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FOR LACK OF A NAIL...

by *Max S. Lale*

Union General Nathaniel P. Banks wanted to be president of the United States. Confederate Captain Nathaniel S. Allen played a cameo role in frustrating that ambition. It happened on April 6, 1864, near Mansfield, Louisiana.

After an abortive attempt in 1863 to bolster his political popularity with a headline-grabbing victory on the line of the Mississippi River, General Banks was well on his way to running Confederate General Edmund Kirby Smith out of his Trans-Mississippi Department headquarters at Shreveport. The previous year he had had to invest Port Hudson after a failed assault, thus denying himself a share of the glory at Vicksburg.¹ The following year, moving in cooperation with Admiral David D. Porter's Red River naval force, Banks had driven General Richard Taylor's meager Confederate army on a 200-mile retreat from the banks of the Atchafalaya River in South Louisiana into the northwest corner of Louisiana, gobbling up Alexandria and Natchitoches along the way.²

With Taylor's army almost in his grasp, this former bobbin boy, three-term governor of Massachusetts, and speaker of the United States House of Representatives, now a senior major general, committed a grievous blunder. Without reconnaissance, he directed his army on a stagecoach road to Shreveport which removed him from the protection of Porter's brown-water batteries. For that decision and a poorly organized march column, he paid a bitter price.³

With confidence bordering on hubris—fully expecting to be in Shreveport by April 10—Banks pressed his two corps northward toward Mansfield through dense forest on a road which amounted to a natural defile. Taylor had laid his trap well. Debouching from piney woods into a clearing, the leading elements found a Confederate army they had not expected. Attacked by Taylor's forces in the late afternoon, Banks' leading elements reeled backward, only to find behind them a road-bound column into which trains had been intermingled with troop units, making the defile a killing ground of the kind attackers dream about. Wagoneers abandoned their animals and wagons—or used the horses and mules for mounts—effectively blocking organized retreat, and a rout was on.⁴

Union casualties were heavy, calculated at 27.8 percent of the numbers engaged. They came to 113 killed, 581 wounded, and 1,541 missing, of whom many if not most were killed or wounded. On the Confederate side, casualties were lighter, although they included a slain division commander, Alfred Mouton. The total loss was 1,000 killed or wounded. Because there

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is no record, the number of missing is a matter of conjecture, though the nature of the battle dictates that their number should have been small.⁵

Losses were heavy again the next day, when Taylor, in pursuit, was disappointed with a tactical defeat but a strategic victory at Pleasant Hill, roughly thirty miles southeast of the first day's fighting. Banks lost 1,369 troopers out of 12,193, a casualty rate of eleven percent, while Taylor's losses totaled 1,626 out of 12,500 effectives, or thirteen percent.⁶

At the end of the second day's fighting, Banks' Red River campaign was over, save for a continued retreat to Alexandria and a political career that did not encompass the presidency.

All of this was, of course, a part of the "big picture" which Captain Allen did not — and could not — know.

Allen's date with Mansfield and Pleasant Hill had been in the making long before. Commander of Company A in former Texas Governor Edward Clark's 14th Texas Infantry, Walker's Texas Division, he was from nearby Marshall, Texas, and had campaigned laboriously in the swamps and bayous of southern Louisiana for months. After his defeat for reelection, Clark, also a Marshall resident, had organized the 14th Texas for the war on February 28, 1862. By that time, Allen had bid farewell to a brother, E.A. Allen, who in May volunteered for service with the "Marshall Guards" — later Company E, 1st Texas Infantry, Hood's Texas Brigade — the second company size unit raised in his home town.⁷

After a period at home in Marshall, N.S. Allen left to rejoin his command on September 2, 1863, and began a daily diary which he continued with infrequent omissions until December 2, 1864. The final poignant entry notes that "No diary from above date to close of war—was in command of Regt at Hempstead, Texas, when the Dept was surrendered—was promoted to Major Oct. 19th, 1864. Arrived home in Marshall June 10th, 1865."⁸

During the period covered in the diary, Allen learned of the death (June 4, 1864) of his brother, Lieutenant Allen, in a hospital at Gordonsville, Virginia, from a wound suffered in the Battle of the Wilderness on May 6. Curiously, there is no reference in the diary to his brother's death, although a clipping of the *Marshall Texas Republican's* obituary was found tucked into a pocket at the back of the book.

