

## The 1864 Capture of Major Eli Lilly

In April of 1864, Eli Lilly who had been promoted to Major was back in Indiana helping Col. George W. Jackson recruit men the newly formed 9<sup>th</sup> Indiana Cavalry. In May, the regiment was ordered to report at Nashville, Tennessee for duty before being sent south to Pulaski, Tennessee. It then that the regiment was informed that the horses that they were to be assigned, were needed elsewhere. Seventy percent of the available horses at Nashville were assigned to the 9<sup>th</sup> Indiana Cavalry.

By the end of June, General John Starkweather, the commander at the post at Pulaski, Tennessee had 2212 cavalrymen and only 536 horses. During the summer, Major Lilly and other men of the command spent a great deal of time "pressing" horses in the area. This was not unusual as horses were always in short supply. Wm. Dubois noted in his diary that Major and some men passed through Lynnville, Tennessee on the 21<sup>st</sup> of August scouting for horses. Mean while, the rest of the men of 9<sup>th</sup> were assigned duty on railroad guarding the bridges north of Pulaski.

The railroad ran from Nashville, Tennessee to Decatur Alabama. It served as a return route for trains running from Chattanooga to Nashville. This railroad was a very important part of General Sherman's supply line. There were two large trestles that span the Elk River and Sulphur Creek. Each of these trestles had a small wood and earthen fort and two block houses at the ends of the trestles. Near the end of August reports started to circulate that Confederate Generals Joe Wheeler and Phillip Roddy were planning raids on the two large trestles.

In the meantime, Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest was in the process of leading his Cavalry to Mobil, Alabama. Near Meridian, Mississippi, his train was intercepted by General Richard Taylor. General Taylor informed Forrest that the raid on the railroad from Decatur to Nashville had been approved and that Forrest was assigned the mission. The object of the raid was to destroy the railroad that ran from Decatur to Nashville and do as much damage to the rail road running from Nashville to Chattanooga. Also, there was hope that the raid would draw General Sherman back north from Atlanta.

During the month of September, General Robert Granger, commander at Decatur, Al., and General Starkweather had noticed an increase in Confederate cavalry activity in the area and heard rumors that Forrest was behind this activity. Grant, meanwhile, assured Granger and Sherman that Forrest was nowhere near their location. As it was reported that Forrest was on his way to Mobile.

As the month of September wore on, the rumors of Forrest became more and more frequent. Granger began to worry but the repeated assurances from Grant also kept coming. Finally, Granger could stand it no more. He began to send out scouting patrols on a daily basis.

On the 21<sup>st</sup> of September, General Forrest starting moving his 4500 men out of Cherokee station and headed for Florence, Alabama. After marching through the city to what looked like a victory celebration, Forrest crossed to the north side of the Tennessee River a short distance east of Florence. General Granger had ordered shallow draft gunboats up river but due to the low river stage, they were forced not to go further. Forrest had almost a free passage to the north side of the river.

Knowing that Decatur was a Union strong hold, Forrest marched his force of about 4500 men and Mortons 8 gun battery, toward an area just south of Athens, Alabama.

During this time General George Starkweather at Pulaski had ordered Col George Spalding of the 12 Tennessee Cav with about 800 men south west toward Florence by the Lamb's ferry road. General Granger at Decatur sent Col. John B. Minnis and his detachment of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Tennessee Cavalry, north from Athens an area near Lexington, Al.. . Both men encountered elements of Forrest force. Col Spaulding captured 3 men and 5 wagons of Forrest train and Minnis reported Forrest and about 12,000 men on the Athens and Florence road. Both men sent messengers to Pulaski but they did not arrive until 2 pm on Saturday, September 24<sup>th</sup>.

Before Dawn on Saturday Sept 23<sup>rd</sup> General Starkweather ordered Col. Pace of the 10 Indiana Cav and Major Lilly and his detachment of the 9<sup>th</sup> Indiana Cav south along the railroad to Elk River Bridge in response to reports that General Phillip Roddy was reported in the area. Lilly's men consisted of 128 men and were issued 40 rounds of ammunition for their Gallagher carbines. Both units arrived at the Elk River Bridge in the afternoon. On Saturday, Lilly proceeded south in the direction of Sulphur Trestle. On the way, Lilly established a courier line back north, as the telegraph was dead.

At the Fort at Sulphur Trestle, located 1 mile south of the present day town of Elkmont and about 10 miles from the bridge at Elk River and 30 miles from Pulaski, Lilly met with the commander of the fort and its two blockhouses. Col. William Lathrup, originally from Cincinnati, was in command of about 600 men of the 111 USCT stationed there. At about 4 pm, Lilly left the fort and headed south in the direction of Athens. Near Hay's Mill, about 2 miles south of the fort, Lilly ran into Confederate Pickets and skirmished with them. While doing so, Lilly determined that they belonged to Forrest. Spotting the advancing column, about a mile long, Lilly disengaged and returned to the fort at Sulphur Trestle.

