



*By Lowell H. Harrison*

Professor of History  
Western Kentucky University

*(Courtesy the Filson Club of Louisville (Kentucky). Filson Club Quarterly, vol. 54, n°1, 1980)*

A modest man, who was content to serve quietly and efficiently in the shadow of his glamorous and illustrious brother-in-law, Basil W. Duke has seldom received the credit he merited for his Civil War leadership. Yet he was one of Kentucky's finest soldiers in the Civil War, and he was one of the most capable Confederate officers of his rank. His excellent books and articles on the war have helped obscure his contributions, for in them he gave himself less than full credit, and his works have been used extensively by later historians of that conflict. It is time, therefore, to look anew at the civil career of General Duke.

He was born on an uncle's farm near Georgetown (Kentucky) on May 28, 1838, the only child of Captain Nathaniel Wilson Duke of the U.S. Navy, and May Pickett Currie Duke. The boy attended two well-known private schools in the Bluegrass before entering Centre College at Danville. He spent 1853-54 at Georgetown College (Kentucky), then studied law at Transylvania College in Lexington, where George Robertson, Chief Justice of the Kentucky Court of Appeals, directed his work. The Bluegrass bar has been crowded since the early days of settlement, and when the youth

received his degree in 1858, he decided to seek greater opportunities in St. Louis.<sup>1</sup> Duke was soon admitted to the bar, and he began the struggle to develop a successful practice. But his career was soon disrupted by the nation's great sectional crisis.

Although he was reported to have supported Stephen A. Douglas in 1860 "*with great zeal and some eloquence*", Duke's sympathies lay with the South. After Lincoln's election by a sectional party, Duke became convinced that the South would soon be attacked. Missouri, like Kentucky, was a Border state with sharply divided allegiance, and the young lawyer threw his energies into the struggle to win the State for the South. He helped to organize the "Minute Men", and he was captain of one of the five companies taken into state service by Governor Clairborne Jackson. Duke was also a member of the four men board that supervised the city police.

As the sectional crisis worsened, Duke and his colleagues recognized the vital importance of the state arsenal with its wealth of arms. Unfortunately, it was held by Union partisans, and the Southern sympathizers lacked artillery with which to force its surrender. Duke and Captain Colton Greene were sent to Montgomery (Alabama) to seek help from the newly organized Confederacy. President Jefferson Davis heeded their urgent plea and ordered two 12 pounder howitzers and two 32-pounder guns delivered to them at Baton Rouge.<sup>2</sup> They chartered a steamboat and managed to deliver the guns and other supplies by April 9, 1861. But the thousands of guns in the arsenal were moved beyond their reach and, under the able leadership of General Nathaniel Lyon the Unionists soon gained the ascendancy in St. Louis. When Duke burned some bridges to delay the Federal advance, he was indicted for both arson and treason. It seemed a good time to visit Kentucky, which has adopted an unusual policy of neutrality.

Duke had another reason for making the trip; he was engaged to the lovely Henrietta Hunt Morgan of Lexington. The wedding was scheduled for June 18, 1861, and "*as the date of that event approached,*" Duke explained, "*I felt a less accurate interest in the military situation and heard with more patience the suggestions of an armistice*". In addition to a wife, Duke acquired a brother-in-law, John Hunt Morgan, who was thirteen years his senior.<sup>3</sup> During the next few years Duke spent more time with John H. Morgan than with Henrietta.

Duty and responsibility meant a great deal to Basil Duke, and he had only received a leave of absence from the Missouri troops he had helped raise. After a few weeks at home, he returned to Missouri where he expected to join Sterling Price's command. However, John Sappington MarmaDuke attached him to Thomas C. Hindman's command, first as a volunteer aid and then as acting adjutant. During this period, Duke later wrote: "*I learned (...) my first lessons in scouring and outpost duty, rudimentary compared with those I afterwards received under Morgan, but nevertheless valuable*". He also became acquainted with General William J. Hardee who advised Duke to return home and recruit a cavalry command there.<sup>4</sup> The young Kentuckian, perhaps thinking of his bride, took the advice.

<sup>1</sup> James W. Henning, *Basil Wilson Duke, 1838-1916*, The Filson Club History Quarterly, 14 (April 1949), pp. 59-60; Bodley Temple and Samuel M. Wilson, *History of Kentucky* (4 vols.; Chicago, 1928), III, pp. 418, 421.

<sup>2</sup> Jefferson Davis to Governor C.F. Jackson, April 23, 1861, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (128 vols.; Washington, 1880-1901), Ser. I, vol. I, p. 688; Basil W. Duke, *Reminiscences of General Basil W. Duke, CSA* (Garden City, New York, 1911) pp. 32-57; Thomas L. Sneed, *The Fight for Missouri* (New York, 1888), pp. 108-10, 133-37, 150-57, 168.

<sup>3</sup> Duke, *Reminiscences*, pp. 51-63; Henning, *Duke*, p. 60; Temple and Wilson, *History of Kentucky*, III, p. 422.

<sup>4</sup> Duke, *Reminiscences*, pp. 68-71.

When Duke reached the Bluegrass, his recruiting proved less successfully than he had anticipated, for most of the men wanted to start their military service as captains. His activities attracted unwanted attention, and after narrowly escaping capture Duke decided to join the Confederate Army that had seized the southern portion of the State in September when Kentucky's tortured neutrality finally ended.<sup>5</sup>

Duke soon found himself second in command to his brother-in-law, John H. Morgan, and as a member of what would become one of the most famous cavalry units of the war. In 1857 Morgan had organized the "Lexington Rifles", an elite company of volunteer militia that later became part of the pro-southern State Guard. Learning that the State Guard was to be disarmed, Morgan slipped his command out of Lexington on the night of September 20. Ten days later, his ranks swelled to 200 members, he marched his men into Munfordville on the Green River.<sup>6</sup>

Although not officially enrolled in the Confederate Army, Morgan began the scouting activities that would command most of his attention during the next several months. Duke confessed that their expeditions north of the Green River were amateurish by later standards, "*yet they were very pleasant episodes in the dull tedious life of the camps, and excellent preparation for really hard and hazardous service*".<sup>7</sup> Their first fire encounter with the enemy was a comedy of errors: "*the fight was much like a camp-meeting, or an election row*", Duke reported. When a horse-soldier erroneously declared that they were being flanked, "*every man withdrew after his own fashion and in his own time*". However, the inexperienced Federal forces fled at the same time.

Morgan's men acquired legitimacy in October when they were sworn into Confederate service. Morgan was then elected captain and Duke first lieutenant. Two other companies were soon assigned to Morgan, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Kentucky Cavalry had its start. In early November Morgan's squadron was ordered to Bowling Green where its members received excellent horses and equipment. Scouting and patrolling occupied time, but lieutenant Duke had an opportunity to drill the men and to try to install some concept of discipline - a difficult matter with some of the independently minded Kentuckians.

As the men and the officers became better acquainted, the quiet but fun-loving Duke began to impress those with whom he served. Twenty-three years of age, he was inches shorter than the six-foot Morgan, and he weighed only 130 pounds.<sup>8</sup> But, according to one description, "*Gravely remote, with deep-set eyes and a square jaw covered with a rich black beard, he attracted respect without raising his resonant voice*".<sup>9</sup> He inspired by example, and his troopers learned to respect his good judgement and admire his courage.

