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REPORT

OF

BRIG. GEN. JOHN S. WILLIAMS

OF

OPERATIONS IN EAST TENNESSEE,

FROM 27TH SEPTEMBER TO 15TH OCTOBER, 1863.

PUBLISHED BY ORDER OF CONGRESS.

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MESSAGE OF THE PRESIDENT.

RICHMOND, VA., Feb. 8, 1864.

To the Senate and House of Representatives :

I herewith transmit, for your information, a communication from the Secretary of War, covering a copy of the report by General John S. Williams "of the operations of the forces under his command at Blue Springs, Henderson, and Rheatown, Tennessee."

JEFFERSON DAVIS.

COMMUNICATION FROM SECRETARY OF WAR.

-CONFEDERATE STATES OF AMERICA, }
War Department, }
Richmond, Va., Feb. 4, 1864. }

To the President of the Confederate States :

SIR : I have the honor to forward, for the information of Congress, and in response to a resolution of the House of Representatives, copies of the report of General John S. Williams, of the operations of the forces under his command at Blue Springs, Henderson, and Rheatown, Tennessee.

I am, sir, very respectfully, your obedient servant,

JAMES A. SEDDON,
Secretary of War.

OPERATIONS IN EAST TENNESSEE.

REPORT OF BRIG. GEN. JOHN S. WILLIAMS.

HEADQUARTERS DEPARTMENT WEST VIRGINIA, }
Dublin, January 25, 1864. }

General S. COOPER,
A. & I. General C. S. A., Richmond:

GENERAL: I forward with this, Brigadier General John S. Williams' report of his operations in East Tennessee, from the 27th September to 15th October last.

Very respectfully, your obedient servant,
SAM. JONES,
Major General.

HEADQUARTERS CAVALRY BRIGADE, }
Abingdon, Va., Oct. 23, 1863. }

Major General SAM JONES,
Commanding, &c., &c.:

GENERAL: I have the honor to submit the following brief account of the operations of the troops under my command during the recent campaign in East Tennessee, from the time I left Zollicoffer, by your order, on the 27th September, to proceed to Jonesboro', until the time of your arrival at Abingdon:

I moved from the neighborhood of Blountville on the 28th day of September, and reached Jonesboro' the next morning at eight o'clock, when we met the enemy's outpost, which we attacked, capturing a portion of them, with the horses and equipments of the entire party. The enemy hastily threw himself into position, and gave us battle on the wooded heights around Jonesboro'. After two hours' sharp fighting he gave way, and fell back to Leesburg. Only a portion of the forces on either side were engaged.

In this engagement the enemy had General Carter's brigade of cavalry and mounted infantry—two thousand seven hundred strong.

I had my cavalry brigade of only one thousand five hundred men, most of them raw and undisciplined troops, and fragments of absent commands.

I received here a dispatch from you, saying "that the infantry had been ordered up." My orders were "to meet the infantry at Jonesboro"; so I encamped to wait their arrival and shoe my horses.

On the 1st day of October, Major General Ransom arrived, assumed command, and ordered me forward to cover a movement which, he informed me, he was about to make upon Cumberland Gap; and, directing me to move as if I was covering the advance of an army, but not to pass through Bull's Gap, until further orders, I moved with my brigade, driving the enemy before me, killing a few and capturing some prisoners.

A courier from General Ransom overtook me at Greenville, directing me to send an assistant adjutant general or aid-de-camp of my staff to Bristol, for the purpose, as was supposed, of communicating with me through him. I sent Captain Stanton, my assistant adjutant general.

Again, on the morning of October 3d, we came upon Carter's brigade at Blue Springs, when, feeling themselves in supporting distance of their infantry, on Lick creek and at Bull's Gap, they showed some disposition to fight.

On the evening of 5th October, the enemy advanced upon us, but was repulsed in an hour or two, and retired.

On the evening previous, Major Giles B. Cook, inspector general upon your staff, arrived to inspect the command, saying he had come from Major General Ransom, who "did not expect me to advance beyond Greenville, and that the general would be disappointed on learning I had gone beyond that place." I was now eight miles beyond Greenville, and could not retire to that place without discovering to the enemy the weakness of my command and the diversion I was to make in favor of General Ransom.

I received at this point, by courier from General Ransom, a communication, from which the following is an extract:

"By direction of General Jones, it is necessary for me, with a portion of the troops under my command, to make a move which will be in such a direction as to prevent my communicating with you. You will, therefore, assume command of the troops in East Tennessee for the present. The artillery, now under Colonel King, and General Wharton's brigade, will not be under your orders. The rest you will use."

This induced me to believe that the expedition to Cumberland Gap was still progressing.

I remained at my camp, in front of Blue Springs, for several days, hourly expecting intelligence that Cumberland Gap had fallen into our hands, and congratulating myself on the success of my diversion in detaining so many of the enemy's forces in my front.

Besides my own brigade, I had no knowledge of there being any troops subject to my order in East Tennessee, with the exception of

about four hundred infantry and home guards, under Brigadier General A. E. Jackson.

I sent immediately to ascertain Gen. Jackson's position, and to order him up.

At ten A. M., Saturday, 10th instant, the enemy, in force, moved upon my encampment, driving in my videttes and pickets. The action soon became general, our men stubbornly resisting the attack—the right wing under command of Col. Carter, of 1st Tennessee cavalry, and the left under Col. Giltner, of 4th Kentucky cavalry—both of whom displayed the greatest gallantry and skill in the management of their commands.

