

Terry's Texas Rangers (Conclusion)

By Glenn Van Eman

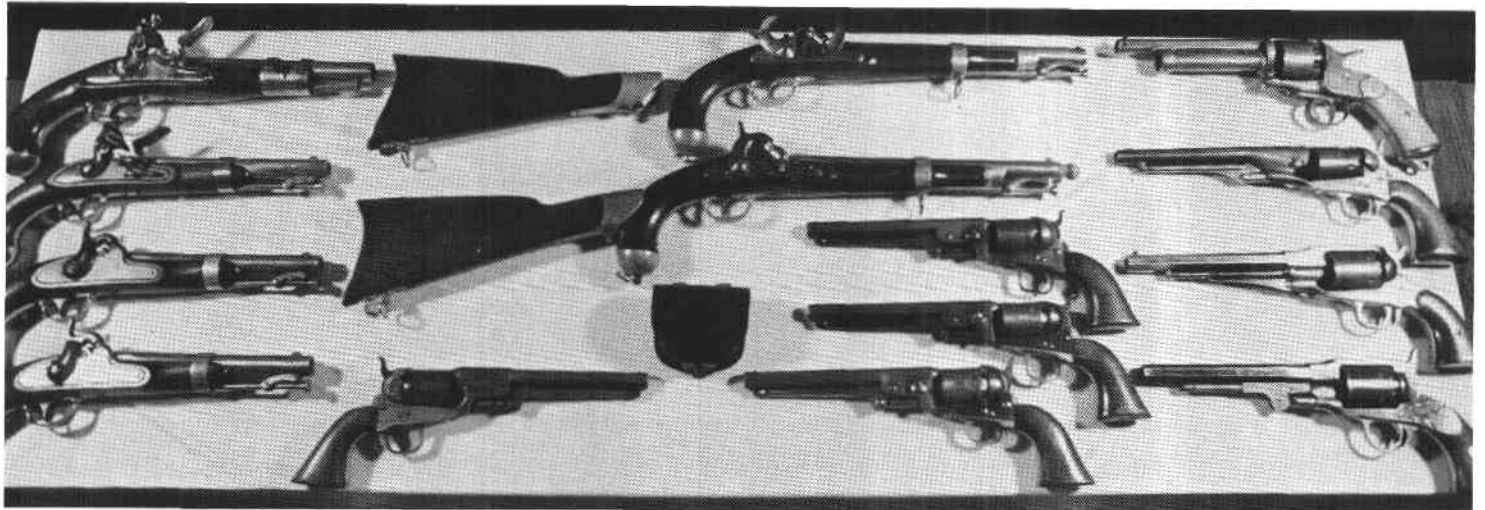
General Hood's last official duty of any consequence while commanding the Army of Tennessee was to assign the 8th Texas again to the job of being spies behind the enemy lines. This started out as an intelligence gathering force at which the cavalry had always been the major source of information and he detailed the 8th Texas to assign a unit permanently to the rear of Sherman's main line of skirmishers to report what the Union army was doing and destroy as much of the Union equipment and capture as many of the Union soldiers as possible. This was an impossible task on paper, but actually the 8th Texas Cavalry carried it out extremely well. The 8th Texas Commander Harrison assigned this duty to Captain Shannon from Fort Bend County and Shannon chose his men well. A lot of them were from his unit, Company H. For his services he was eventually elevated to the rank of Colonel. He used a small force of hand-picked Texas Rangers, usually never more than 43 including officers, and the largest group he worked with was 80 men and all of them were volunteers. Their duty was not only to gain intelligence, which they did constantly and which they funneled back to Hood through couriers who had to run through Union lines, where a lot of their loss occurred, they had to completely resupply their unit with personnel as various unit members were captured, killed or wounded. But their primary contribution to the Confederacy was in their toll on Sherman's bummers who were setting fires to civilian property in Sherman's march from Atlanta to the sea. They cut a 60 mile wide swath through Georgia to the sea and then proceeded to cut the same swath all the way to the Virginia border.

While Sherman's bummers were able to destroy, pillage, plunder, pretty much at will during the day time, a lot of them met their match the following night. Shannon's tactics were very simple. Upon discovering a Union raiding party (which was very easy — you just went to where the smoke was on the horizon

and you could find a Union raiding party, certainly much larger than Shannon's units) they would watch the Union troops and follow them to wherever they were going to spend the night. Then our Confederates would bed down themselves quietly, cook meals if they could, usually cold because if they had fires they could be seen, and then between 3 and 4 a.m. in the morning they would attack the Union camp with everything they had.

