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**THE DISINTEGRATION OF AN ARMY:
CONFEDERATE FORCES IN TEXAS, APRIL-JUNE, 1865**

by William W. White

Even though Texas remained virtually untouched by Union incursions during the American Civil War, by late 1864 war weariness had spread throughout the state among citizens and soldiers alike. As reports of Union successes by Generals Ulysses S. Grant and William T. Sherman arrived, a gathering pall of gloom gripped the state.

In early 1865, as the South moved despairingly toward defeat, letter writing and the keeping of diaries in Texas declined. Newspapers stopped publishing, or published only sporadically. Also the preservation of military records faltered, especially with respect to Confederate forces. Thus, only from fragmentary sources can we reconstruct events of the last days of Texas in the Confederacy.

By early March 1865, signs of uncertainty and defeatism increased. A noted diarist of the war, Sergeant William W. Heartsill, revealed in his March 13 entry, written at Camp Waverly, Texas, north of Houston, conflicting feelings about the situation. He wrote this resolution to present to the men of his regiment:

Whereas: From all the information we receive the dark cloud of subjugation is lowering upon our just and holy cause east of the Mississippi, . . . and some faint hearts are ready to yield, therefore be it resolved; that we will fight the incarnate fiend, so long as we have an organized force, and a kind Providence will give us the strength and power to wield a sword or aim a rifle. And we do furthermore VOLUNTEER to cross to the east side of the Mississippi, and fly to the rescue of our noble brothers who have stood the shock of terrible battle for these three and a half years. [30 signed; 31 refused]¹

In Austin an editor noted that "Early in the Spring of 1865, the masses realized that the end was near at hand. Now and then a soldier would return home and his quiet predictions as to the outcome were circulated."²

Soldier Paul C. Boethal recalled in his memoirs that early in 1865 his company, in camp near Brenham,

. . . waited out the war. As the end neared, doing what they had done for nearly twelve months, that is, sit on their tails in some camp, the men began to break their fine record of discipline. Arrests were frequent; commitments to the guard house at Houston became common.³

General X.B. DeBray wrote of the march of his command from Louisiana to Hempstead, Texas, where the unit arrived in late March of 1865. "There," he recorded, "days of gloom and despondency came on us."⁴

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Notice of General Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox reached Texas on April 20. Initial reaction to this shocking news revealed a further weakening of morale and resolve. But the prospect of impending defeat rallied many to a posture of defiance.

Defiance and hopes for the successful defense of Texas were expressed in various ways: calls for resistance by Confederate commanders at military unit assemblies, impassioned speeches by civilian and military leaders at public mass meetings, and in letters, diaries, and the press. Ringing appeals for action echoed deep feelings about the war and its meaning. The rhetoric of "the Lost Cause" had begun.

General Edmund Kirby Smith, commander of the Trans-Mississippi Department with headquarters in Shreveport, Louisiana, directed a stirring appeal to his men on April 21. "With you rests the hopes of our nation," he wrote, "and upon your action depends the fate of our people . . . You possess the means of long resisting invasion."⁵

Similarly General John B. Magruder, commanding in Texas, sought to arouse his troops and the people in a long general order issued on April 23. He noted:

The enemy threatens invasion of the State. Let him be met with unanimity and Spartan courage, and he will be unsuccessful, as he has been in Texas. Let him be met at the water's edge, and let him pay dearly for every inch of territory he may acquire. . . There is no reason for despondency, and if the people of Texas will it, they can successfully defend their territory for an indefinite period.⁶

On the same day General Magruder addressed a large public gathering in Houston. He stressed the advantages Texas offered for continuing the war: "Come what may," he said, "I shall stand by my country, and I will never be a slave to Yankee power. I had rather be a Comanche Indian chief than bow the knee to Yankeedom." Holding out hope for aid from Mexico, Magruder concluded: "Stand by your leaders and all will be well." The press indicated that the crowd gave three rousing cheers for Magruder.⁷