Minnis and his men had stopped at the fort earlier that day on their way back to Athens but finding their way blocked, had returned to the fort. Lilly arrived a short time later and sent his report up the courier line to General Rousseau in Nashville. Because of earlier reports, Rousseau had started to round up additional infantry to send forward to Pulaski but at the same time he had stopped all rail traffic south. General Starkweather at Pulaski, had also sent a message to Col Lathrup to hold the fort at all costs.

The fort at Sulphur Trestle was a wood and earth fort located at the south end of the Trestle. It also had two blockhouses, one at the north end of the trestle and one just

below the fort on the south end. The south approach to the fort was more of a flat open plain. To the North was a sheer drop off to the creek below and high hills behind the creek to the north. To the west was a sloping area to the valley and high hills about 800 yards west of the fort. Just to the east of the fort not more than 20 yards, was a steep ravine with a high heavily wooded hill on the other side. These hills were higher than the one that the fort was located on. Across the valley to the north and east were also wood hills that were higher than the fort.

During that evening, Lilly, Minnis and Lathrop set the troops to work reinforcing the fort and making traverses. The fort had a magazine and a small building that acted as a hospital. The fort also had two 12 lb cannons.

A picket line was established at about 9 pm to the south and east of the fort. These pickets started receiving fire at about midnight... Before dawn, Minnis sent a courier up the line requesting rations, Ammunition and reinforcements. Lilly dispatched his own messenger to Col. Jackson at Pulaski, making an urgent plea for assistance.

Lilly deployed his men on the south and south east sections of the fort. These positions faced the wooded hill closest to the fort and the level field to the south. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Tennessee was deployed to the left of the 9<sup>th</sup> and the USCT covered the North and western sides of the fort. They also manned the two 12 lb guns.

Ammunition was critical for the 9<sup>th</sup> as they only had about 30 rounds each after the skirmish the evening before and there was none at the fort for their carbines.

Forrest was preparing for battle also. Before dawn, Forrest ordered Captain John Morton to place his artillery to the west, east, north east and south of the fort. With ranges of between 500 and 800 yards, this would be easy work for artillery. With this work completed, Forrest waited for dawn to arrive.

At first light, Forrest started his attack with the roar of 8 pieces of artillery. General Buford moved his men from the west toward the mounted picket line. At the same time Kelley's brigade started pushing the skirmishers on the south and south eastern side of the fort back in.

Kelly's men had approached the fort from the south along the rail road. They then dismounted and then made a charge in the direction of the fort. Hot fire from the fort slowed the charge and at least 7 of his men died doing so. One confederate stated that it was a wall of hot iron coming from the fort as every musket and cannon were firing at them.

The charge then turned to the right and Kelly's sharpshooters took command of the hill east of the fort not more than 50 yards away. Seeking cover any place they could, Kelly's men received very hot fire from the fort as well as cannon fire.

Forrest described the battle as a “concentrated storm of hell.” Col Lathrop was mortally wounded very early in the fight. Frederick Wagner, the Assistant surgeon of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Tennessee was killed while rushing to Lathrop’s assistance.

With Lathrop down and dying, command of the fort devolved to Col. Minnis of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Tennessee. Soon he was struck by a shell fragment and taken to the forts magazine. The command then devolved to Major Ben Cunningham. Major Lilly assumed command of the fort when Major Cunningham was shot through the shoulder.

Lilly and the 9<sup>th</sup> were firing in Volleys at the last min in order to conserve ammunition. By 9 am, Lilly’s men had to whittle down Springfield ammunition to fit in their carbines. Morton’s Artillery made short work of the two 12 lb gun inside the fort. One shell hit gun square on and killed a major and 4 gunners. The other gun was hit and dismantled.

At about 11 am, Lilly could hear gun fire to north of the fort. Col George Spalding and parts of three other regiments had returned to Pulaski at about 9 pm the night before and left for Elk River at 3am, arriving at about 8 am. After taking time to feed their horses, Spalding left before 9 am. At about 11 am, Spalding’s men ran into Forrest’s command just north of Sulphur Trestle at Elk Mound, a watering station on the railroad. After skirmishing for about 20 min Spalding learned that the fort had surrendered and started to fall back.

Shortly a heavy line of Cavalry appeared in the open field to the north. Lilly feared that it meant another attack was eminent. He sent two messengers across the fort to the commander of the colored troops. Both were shot before they could reach the other side. Lilly then went himself and made it. He warned the commander of the approaching cavalry. When he looked out at the confederate troops he discovered that they had stopped.