Everybody would be in the saddle, even those that were wounded that could ride, and everybody would have every weapon that they could get at the ready. They would often, like the rest of the 8th Texas Rangers, carry as many as six revolvers, preferably '51 Colt Navies; they would carry two in holsters at their belts, two stuck inside their belts and two in saddlebags, if they could get six revolvers. If they couldn't, they'd carry as many as they could get. They would ride into the Union camp and kill every living thing in the camp. Anybody that stood up, moved or ran or attempted to fire back at them was shot if possible. The idea was to eliminate all of them, to kill everybody there. That was their goal and they went at their work with great vengeance. They certainly had a great deal of enthusiasm for their work, having seen the destruction of the country as they had. The Union troopers generally never knew what hit them and the Union investigating officers never knew what hit them either.

The unfortunate thing about this interesting unit is that we don't know much about it except what we have found from after-the-war writings and these were quite late because nobody wanted to admit after the war that they were members of Shannon's Scouts, being afraid of reprisals. All their official records were destroyed; they kept very few records of any kind but those that they did have were destroyed before the cessation of hostilities.



"Horse Pistols," "Colt Navies," and other pistols that could have been carried by Terry's Texas Rangers. Upper right: LeMat shipped through the Union blockade. Single gun, lower left center: .36 Griswold and Gunnison.

Johnston left the Atlanta area trying to blunt Sherman's constant attacks and pressure on his badly weakened Army of Tennessee. He could not stop Sherman, all he could do was halt him, bloody his nose and then pull back and let Sherman make his next move.

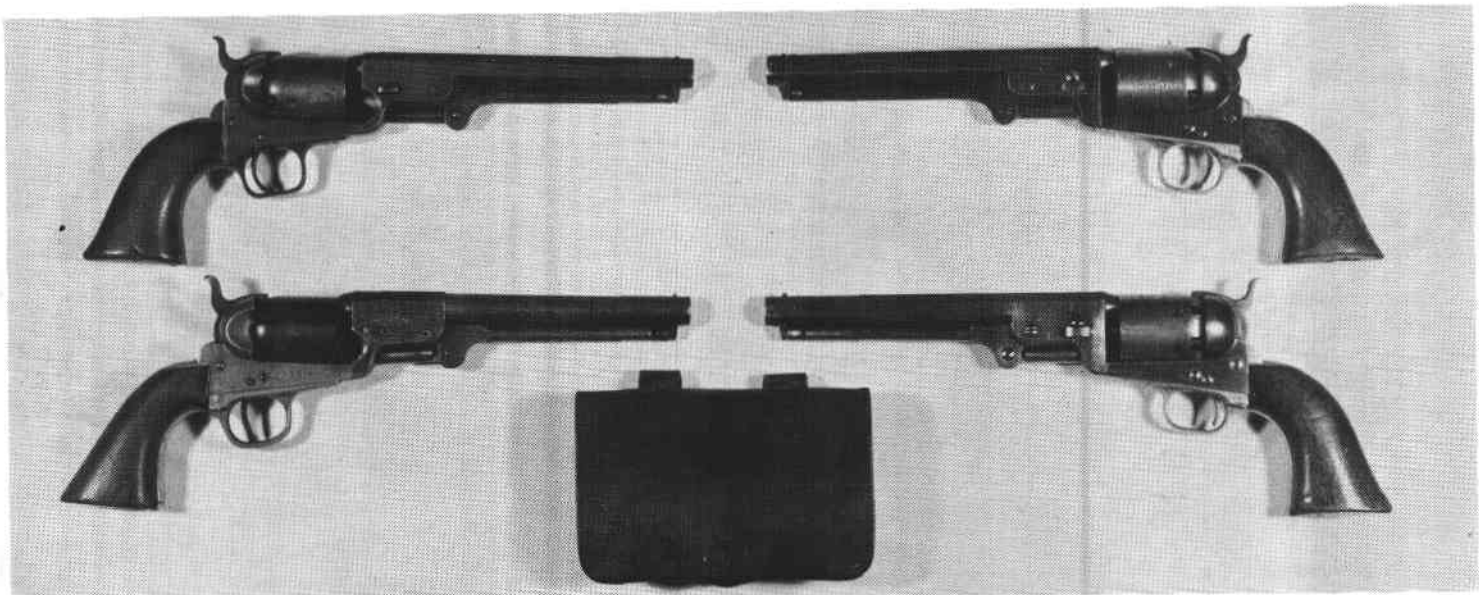
Sherman then proceeded to push Joseph E. Johnston's beleaguered forces back into North Carolina. Johnston was in desperate shape in March, 1865, and had almost lost the entire Army of Tennessee at Bentonville, North Carolina. What had happened, with a beaten and demoralized force, the cavalry fighting every day, at all times during daylight hours, he often lost a real sense of where the enemy was and he often did not have accurate intelligence reports when he was retreating. Not due to any one single cause, the Confederate Army found themselves south of a major bridge crossing, the only bridge in the area across a good sized river and Sherman's forces had suddenly made a rather rapid advance. An entire brigade had managed to capture a river crossing at a bridge with about three-fourths of the army of Tennessee south of the bridge with no other means of crossing the river. Into this desperate gap was ordered the 8th Texas Cavalry. General Joseph Wheeler, still the commander of the Army of Tennessee, simply ordered, without any fanfare, the 8th Texas to charge whatever forces were at the bridge, drive them from the bridge, recapture the bridge and hold it until the remainder of the Confederate army crossed. It was a very simple order and one that was virtually impossible to carry out. At the time of the order, the entire regiment was commanded by a captain. All of the field grade officers were wounded or killed. Unit numbers at this time were 250 effectives, but they were scattered out in various duties and under various commands. The captain only had with him about 150 troopers. He immediately took the command to carry out the order.