When Colonel Ashbel Smith, commanding the defenses of Galveston, heard of Lee's surrender he issued an encouraging order to the troops. "Be of good cheer," he wrote, "there is life in the Old Land yet. . . There is nothing in the news received this day of our misfortunes in Virginia, which should dampen our ardor."⁸

On April 25, J.E. Harrison, encamped near Houston, wrote to Colonel Guy M. Bryan lamenting the death of General John A. Wharton, and the recent disasters east of the Mississippi River: "Yet all is not lost. . . If the people will turn out, they have the means of resisting successfully for an indefinite period. But will they do it? I fear not."⁹

General Magruder, still confident of success in defending Texas,

nevertheless showed anxiety in his letter of April 28 to General Kirby Smith. He informed his superior that

Some desertions have taken place from several of the corps under my command, . . . but as yet the disposition of the army, as far as I have been able to judge, is one of proud and patriotic defiance. The citizens of Texas, too, particularly in this part of the country, present a front of determined opposition and indicate unmistakably a purpose to put down croakers and disaffected men in their midst.¹⁰

All the positive hurrahs notwithstanding, morale wained. By May 4 the weakening morale led General Magruder to issue a stirring communication to the people and to his men. Referring to news of General Joseph E. Johnston's surrender in North Carolina he stated:

Citizens, encourage by your patriotic example your noble Texan soldiers in performing their duty! Soldiers stand by your venerated and illustrious [*sic*] President in his misfortunes, and above all present to your foe a united, firm, and defiant front. . . . Come what may, we will thus be true to our colors and to the interests of the great State of Texas. We are not whipped, and no matter what events may transpire elsewhere, recollect that we never will be whipped.¹¹

Nonetheless, fears and doubts mounted. General Henry E. McCulloch, writing from Bonham in north central Texas to Colonel Guy M. Bryan, seemed even more depressed. On May 3 McCulloch wrote:

This is indeed a dark hour to our . . . bleeding country but I have not lost confidence yet. God never will permit us to become the slaves of the Yankee hordes. No, never, never, and I shall fight on with a steady hand and strong heart until the last vestige of hope shall be swept away and then in the last struggle of my Country seek a soldier's grave.¹²

General Magruder continued to make public appearances in an attempt to boost soldier and civilian morale. While inspecting work on fortifications and entrenchments at Galveston on May 11 he escalated the fervor of his rhetoric:

With my own hands . . ., in the hot sun, I will take the spade and work hard, for my whole heart and interest are enlisted in the cause, and if we are to be overrun I do not wish to survive subjugation. No terms will ever do short of independence. To preserve our freedom we should be prepared to lose all, even life itself, . . . rather than submit to a foe so base, so grasping, so depraved, and so devoid of all that constitutes a respectable people.¹³

Mass meetings of citizens in late April and early May rallied a fighting spirit. At the meetings public officials, prominent citizens, and military leaders spoke to large crowds. Trying to bolster morale, they wrote resolutions of defiance and acquired signatures from those present. Citizens in Houston, Galveston, San Antonio, and Austin were the most ardent in holding gatherings to promote morale.¹⁴

By mid-May, however, public resistance meetings declined in number. Now proclamations gave way to silence, and reports from military units

took on a tone of helplessness. On May 15 Sergeant Heartsill wrote in his diary concerning deterioration of the army's morale:

All kinds of rumors, and excitement intense. The men can be seen in squads and crowds, talking and speculating over the news; some are rejoicing to think the war so near over; while others would rather see it last for years upon years, than to see it close in the manner now threatening us.

Two days later Heartsill noted dejectedly: "We have news that Genl Dick Taylor with the Mississippi Army has surrendered. . . . Now the Army of the Trans-Mississippi is all that is left of the once proud defiant Army of the Confederacy." On May 19 he recorded that 105 men at his camp had deserted the previous night.¹⁵

The middle of May marked a turning away from defiance and a rush toward disintegration for Confederate forces in Texas. Morale seemed to plummet between May 15 and May 20. Then, in the last days of May, the "break-up" began — and ended.

