

CHAPTER SEVEN

1857 - HOOD'S DEVIL'S RIVER FIGHT

Then, the war drums broke the silence,
And re-echoed from its crest;
Now, the gentle zephyr ripples
The Llano's placid breast.
And at eve its shining waters
Flowing onward to the sea,
Bring in fancy, ghostly shadows
Of the gallant Hood and Lee.
It was here the dark marauders
Played havoc in their day;
While undaunted the 2nd Cavalry,
Kept the savage hordes at bay.

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- Author Unknown

The stable of Company G, 2nd U.S. Cavalry, at Fort Mason, Texas, was alive with activity in the early morning hours of July 5, 1857, as twenty-five troopers of Captain Bradfute's Company, swearing and sweating, hurriedly saddled their brown mounts.¹ Joseph P. Henley, 1st Sergeant of Company G, passed from man to man helping to adjust equipment, inspecting saddle bags - mess kit and personal belongings in one;hardtack, bacon and coffee in the other - and passing out ammunition, 25 rounds to a man. Pack mules would carry reserve ammunition, extra food and forage, enough for a month's campaigning.²

With the call, "Boots and Saddles," each horse soldier who had finished checking his weapons (saber, carbine and pistol) and adjusting his saddle and equipment led his horse out to the parade ground on the sloping crown of Post Hill. After the last cavalryman had left the stable, Sergeant Henley, leading both his horse and that of the detachment commander, made his way up the rocky slope, past the officers quarters and joined his men on the parade ground. Here the Sergeant formed his detail and awaited the appearance of the leader of the scouting expedition.³

The wait was short. From the direction of Post Headquarters, strode the tall, lean, tawny-bearded lieutenant, West Point graduate and man of action - John Bell Hood. ⁽¹⁸⁵¹⁻⁵³⁾ With the grace of a born Kentucky horseman, Hood swung easily into the saddle, wheeled his big brown mare around, and faced his command. Crisp, clear orders rang out - "Stand to horse;" "Prepare to mount;" "Mount, ho" - and the twenty-five horse soldiers settled into their saddles and brought their mounts into line.

Hood, putting the troopers at ease, briefed the command on the orders that he had received from Major George H. Thomas, the Post Commander. The detachment, Hood said, was to ride west from Fort Mason along the North Llano to a point some 15 miles the other side of old Fort Terrett.⁴ The purpose of the expedition, he added, was "to examine and explore" an Indian trail, running north and south, that had been reported by Lieutenant John T. Shaaff, out on a scout, a few days before.⁵ The Lieutenant, asked for questions; receiving none, he brought the command to attention and then gave out the orders: "Prepare to move out;" "Column of twos by the right flank, ho." The column led by Hood moved off the parade ground, down the eastern slope of Post Hill to the Fredericksburg Road and turned south toward the Llano.⁶ At the head of the column, accompanying the Lieutenant, was John McLoughlin, famous Delaware scout and tracker of the 2nd Cavalry.⁷

The detachment soon struck the Llano and turned west toward Indian country. After three days ride, the column came to the crumbling ruins of Fort Terrett, abandoned to the elements several years previously. Hood decided to camp here for the night, and Private Dick Hopkins, the designated "hunter" for the detachment, was sent out on a quest for

wild game to supplement their hard tack and bacon. Hopkins cornered a bear in a cave not far from camp and came back for help to dispatch the animal. Sergeant Deaton, who led the volunteers, succeeded only in wounding the bear, and in the ensuing flight from the cave with the enraged brute at his heels, Deaton rolled down a hill dislocating his knee cap. Fortunately a shot from another member of the party felled the animal, and the detachment feasted on bear meat for supper that night and breakfast the following morning. Deaton was too badly injured to continue on the patrol, so was sent back to Fort Mason accompanied by Corporal Henry Jones.⁸ This reduction in the size of the detachment would almost prove fatal.

Not finding the trail reported by Shaaff, Hood, bent on action, continued on in a northwesterly direction toward the headwaters of the Middle Concho and the bleak country beyond. The detachment passed several old trails, but saw nothing worth pursuing and continued on westward through wasteland dotted occasionally with cactus and sagebrush. John McLoughlin, the Indian Scout, dependable when sober and always daring, ranged far in front of the column, seeking a fresh pony trail or other signs of recent Indian activity.