Although a major clash had been often predicted for strongly fortified Bowling Green, the Confederate line that swept across southern Kentucky was crumbling on his flanks, and General Albert Sidney Johnston decided to withdraw in early 1862. Morgan's cavalry helped cover the retreat to Nashville (Tennessee) in miserable February weather. When both military and civilian discipline collapsed in Nashville, the troopers helped restore order and save a portion of the vast accumulation of supplies. When they moved to Murfreesboro, they were attached to the command of General John

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, pp. 71-77.

<sup>6</sup> Basil Duke, *A History of Morgan's Cavalry* (Bloomington, Ind., 1960; first published 1867), pp. 88-91.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 96.

<sup>8</sup> Edison H. Thomas, *John H. Morgan and His Raiders* (Lexington, 1975), pp. 19-20.

<sup>9</sup> Dee A. Brown, *The Bold Cavaliers* (Philadelphia, 1959), p. 28.

C. Breckinridge, a fellow Kentuckian whom many of them knew. Duke led numerous scouting raids toward Nashville as the two armies maintained contact and probed for information.

During this period Morgan's men had their first brushes with the 4<sup>th</sup> U.S. Ohio Cavalry, one of their favorite and most determined enemy units. Then, the long retreat resumed until the Confederates reached the vicinity of Corinth (Mississippi). When substantial reinforcements arrived, Johnston decided to strike at Ulysses S. Grant's Union Army at Pittsburgh Landing before it was joined by the forces of Don Carlos Buell. When the Confederates attacked on Sunday morning, April 6, 1862, Morgan's unit was attached to Colonel R.P. Trabue's 1<sup>st</sup> Kentucky Brigade. Inactive during the early hours of the battle, "*we listened to the hideous noise*" Duke said, "*and thought how much larger the affair was than the skirmishes on Green River and around Nashville*". Casualties were heavy, and as Duke recalled, "*My patriotic ardor and anxiety to take part in the battle was considerably dampened when I saw this evidence of what extreme pains were taken to dispose of combatants*". Late in the morning General Hardee ordered Morgan to go to the extreme flank and "*charge the first enemy he saw*". During the ensuing struggle as the troopers cut their way through a Federal regiment, Duke was severely wounded in both shoulders.<sup>10</sup> Thus he was absent on the following day when the Confederates were forced back over the bloody ground that they had won on Sunday.

Duke missed several weeks of activity while his wounds healed. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Kentucky was with Braxton Bragg's army at Chattanooga when Basil Duke rejoined the command, bringing with him some thirty stragglers who had become separated from the unit. Two Texas companies received permission to join Morgan, as did 300 former members of the 1<sup>st</sup> Kentucky Infantry who decided they preferred riding to marching. Other recruits came into camp from Kentucky, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> cavalry regiment was officially formed with Morgan as colonel and Duke as lieutenant colonel.

There were also joined there by George St. Leger Grenfell, a delightful eccentric Englishman who explained his presence by saying, "*If England is not at war, I go elsewhere to find one*". He became a legendary figure whose exploits enlivened numerous campfire conversations, and his military experience, gleaned from a dozen campaigns, was invaluable to Morgan and Duke. The young Confederate obviously liked and admired a man "*who was always cheerful and contended when he could shoot and be shot at*".<sup>11</sup>

It was during this period that the regiment adopted the distinctive tactics for which Morgan became famous. Although he always gave his superior full credit for devising the innovations, many persons, then and since, insisted that the credit belonged to Basil Duke. The key of the new approach was to treat the troops as mounted riflemen, not as cavalry; horses provided mobility, but the actual fighting was done on foot. While this approach was not unique, it was not commonly practiced by cavalrymen. Inefficient sabers were abandoned in favor of sawed-off Enfield rifles and two pistols per man, whenever they could be obtained.

The unique tactic came when the regiment went into action. The corporals and one-fourth of the men acted as horse-holders while the others deployed in a single line that curved forward on each man. This flexible line, Duke insisted, was difficult to break: "*if*

---

<sup>10</sup> Basil Duke, *Personal Recollections of Shiloh*, paper read before The Filson Club, April 6, 1914 (The Filson Club), pp. 6-11.

<sup>11</sup> Duke, *History*, pp. 180-81. See also Stephen Z. Starr, *Colonel Grenfell's War* (Baton Rouge, 1971).

*forced back at one point, a withering fire from every other would be poured in on the assailant". It admitted too, of such facility of maneuvering, "it could be thrown about like a rope, and by simply facing to the right or left, and double-quicking in the same direction, every man could be quickly concentrated at any point where it was desirable to mass them".* When the troopers charged, they moved at double-quick or half run that reduced casualties from long-ranger enemy fire. Since Morgan's men usually fought far away from supporting units, they carried their own light artillery pieces - their "bull pups"- with them.<sup>12</sup>

On July 4, 1862, while the main Confederate force was still preparing for its later offensive, Morgan led 876 men from Knoxville on the first of the Kentucky raids that became his trademark. Duke had 370 of the men in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Kentucky that he commanded. At Tompkinsville they routed a smaller Union force in minutes. Since prisoners were always a problem for a fast-moving mounted force, the Federals were paroled as quickly as possible. Wagons headed for Tennessee with heavy loads of supplies needed by the Confederate army. Duke's company C was from the Glasgow vicinity, and the column received an unusually warm welcome; it inclined a mammoth country breakfast. The men rested at Bear Wallow while *Lightning* Ellsworth tapped into the telegraph line to obtain information along the wires. Large stores of supplies were seized at Lebanon; what could not be used was given to civilians or burned. A system of scouts and advanced guards, probably perfected by Duke and Grenfell, worked smoothly as the column rode through the Kentucky countryside.<sup>13</sup>

The Confederate sympathizers in Harrodsburg supplied a bountiful Sunday picnic lunch as the raiders neared Lexington. Detachments burned bridges between the capital of the Bluegrass and Louisville and Cincinnati (Ohio) to prevent reinforcements from reaching Lexington, but at Versailles Morgan and Duke learned that Lexington was held by a force too strong for them to dislodge. Reluctant to leave the area, Morgan rested his command at nearby Georgetown. John Castleman and some other adventurous spirits slipped into Lexington to visit families and friends, and W.C.P. Breckinridge joined the command with a company he had recruited.<sup>14</sup> Scouts kept the Confederate leaders aware of the enemy's moves while throwing a cloak of secrecy around their own movements.

A long delay would invite disaster, and Morgan planned his route back to Tennessee. To divert the enemy's attention, he appeared to threaten Cincinnati by moving against strongly held Cynthiana. Grenfell added to his legend by leading a charge against the railroad depot where resistance was strong; he was only slightly hurt despite eleven bullets that touched him or his mount. Duke reported 40 casualties in the command, but they inflicted 90 and captured 420 prisoners.

Large Federal forces sought to intercept the Confederates as they rode southward, but the pursuit was unsuccessful. In 24 days, the command had moved over 1,000 miles, captured 17 towns, paroled 1,200 troops, scattered 1,500 Home Guards, added 300 recruits, used or destroyed great quantities of supplies, and upset any number of Union commanders. The Confederate casualties numbered only 90.