At noon, the confederates sounded the cease fire. A white flag was displayed over the fort. Lilly took advantage of the truce to survey the condition of the fort and its men. Finding that both artillery pieces were out of action, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Tennessee was out of ammunition and his own men had been whittling down Springfield rounds for the past two hours. It was also found that 19 men of his command had been killed. Viewing the facts, it was determined that only one third of the line could be defended.

Finding two horses, Lilly and the adjutant of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Tennessee Cav Union with him, they rode out to meet Major John P. Strange of Forrest’s Escort. Major Strange, an attorney from Memphis before the war, handed Lilly a note from Forrest. It was a demand for “immediate and unconditional surrender” and the threat “In case this demand is not instantly complied with, General Forrest cannot be held responsible for the conduct of his men.”

Lilly took the threat as an insult. He told Major Strange that even though the fort was heavily damaged, the men inside the fort could still “inflect great damage upon those who

press an attack.” He then told Strange that he would not surrender his men under “humiliation of a threat”, but would counsel surrender under “honorable terms...”

Turning their horses to ride back to the fort, Major Strange called to Lilly to return and meet with General Forrest personally. It would have been interesting to find out what would have happened if Forrest knew that one of Lilly’s batteries had wounded him at Tunnel hill before Chickamauga. When he returned, Forrest and Buford were waiting for him. Lilly then repeated to them both what he had told Major Strange. He also told Forrest that it would be hard to believe that he, Forrest could not control his men and if he did not, then he would be held responsible for their actions.

Another note came forward from Forrest. This one stated that all men would be treated as prisoners of war and all officers and soldiers would be taken to Mississippi and Alabama and held there until General Washburn in Memphis could be contacted for paroled or exchanged. Lilly then asked for an hour to discuss the terms with his men.

On his return, he found Col Minnis had recovered to a degree that he could resume command of the fort. During the surrender conference, all of the officers agreed with Lilly as to the surrender of the fort, all except Minnis. At that time, movements of the Confederate troops were noted and the white flag in the fort was lowered and firing resumed. Quickly the movement stopped and the confederates blew siece fire and the conference continued.

As the offices continued to confer, Minnis was informed of the condition of the fort. He was also informed of the 3<sup>rd</sup> being out of ammunition and the situation with the 9<sup>th</sup> also being out and the two artillery pieces being out of commission. Minnis did not want to give up the fight but he had no choice. He rode out to Forrest and accepted the terms of surrender.

Forrest gave the men in the fort time to care for the wounded and bury their dead as the men of his command cut down the trestle and set it afire. The rest of the fort and the two block houses were destroyed. As Forrest continued north toward the Elk river Bridge, Col. Logwood and a small mounted guard moved the 973 prisoners south toward the Tennessee River. Estimates of the killed union troops range from 200 to 107. Confederate losses are estimated at about 30 killed and wounded. The union also lost 700 small arms, two cannons, 19 wagons and ambulances and more than 300 horses that had belonged to the 9<sup>th</sup> Indiana and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Tennessee. Also headed south with Col Logwood were 150 horses, the two cannons and four of the 8 guns of Morton’s battery. Forrest was worried that he would not have enough ammunition for the guns as they had used over 800 rounds while taking the fort.

On the march to the Tennessee River about 200 men managed to escape Col. Logwood’s prison march and make it back to Decatur. The second night out, while they were camped about 15 miles from Bainbridge, Union cavalry was reported on the road from Decatur. Logwood sent about 20 men to contest the cavalry advance and the prisoners were put in to a forced march to Bainbridge and crossed the Mussel soles at that point.

Lilly and several officers tried to organize an escape plan but fear that the colored troops would not join them put the plan to rest.

The captives were then sent south to Meridian, MS. From there, the colored troops were sent to Mobile to work on the fort there. The Enlisted men were sent to the Cahaba prison camp and the officers were sent to Enterprise, Ms.

At Enterprise, Lilly and the other officers were greeted by post commander Major Matthew S. Ward of the 14<sup>th</sup> Mississippi Light Artillery Battalion. Major Ward an attorney before the war was born in Virginia and then moved to Indiana where his brother John W. Ward was born. Some of the information that was obtained states that Major ward was once involved with the Indiana State legislator.

The Officers were given almost free rein of the town of Enterprise. They could sell the property and use the money that they got to purchase goods in town. From the history of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Tennessee Cavalry Union: Major Ward took a liking to Major Lilly and the other Indiana Boys. There were many occasions that they would gather at his home for get-togethers.

At some point in October or early November, word reaches Major Ward that a band of bushwhackers and deserters were headed in the direction of Enterprise. They had heard that there were Union prisoners there and the town was treating them too well. They thought that they would teach the town and the prisoners a lesson.

Major Ward, hearing this sent a telegraph to his commander requesting troops to help guard the town. The return message stated that it would be over a week for help to arrive, much too late to be of any help.