On May 15 General Hamilton P. Bee wrote to Colonel Guy M. Bryan:

Our situation seems, to me, to be desperate as there is not much fight in the army — and less in the people. The few of us who intend to stay in the front will be sacrificed. . . . We can make a fight that will complete the brilliant record of Texas in history . . . but it is folly to try and convince ourselves that the people will stand.¹⁶

Likewise General Magruder's letter to General Kirby Smith on May 16 was devoid of hope. He reported the recent mutiny of 400 troops at Galveston. Also he advised that General Maxey believed that his division could not be depended upon to resist, and that Walker's and Forney's divisions would no longer fight. Magruder continued:

The officers and men insist upon dividing the property before the surrender, and I think it ought to be done. . . . I have exerted myself more than I ever did to instill a spirit of resistance into the men, but in vain Nothing more can be done except to satisfy the soldiers, to induce them to preserve their organization, and to send them in regiments, &c. to their homes with as little damage to the community as possible. For God's sake act or let me act.¹⁷

Rumors of peace kept surfacing as the situation deteriorated. Paul C. Boethal wrote in his memoirs that

. . . finally on May 17th, when news of the end of the war was received [a false report], the company really went on a bender — the orderly sergeant penned it neatly in the *Morning Report*: 'Whole company drunk, raving drunk, except Cpl. Leo Andre.'

Later sobered somewhat, the company marched to Houston, and on May 22, disbanded. They were "Told to go home," Boethal wrote, "And home they went."¹⁸

At Shreveport General Kirby Smith announced on May 18 that he would move his headquarters to Houston where he intended to take drastic

measures to continue resistance. His journey across Texas began on May 20 but was slowed by roads crowded with homeward bound and often riotous troops. Finally reaching Houston on May 27, Kirby Smith found nothing to command. His week-long trip had coincided with the break-up of his army.¹⁹

Kirby Smith's sense of frustration and despair as he traveled the road to Houston was also felt by his men as their units dissolved, mainly between May 19-27. Each soldier must have had his own moment of truth and realization of defeat. For Sergeant Heartsill this moment came on May 20 when he closed his diary on the 1,491st day of military service. That morning ammunition supplies were issued to the men, and they were ordered to go home. Each company was to return to the county where it was organized, staying together enroute for protection against robbers. Thus dismissed, Heartsill gave vent to his feelings which must have been representative of those of many others:

So our bright dream is or'e, our country is subjugated, our armies are scattered to the 'Four winds of the Heavens,' our cause is lost! Lost! LOST!!! My heart swells, my lip quivers, my tongue refuses to give utterance, the very depths of my soul is stirred up; yes I could fall down in the dust and weep over our great misfortunes, our great calamities.²⁰

The final dissolution of army units in the countryside got underway May 19. The break-up of military units in the cities began in Galveston on May 21. By May 30 the Confederate forces in Texas had disbanded. When General Kirby Smith signed the surrender terms at Galveston on June 2 there was little in Texas but a few bits of government property to surrender. The army had gone home.

On May 21 General Magruder ordered Colonel Ashbel Smith to evacuate Galveston the next day. But before the planned withdrawal could begin the troops rioted and seized transportation, quartermaster, commissary, and ordnance stores. The men, whose pay was in arrears from one to two years, thought they had a just claim to the government property. Rioting and looting continued in Galveston until May 23.²¹

May 23 was also a big day in Houston. When soldiers there disbanded, they confiscated government property. From 8:00 a.m. until noon an estimated 2,000 to 3,000 soldiers, joined by men, women, and children, marched on government supply buildings. Pistols, muskets, and ammunition were seized. At the clothing bureau blankets, bolts of cloth, and clothing were parceled out to the mob. Shoes, leather, and such diverse items as mule whips fell into greedy hands. A witness who fled the city reported that by mid-morning "The whole thing is busted up. . . . The soldiers have laid down their arms and want to go home, the war is over." Another observer recorded that chaos and confusion reigned and that he saw such odd things as mounted soldiers riding up and down the streets trailing opened bolts of cloth behind them. Ordnance and commissary stores were "all gutted," he wrote.