During the day, the enemy received reinforcements and continued to extend his lines, to meet which I was compelled to lengthen my own, until my front was more than two miles long, and became nothing but a line of skirmishers.

Our four pieces of artillery were well posted and supported by two companies. At about five, P. M., the enemy, discovering the weakness of our lines, made a furious assault on the centre, composed of a battalion under Lieutenant Colonel Trimble, numbering between seventy-five and one hundred men, against which were precipitated two regiments and a battalion of infantry and a battery of six pieces of artillery. Our centre was compelled to give way, but withdrew handsomely upon the right and left wings, and the enemy pressed straight towards our batteries, which did not open until they approached within two hundred and fifty yards; then our four heavier pieces and Lieutenant Schoolfield's battery of Williams' guns opened upon them with grape and canister, mowing them down.

The enemy broke and attempted to escape under cover of a ravine and woodlands towards our left, where Giltner's rifles dealt destruction in their discomfitted ranks. With heavy loss they fled to their original position, and darkness covered the field.

During the night, reliable information reached me that a brigade of Indiana infantry, passing through Cumberland Gap, Tazewell and Morristown, had arrived at Blue Springs, and were being placed in position to engage us next morning. I also had positive information that a heavy force of cavalry had passed through Rogersville on their road to Jonesboro'.

At dark I left the field and went to Greenville, and put myself in communication with you by telegraph.

I informed you that the enemy in my immediate front was at least five thousand strong, with reinforcements coming up; and here I first learned that the expedition to Cumberland Gap had been abandoned.

While in the telegraph office, a courier from Colonels Giltner and Carter informed me that the enemy had thrown two strong forces of infantry on my right and left, and that they had arranged everything for a retrograde movement, subject to my approval.

I approved the movement.

My only chance of escape was to elude the pursuit of the force in my front and attack and whip the one in my rear.

We marched all night; were joined by General Jackson's brigade

at Greenville, and, at daybreak on Sunday, 11th instant, came upon the brigade of the enemy, commanded by Colonel Foster, two thousand two hundred strong, and six pieces of artillery, posted.

I ordered General Jackson to charge the enemy on the right, with his three hundred infantry, and Colonel Carter, with the first Tennessee cavalry and the commands of Lieutenant Colonel Trimble and Major Halsey, to charge on our left, which was done in handsome style and the Yankees completely routed.

We passed on, without the loss of a wagon or a single head of beef cattle. We moved on to Rheatown, where, by some misunderstanding of orders, the artillery took the wrong road, and some time was consumed in getting it back. While waiting for its return, the enemy again made his appearance, which, in the absence of our artillery, produced considerable confusion, but order was soon restored, and the enemy checked.

The artillery was brought back as soon as possible, and, from a good position, two miles east of Rheatown, we again gave the enemy battle, which lasted for more than three hours, when we gradually fell back to Jonesboro'. Agreeably to your instructions, I moved General Jackson's infantry along the line of the railroad, and the cavalry towards Blountville.

On the 13th instant, the enemy again made his appearance, and attacked our cavalry near Blountville, using artillery chiefly. The cavalry under Brigadier General William E. Jones maintained their position until evening, when they fell back towards Zollicoffer, and were met by Brigadier General Wharton's brigade of infantry, which had arrived that morning, and which I had ordered to the support of the cavalry. Brigadier General William E. Jones informed me that the enemy's force in his front was large, and that a heavy force, with a wagon train, had turned his right by the Reedy Creek road, and were moving upon Bristol. I dispatched Lieutenant Colonel Witcher, with his (thirty-fourth Virginia) battalion, by the Beaver Creek road, to get into the enemy's front, and detain him, by skirmishing, until our main force could march from Zollicoffer to Bristol, which he did in an admirable manner. I at once put the whole force in motion, sending the wagons and cattle by the Paperville road, and marching the troops straight to Bristol. The enemy being on the main Bristol and Abingdon turnpike, and also on the Reedy Creek road, I was compelled to fall back to a point beyond which these two roads united, near which place I found a good position to make a stand, and here I posted my artillery and troops in line to receive the enemy.

The next morning he advanced with several regiments of cavalry within six miles of Abingdon, but for some reason as yet unexplained, he suddenly commenced a retrograde movement, which took place about the time of your arrival.

Where so many have behaved well, it is impossible to do justice to all, but I cannot close this communication without testifying my entire satisfaction with the conduct of Lieutenants Schoolfield, Loyd and Graham, of the artillery. I am greatly indebted to my staff officers, Captains Stanton, Myer, Guerrant and Jenkins, and Frank

Miller, for gallant and efficient services, rendered not only upon the battle-field, but throughout the campaign.

Very respectfully,

JOHN S. WILLIAMS,
Brigadier General.

HEADQUARTERS CAVALRY BRIGADE, }
Blountville, Tenn., Nov. 3, 1863. }

Major General SAM JONES,
Commanding, &c., &c. :

GENERAL: I beg leave to submit the following supplemental report, to wit: That subsequent information of the most positive and reliable character, as well as the official report of General Burnside, satisfies me that I greatly underestimated the enemy's strength at Blue Springs. General Burnside was in that engagement himself, with his entire army, which did not fall far short of fifteen thousand men. The two regiments and battalions of Yankees which I mentioned in my original report as having attacked and forced our centre, but were repulsed with heavy loss in their assault upon our batteries, General Burnside mentions as an entire division of infantry. This mistake might easily have been made, from the undulating and wooded character of the ground and the short duration of their unsuccessful effort to take our guns. I herewith enclose you a copy of General Burnside's report.

Very respectfully,

JOHN S. WILLIAMS,
Brigadier General.