Hood's persistence finally paid off. After 12 days out from Fort Mason, while exploring several creeks that emptied into the Middle Concho, McLoughlin discovered a recent Indian trail near the mouth of Kiowa Creek. The trail, from all indications, appeared to be but two or three days old, and there were from 15 to 20 ponies in the party. The raiders were moving south toward Mexico via the headwaters of the Devil's River. Hood, without hesitation, after hearing the scout cry, "Comanche,"

McLoughlin's signal for a fresh trail, directed the column south and took up the chase on July 17. With the trail three days old, and a land barren of food, forage and water ahead, overtaking the marauders before they reached Mexico would be a difficult task. Fatigue and privation would be the daily routine for both men and animals.⁹

The detachments, rode south several miles, then turned east to a water hole, "two miles south of the head of Lipan Creek." The war party had stopped here and then had headed due south. Hood continued the chase, following a line of water holes that were from 35 to 50 miles apart, a course that marked one of the main Comanche trails into Mexico. The dogged cavalymen rode rapidly south under a brutal July sun. Unfortunately, few of the water holes yielded palatable water. The smell was so bad at several of the watering places that the men had to hold their breath as they drank from the stagnant pools. At the scum-covered, brackish ponds the soldiers filled their canteens and the sleeves of all waterproof coats; they could take no chances: even if the water was bad, each water hole might be the last.

For four days Hood led his command, their blue uniforms grey from alkali dust, in a relentless forced march across the barren plains of southwest Texas. A private riding with the detachment, wrote, "...we pushed on out to the dry plains, and soon the cry for water was heard among the men. It was the hottest weather I ever experienced and our horses suffered beyond measure...."¹⁰ Each day the Indian trail became more distinct. While this encouraged the troopers to greater effort, the pace was telling on the horses, several of which began to show great fatigue and leg weariness. An ominous sign appeared on the morning of July 20,

when the command came to a waterhole a few miles above the head of Devil's River - a second party of Indians had joined the first group. Evidence at a campsite near the stagnant body of water indicated that not fewer than 50 marauders had camped there. Wisps of smoke still rose from the embers; the quarry was near.

The increase in the size of the comanche force, the jaded condition of the army mounts, and the extreme thirst and hunger of the soldiers caused the young West Pointer to reassess the situation. His command would be outnumbered at least two to one, and while the Indians, who had been traveling at a much less punishing pace, would be fresh and alert, his animals and men were much fatigued. Fortunately the horse soldiers were well armed. Each private carried a Springfield rifle carbine and a Navy Colt six-shooter revolver. The noncommissioned officers carried the same arms as the privates and in addition a heavy dragoon saber. Hood himself was a veritable mounted arsenal. He carried, besides a dragoon saber and two Navy Colt revolvers, a double-barreled shotgun loaded with heavy buckshot. The consensus (no doubt dominated by the aggressive lieutenant) was to continue the pursuit and bring the "Terrors of the Plains", as the Comanches were often called, to combat as soon as possible.

The detachment from Fort Mason pressed on during the afternoon of July 20, expecting any moment to sight the war party. The cavalrymen crossed the bluffs near Devil's River and followed south some three miles east of the river. "Late in the afternoon," Hood wrote, "from the extreme thirst of my men, I left the trail to go to the river and camp. About one mile from the trail," he added, "I discovered some two miles

and a half from me, on a ridge, some horses and a large white flag waving."¹¹ The Lieutenant was not certain whether the group he sighted was the Comanches he sought or a band of friendly Tonkawas on their way to Mexico under safe passage orders from Army Headquarters. According to information that he received prior to leaving Fort Mason, the Tonkawas were to display a white flag for identification if they were intercepted by a military force. Hood, aware that the flag and the small group of Indians clustered around it could be bait for a trap, cautiously approached the ridge and its occupants.

The terrain in the area was rough and partially covered with a growth of Spanish bayonet that offered excellent concealment. When the detachment was a hundred yards or so from the Indians, the Lieutenant halted his men and warned them not to fire until he gave the order. Leaving six men with weary mounts and Scout McLoughlin to guard the pack mules and supplies, Hood formed the remaining 17 troopers into line and, taking position to the front and right of his command, gave the order to advance. The Lieutenant was taking no chances; his shotgun, double-cocked, was lying across the pommel of his saddle.¹² As the cavalymen drew near to the cluster of Indians, a half dozen or so of them, bearing the white flag, left the hill and walked toward Hood, apparently in a show of friendship. However, when the warriors were within "some 30 paces" of the advancing horse soldiers they threw the flag to the ground, brandished their concealed weapons and rushed toward Hood and his men.¹³ As the warriors threw down the flag (which apparently was the signal for the attack), some thirty others on foot arose from the Spanish bayonet and about twelve on horseback rode from behind the ridge toward the cavalymen.