Troops arriving in Houston from Galveston on May 23 were angry because there was little loot left for them. Threatening to wreck the town, they were mollified by citizens who produced some of their booty and gave it to the latecomers. It took several days for order to be restored. Fortunately there was little personal violence in the Houston riot, and private property was generally respected.²² The editor of the *La Grange Patriot* noted the outcome of the Houston affair for the soldiers:

We infer from . . . accounts, that, though badly clad during the progress of the war, they ought to be pretty well clad now, and they have at least obtained some slight indemnity for the privations of the past. Private property . . . was, in the main respected, though some little irregularities were indulged.²³

Large scale rioting and looting by soldiers and civilians also occurred in other cities, especially in Austin, Brownsville, and San Antonio.²⁴ Towns reporting similar incidents included Clarksville, Crockett, Gonzales, Henderson, and La Grange. La Grange suffered the most. The principal incidents took place on May 22-24 when the three-day loss of property to looters was estimated at \$20,000 to \$30,000. A band of cavalymen from Walker's Division took as much government property as possible on May 22. Reason seemed to desert these men when they totally demolished the Hat Factory, taking about 2,500 hats.²⁵ Presumably each soldier left La Grange wearing a fancy new head piece.

By the end of June 1865, reports of soldiers returning home declined, giving way to accounts of jayhawking and general lawlessness no longer directly connected with former soldiers. Now veterans, these men, one by one, had accepted defeat and the end of the war. Perhaps it was fitting that the commanding general of the Trans-Mississippi Department was among the last to accept the personal agony of defeat. This day of reckoning came to Edmund Kirby Smith at Houston on May 30, 1865. That day he wrote two fateful messages.

In the first, Kirby Smith admitted defeat to the Union commander at Shreveport. "The department is now open to occupation by your government. The citizen and soldier alike, weary of war, are ready to accept the authority and yield obedience to the laws of the United States."²⁶

In the second message the general acknowledged defeat to the soldiers of the Trans-Mississippi Department. It read:

I reached here to find the Texas troops disbanded and hastening to their homes. They had forsaken their colors and their commanders; had abandoned the cause for which we were struggling, and appropriated the public property to their personal use.

Soldiers, I am left a commander without an army — a General without troops. You have made your choice. It was unwise and unpatriotic, but it is final. You have voluntarily destroyed your organizations, and thrown away all means of resistance.

Your present duty is plain. Return to your families. Resume the occupations of peace. Yield obedience to the laws. Labor to restore

order. Strive both by counsel and example to give security to life and property. And may God in his mercy direct you aright, and heal the wounds of our distracted country.²⁷

The Trans-Mississippi Army had disintegrated by May 30. A three-week delay ensued before the Union General Gordon Granger arrived at Galveston with occupation forces. Then came a hectic summer: ex-soldiers scrambled to designated centers for paroles and to take amnesty oaths; federal efforts to recover Confederate government property were near hopeless; and attempts to stamp out widespread lawlessness largely were unsuccessful.

Uncertainty and the pains of defeat lingered into the long years of Reconstruction. In Texas there was an abundance of blame to assign to the Confederate government, to General Kirby Smith and other leaders, and to the soldiers for the failure of the Trans-Mississippi Department to continue the war. Reasons why the people of Texas and the army accepted defeat included war weariness, economic discontent, and elusive emotional/psychological factors.

For four years the people and the soldiers in Texas resisted and held on with courage. Somehow, with uncertain information, poor communications, news of the earlier surrenders in the East, and the fall of the Confederate government, the people and the soldiers came to an understanding: the war was over, the cause was lost. And in quick order between April and June 1865, Confederate forces and the people of Texas moved from defiance to disintegration.

NOTES

¹William W. Heartsill, *Fourteen Hundred and 91 Days in the Confederate Army*, edited by Bell I. Wiley (Jackson, Tennessee, 1954), p. 233.

²Frank Brown, *Annals of Travis County*, Frank Brown Papers (Archives, University of Texas Library, Austin), chapter 24, p. 11.

³Paul C. Boethal, *The Big Guns of Fayette* (Austin, 1965), p. 68.