It was then that Major Lilly approached Major Ward with this idea. The Union Officers that were being held there should be given arms and that they would help defend the town. With their word of honor as officers, they would after the danger had passed or help would have arrived, they would return their arms to the Major and would not try to escape. Thus for two days and two night, Union and Confederate soldiers walked the picket line together.

On or about November 15<sup>th</sup>, the officers were escorted to Memphis for exchange. From there, they were sent to St. Louis and then to Camp Chase in Ohio. Lilly stated that he had not seen Col Minnis smile until he left Enterprise.

Just after the battle at Nashville, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Henry Campbell, the bugler of Lilly's former battery, ran in to Mrs. Lilly on a Nashville street. She stated that she had been in town ever since her husband had been captured.

About December 7<sup>th</sup> or in that area, Col. Jackson sent a letter to Governor Morton requesting that Lilly be promoted to Lt. Col. This was granted about the first of January.

Henry Campbell recalls that on the first of January he also ran into then Col Lilly on a street in Nashville. Lilly stated that the Cavalry was much harder than the artillery.

From Nashville, Lilly was sent to Gravelly Springs, Al to rejoin the rest of the Regiment in winter quarters. The rest of his service was in and around Vicksburg, Ms and was mustered out in August of 1865

After thought:

After the war, Lilly and another man went into partnership in a cotton plantation near Port Gibson, Ms. Lilly sent for his wife and only son to join him there. Within one year, two major tragedies hit home hard. Drought had ruined the cotton crop, his partner left town with all of there money and worst of all, his beloved wife Emily became ill and died. Lilly returned to Indiana with his son who was also very ill. He had to declare bankruptcy. After several endeavors in Ill and in Indiana, Lilly was able to save enough money to open a small lab in downtown Indianapolis in 1876. It was his experience in the Civil war that helped him to decide that higher standards for the making of medications needed to be made. He also developed innovative ways that medicine could be easley taken.

After the capture of Lilly, the fort at Pulaski was named Fort Lilly in honor of him. Col. Jackson and Col Spaulding pressed charges against General Starkweather for being drunk before and during the loss of the fort at Sulphur Trestle. General Starkweather denied these charges but in light of them, he never commanded a garrison again.

Col. Jackson resigned his command in June of 1865 thus promoting Lilly to full Col.  
Col. Spaulding later became a General  
Col. Minnis later became the postmaster at Knoxville, Tn.

One Hundred-forty five years ago, on a rain soaked hill in Middle Tennessee, Eli Lilly fought his first battle of the American Civil War. Lilly, the founder of Eli Lilly and Company, organized the 18<sup>th</sup> Indiana Light Artillery Battery in the summer of 1862. After almost 10 months of chasing various Confederate threats in Kentucky and Tennessee, his skill and resolve was tested when Col. John T. Wilder's brigade faced an entire Confederate division at Hoover's gap on June 24, 1863.

On the 28<sup>th</sup> of June 2008, guns of the 18<sup>th</sup> Indiana Light Artillery again were heard on the same hill that Capt. Eli Lilly fought. Only, this time, the guns were fired at the dedication of a marker honoring Lilly's Indiana Battery.

This marker was placed at what is named the Beechgrove Confederate Cemetery and Park. This is the first Union marker of its kind to be placed on a privately owned battlefield in the state of Tennessee.

Work on the marker started when Richard Young of Martinsville, In. returned from a research trip to the battlefield last August. Dr. Michael Bradley retired professor of history at Motlow State Community College in Tullahoma, Tennessee had suggested to Mr. Young that such a marker would be a welcome addition to the Park.

With the help of the Midwest Civil War Artillery, a living history group located in Shelbyville, Indiana headed by Allen Dorsett, the group raised the money from donations by various individuals in the area.

The dedication featured three artillery pieces being fired, two soldiers one Union and one Confederate walking from the north and one from the south to shake hands, and the playing of two civil war songs. The ceremony not only was to dedicate the marker but also to honor the brave men Union and Confederate who fought at this location.

The Beechgrove Confederate Cemetery is located 15 miles south of Murfreesboro, Tennessee on Interstate 24 at exit 97. The park is open all year with restrooms and picnic areas. The land was a local cemetery before the war and now contains 74 graves of unknown Confederate soldiers that died in the battle of Hoover's Gap.

Mr. Dorsett heads the living history group that portrays the 18<sup>th</sup> Indiana Light Battery (Lilly's Battery) and the Rockridge Confederate Artillery Battery. He and his group give talks and demonstrations on the Civil war to schools with in the state and many Civil War Reenactments across the United States.

Mr. Young has been researching Eli Lilly's civil war involvement for several years and has given talks on Lilly to various groups including groups at DePauw University.