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BRIGADIER GENERAL THOMAS GREEN OF TEXAS

by Curtis W. Milbourn

The Civil War produced many interesting personalities. The accomplishments of some of these individuals have been well documented but countless others have slipped into anonymity. One of these nearly forgotten personalities is a Confederate general whose performance in the oft-neglected Trans-Mississippi Theatre contributed to many Southern successes in New Mexico Territory, Texas, and Louisiana.

Nathaniel Thomas Green was born on June 8, 1814 in Buckingham County, Virginia, to Nathan and Mary Field Green. In 1817 the family settled near Winchester, Tennessee, where Nathan Green attained prominence as a judge on the Tennessee Supreme Court and head of the Cumberland University Law School. According to family lore, while Nathaniel Green was still a boy he was involved in numerous fights with another lad named Nathaniel which resulted in young Green refusing to acknowledge his Christian name, thus becoming forever known as Thomas "Tom" Green.¹ As a youth, Thomas Green enjoyed reading stories about great generals and famous battles. He attended a local village school, Jackson College, Cumberland University, and the University of Tennessee (also referred to as the University of Nashville), from which he was graduated in 1934.

In 1835 Green sought adventure in Texas, then a province of Mexico. A revolution was in progress, and the strapping Tennessean, who stood over six feet tall and weighed nearly 200 pounds, enlisted as a private in the Texas Army. On April 21, 1836, Green manned one of the famous Twin Sisters – two cannons that comprised the Texans' entire artillery compliment – at the Battle of San Jacinto. A victory all but assured Texas of independence, and on May 30, 1836, Green resigned from the army with the rank of major.

Thomas Green returned to Tennessee, where he studied law under his father, but by 1837 was drawn back to Texas. He made the new republic his home, settling in the village of La Grange. Green occupied various governmental posts, including county surveyor of Fayette County, one term as a Texas congressman, and clerk for the Texas Senate and Texas Supreme Court. Green also found time for adventure, serving in limited campaigns against the Mexicans and Comanche Indians. Green's military and governmental service permitted him to work with such distinguished Texans as Stephen F. Austin, Sam Houston, and Mirabeau Lamar.

Shortly after Texas gained statehood on December 29, 1845, the Mexican War broke out. Green raised a company of John C. Hays' Texas Rangers and was appointed captain. The Rangers were mustered into the United States Army as the Texas Mounted Rifle Volunteers and assigned as scouts to General Zachary Taylor's command. During the campaign to capture Monterrey, Green and his company were in the thick of the fighting.

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Following Monterrey's fall, the Rangers were discharged from the army.

In 1847, Green married Mary W. Chalmers, the daughter of Dr. John G. Chalmers, former United States senator from Mississippi. The couple raised a large family, having six children of their own who reached adulthood and adopting six others. Green continued in government service until the nation was torn apart with the election of Abraham Lincoln as president. When Texas seceded from the Union on February 1, 1861, Green, who already had an aversion for Northerners, stood by his state and enlisted in the Confederate Army.

Initially assigned the duties of aide-de-camp of the Second Military District of Texas, Green soon raised the Fifth Regiment of Texas Mounted Volunteers and was elected colonel of the regiment.

In late summer 1861, Brigadier General Henry H. Sibley organized an expedition for an invasion of the Far West. The Army of New Mexico, called Sibley's Brigade, was formed in San Antonio. It included the Fifth Regiment of Texas Mounted Volunteers. By mid-December the Brigade had marched over 500 miles to Fort Bliss, and by February 1862 occupied Fort Thorn, New Mexico Territory. On February 7, the Army of New Mexico left Fort Thorn, for Albuquerque and Santa Fe. Fearing a lack of water, Sibley opted for the bruising terrain of the west bank of the Rio Grande rather than the shorter desert route. By mid-February the Confederates confronted Fort Craig and its Union garrison under Lieutenant Colonel Edward R.S. Canby. Located on the west bank of the Rio Grande, Fort Craig stood astride the Confederate's line of communication. Deciding that the fort could not be taken by assault, Sibley ordered the brigade to cross to the east bank of the river, move upstream to Contadero Ford near Valverde, then recross the river. The movement was designed to force Canby to leave the fort and fight in the open or have the Army of New Mexico interposed between the fort and Federal supplies to the north. Canby sent troops to oppose the crossing at Contadero Ford and on February 21 the first major engagement of the war in the Southwest was fought.