Allen's diary was discovered by a great-grandson, Douglass Blocker, in the drawer of an antique desk at Mimosa Hall, the antebellum ancestral seat of the Webster-Blocker family in eastern Harrison County. Written in pencil in a small (2½x3¾ inch) leather-bound "Miniature Diary" printed in New York City for the year 1858, the volume is ornamented on the inside covers by sketches of camp life done by the author, an accomplished artist and artisan. Internal evidence indicates that Allen wrote his entries throughout the day, adding as events occurred.

The diary entries were made in a small, constricted hand for obvious reasons and are terse except when events dictated otherwise. Because soldiers campaigning in the field may be more concerned with weather than any others, except perhaps for farmers, there are many references to cold, rain, heat and wet bedding. Allen recorded the vicissitudes of inadequate supply, countermanded orders, attacks of illness, and the many other troubles which beset those in uniformed ranks. Implicit is a quotidian tedium relieved only by mail from home or an occasional assignment as brigade officer of the day.⁹

The following excerpts from Allen's dairy span a part of the Confederate retreat from southern Louisiana, the climactic engagement at Mansfield and Pleasant Hill from which Banks' military and political career never recovered, and a mission assigned to Allen personally by the army commander, General Taylor, the architect of a smashing victory.

Monday March 7th 1864

Moved from camp near Marksville at 8 o'clock AM, marched 10 miles to Bayou De Lack (sic) and camped.

Tuesday 8th

Heavy rain commencing about midnight, raining still in the morning, recd a letter from wife & one from daughter, one from Lt. Van Hook.

Sunday 13th 1864

Recd orders last night at 8 o'clock to be ready to move immediately — packed up — cooked rations — and slept 'till 4 o'clock this morning — ordered to load up the wagons and start at daybreak — moved about sunrise — marched one mile and halted — Enemy reported to be landing at Simsport — Bivouacked for the night.

Monday 14th

Marched at 7 o'clock in the direction of Mansura — got to Mansura & found Scurry's Brigade. [*Here two pages are illegibly faint. The diary resumes with an updated page as follows*] drawn up in line of Battle below the town — formed in line and remained about ½ hour — ordered back, marched back in the direction of Bayou De Lac again — skirmishing going on in our rear, ordered back in the direction of Mansura, marched ½ mile and returned to Bayou De Lac — crossed the bayou — and bivouacked — heavy cannonading all the evening in the direction of Fort De Russey (sic) — lay on arms with orders to get up at 2 o'clock — waked up at one o'clock — ordered to get ready to move — rolled up our Blankets and lay down before the fire again, roused up at ¼ before 3 o'clock again — found the Bridge on fire — our men still working on it, destroying it.

Tuesday 15th

Marched at 3 o'clock this morning in the direction of Chaneyville — 1800 Federal Inf & 1000 Cavalry at Marksville¹⁰ — took Fort De Russey last night¹¹ — Passed through Chaneyville and Bivouacked 2½ miles beyond, making 21 miles, ordered to unload the wagons and cook rations

— half hour afterward, ordered to leave the wagons again — and be ready to move at a moment's warning -- moved at 5½ o'clock, feet very sore, weather very cold — marched 6 miles on the Texas Road and bivouacked — ordered to cook rations for one day and then load the wagons and be ready to march, men so worn out that few of them cooked anything — all lay down and went to sleep — roused up at 2 o'clock — marched at 3 — made 33 miles.