Simultaneously with this assault, the squaws fired a large heap of dried grass, weeds and leaves directly in front of the troopers. The dense smoke and crackling fire greatly effected the soldier's horses, causing several of them to plunge and rear. With hideous yells, some 50 warriors, vividly painted, stripped to the waist, and with horns or feathers on their heads, advanced on the troopers from both flanks.¹⁴

The cavalrymen answered the challenge of battle with a shout of their own and engaged the warriors in hand-to-hand fighting. All of the Indians carried tough buffalo-hide shields, and while those on foot were armed with either guns or bows and arrows, those mounted carried flint-tipped lances - deadly in the hands of expert horsemen like the Comanches.¹⁵ Outflanked by a force at least three times his number and hemmed in by a wall of fire and smoke to his front, all that Hood could hope for was that superior marksmanship and discipline would prove to be the decisive elements in the fight.

Lieutenant Hood, who was well in advance of his men, was the first target. Two warriors rushed at him, one from each side, and attempted to drag him from the saddle. Two quick blasts from his shotgun at point blank range all but decapitated his attackers and frustrated a quick attempt by the Comanches to down the leader of the horse soldiers. Hood then drew his revolver and led his men into the midst of the advancing Indians driving them back toward the fire. The handful of troopers, like their leader, fought fiercely in their attempt to whittle down the odds against them. After firing their carbines, the soldiers drew their revolvers and, firing at close range, did fearful execution. The melee continued unabated for some time; the fighting was primarily hand-to-hand,

and no quarter was asked or given. Sergeant Henley killed a chief decked out in a war bonnet by parrying his lance thrust and then cleaving his skull open with a saber stroke. Several cavalry mounts were beaten about the face and neck with the buffalo hide shields in an attempt to unhorse the rider.¹⁶

Herman G. Rost, a veteran of the Mexican War, and a member of Hood's command, wrote, concerning the severity of the action,

In the heat of the hand-to-hand encounter, an Indian seized my horse by the bridle reins, another seized me by the left leg, trying to pull me off. I still held my gun, although it was empty, when an Indian from behind rushed forward and seized it and wrenched it from my hands...When I drew my pistol, I shot the Indian that was pulling my left leg and he fell over....When I shot the Indian on my left I turned to attend to the Indian on the right, but just at that moment one of the boys shot him....¹⁷

Rost, along with his surviving comrades, was later cited in Army Orders for "gallant conduct" during the engagement.¹⁸

Hood kept rallying his men as the fighting waged back and forth, and with first one side and then the other gaining temporary advantage of the smoky field.¹⁹ As the Indians discharged their rifles, they passed them back to their squaws, who handed back a second rifle while they reloaded the first one. The soldiers, after expending the full loads of their Navy Colts, following Hood's orders, fell back about 50 yards and dismounted to reload their weapons.²⁰ The restlessness of the horses and the "deadly fire of the Indians" would not permit the troopers to reload while mounted.²¹ Just before falling back with his men to reload, Lieutenant Hood was painfully wounded. An arrow pierced both his left hand and the reins, pinning his hand to the bridle. After breaking the arrow head off, Hood withdrew the shaft from the wound.

A handkerchief, wound tightly around his hand, staunched the bleeding.²²

As the cavalrymen were in the proces of reloading their arms, a terrible wailing and howling arose from beyond the smouldering brush. This sound, although bloodcurdling, was reassuring to the soldiers, for it meant that the Indians would not renew their attack. It was the sound of sorrow uttered by the squaws as the dead and wounded were being gathered up. Another attack by the Comanches while the men were dismounted and loading would have wiped out the detachment from Company G, for Hood had but a half dozen men and mounts left that were suitable for combat. The Lieutenant attributed the survival of his command against such great odds to two things, one, that the "Indians did not have the self-possession to cut our bridle reins, which act would have proved fatal to us," and, two, that "we were mounted and above their level seems to have rendered their aim very imperfect."²³

The Indians, after picking up their dead, and with nightfall approaching, disappeared through the underbrush toward the Rio Grande. The detachment from Fort Mason, with worn out mounts, short on food and water, and having suffered several casualties, was in no condition to pursue.²⁴ Hood moved his crippled command to Devil's River, where it bivouacked for the night. At the same time he dispatched a rider to nearby Camp Hudson for supplies and medical aid.²⁵