Having established a small bridgehead on the west bank, the Confederates were driven back across the river and into sand hills by the attacking Federal forces. Both sides continued to pour troops into the fray while maneuvering for advantage. By early afternoon, with the outcome in doubt, Sibley retired from the field with an illness, leaving Green in command. Green sent two columns charging over the sand hills, simultaneously striking both flanks of the Union line. After vicious fighting, the Federal left flank gave way and Canby's troops fled. Of his subordinate, Sibley wrote, "His coolness under the heaviest fire and interpidity under the most trying circumstances are sufficiently attested to by the results. I can not commend Colonel Green too highly to the favorable consideration of the Executive."²

Following the victory at Valverde, Sibley decided to proceed to Albuquerque and Santa Fe in the hope of replenishing his army's dwindling sup-

plies. Both cities were occupied without much resistance and the Confederates began a march to Fort Union, the last major obstacle in the conversion of New Mexico to the Confederacy. On March 26 and 28, Union and Confederate forces battled in Glorieta Pass, but when Confederate supplies were destroyed near Johnson's Ranch, Sibley chose to retire from New Mexico. On April 15, at Peralta, Green's regiment clashed with some of Canby's men and were driven from the village after house-to-house fighting. This was the last engagement of note in the fruitless New Mexico campaign. Sibley abandoned his army, leaving Green to oversee the difficult return to San Antonio.

Thomas Green, who performed well throughout the campaign, received no promotion despite numerous letters written in his behalf. It was rumored that Sibley, out of animosity and jealousy, sent word to Richmond that Green could not be trusted because of a propensity for strong drink. If true, Sibley was not the only witness to this weakness. Another source wrote, "Colonel Green was a man who, when out of whiskey, was a mild mannered gentleman, but when in supply of old burst-head was all fight."

No evidence exists that Green's duty performance was affected by his alleged love of spirits, but he did write a letter to Confederate Postmaster General and fellow Texan John H. Reagan, denying the allegation. Unfortunately, this was not the last time the subject of Green's drinking would be broached.

After returning to Texas, Sibley's Brigade was refitted and rested. In December 1862, the unit was ordered to assist Major General John B. Magruder in recapturing the port of Galveston. Magruder planned a combined land-and-naval assault to drive the Federals out. Colonel Green and his men manned the cottonclads "Bayou City" and "Neptune" (two converted steamships) for the naval portion of the assault.

On January 1, 1863, the Confederates launched a surprise attack. "Bayou City" and "Neptune" dueled with five Union gunboats in Galveston Bay while Magruder directed the ground assault. "Neptune" was sunk but "Bayou City" was able to close on the Federal flagship "Harriet Lane," allowing Green and his "marines" to board her and subdue the crew after hand-to-hand fighting. With the loss of their flagship, the remaining Union ships fled the bay, leaving the unsupported Federal land forces no choice but to surrender. For his part in the assault Green was commended by the Confederate Congress, but he had little time to enjoy this accolade. A short time later he was ordered to Louisiana to help Major General Richard Taylor prevent the Pelican State from being overrun by Union forces.

In an attempt to open the Mississippi River to Federal shipping and split the Confederacy in two, Major General Ulysses S. Grant was operating against the Southern fortress of Vicksburg. Major General Nathaniel P. Banks was ordered to cooperate with Grant by seizing Port Hudson, located on the east bank of the Mississippi River approximately 120 miles down-

stream from Vicksburg. In compliance with his orders, Banks began a campaign in Louisiana to secure the west bank of the Mississippi River, which would isolate Port Hudson by cutting off supplies from the fertile regions of western Louisiana and eastern Texas. Banks had over 35,000 soldiers to accomplish this task. With a little luck, he hoped to destroy Taylor's 4,000 men in the process.

Upon arriving in Louisiana, Sibley's Brigade was directed to the lower Bayou Teche region, near Grand Lake. Portions of the brigade were involved in skirmishes near Pattersonville on April 10-11. By April 12, the outnumbered Southerners had been pushed back to Fort Bisland, a strong earthwork located near the mouth of the Bayou Teche. Arrayed against them were three Union divisions of 5,000 men each. Hoping to capture Taylor's entire army, Banks ordered one division to sail up Grand Lake, land at Indian Bend, and block the Confederates' only avenue of escape. This movement would be masked when the remaining two divisions made diversionary attacks in front of the fort. Taylor learned of the ruse and abandoned the fort on April 14, leaving a rearguard of 900 men commanded by Colonel Green to delay over ten times their number.