Morgan left Duke in command at Sparta while he went to consult Bragg and Kirby Smith about his next move. Duke seized the opportunity to give the men another strong dose of rigorous drill; the recruits needed to be trained as quickly as possible and the

---

<sup>12</sup> Duke, *History*, pp. 174-77.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 188-89.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas, *Morgan's Raiders*, p. 44.

veterans could stand a refresher course. Other activities in camp were more attractive, and guards had to be posted to keep the men in camp. Soon, Duke commented wryly, *“one half of the regiment had to be put on to watch the rest”*.

When Morgan returned, they moved against Gallatin (Tennessee), with orders to destroy the Louisville & Nashville railroad, one of the Union Army’s main supply lines. The garrison of 200 men surrendered on August 12 without firing a shot, and the railroad tunnels north of town were blocked when fires burned supporting timbers and allowed the roofs to collapse.<sup>15</sup>

On August 21, when General Richard W. Johnson approached Gallatin, Duke persuaded Morgan to accept a fight. As the Confederates deployed into their long skirmish line, Duke rode along the front, giving instructions to the men. *“He was”*, John Castleman wrote in admiration, *“the coolest and always most self-possesses officer that we encountered during the war (...) it was the common sentiment of a body of intelligent men and discriminating soldiers, that no officer that any of us ever served under in battle had so wonderful an influence in securing from troops deliberate action. And the more severe the service, the more danger involved, the more quiet and composed and undisturbed was this brilliant cavalryman”*.<sup>16</sup> Duke repulsed two orthodox cavalry charges with heavy losses, then led a dismounted assault that broke the Federal force and drove it from the field. Morgan commented in his official report that *“lieutenant-colonel Duke led on his regiment, if possible, with more than his usual gallantry, and contributed, by the confidence with which he has inspired his men, to insure the success of the day”*.<sup>17</sup>

An engagement at Edgefield Junction illustrates well Duke’s calm judgement. Incensed over alleged mistreatment of both civilians and captured Confederates, Morgan’s men were blinded by their desire for revenge, and Duke found elements of two companies flinging themselves madly against a strongly fortified stockade. Two able officers and three enlisted men had been killed when Duke halted the assault. *“I saw no chance of reducing the work, even with great loss”*, he explained, *“in the time that would be allowed us”*. Morgan was so incensed by the loss of two valued officers that *“it was with greater difficulty that he could be dissuaded from continuing to attack until the stockade was taken”*.<sup>18</sup> Duke’s role as a counterbalance to Morgan’s impulsiveness was one of his major contributions to the success of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Kentucky Cavalry. It was typical of Duke’s analytical mind that he soon devised a scheme, which he never had occasion to use, that he believed could be employed effectively against such stockades as the one at Edgefield Junction.

Duke played his usual active role in Morgan’s second Kentucky raid during the late summer of 1862 when Bragg and Kirby Smith conducted their ill-fated invasion of Kentucky. During the planning stage General Kirby Smith forwarded to both Bragg and President Davis copies of a letter in which Duke had suggested that Kirby Smith moves on to take Lexington instead of lingering to reduce Cumberland Gap if the Federal garrison there decided to resist. *“I know him to be the man of that command”*, Kirby Smith wrote Bragg, *“He is said by all to do the drilling, planning and fighting which as*

---

<sup>15</sup> Duke, *History*, p. 205.

<sup>16</sup> John B. Castleman, *Active Service* (Louisville, 1917), pp. 95-97; Courier Journal, September 17, 1916.

<sup>17</sup> OR, S.I, vol. XVI, pt. 1, p. 881.

<sup>18</sup> Duke, *History*, pp. 216-17.

*gained his regiment such 'eclat', and as he is a modest and intelligent gentleman, I think his views are entitled to be well considered".*<sup>19</sup>

Morgan's command, some 1,100 strong, endured some of the most severe bushwhacking activities of the war on the way to Lexington, but the men entered the town on September 4, 1862. Morgan's ranks were increased by a number of eager volunteers, although General Bragg was disappointed by the small number of Kentuckians willing to join the Confederate infantry. Duke's explanation was probably correct: "*All of the Kentuckians who joined at that time wanted to ride*".<sup>20</sup> Duke was given what amounted to an independent command when Morgan rode eastward in an effort to intercept Federal General George W. Morgan who was withdrawing from Cumberland Gap. Duke's assignment was to hold as many Federal troops as possible at Cincinnati by threatening that city with his 2<sup>nd</sup> Kentucky Cavalry.

He decided to accomplish his mission by capturing Augusta, a small river town on the Ohio some 40 miles above Cincinnati, where a strong Home Guard unit was reported to be building up. The river could be forded there, and Duke considered crossing it and threatening Cincinnati. Such a treat would almost certainly draw back troops to protect the Queen City.

When Duke reached the outskirts of Augusta on September 27, he had some 450 men with him. The unusually resolute Home Guard numbered only 150, but they were ably commanded by Colonel J. Taylor Bradford, and they occupied well protected positions. Three little gunboats were expected to provide additional help, but the cavalry "bull pups", firing from a hill just outside town, soon forced the fleet to depart. Overconfident, Duke expected the garrison to surrender without additional fighting. But as he led his dismounted B and C companies down the main street they were met by heavy rifle fire that caused several casualties and sent the surprised Confederates scurrying for cover. Duke called up companies E and I and elements of L and M as the fighting raged from house to house, from room to room. A rash young lieutenant disobeyed orders and led a mounted charge into the town; he died almost instantly and several of his men were hit.

To overcome the stubborn resistance, Duke brought up his artillery. Firing at point-blank range, the guns tore gaping holes in the walls and inflicted casualties. Some of the Union soldiers hung out white flags, but others continued to fight, and several Confederates were hit trying to put out fires that had started. In a rare rage, the young colonel immediately "*ordered that every house from which shots come should be burned*". "*My men were infuriated*" Duke later recalled, "*by what they deemed bad faith, in a continuance of the fight after the flags of truce were displayed, and by the loss of their comrades and some favorite officers. I never saw them fight with such ferocity. Few lives were spared in the houses into which they forced their way. Several savage hand-to-hand fights occurred*".<sup>21</sup>

Although Duke made not mention of it, several contemporary accounts indicate that extensive looting followed the surrender, and fire destroyed two and half town squares.<sup>22</sup> For one of the few times in his military career, Duke either lost control of his

<sup>19</sup> Kirby Smith to Bragg, August 9, 1862, OR S.I, vol. XVI, pt. 2, p. 748; Kirby Smith to President Davis, August 11, 1862, *ibid*, p. 753. Duke's letter was missing from both of Kirby Smith's letters.

<sup>20</sup> Duke, *History*, p. 237.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 247-52; Walter Rankins, *Morgan Cavalry and the Home Guard at Augusta*, The Filson Club History Quarterly, 27 (October 1953), pp. 311-14.

<sup>22</sup> J. Jeffery Auer, *The Little Fight*, Register of the Kentucky State Historical Society, 49 (January 1951), pp. 31-32.

troops or made no effort to restrain them. He reported a loss of 21 killed and 18 wounded during the brief but savage encounter. Federal losses were only 12 killed and 3 wounded, but nearly 200 prisoners were taken. Two hours after the first shots were fired the Confederate withdrew from what was left of Augusta. It was not one of Duke's best performances, but he had averted what could easily have been a disaster. The affair ended his hopes of crossing the river to harass Cincinnati.

