon after went to their homes. My Regiment remained in service, the different Companies sent around to adjacent towns for the protection of the inhabitants, as the condition of the country was very unsettled. I was then appointed Provost-Marshal on the Staff of General Wilson.

This little incident occurred at Macon. Davis and his family and officers were quartered in the Lanier House, the leading hotel in Macon. I afterward boarded for a time at the Lanier House and became well acquainted with a Major Warren, clerk of the hotel. He told me that after Davis arrived there, he and a number of his Confederate friends arranged to assist Davis to escape. At the time he was relating the incident to me, he had the ropes under his desk in the hotel that they had provided for their use in making the escape. Mr. Davis positively refused to allow this to be done, which was very fortunate for him and many others.

The last of August the very welcome order for our discharge was received from the War Department. This order was received with great joy by all the Regiment. Our hearts were filled with pride by the record our Regiment had made during the four years of constant service in the field. But we could not repress a feeling of sadness when we thought of the toll battlefield, disease and prison had taken from the brave men who had left their homes so courageously with the Regiment in '61, and who were sleeping their long dreamless sleep under Southern skies.

We were ordered to Harrisburg, where we were given our final discharge and bade adieu to our comradeship that had been so close and constant during our four years of service. Thus ended my war experience.



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