Taylor retreated up the Teche into northwestern Louisiana in an attempt to save his meager command. From April 14-17, Green fought delaying actions over terrain that was "three-fourths marsh, and one-eighth lagoons, bayous, overflowing creeks and rivers."⁴ At Centerville, Jeanerette, New Iberia, and Vermillionville, Green and his cavalry fought "the enemy from dawn to dark, watching him from dusk till the ensuing morn, disputing every foot of ground, burning every bridge (himself the last to cross); in sight and in range of the enemy's guns, he and his men were constantly on duty, often forty-eight hours without rest or food."⁵

Finally, on April 19, the Texans stung the Federals near Grand Couteau, and Banks halted the pursuit. Though isolating Port Hudson, the Federals had failed to destroy Taylor despite their overwhelming superiority in numbers. Taylor remarked of Green, "In truth he was the Ney of our retreat ... the shield and buckler of our little force."⁶ For his actions, Taylor recommended that Green be promoted to brigadier general and on May 20, 1863, the promotion became official.

Having driven the Confederates deep into western Louisiana, Banks besieged Port Hudson. With the Federal's attention elsewhere, Taylor launched an offensive designed to recapture the territory recently lost and relieve the pressure on Port Hudson by threatening to occupy New Orleans.

On May 24, Green recaptured Franklin, and on June 11 Berwick City fell. On June 22, General Green, in combination with Colonel James Major, his brother-in-law, and Brigadier General Jean Mouton, attacked Brashear City from the front and rear after transporting troops through dense swamps. The Federal garrison surrendered the following day, netting the Southerners over \$3 million in supplies and 1800 prisoners. A Confederate army had not

enjoyed such plunder since Stonewall Jackson captured Harpers Ferry in September 1862.

Green and Major were ordered to Donaldsonville to establish batteries on the Mississippi River. They were to disrupt supplies being sent to the forces investing Port Hudson. Arriving on June 27, Green found 225 Federals occupying Fort Butler, an outpost located at the confluence of the Mississippi River and Bayou LaFourche. After consulting with his superiors, Green was ordered to seize the fort.⁷ Prior to the assault, the chivalrous general requested that all women and children within three miles of the fort be evacuated. In the predawn hours of June 28, Green sent his 800 troopers forward. After initial gains, the Confederates stumbled into a trench that their guides had failed to locate. The attack bogged down and at dawn Union gunboats joined the fray forcing the Confederates to retreat.

Green retreated nine miles down the LaFourche, where he established a base to watch Federal movements in Donaldsonville. He detached Major to the banks of the Mississippi River, between the road to Vacherie and the road to Bateau, where he established several batteries. Although Federal river traffic was disrupted, the action was insufficient and Port Hudson surrendered on July 9. Banks was free once again to deal with Taylor.

When the Federals landed 6,000 soldiers near Donaldsonville, Green recalled Major and turned to meet the threat. On July 13, General Green's 1,400 troopers launched a surprise attack shortly after sunrise and forced the Federals into a hasty retreat. The Southerners lost just thirty-three men while inflicting over 450 casualties and capturing numerous supplies.

Again facing overwhelming odds, Taylor was forced to withdraw across western Louisiana. Once more Green was assigned the task of protecting the rear of the Confederate army. The Federals attempted to gain the Southerners rear near Washington, but on September 7 were repulsed by Green at Morgan's Ferry on the Atchafalya River. The Northerners retreated to an area between Morganza and Forduche, where they established a camp and attempted to reorganize themselves for another advance. For over three weeks Green waited in vain for the Federals to break camp. On September 29, the aggressive cavalry commander crossed the Atchafalya River and attacked the Union encampment. The Federals were driven back in disorder, but before the Texans, known by now as Green's Brigade, could destroy them, Green received orders to withdraw to Vermilionville.

A second Federal column was marching up the Bayou Teche, and Green's Brigade was needed to check its advance. On October 9, elements of the brigade skirmished Federal forces at Vermilionville, but were driven back. On October 13, an encounter occurred near Carrion Crow Bayou, ten miles below Opelousas. On October 16 and 18, engagements were fought near two local plantations. Despite resisting fiercely, the Confederates were forced back by the weight of the Federal advance. The Union drive continued, and by October 21 the Confederates had been pressed back to

Opelousas. By this time Banks had learned of the Federal defeat at Sabine Pass. He fell back to Vermilionville, leaving 5,000 men at Bayou Bourbeaux, seven miles southeast of Opelousas, to discourage any Southern pursuit. On November 3, Green attacked the Federals at Bayou Bourbeaux, gaining a complete victory for the Confederates.