When Duke rejoined Morgan in Lexington, he was dismayed to find that the town was to be evacuated. In all of his writings on the Civil War, Duke was notably charitable in discussing personalities, and his compliments strained the truth. But this was true of Braxton Bragg than of any other Confederate commander under whom he served. Duke admitted Bragg's personal courage and his success when in subordinate position, but he held Bragg largely responsible for the failure of the 1862 invasion of Kentucky. Perhaps because he did not know the reluctance of Kirby Smith to cooperate with Bragg, Duke attached little blame to the former. Duke was bitterly critical of nearly every decision Bragg made during the campaign, particularly of his failure to combine his forces for a decisive battle. As the Kentuckian saw it: "*with the failure to hold Kentucky, our best and last chance to win the war was thrown away (...) All the subsequent tremendous struggle was but the dying agony of a great cause and a gallant people*".<sup>23</sup>

Morgan's force was not directly involved at Perryville on October 8; it was protecting the Confederate left flank and saw little action. As the Confederates withdrew from the state, Duke helped cover the retreat from Buell's cautious advance. Morgan, perhaps anxious to separate his command from the stigma of the retreat, obtained Kirby Smith's permission to withdraw from the state by his own route once the main army was safely on its way.

On October 17, Morgan led some 1,800 men back in the Bluegrass, well behind Buell's lines. Near daylight, on October 18, Morgan surprised the Federal garrison at Lexington and captured over 500 prisoners and a large number of treasured Colt handguns. Speed was essential if they were to escape pursuit, so the column, sending out scouts and detachments in all directions, swept through Lawrenceburg, by-passed strongly held Bardstown, captured a 150-wagon train, passed through Elizabethtown, cut the "L & N Railroad", camped at Leich field, and on October 22 crossed the Green River at Morgantown and Woodbury. An unseasonable snowstorm pelted them at Greenville, but good weather soon returned. Pursuit had ceased, and the weary men and horses rested three days at Hopkinsville where Confederate sentiment was strong. Riding leisurely, the troopers reached Gallatin (Tennessee) on November 4. They were joined there by the 9<sup>th</sup> Tennessee cavalry that had been recruited in that area.

The command remained busy with the type of independent operation that it and its commander enjoyed. As Duke phrased it: "*It was a very busy season, and a good many prisoners were taken; they brought in from some every day. Our own loss was slight. Colonel Morgan believed that, with enemies so near him in so many quarters, he could defend himself only by assuming the offensive*".<sup>24</sup>

The command failed to destroy 300 railcars at Edgefield, but one of its most occurred in December, when Morgan captured an important supply depot at Hartsville. When the Confederates left Murfreesboro for Hartville on a cold, snowy December 7, Duke commanded the 1,500 cavalymen; 700 infantrymen also joined the expedition. High

---

<sup>23</sup> Duke, *History*, pp. 270-72; Duke, *Reminiscences*, pp. 308, 331-33.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 306-307.

waters on the Cumberland River delayed Duke's crossing and causes intense suffering among his soaked troopers. Without waiting for all of them to cross and thaw, he pushed on rapidly to meet Morgan and their infantry 3 miles outside Hartsville.

When they attacked near daylight on December 8, the Federals resisted strongly. Instead of an expected garrison of 1,500 there were at least 2,300. "*You have more work cut out for you, than you bargained for*" Morgan replied grimly, "*You gentlemen must whip and catch these fellows, and cross the river in two hours and half, or we'll have 6,000 more on our backs*".<sup>25</sup> As Duke formed his lines, he had only some 1,250 available men for the assault. But the rapid advance of his dismounted cavalymen and the supporting infantry gave the Federals little time to rally. Many of the 125 Confederate casualties came when someone foolishly halted the troops to reform their line. Within an hour of the initial attack the enemy surrendered with a loss of nearly 400 killed and wounded and 2,000 prisoners. Among the supplies were many shoes, an article desperately needed by some of Duke's barefoot cavalymen. Supplies that could not be carried off were burned, and the sky to their rear was smoke filled as the Confederates raced for the safety of the river. It was one of John Hunt Morgan's most successful raids, and, as usual, Duke played a major role in leading the troops.

The Hartsville success brought Morgan and Duke another promotion later that month when President Davis visited the Army of Tennessee. Their promotions to Brigadier General and Colonel only made official the functions that each had been handling for several months. One of General Morgan's first acts was to divide his growing command into two brigades. Duke's first brigade consisted of John B. Hutchinson's 2<sup>nd</sup> Kentucky, Richard M. Gano's 3<sup>d</sup> Kentucky, and R.S. Cluke's 8<sup>th</sup> Kentucky, as well as a four guns battery. Duke also served as Morgan's second-in-command. The second brigade was offered Adam Johnson who preferred to remain in charge of his own regiment. William C.P. Breckinridge was then appointed to the position, despite the vocal and prolonged protests of Grenfell who did not believe him qualified for that post. As a consequence of this dispute, and perhaps also in protest of Morgan's December 4, 1862, marriage to Martha Ready of Murfreesboro, the prickly Englishman soon left the command. He would be missed. One of Morgan's biographers certainly exaggerated when he wrote: "*It cannot be a coincidence that when Grenfell was along there was complete success and when he was absent there was disaster*", but the outfit did miss Grenfell's tactical knowledge, his belief in discipline, and his youthful enthusiasm.<sup>26</sup>

On December 21, 1862, when the first brigade was reviewed near Alexandria, Duke commanded nearly 2,100 men, including some 200 who were mounted but unarmed. Breckinridge's second brigade had some 1,800 present.<sup>27</sup> The following day the command rode for Kentucky with the mission of cutting General William Rosecrans's rail-line and thereby delaying the offensive for which he was accumulating supplies. Their particular targets were the massive wooden trestles that carried the "L & N" tracks at Murdraugh's Hill, north of Elizabethtown. Duke led the march on a sunny December morning, riding at the head of his beloved 2<sup>nd</sup> regiment.

The Confederates drove Federal cavalry out of Glasgow on December 24, then crossed the Green River on Christmas night. Their holiday camp was made festive by the timely capture of an enormous wagon crammed with sutler's delicacies intended for

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 311; R.T. Bean, *My Recollections of the Battle of Hartsville*, typescript (The Filson Club), pp. 1-7. Duke's notes on the numbers involved are with the manuscript.

<sup>26</sup> Howard Swiggett, *The Rebel Raider* (Indianapolis, 1934), p. 63.

<sup>27</sup> Duke, *History*, p. 325.

the Glasgow garrison. Bridges were burned at Bacon's Creek and Nolin, and the Elizabethtown garrison surrendered on December 27 after a brisk fight in which Morgan's light artillery played a decisive role. The following day the garrisons guarding the trestles were forced to surrender and the huge structures were burned. The "L & N" remained closed to through traffic until February 1<sup>st</sup>.

Their mission accomplished, the raiders moved quickly to elude the pursuit. On the morning of December 29, they encountered serious difficulties at Rolling Fork River. High waters delayed their crossing, and about eleven o'clock artillery fire revealed that Union forces had caught up with them. Morgan had gone ahead, and Duke was in command of the rear-guard of some 300 men. Cluke's regiment, sent to destroy a railroad bridge five miles distant, was in danger of being cut off from the rest of the command by the advancing Federals. Duke saw at once that the enemy had to be checked until Cluke's regiment could be brought back and the rear-guard passed safely across the river. He deployed his 300 men to contest the Union advance. When Cluke's regiment galloped up, Duke added five of its companies to his rear-guard while the others crossed the stream. The Federal artillery closed one ford and inflicted heavy losses among the Confederate horses. Duke saw that his men were outnumbered several times over the approaching Federals.