Wednesday 16th

Feet very sore and worn out generally not having slept hardly in three days, kept on the same road, men giving out all along the road, got on the Burns ferry road and turned left toward McM() — bivouacked making 26 miles — suffered more from the travelling today than every before — wagons came in after dark — ordered to march at 4 in the morning.

Thursday 17

Marched at 4 o'clock this morning — feet very sore and worn out generally — travelled on to Carroll Jones' and Bivouacked making 17 miles¹²

Friday 18

Lay up today — Train sent to the rear — all the baggage sent off except one blanket to the man and just what cooking vessels can be made do with — only one wagon to remain with the Regt. — ordered to cook one day's ration, ready to move at a moment's warning.

Saturday 19

Nothing of interest going on — no news from the front — lay still today, looks like rain — men putting up shelters, etc. Rained at night, turned very cold.

Sunday 20th

Ordered to move at 6½ o'clock this morning — loaded up the wagon and ready — lay still until 4 o'clock in the P.M., ordered to unload the wagon and go to cooking. Rained at intervals all night and very cold — could not sleep having only one blanket — 6 prisoners brought in.¹³

Monday 21st

Still showering & very cold -- wind from the E, quiet and very dull in camp today — hear some cannonading in front — heavy rain at night.

Tuesday 22nd

Ordered to send the wagon to the rear at 5 o'clock this morning — formed in line and loaded guns for a fight — waited some time and then moved off — got news that our Picket had been captured, part of the 2nd La Cavalry and Edgar's Batterly¹⁴ — marched in the direction of Fort Jessup,¹⁵ made 23 miles and bivouacked on a creek — very sore and worn out.

Wednesday 23rd

Moved on two miles and came up with our train — found them burning all the tents but one to a company — ordered to weigh our baggage and allow each man eight pounds of clothing & one blanket to be hauled.

Thursday 24th

Ordered on Picket — marched back 6 miles and bivouacked, terrible rain today — found quarters in old house — slept very well.

Friday 25th

Cold this morning and looks like rain — heard that Green was advancing to reinforce us with 13,000 men — nothing from the enemy.¹⁶

Saturday 26th

Relieved today at 12 N by 11th Texas Infy — marched back to the old camp & Joined the Brigade, making 6 miles.

Sunday 27th

Fine day — good camping place, furloughing resumed — sent our Baggage this morning — looks like rain at night.

Monday 28th

Rained this morning at 4 o'clock, looks like there would be more.

Tuesday 29th

Fine morning — rather cool — orders to march at 2 o'clock, moved according to orders on the Fort Jessup Road, made six miles and Bivouacked.

Wednesday 30th

Ordered to be ready to move at a moment's notice, moved at 12 o'clock, marched 12 miles and Bivouacked.

Thursday 31st

Marched at 9½ o'clock, passed Fort Jessup, marched 15 miles & Bivouacked. Nothing of interest transpired today.¹⁷

Friday April 1st

Moved at 6 o'clock this morning toward Pleasant Hill — arrived there in good time, making seven miles — Bivouacked — men were allowed to go to the baggage train and get such clean clothing as they needed.

Saturday 2nd

Marched at 8 o'clock on the road to Bayou Pine, made 5 miles and Bivouacked — heard heavy cannonading in the direction of Grand Ecore — soon after were ordered to load the wagons and be ready to move at a moment's notice — moved about ½ past 5 in the direction of Pleasant Hill, arrived there after dark — formed in line of Battle and remained on arms all night — Enemy reported to be advancing.¹⁸

Sunday 3rd

Slept very little last night — windy and cold this morning — drew

some bacon last night — but no bread stuff — got plenty of meat but no bread — marched 10 miles in the direction of Mansfield and Bivouacked — the Enemy Cavalry made a flank movement out from Natchitoches on the Manna road to get in rear of our Pickets and destroy what we had at Pleasant Hill, but one of Genl Green's Regts of Cavalry and the Val Verd (sic) Battery were on that road coming to join us and the Yankees were driven back.¹⁹

Monday 4

Marched in direction of Mansfield, passed through that place and camped 7 miles on the Kingston and Shreveport Road, making 18 miles — very warm & dusty and water very scarce today — suffered a great deal with my feet.