The loss for Company G had been rather severe for a small command; two soldiers had been killed (Privates William Barry and Thomas Ryan), one had been dangerously wounded, and three soldiers and Hood had been badly wounded. One horse was killed, three were wounded, and the rest were leg weary. After the engagement Hood had but 11 men left to protect his wounded and his horses.²⁶

In his official report of the battle, Lieutenant Hood estimated that his command had killed 8 or 9 Indians and had wounded about double that number.²⁷ The exact number of Comanche casualties, Hood explained, was difficult to determine due to the nature of the ground cover and the pall of smoke that hung over the battlefield. It was verified later (by Reservation Indians who had been in the engagement) that there had been close to 100 Comanches and Lipan-Apaches in the party that Hood attacked and that the Indians had nineteen warriors killed (including two minor chiefs) and a great number wounded.²⁸

A relief column under Lieutenant Theodore Fink from Company G of the 8th U.S. Infantry Regiment stationed at Camp Hudson reached Hood's battered command on July 21, the day following the battle. The wounded, other than Hood, were sent back to Camp Hudson to rest and recuperate. Hood and the remnant of his cavalry detachment, accompanied by a 15 man detail from the 8th Infantry, returned to the scene of the battle to bury the dead and continue the fight if any of the marauders still lurked around. The blood, feathers, torn clothing, spent arrows, and discarded equipment that littered the churned-up ground attested to the severity of the struggle. Private Thomas Ryan's body was found "horribly mutilated," in addition to multiple wounds and marks a rifle ramrod had been thrust lengthwise through his body. Private Barry's body was not found.²⁹ The scouts who had been sent forward to pick up the trail soon returned and reported that the Indians had scattered in so many directions that further pursuit was impossible. Using picks and shovels brought from Camp Hudson, the soldiers buried Ryan in the field. A close search for Barry's body proved futile.³⁰

Lieutenant Hood and the troopers of his command who were fit to

travel rode by easy stages east to Fort Clark, in present Kinney County, arriving there on July 27. Here Hood wrote his report of the Devil's River Fight and forwarded it to the Headquarters of the Texas Military District at San Antonio. After remaining at Fort Clark for a few days to rest the men and the horses, the survivors of the expedition rode northeast to Fort Mason, where they arrived on August 8.³¹ Hood's command had been on the mission for almost five weeks and had ridden over 500 miles through dry, desolate country. Except for Van Dorn's two battles north of the Red River in 1858 and 1859, Hood's encounter on the Devil's River in 1857 would be the most severe engagement fought by the 2nd Cavalry while it was in Texas.

The expedition leader and his men were commended for gallantry by both General David E. Twiggs, commander of the Department of Texas, and General Winfield Scott, commanding general of the United States Army. Twiggs, in forwarding Hood's report on to Washington stated in his endorsement, "Lieutenant Hood's affair was a most gallant one, and much credit is due to both the officers (sic) and men." Winfield Scott before passing the report on to the Secretary of War wrote, "This combat was.. a most gallant one, and I shall take pleasure in taking some further notice of it."³²

The battlefield aggressiveness and disregard for his personal safety shown by John Bell Hood at Devil's River in 1857 would carry over into the Civil War, where he would first gain fame as commander of the hard-fighting Texas Brigade. Hood would climb rapidly in the Confederate Army, advancing from a 1st Lieutenant in April, 1861, to a full General in July, 1864 - the eighth and last Confederate officer to achieve this rank. He rose more rapidly in rank than any officer in the Civil War -

North or South. Badly maimed by the loss of an arm at Gettysburg and the amputation of a leg at Chickamauga, he nevertheless fought throughout the conflict, aggressive to the end.

By 1857 the Regiment was in excellent condition for field service. A year on the Texas frontier had enabled the cavalrymen to acquire a knowledge of the county, to improve their horsemanship and to gain valuable experience in fighting their wily foe. Too, by this time the Indians had come to realize that they could not successfully engage the mounted troops on equal terms, consequently they began to mass their numbers into larger bands for their depredations along the frontier. Hood's fight on the Devil's River in mid-July was an example of this change in strategy by the Southern Plains Indians. Heretofore no cavalry detachment had fought such a large band of the red marauders.

The year 1857, with fourteen engagements and several long scouting expeditions, was the most active year for the 2nd Cavalry in Texas. Although the Devil's River fight was the most serious of the engagements, several of the others are worth recording in some detail.