Then a courier arrived from Morgan with orders to withdraw. "*In common with quite a number of other,*" Duke said, "*I devoutly wished I could*".<sup>28</sup> His situation appeared desperate, but he noted that Federal troops halted, and then withdrew slightly when they came under Confederate lines. Duke decided that he could gain the time necessary to disengage and withdraw by attacking the enemy. He ordered three companies on his left flank to take a Union battery that had been causing particular troubles.

At that moment a shell fragment struck him on the head, and Duke fell from his horse, blood streaming from the wound. "*Before the nature of his wound was ascertained and when all of us thought he was killed*", one of Duke's men wrote, "*I never saw as much sorrow among the men. Colonel Breckinridge moved over the field with tears streaming down his manly cheeks and urged the four companies to hold their ground till Duke could be safely carried over the river*".<sup>29</sup> They held. Tom Quirk, the matchless scout, scooped up the slight body, placed it across his saddle and splashed his way across the stream. The enemy had halted before the attack, as Duke had anticipated, and the rest of the Confederate rear-guard dashed across the muddy fords to safety.

In reporting the failure to trap the Confederates against the river, Colonel John M. Marlan paid tribute to Duke, whom he promoted in rank: "*It is certain however, that among the wounded was General Basil W. Duke, commanding a brigade under Morgan, and who is believed to be the life and soul of all the movements of the latter*". Some hopeful Federal reports had Duke dying of his wounds.<sup>30</sup> Such reports were exaggerated. A carriage was requisitioned at a farmhouse and filled with bedding on which unconscious Duke was rushed to Bardstown for medical attention. When the caked blood was cleaned away, some bone and skin were found missing from behind the ear. Duke finally opened the eyes, surveyed the situation, and murmured: "*That was*

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 338.

<sup>29</sup> John A. Porter, *A Brief Account of the Experiences of Hon. John M. Porter during the War for Southern Independence*, typescript (Manuscript Division, Kentucky Library, Western Kentucky University); John A. Wyeth, *With Sabre and Scalpel* (New York, 1914), p. 186; India W.P. Logan, *Kelion Franklin Peddicard of Quirk's Scouts* (New York, 1908), pp. 72-73.

<sup>30</sup> Report of Harlan, January 5, 1863, OR S. I, vol. XX, pt. 1, p. 139; Report of Brigadier General Jeremiah T. Boyel, January 1, 1863, *ibid*, p. 134.

*a pretty close call*". Morgan was determined not to lose his invaluable second-in-command, and when the Confederate moved out the next day, Colonel Duke lolled in unusual comfort in a buggy filled with featherbeds.<sup>31</sup>

Pursuers were closing in from several directions, but Morgan kept the men moving through one of the coldest, most uncomfortable nights of the war, and they slipped by the Union forces that attempted to intercept them. In early January they crossed the Cumberland River and were at last able to pause for some badly needed rest.

Sent to Georgia to recover from his wound, Duke was absent from the command for over two months. Thus he missed such of the discomfort of the winter camp at McMinnville and the strain imposed by frequent patrols and minor raids. The lack of pay and adequate supplies adversely affected discipline among the men, and Duke was not there to combat its effects. *"It is hard to maintain discipline"*, he later observed, *"when men are required to perform the most arduous and harassing duties without being clothed, shod, paid or fed"*. One of the troopers expressed the confidence in their leaders that helped hold the outfit together despite lack of supplies. They had performed poorly upon two occasions, he admitted, *"but at neither engagement was the General or Colonel Duke with us, and to this our failure may be laid"*.

Duke rejoined the command in time to participate in the hard, dangerous, exhausting but inconclusive fighting that confronted Morgan's cavalry in the spring of 1863. The enemy displayed greater initiative and more determination than in previous encounters, and the Confederates' superiority had narrowed. Guarding and picketing a long front and scouting far beyond that line was strenuous work, but the condition of both men and mounts improved with the advent of good weather. Whenever he could Duke emphasized drills, dress parades, and inspections in a never ceasing effort to instill the spirit and discipline that valued so highly.

On June 10, an exuberant John H. Morgan rode into Alexandria from conferences with General Bragg with permission to launch another Kentucky raid. Bragg had decided to withdraw his army beyond the Tennessee River, but he needed to divert the enemy's attention while undertaking that hazardous move. Morgan could provide a diversion by slashing into Kentucky and threatening Louisville. Bragg rejected Morgan's request to raid into Indiana and Ohio; he was ordered not to cross the Ohio River. But Morgan informed Duke privately that he intended to cross the river despite Bragg's command; if General Robert E. Lee was still in Pennsylvania, they might ride eastward and join him. Three weeks earlier, in response to Morgan's orders, Duke had sent scouts to investigate the fords on the upper Ohio where the command might cross on its return from the forbidden states.

Their start was delayed by an attempt to intercept an elusive Federal command that was reported threatening Knoxville, but on July 2 the 2,460 men crossed the Cumberland River near Burkesville. As usual, the river was in flood. Two days later the raiders received their first repulse at Tebb's Bend on the Green River. A Michigan regiment was strongly entrenched, and its colonel rejected a demand for surrender by referring cheerfully to the day: *"It is bad day for surrenders, and I would rather not"*.<sup>32</sup> When Morgan halted his futile attack after half an hour, he had lost 36 killed and 45 wounded. Among the dead was the capable Colonel D.W. Chenault. The position could have been bypassed easily, but Duke explained, *"Morgan assailed it merely in*

<sup>31</sup> Brown, *Bold Cavaliers*, pp. 153-57; John H. Morgan to wife, January 2, 1863, Duke-Morgan Family Papers (Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina).

<sup>32</sup> Duke, *History*, pp. 420-21.

accordance with its habitual policy when advancing of attacking all in his path except very superior forces". Morgan had not ascertained the strength of the Federal position, and he had not anticipated "*a resistance so spirited and so skillfully planned*".<sup>33</sup>

Federal troops at Lebanon also resisted, and before they surrendered, Tom Morgan, the General's nineteen-year-old brother, was killed. But there was no time for mourning, and they moved on, marching through a soft Kentucky night. General Edward Hobson was known to be in pursuit, but he was at least a day's march behind, and Morgan was determined to maintain the lead. Confederate detachments were sent off in various directions to confuse the enemy, but Morgan never wavered in his intent to cross the Ohio.

Thanks to an advance party, two captured steamboats awaited the column's arrival at Brandenburg. Some Indiana militias on the north shore were soon routed, and a gallant little gunboat that earned Duke's admiration finally withdrew under fire. The captured boats shuttled men and mounts across the river as rapidly as possible; the task was completed by midnight, July 8, before Hobson's advance troopers arrived. One boat was burned, but one of Duke's friends was captain of the other, and Duke interceded to save the *McCombs*.

During the following days, as panic spread through much of the Ohio Valley, Basil Duke endured his most strenuous campaign of the war. Constant vigilance was part of the price for safety, but fatigue seeped into the bones and dulled the senses. Worn-out horses could be exchanged for fresh ones, but men had to endure. They had ridden hard in Kentucky, but north of the Ohio Duke estimated that they averaged twenty-one hours a day in the saddle with a few hours snatched here and there for uneasy sleep. Any turn of the road might reveal an ambush, any village might be defended by the militia. And somewhere, behind, ahead, regular troops were moving under frantic orders to let none of the raiders escape.