Tuesday 5

Lay in Camp — Reserve Baggage Train came in today — ordered that one trunk to the company officers would be taken with the Command and that 1 blanket and a change of clothing would be hauld for each man — Train sent to the rear — no news from the front.

Wednesday 6th

Lay in Camp today — no news from the front.

Thursday 7th 1864

Lay in Camp — nothing of interest going on — heard cannonading in front late in the Evng.

Friday 8th

Ordered to move at Day Break — moved in the direction of Mansfield, passed through Mansfield on the road to Pleasant Hill, marched about 3 miles from Mansfield when we found our Cavalry and the Enemy skirmishing, formed in line of Battle behind a fence — waited for some time — then moved further to the left -- stood some time and was then ordered forward & the Engagement now becoming pretty general — Scurry and Waul on the right and Polignac on the left and Randal in the Center. About 3 o'clock Charged the Enemy and drove them from their position — kept on charging at double quick through the bushes and thick woods for nearly five miles — where we came up with their train, One Regt charged and captured it. I was ordered by Genl Taylor to take charge of the train and get it to Mansfield as soon as possible and turn it over to Maj Sanders, Chf Qt Master, went into Mansfield with 182 wagons and ambulances, 2 pieces of artillery and a number of mules and horses.²⁰ The Command kept on driving the Enemy before them until night, making about 16 miles travel. Lt. Rain and F. Wolz of my command wounded — only one man (W.L. Barrett) in the Regt killed so far as heard from.

Saturday 9th

Left Mansfield for the Regt this morning early, reported that they were about getting another fight near Pleasant Hill, find dead & wounded all along the road. The Enemy suffered triple as much as we did yester-

day, terrible fight came off just before night — a great many killed and wounded on both sides, drove the enemy from their position. John Wale was killed and we thought that Peter Richardson was killed too, he having been shot in the head but he came too again — John Muntz had the fore finger the right hand taken off²¹ — we were drawn off the field after dark and marched back to the Steam Mill 7 miles for water — our forces still holding the Battle ground. The Enemy destroyed a great deal and made a precipitate retreat this Evng, our Cav on their heels — felt very bad after getting to camp. As Col Clark was wounded I was in command of the Regt — had to turn the Comd over to Capt. Lyle.²²

Sunday 10th

Moved this morning in the direction of Mansfield — very sick today — rode Col Clark's horse²³ — camped near Mansfield — reports from the front say Enemy still retreating.

Monday 11th

Moved on through Mansfield & camped 4 miles on the Shreveport road where our Train was then in camp. Prisoners still coming in — very sick still — no surgeon present — all busy in the Hospitals with the wounded.

Tuesday 12th

Still getting worse, had to lie in bed all the time — nothing of interest transpiring today.

Wednesday 13th

Father and Mr. Locke arvrred this morning — still very sick — Mr. Locke is anxious to get the body of his son. They will start after him in the morning.²⁴

Thursday 14th

Moved in the direction of Shreveport — very sick all day — the ambulance almost shaking me to pieces — camped.²⁵

Friday 15th

Moved through Shreveport — crossed the Pontoon Bridge and camped one mile from Shreveport up the river. Still very sick.

Saturday 16th

Moved in the direction of Minden. Sick all sent to Hospital. I was sent to Shreveport, but the hospital being all full I was transferred to the Hospital at Marshall — took passage on a Steam Boat for Jefferson.

Sunday 17th

Arrived in Jefferson today very sick and worn out — went to the Hospital and went to bed. Telegraphed Father to come after me.

Monday 18th

Father came after me today & after terrible suffering I arrived home about midnight.