While galloping his horse down toward the river crossing, he was met and stopped by General Hardee, one of the senior commanders of the Army of Tennessee and the author of *Hardee's Infantry Tactics*. General Hardee, in dismay, asked

the captain where he was going and what he was going to do. As far as Hardee was concerned, the battle had been lost and the Army of Tennessee was finished. The young captain told him that "I am going to capture the bridge and throw the bluebellies out." The general asked him, "With what?" The captain said, "With Terry's Texas Rangers." That was all of the interrogation. Hardee simply bid him farewell; his last comment was, "Then execute your orders."

On the way to the bridge, the 8th Texas Cavalry met and passed a Confederate infantry brigade that had been assigned to support the movement of the cavalry and to help secure the bridge if possible, after the Texans had captured it. They were at double-time, running up a slight incline that the Texans soon climbed with their horses, passing the Confederate infantry with a lot of shouts and a lot of hoorahs on both sides. The Texans rolled over the crest of the hill at the top of the incline and opened up with a classic rebel yell. The Union forces had crossed the bridge and gained the other side. They had a number of somewhere around 4,000 troops at the bridge, an entire brigade. They were utterly dismayed seeing, coming down the hill charging at full speed, these wildly yelling Texans. This would be the last cavalry charge of the entire Eastern campaign and of course the last of the 8th Texas Cavalry.

The Union forces were so shocked and so surprised that they lost their foothold on the north side of the river. They proceeded to get a lot of them killed on the north side by Confederate shotguns. They retreated across the bridge, lost the bridge and were driven from the entire field of battle. In fact, the Union infantry forces that had occupied the bridge literally turned and ran and it became a Yankee rout. The cavalry charged across the bridge, the infantry forces followed. They established a good sized beach head on the south side of the river, and the entire Army of Tennessee crossed to safety to the north bank before the Union forces were able to recover. The entire battle took place on March 19, 1865. It must have been a rather exhilarating experience for these people to ride in their saddles again and give the rebel yell one last time. It was only one week



Three "Colt Navies" and a Griswold & Gunnison, .36 calibre, #2720.

later, a week of no important fighting, that General Joseph E. Johnston surrendered his Army of Tennessee to General Sherman.

Very few records were kept of the last week of the war, but 248 men were present for duty in the 8th Texas Cavalry on the day before the surrender. The commanding officer, the same officer who had commanded the charge at Bentonville, Captain Dock Matthews of Company H, went to General Hardee the night before the official surrender and asked the general's permission to take out the troopers of the 8th Texas who did not want to participate in the surrender and sign parole. They wanted to see if they could fight their way out and join General Richard (Dick) Taylor, the Confederate general commanding in the Alabama area, and continue the war.