Duke was constantly on the move, prodding his men into movement while coping with his myriad responsibilities. He was somewhat frustrated by the men's determination to pillage in the enemy's land. "*This disposition for wholesale plunder exceeded anything that any of us had ever seen before*" he complained. Much of it was foolish - bolts of calico, a birdcage occupied by two canaries, seven pairs of ice skates slung around a trooper's neck.<sup>34</sup> Duke's concern about this did not extend to food. He was especially complimentary of the home-baked bread and pies; his opinion was based upon extensive personal sampling.

The Confederates created great alarm and considerable destruction as they moved eastward, pushing aside limited resistance with little difficulty. But their pursuers hung grimly to the trail, and fatigue became a constant companion. "*The men in our ranks were worn down and demoralized with the tremendous fatigue*" Duke recalled, "*which no man can realize or form the faintest conception of until he has experienced it.*" During one period of thirty-five hours of intense danger they covered over 90 miles. "*Strong men fell out of their saddles, and at every halt officers were compelled to move continually about in their respective companies and pull and haul the men who would drop asleep in the road - it was the only way to keep them awake. Quite a number crept off into the fields and slept until they were awakened by the enemy*".<sup>35</sup> When Colonel Cluke groaned that he would gladly give \$ 1,000 for an hour's sleep, Duke led his horse

---

<sup>33</sup> Basil Duke, *The Raid*, Century Magazine, 1981, p. 407.

<sup>34</sup> Duke, *History*, pp. 436-37.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 442, 444.

and let Cluke doze in saddle until the arrival of scouts forced a return to duty. Duke seemed beyond exhaustion; he was one of the forces that held the outfit together and kept it moving. “*His power of physical endurance, through heat or cold, never faltering or knowing dread,*” one of his men wrote after the war, “*was at once the pride and wonder of his regiment (...) He may not know it, but the soldiers of his command gave him the sobriquet of the ‘Little Whalebone’. His efficiency and endurance was their constant boast*”.<sup>36</sup>

The raid ended for Basil Duke at Buffington Island where scouts had reported the Ohio could be forded. During the afternoon of July 18 Morgan delayed a fateful ninety minutes at Chester while the column closed up and guides were sought. When the advance guard reached Portland, a village near the ford, night had fallen. The ford was reported guarded by earthworks, two guns, and 300 men, but darkness concealed their disposition, and Morgan decided to rest that night and to attack at daybreak. Duke was assigned the task, and before his weary men collapsed into sleep, he placed the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Regiments and the supporting Parrots in position about 400 yards from where he guessed the enemy to be located.<sup>37</sup>

Duke advanced his men at early dawn, only to discover that the works had been abandoned during the night. The crossing could already have been made. Duke notified Morgan at once, then ordered Colonel D. H. Smith to place the two regiments in a blocking position on the road to Pomeroy. Moments after Smith moved out, Duke heard rifle shots, and he galloped in that direction. Smith had driven back a small Union detachment, but a captive revealed that it was the vanguard of General Henry Judah’s column, a force of several thousand men. Duke withdrew Smith to his previous night’s position, then reported the crisis to Morgan. “*Check them*”, the General ordered, “*call upon any troops needed to accomplish that mission*”.

The Confederates’ position worsened, almost by the minute. Scouts reported that the persistent Hobson was closing in rapidly on the Chester Road with some 3,000 men. The arrival of some gunboats cut off escape across the ford - and the boats began to shell the shocked raiders who were almost surrounded in a shallow valley. Duke hurriedly advised Morgan to escape from the open north end of the valley with what units he could get away; he and Adam Johnson would delay the Federals as long as they could. Smith dismounted his troopers in the early stages of the engagement.<sup>38</sup> Smith could not hold without help.

Faced with impending disaster, Duke called for his faithful 2<sup>nd</sup> Kentucky, but it never came. Colonel Johnson formed his line at right angles to Duke’s position as they were subjected to increasingly heavy pressure. In the midst of “*indescribable confusion*”, with men exhausted and ammunition almost gone, Duke and Johnson held off the enemy for nearly half an hour while Morgan led over 1,000 of the command out of the trap. “*Duke behaved with signal gallantry, as he always did*” Colonel Smith wrote, “*but it was all to no avail*”.<sup>39</sup>

When they saw that Morgan had cleared the valley, Duke and Johnson remounted their men and attempted their own escape. But the only exits were blocked, and Duke and some fifty men who had been shoved off into a ravine surrendered. “*Colonel Duke*

<sup>36</sup> Allan Keller, *Morgan’s Raid* (Indianapolis, 1961), pp. 128-29; John J. McAfee, *Kentucky Politicians: Sketches of representative Corn-Crackers* (Louisville, 1886), p. 63.

<sup>37</sup> Duke, *History*, p. 448.

<sup>38</sup> Don D. John, *The Great Indiana-Ohio Raid* (Louisville, 1955), pp. 17-18.

<sup>39</sup> Sydney K. Smith, *Life, Army Record and Public Services of D.*

bore himself with great dignity” a Federal captain reported, “and I would not have known I had him if one of his own men had not accidentally disclosed his identity to me”.<sup>40</sup> General Judah’s jubilation showed in his report: “To use Colonel Duke’s own expression after his capture, he could not have been more surprised at the presence of my force had it dropped from the cloud”.<sup>41</sup> When General Ambrose E. Burnside reported the capture of 700 Confederates in addition to their 120 casualties, he complimented Duke by describing him as “the managing man of all Morgan’s raids”.<sup>42</sup>

While the pursuit of Morgan continued, Duke was on his way to prison, consoled by the belief that the objects of the raid had been accomplished. The objects were worthwhile, he contended, even if their cost was Morgan’s division. He was delighted that some Northerners had been shown “something of the agony and the terror of invasion. It would have been an inexpiable shame if, in all the Confederate army, there had been no body of men found to carry the war, however briefly, across the Ohio, and Morgan by this raid saved us, at least, that disgrace”.<sup>43</sup>

Duke and his fellow captives were marched ten miles to transports that carried them leisurely to Cincinnati. Duke, so lame that he could hardly hobble, and Dick Morgan, with an infected wound, were seated in an open carriage that led the long column of prisoners through the crowded city streets. Cincinnati held many friends, and Duke repeatedly lifted his hat to acknowledge familiar faces in the throng that had turned out. He was reported casually dressed in blue jeans pants, a white linen shirt and a dusty, wide-brimmed hat. He wore nothing that indicated his rank. A reporter for the New York Post wrote that “He is of small stature, weighing scarcely 300 pounds, well built, erect, with angular features, dark hair brushed carelessly aside, sparkling and penetrating eyes of the same color, a low forehead, moustache and goatee. He has a sweet, musical voice, a pleasant smile continually on his face, and is very free and cordial in his manner. There is nothing commanding in appearance, though he has been termed the brains of the raid”.<sup>44</sup>

Duke and the other officers were held in the Cincinnati jail for three days, then transferred to the prisoner of war camp at Johnson’s Island near Sandusky. It was, Duke said, “the most agreeable prison I ever saw” but Ohio Governor David Todd insisted that the Confederates were prisoners of the state and secured their removal to the much less desirable state penitentiary. There they were reunited with Morgan and the later captives.<sup>45</sup> The prisoners were denuded of all hair, and Duke did not recognize the shorn Morgan until his brother-in-law spoke to him. Colonel Smith was particularly incensed over their treatment, for his cherished beard had reached nearly to his waist and had been famous throughout the command.<sup>46</sup>

Tucked in tiny cells three and a half feet wide and seven feet long, the prisoners found boredom their major problem. They read, studied languages, carved, gambled, played chess, participated in athletic games - and debated endlessly any topic that came to mind. Duke was always fond of poetry, and he spent much time in composition; unfortunately, he was more successful as a cavalryman than a poet. Discipline was strict

---

<sup>40</sup> Brown, *Bold Cavaliers*, p. 216.