⁴X.B. DeBray, *A Sketch of the History of DeBray's 26th Regiment of Texas Cavalry* (Austin, 1884), p. 25.

⁵*The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, 1880-1901), Ser. I, XLVIII, Part 2, pp. 1282. Cited hereinafter as *OR*.

⁶*OR*, Ser. I, XLVIII, Part 2, pp. 1284-1285.

⁷*Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph*, April 25, 1865.

⁸Elizabeth Silverthorne, "Once Right in the Eyes of God: The Amazing Career of Ashbel Smith," *Civil War Times Illustrated*, XIX, No. 8 (December, 1980), pp. 18-25.

⁹J.E. Harrison to Guy M. Bryan, April 25, 1865, Guy M. Bryan Papers, Archives, University of Texas Library, Austin.

¹⁰Magruder to Kirby Smith, April 28, 1865, *OR*, Ser. I, XLVIII, Part 2, pp. 1294.

¹¹*OR*, Ser. I, XLVIII, Part 2, pp. 1294.

¹²Henry E. McCulloch to Guy M. Bryan, May 3, 1865, Guy M. Bryan Papers, Archives, University of Texas Library, Austin.

¹³*Austin Weekly State Gazette*, May 17, 1865, quoting *Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph*, n.d.

¹⁴*Galveston Tri-Weekly News*, April 23, 27, 1865; *Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph*, April 24, 25, 26, 1865; Charles W. Ramsdell, *Reconstruction in Texas* (Austin, 1970), pp. 29-30; *The Patriot* (La Grange), May 6, 20, 1865.

¹⁵Heartsill, *1491 Days*, pp. 242-244.

¹⁶Hamilton P. Bee to Guy M. Bryan, May 15, 1865, Guy M. Bryan Papers, Archives, University of Texas Library, Austin.

¹⁷Magruder to Kirby Smith, May 16, 1865, *OR*, Ser. I, XLVIII, Part 2, pp. 1308-1309.

¹⁸Boethal, *Big Guns of Fayette*, pp. 68-69.

¹⁹Parks, *Edmund Kirby Smith*, pp. 472-474.

²⁰Heartsill, *1491 Days*, p. 244.

²¹Magruder to Ashbel Smith, May 21, 1865, *OR*, Ser. I, XLVIII, Part 2, pp. 1316-1317; Ashbel Smith to General Gordon Granger, June 23, 1865, Ashbel Smith Papers, Archives, University of Texas Library, Austin; *San Antonio Semi-Weekly News*, May 30, 1865, quoting *Galveston News*, n.d.

²²*Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph*, May 24, 1865; Ramsdell, *Reconstruction in Texas*, pp. 33-34; H.A. Wallace, "Reminiscences of the Last Vestige of a Lost Cause," H.A. Wallace Papers, Archives, University of Texas Library, Austin.

²³*The Patriot* (La Grange), June 3, 1865.

²⁴For details on events at Brownsville see *Austin Weekly State Gazette*, June 9, 1865; *Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph*, June 16, 1865; *OR*, Ser. I, XLVIII, Part 2, pp. 1273, 1313-1314; *San Antonio Semi-Weekly News*, June 27, 1865; *The Daily Rancho* (Matamoros, Mexico), May 31, 1865. For events at Austin see Brown, *Annals of Travis County*, chapter 24, p. 13; George R. Freeman to General Gordon Granger, June 26, 1865, George R. Freeman Papers, Archives, University of Texas Library, Austin; *Galveston Daily News*, June 16, 1865; *Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph*, June 16, 1865. For disturbances at San Antonio see *Galveston Daily News*, June 3, 1865; *San Antonio Semi-Weekly News*, May 30, 1865.

²⁵*Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph*, June 5, 1865; *The Patriot* (La Grange), June 3, 1865.

²⁶*OR*, Ser. I, XLVIII, Part 1, pp. 193-194; Parks, *Edmund Kirby Smith*, pp. 475-476.

²⁷*Austin Weekly State Gazette*, June 9, 1865; Parks, *Edmund Kirby Smith*, 481-482; Ramsdell, *Reconstruction in Texas*, p. 39.