General Hardee gave his total approval and said, "By all means, take every man out who wants to continue the fight, and those that are left will surrender with us." So those troopers that decided not to surrender left that night with their horses and their weapons, bid their comrades and fellow troopers goodbye and on May 26, 1865 the commanding officer of the regiment, Captain J.F. Doc Mathews surrendered, along with the rest of the Army of Tennessee and 90 troopers of the Terry's Texas Rangers. Ninety had decided to surrender, the rest cut their way out that night before.

If you have wondered from the very start of this paper what the Southern troops were fighting for, particularly our 8th Texas Cavalry unit so far away from home, the real answer is, and this was part of the answer to the success of all the Southerners fighting against such tremendous odds that they should never have fought at all; that these men had a fierce pride and a deep patriotism. Not the flag-waving patriotism that we often talk about in modern America, not the rousing cheers and the enthusiasm that we sometimes see generated in America (we see it very seldom these days), but the patriotism that is much deeper, that comes from love of homeland. Now, to the Texans, homeland meant their plantation area. They were all from rural beginnings and all rurally oriented, so plantation had a great deal of meaning to them, whether they owned it, worked on it or were children of the owners, they had a tremendous feeling for the old homeplace. There was no loyalty to cities or towns particularly, but there was a great deal of loyalty to the country. After the plantation we had a country oriented existence, and then after that their section of Texas or wherever in the South that they were from. In our case Texas, whether east, central or west, they were very loyal to this region. Then their supreme loyalty was to their state, in most cases not native state. Only 21% of our 8th Texas Rangers were native Texans, a little over 1 in 5, which is an unbelievably high percentage when you consider Texas had been a state only a little over 15 years and half of it was Indian controlled. A group that had that high a percentage of native born is quite unusual, anyway among the Texas troops.

Love of state was what carried them into war in the first place. They never thought of themselves as Confederates *per se* until after they had been in the army for a while. They thought of themselves as Texans. Their loyalty to the Confederacy was a fairly loose loyalty because the state's loyalty was somewhat loose, but once they got into combat and proceeded to take

losses and get shot at, they had a great deal more respect for their new home nation, the Confederacy, but they would never forget that they were basically Texans.

This unit, in my estimation, would have to go down as the toughest single military unit in the history of the United States. I know of no other United States military unit that did so much for so long with so little as the 8th Texas Cavalry, TERRY'S TEXAS RANGERS!

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Artist's sketch of a member of Hood's Texas Brigade (1st Texas Infantry Regiment), Army of Northern Virginia, C.S.A. The SR on the kepi stands for "Star Rifles." All letters cut from sheet brass.

SONG OF THE TEXAS RANGERS

(To the tune of *The Yellow Rose of Texas*)

The morning star is paling,
The camp fires flicker low,
Our steeds are madly neighing
For the bugle bids us go;
So put the foot in stirrup,
And shake the bridle free,
For to-day the Texas Rangers
Must cross the Tennessee!
With Wharton for our leader,
We'll chase the dastard foe,
Till our horses bathe their fetlocks
In the deep blue Ohio.

Our men come from the prairies
Rolling broad, and proud, and free,
From the high and craggy mountains,
To the murmuring Mexic sea;
And their hearts are open as their plains,
Their thoughts are proudly brave
As the bold cliffs of the San Bernard,
Or the Gulf's resistless wave.
Then quick into the saddle,
And shake the bridle free,
To-day with gallant Wharton,
We cross the Tennessee.

'Tis joy to be a Ranger;
To fight for dear Southland;
'Tis joy to follow Wharton,
With his gallant, trusty band;
'Tis joy to see our Harrison
Plunge, like a meteor bright,
Into the thickest of the fray,
And strike with deadly might.
Oh! who would not be a Ranger,
And follow Wharton's cry,
To battle for the country—
And if it need be—die!

Up with the crimson battle-flag!
Let the blue pennon fly!
Our steeds are stamping proudly,
They hear the battle-cry.
The thundering bomb, the bugle's call,
Proclaim the foe is near,
We strike for God and native land,
And all we hold most dear
Then spring into the saddle,
And shake the bridle free—
For Wharton leads thro' fire and blood,
For Home and Victory!