<sup>41</sup> Judah’s Report, July 29, 1863, OR S. I, vol. XXIII, pt. 1, p. 657.

<sup>42</sup> Burnside to General H.W. Halleck, July 22, 1863, *ibid*, p. 635.

<sup>43</sup> Duke, *History*, pp. 460-61.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Brown, *Bold Cavaliers*, pp. 226-27.

<sup>45</sup> Duke, *History*, pp. 466-67; Thomas, *Morgan’s Raiders*, p. 86.

<sup>46</sup> Smith, D. Howard Smith, p. 88.

from the start, but it became even more stringent after November 27 when Morgan was one of four officers put in the “black hole” for talking at night. All were released the next morning, Dick Morgan wrote in an intercepted letter, “*except Basil, who they say is not humble enough yet to be let out (...) Cally says it is the most terrible place he was ever in and was covered with green mold when he came out*”.<sup>47</sup>

In February 1864, the intercession of some northern friends got Duke moved to Camp Chase where conditions were much more tolerable under camp parole. But his friends were still incarcerated, and Duke soon requested that his parole be revoked and he be returned to the penitentiary.<sup>48</sup> Then he was shifted to Fort Delaware where a kind commandant made life more bearable. Exchange was the prevailing topic of conversation, and Duke’s hopes soared when Kentucky Confederate Congressman E.M. Bruce arranged for a special exchange to be made for him. But Federal authorities rejected the plan because other prisoners had awaited exchange longer than Duke.<sup>49</sup>

Then during the summer of 1864, a rumor spread that Confederate authorities at Charleston had placed 50 Union prisoners in a location that was subject to fire from the Union fleet. Duke was delighted to be among the 50 Confederate officers selected for placement in a spot of similar danger. He was less delighted with the ocean voyage to Hilton Head where they were detained because the rumor had been proved false. Duke endured five weeks on the brig *Dragoon* before an exchange was finally negotiated. On August 3, he and other Confederate prisoners landed in Charleston where they received an enthusiastic welcome.

“Duty” was a sacred word to Basil Duke, and he hastened to rejoin what was left of his old command. When he reached Abingdon in Western Virginia, he was shocked by Morgan’s appearance. “*He was greatly changed*” Duke recalled. “*His face wore a weary, care-worn expression, and his manner was totally destitute of its former ardor and enthusiasm*”. Morgan’s unauthorized raid into Kentucky in June 1864 had been a disaster. In addition to a smarting defeat, discipline had broken down, and burning, looting, and robbery had occurred. When Morgan failed to take prompt action against the offenders, some of his senior officers appealed over his head to the Secretary of War. Brigadier General John C. Echols was appointed to replace Morgan in southwestern Virginia, and a commission of inquiry was ordered convened in Abingdon on September 10 to consider charges against Morgan.

But a Federal force was reported heading for Bull’s Gap, and Echols had not arrived, so, ignoring his suspension, Morgan moved his troops in that direction. He lingered in Abingdon to await Echols’ arrival, and it was there that Duke found him. They chatted for a few moments then Morgan swung aboard the train that would carry him to his command. Duke wanted to accompany him, but Morgan insisted that he remain behind to visit with his family. Soon, Duke wrote, “*I was again with my wife and little boy, and found there another baby, a little girl I had never seen before, for she had been born while I was a prisoner*”.<sup>50</sup> The brothers-in-law never saw each other again. On September 4 the Confederates were surprised at Greenville (Tennessee) by a Federal

<sup>47</sup> Dick Morgan to Miss Sallie C. Warfield, December 5, 1863, OR S. II, vol. VI, p. 734; Duke, *Reminiscences*, pp. 361-63; Willis F. Jones to Mrs. B.W. Duke, October 28, 1863, Duke-Morgan Family Papers.

<sup>48</sup> Duke to Mother, February 25, 1864, Morgan and Duke Families: Added Manuscripts (The Filson Club); Duke to mother-in-law, February 28, 1864, Duke-Morgan Family Papers; Duke *Reminiscences*, p. 365. See OR S. II, vol. VI, pp. 888, 953 for letters regarding the change.

<sup>49</sup> Duke to General A. Schoepf, March 11, 1864, OR S.II, vol. VI, 1036-37; W. Hoffman to General Schoepf, March 25, 1864, *ibid*, p. 1094; Duke to Mother-in-law, March 18, 1864, Duke-Morgan Family Papers.

<sup>50</sup> Duke, *Reminiscences*, pp. 375-78, *History*, pp. 501-505, 532-33.

attack, and John Hunt Morgan was killed. “*When he died,*” Duke wrote in sorrow, “*the glory and chivalry seemed gone from the struggle, and it became a tedious routine, enjoined by duty, and sustained only by sentiments of pride and hatred*”.<sup>51</sup>

When one of Morgan’s men heard that Duke had been exchanged, he wrote, “*If so, we are all right*”.<sup>52</sup> Such confidence in Duke helped explain his September 15 appointment to command the brigade, although he was not the senior colonel. General Echols removed Colonel D. Howard Smith and replaced him with Duke. Smith had recommended Duke’s appointment; the outfit was in very bad condition, and Smith had not been able to cope with its deterioration. Morgan’s troops in southwest Virginia. Duke declared “*were not like his old riders, accustomed to his methods, confident in his genius, and devoted to his fortune*”.<sup>53</sup> When Echols notified General Samuel Cooper of the change, he indicated his confidence in Duke: “*I am sure that he will improve its condition, as he is a most intelligent and efficient officer*”.<sup>54</sup>

When Duke assumed command at Jonesboro there were only 273 effectives in the brigade and only 50 of them had serviceable weapons. During the next two weeks he labored to obtain supplies and equipment and to restore morale and discipline to the demoralized outfit. Duke’s promotion to brigadier General in mid-September seemed an omen of better fortune, and the men were soon eager to meet the enemy again.

In late September, General John C. Vaughn, to whom Duke’s brigade was attached, moved toward Bull’s Gap near Greeneville in an effort to capture the Union force stationed there. Duke led the advance and forced a crossing of Lick Creek. The Federals retreated to the Gap and could not be lured out of their position even by the playing of “Dixie”. Vaughn was not strong enough to risk an attack, and the Confederates withdrew.<sup>55</sup>

When General Stephen Burbridge led a strong expedition toward Saltville, the harassed Confederates shifted their depleted strength to meet that threat. Duke fought a sharp engagement at Carter’s Station near Bristol where his initiative in seizing battlefield opportunities helped check the Union advance. On his way to Saltville Duke was delighted to hear that Major General John C. Breckinridge had been placed in command of the department. Duke liked and respected Breckinridge and he had already asked to join his command: “*I wish to take part in the expedition against Burbridge, and at any rate to join you while my command is yet in a condition to do service*”.<sup>56</sup>

General John S. Williams beat off the attack on Saltville on October 2 before Duke arrived, but the presence of fresh troops allowed Breckinridge to assume the offensive. Burbridge retreated that night, and Duke and George Cosby were ordered in pursuit. Duke could hardly restrain himself until the final order was given. As one of his men observed, “*His agile, symmetrical form was in constant, nervous motion. Restlessly turning in his saddle, his dark eyes flashing, he impatiently awaited the order to*

<sup>51</sup> Duke, *History*, pp. 539-40; Duke to Mrs. John H. Morgan, September 28, 1864, Duke-Morgan Family Papers.