Tuesday 19th

Sent for Dr. Madison the P surgeon and commenced taking medicine from him today.²⁶

After recovery and recuperation from his unexplained illness, Allen was fit enough to begin a journey back to his command on July 12, 1864. At Shreveport he booked passage on a river boat, the "Anna Perrett," for Alexandria. He rejoined the regiment in camp near Alexandria on July 16. His regiment participated in the campaign into Arkansas later in the year before returning to winter quarters near Minden, Louisiana, where he recorded on December 2, 1864, that he and his men were "living well" in seven cabins built by the soldiers. As previously noted, he had been promoted to major on October 19, 1864, and was in command of the regiment when the Trans-Mississippi Department was surrendered.

NOTES

¹Lawrence Lee Hewitt, *Port Hudson: Confederate Bastion on the Mississippi*. (Baton Rouge and London, 1987), o. xiii

²Thomas Yoseloff, ed., *The Way to Appomattox: Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, (4 vols.; reprint, New York and London, 1952), p. 349. Porter's fleet entered the mouth of Red River on March 12. Three divisions of Banks' army landed at Simsport on March 13 and the next morning marched on Fort De Russy.

³Ludwell H. Johnson, *Red River Campaign: Politics and Cotton in the Civil War*, (Baltimore, 1958), p. 115.

⁴Johnson, *Red River Campaign*, p. 133-145.

⁵Johnson, *Red River Campaign*, p. 140-141.

⁶Johnson, *Red River Campaign*, p. 168-169.

⁷Harold B. Simpson, *The Marshall Guards, Harrison County's Contribution to Hood's Texas Brigade*, (Marshall, 1967), pp. 1, 9.

⁸For biographical information on N.S. Allen, see Max S. Lale, "New Light on the Battle of Mansfield, *East Texas Historical Journal*, 25 (Fall, 1987), pp. 34-41.

⁹The diary is deposited in the library of Louisiana State University—Shreveport.

¹⁰These were the lead elements of General A.J. Smith's Third Division, 16th Corps, which late in the afternoon of March 14 took Fort De Russy, located three miles upstream from Marksville. Alexandria fell the next day. See Johnson, *Red River Campaign*, p. 94.

¹¹A defensive work directly ordered by General Kirby Smith, over General Taylor's objections, but whose hasty completion General Taylor ordered early in March when General Banks' movement became obvious. Its capture was hardly more than a skirmish in which Union casualties totaled thirty-eight killed and wounded. See Johnson, *Red River Campaign*, pp. 87, 93.

¹²Carroll Jones was a wealthy free Negro with a considerable plantation establishment. See Blessington, *Walker's Texas Division*, p. 175; Johnson, *Red River Campaign*, p. 96.

¹³Captured by a squad of Louisiana cavalry at McNatt's Hill. Blessington, *Walker's Texas Division*, p. 177.

¹⁴Blessington, *Red River Campaign*, p. 177, places these losses in the night of March 22, but Allen obviously is correct that their capture had occurred earlier, inasmuch as his company continued a march of twenty-three miles after he wrote his entry. Johnson, *Red River Campaign*, gives the date as March 21. The 2nd Louisiana Cavalry, commanded by Colonel William G. Vincent, had been posted as a rear guard, along with Edgar's Battery. The units were taken in the rear by a heavy reconnaissance force under General Joseph A.

Mower, whose Third Brigade had captured Fort De Russy. Described as a "humiliating disaster" for the Confederates and a "brilliant coup" by the Federals, the affair deprived General Taylor of almost all his cavalry when he most needed it. Blessington, *Walker's Texas Division*, p. 177, placed the losses as "400 of the cavalry, besides the guns and men of Edgar's Battery." Johnson, *Red River Campaign*, p. 97, placed the losses at 250 prisoners, "scores of horses, and Edgar's four-gun battery."

¹⁶Fort Jessup, located just across the Texas boundary in Louisiana, was a pre-annexation United States Army post used by Zachary Taylor, General Taylor's father, as a staging area for troops on their way to Corpus Christi, just prior to the outbreak of the Mexican War. See Blessington, *Walker's Texas Division*, p. 178.