Frustrated by his slow progress in western Louisiana and under strong pressure by the Federal government to produce results, Banks decided to invade the lightly defended Texas coast. When Union troops landed near Brownsville in early November, Green was recalled to the Lone Star State to assist in her defense. Leaving Louisiana on December 7, he arrived in Houston on Christmas Day.

Assigned to the defense of Galveston Island, Green spent the next few months strengthening the island's fortifications and readying for a Federal assault. When Banks abandoned his invasion of the Texas coast for another try in western Louisiana, Green was ordered back to the bayous to help Taylor parry yet another thrust.

While Green was in Texas, Lieutenant General Edmund Kirby Smith, commander of the Trans-Mississippi Department, the largest theatre in the Civil War, recommended that he be promoted to major general. In making the recommendation, Smith wrote of Green, "He is a rising officer and has displayed greater ability and military genius than any officer of his grade in the department."⁸ While waiting for the promotion to become official, Green assumed the duties of a major general.

On April 5, 1864, Green led a division of cavalry into Mansfield, Louisiana. The arrival of Green's troopers raised Taylor's total force to 8,800 and reunited the former president's son with his ablest lieutenant. Green's appearance was timely because Banks was racing toward Shreveport with nearly 30,000 men. Mansfield stood between the Federal commander and his objective.

By concentrating at Mansfield, Taylor gained certain advantages over his adversary. The Federals were approaching along an old stage road, a narrow track running through dense pine forests and rolling hills, and were unable to by-pass the Confederates. The invaders were also moving away from the Red River, where they were protected by powerful gunboats. The terrain would also make it difficult for Banks to concentrate his forces, giving Taylor an opportunity to defeat him in detail. Buoyed by Green's arrival, Taylor decided to strike the Federals at the first possible moment.

A suitable battlefield, which consisted of a treeline adjacent to a rare cleared field, was located three miles southeast of Mansfield near Sabine Crossroads. On April 7, Green and his cavalry moved forward to harass and slow the advancing Federals, while Taylor organized his army just inside of the treeline. The following day, shortly after noon, Green's troopers emerged into the clearing, pursued closely by the unsuspecting Union vanguard. When the Northerners approached the treeline, Taylor sprung the trap.

Struck by a heavy volley of musketry, the Federals rocked back in surprise. Retreating across the field, they established a defensive line on a small hill from which they exchanged shots with the unseen Confederates. At 4:00 p.m., Taylor sent his army forward to dislodge the 5,700 Federals opposing him. After some hard fighting the Union troops were routed from the field. The pursuing Confederates struck and overwhelmed a second defensive line three miles down the road. Continuing after the panicked Federals, the Southerners finally were halted after striking a third defensive line, more from disorganization and darkness than from Union resistance.

The signal victory, sometimes referred to as the "Bull Run of Louisiana," netted Taylor's army nearly 1,000 horses and mules and 150 wagons loaded with supplies. The Federals lost 2,200 men, compared to 1,000 Confederate casualties. Mansfield marked one of the last major field victories for a Confederate army.

During the night Banks ordered a retreat to Pleasant Hill, twenty miles from Mansfield, where he established a battleline of 12,000 men. In the early morning of April 9, Taylor, reinforced to 12,500, set off in pursuit of his nemesis, seeking the battle that would finish Banks. At 5:00 p.m., the exhausted Confederates assaulted the prepared Federals. Intending to turn the Union left flank, the Confederates struck near the center. After severe fighting the Southern right flank was repulsed, forcing the Confederate center and right flank to withdraw.

Both sides lost over 1,300 soldiers, but Taylor's aggressiveness further discouraged Banks, who ordered a retreat to Grand Ecore. Despite being driven from the field, Taylor and Green had turned back the Federal invasion.

The Union retreat to Grand Ecore left Admiral David D. Porter's Red River fleet in a precarious situation. The rapidly receding river made navigation difficult. Porter's fleet would have to retreat without the protection of Banks' army and would be susceptible to recapture or destruction while it slowly sailed back to Grand Ecore.