--- Excerpt from:

Cry Comanche, The 2nd U.S. Cavalry
in Texas, 1855-1861

Chapter Seven, Pages 83 - 93

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the author, Colonel Harold B. Simpson
for the express purpose of background
information to secure the approval of
a Texas Historical Marker on the
occasion of the 130th Anniversary of
Hood's Devil's River Fight.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 J.B. Hood, Advance and Retreat, New Orleans: G.T. Beauregard, 1880, p. 8. Hereafter cited as Hood.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Simpson, p. 135. Henley, who was born in Ireland, enlisted in the 2nd Cavalry in 1855, and as a non-commissioned officer was involved in several engagements while the Regiment was in Texas. He left Texas with the 2nd Cavalry in March, 1861, and remained in the Federal Army during the Civil War. Henley was the 1st Sergeant of the Regiment when he was commissioned a 2nd Lieutenant in April, 1863. Promoted later to captain and a company commander, Henley fought a Gettysburg and other engagements in the East. He was killed in action at the battle of Trevillian Station, Virginia, June 12, 1864. Price, pp. 505-06.
- 4 Fort Terrett in present Sutton County was established February 5, 1852 and abandoned on February 26, 1854. Robert W. Frazer. Forts of the West, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965, pp.163-64. Hereafter cited as Frazer.
- 5 "Report of Lieutenant John B. Hood" included in the Report of the Secretary of War, 1857. Sen. Exec. Doc's 35 Cong., 1st Session, No. 11, page 131. Hereafter cited as Hood's Report.
- 6 Simpson, p. 136.
- 7 H.G. Rost, "Desperate Fight on Devil's River," Frontier Times, Vol. 21, p. 142. Hereafter cited as Rost.
- 8 Ibid, p. 142
- 9 Hood's Report. p. 131
- 10 Rost, p. 142
- 11 Hood's Report, p. 131
- 12 Rost, p. 142; Hood, p. 11; Hood's Report, p. 132
- 13 Hood's Report, p. 132
- 14 Ibid.; Hood, p. 12; "General John B. Hood's Victory," Frontier Times, Vol. IV, No. 7 (April, 1927), p. 16
- 15 Hood's Report, p. 132.

FOOTNOTES (CONTINUED)

- 16 Hood's Report, p. 132. Hood stated in his autobiography that he "felt most grateful that (his) horses were so broken down as, but for these conditions," he wrote, " they would, doubtless, when beaten over the head with shields, have become totally unmanageable and caused the massacre of my entire command." Hood, p. 13.
- 17 Rost, p. 143. The hand to hand combat at Devil's River caused Hood thereafter to arm half of his command with sabers and the other half with pistols, in addition to their carbines. Price, p. 60.
- 18 Price, p. 664
19. Rost wrote, that hood's "stentorian voice of cheer and command was heard above the unearthly din" and that he "could never forget the coolness and bravery of Lieutenant Hood...." Rost, p. 143
- 20 It was Hood's contention that if each of his men had had two six-shooters he could have killed or wounded all of the Indians, Hood's Report, p. 132.
- 21 Hood's Report, p. 132; Hood, p. 13.
- 22 " Battle With Indians on Devil's River," Frontier Times, Vol. III, No. 6 (March, 1926), p. 14.
- 23 Hood, p. 13, 15.
- 24 Trooper Rost reported that the suffering of the command after the battle was "beyond description. Nearly every man was wounded, some severely, and few of our horses escaped the shafts of the enemy. We had not a drop of water and were tortured with thirst." Rost, p. 143.
- 25 Camp Hudson in present Val Verde County was established on June 7, 1857 on San Pedro Creek near Devil's River. Handbook, I, p. 281.
- 26 Hood's Report, p. 132.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 Hood, pp. 14-15.
- 29 Rost, p. 143; "Post Returns," Camp Hudson, July, 1857, Microfilm Copy No. M-617, Roll No. 495.
- 30 Hood, p. 14

FOOTNOTES (CONTINUED)

- 31 "Post Returns," Fort Mason, Texas, July, 1857. Microfilm Copy No. M-617, Roll No. 759.
- 32 "Report of the Secretary of War, 1857." Sen Exex. Doc's, 35th Cong., 1st Session, No. 11, pp. 131-132. Shortly after Hood returned to Fort Mason he was promoted to 1st Lieutenant, reassigned to Company K and placed on duty at Camp Colorado. In 1858 he reestablished Camp Wood and remained here until he was granted a leave of absence in November, 1860. Hood refused an assignment as Chief of Cavalry at West Point and, although still on leave, returned to Camp Wood in February, 1861. He accompanied the Regiment to Indianola when it left Texas in March, 1861 and soon thereafter resigned his commission in the U.S. Army. Hood, p. 15.

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