¹⁷This was the day General Banks' 13th and 19th Corps closed into Alexandria, completing the assembly of "an impressive display of military might — the greatest in the history of the Southwest"; Johnson, *Red River Campaign*, p. 90. Blessington, *Walker's Texas Division*, p. 178, wrote that while in camp on March 24, word was received that General Tom Green had crossed the Sabine from Texas with 13,000 cavalrymen "en route to reinforce us."

¹⁸Another participant in the campaign recorded in his diary on March 31 that Fritz Giesecke "told us that Walker's Division had been chased considerably by the Yankees and that they had taken Alexandria and also that over half of the Second Louisiana Cavalry had been taken prisoners." Oscar Hass, ed., "The Diary of Julius Giesecke, 1863-1865," *Military History of Texas and the Southwest* (1938, Number 3), p. 85.

¹⁹Natchitoches fell to the invaders about 2:00 this day. In contrast to Allen's somewhat casual reference, one writer declared that "The whole country, far and wide, was aroused to the highest pitch of excitement by the retreat of our army. The inhabitants, all along the route of our retreat, were hurriedly quitting their homes, and flying before the approach of the invader." Blessington, *Walker's Texas Division*, p. 179.

²⁰According to one authority, brigade commanders were informed that a race was on to determine whether Walker's division or the enemy should reach Pleasant Hill first. The division was formed, and regimental commanders received orders to double-quick their regiments the five miles to Pleasant Hill. See Blessington, *Walker's Texas Division*, p. 170. The Valverde Battery was organized early in 1862 and was commanded originally by Captain Joseph D. Sayers, later governor of Texas. When Sayers was promoted to assistant adjutant of the Fifth Texas Cavalry, he was succeeded in command of the battery by T.D. Nettles. The battery was assigned to the First Artillery Battalion in 1864. Harold B. Simpson, ed., Marcus J. Wright, *Texas in the War, 1862-1865*, (Hillsboro, 1965), p. 5-6.

²¹General Taylor, in his official report of the battle, reported the capture of "about" 2,000 prisoners, twenty pieces of artillery, 200 wagons and "thousands" of small arms. Blessington, *Walker's Texas Division*, p. 192. Johnson, *Red River Campaign*, p. 141, places the losses at "Many small arms, twenty pieces of artillery, at least 156 government-owned wagons and close to 1,000 horses and mules."

²²Perhaps because of illness or fatigue, Allen does not identify all the Harrison County residents who were killed or wounded in the first day's fighting. Others included Captain Gil McKay, George H. Adkins, and Clinton Locke killed, and R. Watkins, R.W. Jennings, R. Wilson and T.P. Hawley, wounded. W.W. Heartsill, *Fourteen Hundred and 91 Days in the Confederate Army*, (Marshall, Texas, 1876; reprint, Jackson, Tennessee, 1954; reprint, Wilmington, North Carolina, 1988), p. 200.

²³Captain Sam J. Lyle commanded Company K, 14th Texas Infantry. Blessington, *Walker's Texas Division*, p. 53.

²⁴The use of Colonel Clark's horse apparently served a two-fold purpose. It provided Allen with transportation, and it also secured the horse for Clark's use later.

²⁵It was not unusual, especially if the battlefield was nearby, as Marshall was, for family members to search for sons and brothers and to return them or their bodies home.

³⁵The "ambulance" of the Civil War was little more than a covered spring wagon. It was reported that General T.J. (Stonewall) Jackson suffered similarly when he was removed from the field after being wounded.

³⁶Marshall was a major sub-headquarters of the Trans-Mississippi Department at Shreveport. Located in Marshall were important ordnance works, a chemical laboratory, a hat factory, a post hospital, quartermaster warehouses, and the Trans-Mississippi Department's civilian postal service. Allen was treated by the post hospital surgeon.