Taylor grasped his opportunity and ordered Green to Blair's Landing, twelve miles from Pleasant Hill, to intercept the Federal fleet. Arriving on April 12, Green deployed his 2,500 dismounted troopers in ambush along the river bank. Green's plan was to disable one of the leading ships with his artillery, thus blocking the river and allowing the Confederates to capture or destroy the ships that followed. When the leading elements of the fleet steamed into sight, a vicious firefight erupted. Southern small-arms fire was



*Brigadier General Thomas Green
CSA, 1814-1864
(Courtesy of The Library of
Congress)*

so effective that "everything that was made of wood ... was pierced with bullets."⁹ However, the Confederate artillery was mauled by the fleet's powerful guns. During the exchange of fire, Green was struck by a shell which tore away the upper portion of his skull, killing him instantly. With Green's death, the Confederate attack faltered and the Union fleet avoided disaster.

Some controversy surrounds Green's last battle. Admiral Porter recorded that "Green had been drinking heavily" and that near each Confederate body at Blair's Landing was "a canteen half full of whiskey."¹⁰ Years later, an embittered Southerner not present at Blair's Landing wrote of Green's troopers, "Had they had as much Louisiana rum under their belts as Green had, my sympathies for the dead would not have been so great."¹¹ Whether because of aggressiveness, foolhardiness, or liquor, the dependable "Murat of the West" was dead.

Thomas Green's body was removed to Austin, Texas, where he lay in state in the House of Representatives. He was buried in the family plot in Oakwood Cemetery. Feeling he would die in battle, Green had requested that he be buried with his family rather than at the prestigious State Cemetery of Texas, where many famous Texans rest. A simple tombstone was all that marked his grave until 1909, when a monolith of gray granite nearly twenty-five feet high was erected at the sight by the surviving members of Green's Brigade and the United Daughters of the Confederacy.

Thomas Green left a trail of success few men equaled during the Civil War. Although Green's promotion to major general never became official, the only cavalry commander on either side to hold a rank higher than major general was Nathan Bedford Forrest. The governor of Texas, during Green's funeral oration, compared the cavalier to Confederate immortals John Hunt Morgan, Stonewall Jackson, and Forrest.¹² While this praise might be somewhat extravagant, there is no doubt that Green was a major figure in the Southern efforts in the Trans-Mississippi Theatre. His men adored him, his commanders relied upon him, and perhaps the greatest tribute of all, his foes respected him. Admiral Porter recorded that Green was "the best officer the Confederates had in this quarter, who ... would have given no end of trouble had he lived," and that losing him "paralyzed (sic) them; he was worth 5,000 men."¹³ Captain Thomas Selfridge, who commanded the gunboat "Osage" at Blair's Landing, wrote that Green was "the foremost partisan fighter west of the Mississippi."¹⁴ Even Nathaniel P. Banks, whom Green had caused nothing but grief, conceded, "... he was the ablest officer in their service."¹⁵

NOTES

¹Tom Green Scrapbook, Austin, Texas, Texas State Archives.

²Odie Faulk, *General Tom Green, "A Fightin' Texan"* (Waco, 1963), pp. 42-43.

³Theophilus Noel, *Autobiography and Reminiscences of Theophilus Noel* (Chicago, 1904), p. 100.

⁴Noel, *Autobiography and Reminiscences*, p. 89.

⁵Faulk, *General Tom Green*, p. 53.

⁶Clement A. Evans, ed., *Confederate Military History* (Atlanta, 1899), XI, p. 195.

⁷*The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington D.C., 1883), Series I, vol. 26, part 1, p. 227.

⁸*War of the Rebellion*, Series I, vol. 26, part 1, p. 385.

⁹Robert V. Johnson and Clarence c. Buell, eds., *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War* (New York, 1884-1888), vol. IV, p. 363.

¹⁰W.C. Nunn, ed., *Ten More Texans in Gray* (Hillsboro, 1980), pp. 36-37.

¹¹Noel, *Autobiography and Reminiscences*, p. 100.

¹²"Oration Delivered by Governor P. Murrah in the Capitol at the Funeral Ceremonies over the Remains of Maj. Gen. Tom Green," Tom Green Scrapbook.

¹³Nunn, *Ten More Texans*, p. 37.

¹⁴Johnson and Buell, *Battles and Leaders*, vol. IV, p. 364.

¹⁵Evans, *Confederate Military*, vol. XI, p. 233.