<sup>52</sup> Brown, *Bold Cavaliers*, p. 296.

<sup>53</sup> Smith, D. *Howard Smith*, pp. 151-52; D.H. Smith to Secretary of War James A. Seddon, September 9, 1864, Basil W. Duke Records (National Archives); Duke, *The Raid*, p. 412.

<sup>54</sup> September 7, 1864, OR S. I, vol. XLIII, pt. 2, p. 861; William C. Davis, *Breckinridge: Statesman, Soldier, Symbol* (Baton Rouge, 1974), p. 462.

<sup>55</sup> Duke, *History*, pp. 540-46.

<sup>56</sup> Duke to Breckinridge, October 1, 1864, OR S. I, vol. XXXIX, pt. 3, p. 778; Duke, *Reminiscences*, pp. 176, 193-94; Duke, *History*, pp. 550-51.

advance". When it came, "Like a flash General Duke wheeled in his saddle, shouted 'Forward!' and was off like a shot".<sup>57</sup> But the Federals escaped with little damage.

Desertion was a major problem in the Confederacy by late 1864, and Floyd and Franklin counties harbored a larger number of deserters. Those in Floyd County had even proclaimed a "New State" and elected provisional officers. Rooting them out was a formidable task, for the rugged terrain worked to their advantage. Duke was sent there in mid-October with 200 men, and in two hectic weeks he greatly improved the situation. "He has done most effective service there" General Echols reported, "having arrested a large number of deserters and disloyal men, shot some, and driven them so effectually that many are coming in".<sup>58</sup>

Breckinridge was determined to avenge a defeat at Bull's Gap, and Duke's brigade was, of course, selected for the expedition. As Duke explained with a touch of pride, when Breckinridge "got hold of officers and men who could not complain, he worked them without compunction, giving them no rest, and leaving the reluctant in clover."<sup>59</sup> Duke inspired the same respect and admiration among his men. One of them testified that "he had borne, from the beginning, a reputation only second to Morgan, and was now the idol of the old division (...) It was now claimed that he had no equal as a commander in the cavalry service, barring Forrest".<sup>60</sup>

The Confederates encountered some 1,200 Federal troops a mile or so in front of Bull's Gap on November 10, and Duke's men drove them back into the Gap, then fought off strong counterattacks. The night was so cold that Duke requested to be relieved for a time so his men could build fires; he promised that they would be ready for the planned attack.<sup>61</sup> Early the following morning Breckinridge and Duke led some 500 men on a tortuous climb up a mountainside to attack the Union right flank. They made some progress, but their casualties amounted to a third of the command, and they could not carry the enemy's strong earthworks.<sup>62</sup>

When some infantry arrived, Breckinridge decided to move through Taylor's Gap, three miles distant, and gain the rear of the Union position. As they passed through Taylor's Gap, scouts reported that General Alvan Gillem was evacuating Bull's Gap. Vaughn and Duke were ordered to cut off his retreat, if possible, or to strike his flank. They were never able to get ahead of the Federal column, and Gillem's main body escaped although he lost heavily in prisoners and supplies.<sup>63</sup>

The outnumbered Confederates in southwestern Virginia had to shift almost constantly in an effort to concentrate at the point most threatened at that moment. A few days later after the Bull Gap victory, Duke's brigade was ordered to Rogersville where Colonel Richard Morgan assumed command while Duke went on a short leave. Gillem returned to drive Morgan back to Kingsport, then on December 13 to over-run his position. Morgan and 80 of the troopers were captured, along with all the brigade's

<sup>57</sup> George Dallas Mosgrove, ed., by Bell I. Wiley, *Kentucky Cavaliers in Dixie* (Jackson, Tenn., 1957), p. 208.

<sup>58</sup> Breckinridge to Duke, October 15, 1864, OR S. I, vol. XXXIX, pt. 3, p. 820; Echols to J. Stoddard Johnston, October 17, 1864, *ibid.*, p. 824.

<sup>59</sup> Duke, *History*, p. 551.

<sup>60</sup> John W. Headley, *Confederate Operations in Canada and New York* (New York, 1906), pp. 423-24.

<sup>61</sup> Duke to Breckinridge, November 11, 1864, OR S. I, vol. XXXIX, pt. 1, p. 897.

<sup>62</sup> Duke, *History*, pp. 551-55; Duke, *Reminiscences*, pp. 186-89; Davis, *Breckinridge*, pp. 465-66.

<sup>63</sup> Report of General Gillem, November 16, 1864, OR S. I, vol. XXXIX, pt. 1, p. 889; Report of General Breckinridge, November 29, 1864, *ibid.*, pp. 892-93; George W. Hunt to Mrs. B.W. Duke, November 26, 1864, Duke-Morgan Family Papers.

wagons. An exuberant George Stoneman declared that *“All consider this command completely destroyed”*.<sup>64</sup>

The report was exaggerated, although the losses again reduced the brigade to under 300 men. Duke hurried to resume command, but heavy enemy pressure forced him out of Bristol on December 14 and back toward Saltville. Duke fought skillfully, delaying the enemy as much as he could while husbanding his slender strength. In the confusion and danger of his own situation, he nevertheless kept Breckinridge fully informed on what he could learn about the enemy’s movements.<sup>65</sup>

When Breckinridge concentrated at Saltville, he had only 1,500 men available and Duke considered only 800 of them suitable for offensive action. Instead of waiting to be attacked, Breckinridge moved toward Marion. Duke pushed the enemy back at an engagement beyond Wytheville, then took position on a ridge when his men slept in line of battle. The next day the enemy launched a series of strong attacks. Although he had only 220 men to hold a line half a mile long, Duke’s single skirmish line held throughout the morning. Fifty welcome reinforcements arrived about noon, but by then ammunition was dangerously depleted. The thin line was driven back late in the afternoon, and at one time Duke believed the position was lost. But the men refused to break, and Duke said proudly, *“I say without hesitation, that troops never fought more resolutely and bravely than did those I commanded on that day”*.<sup>66</sup>

Sixty more men arrived just before sundown, and Duke immediately sent them on a flank attack against the Union horse holders. *“But the officer in command was timid and would do nothing”*, Duke complained, although he never named the offender. There were 187 enemy dead in front of his position, but Duke withdrew that night, falling back through Marion to Rye Valley some fifteen miles away.<sup>67</sup> The Confederates were unmolested as they retired.

When Breckinridge learned that the Federals had move directly to Saltville and were well ahead of him, he dispatched Duke in a futile effort to save the works. Duke picked 300 of the least exhausted men from the entire command, mounted them on the best horses, and raced for Saltville. Roads were in terrible condition and the weather so cold that *“the men were scarcely able to sit on their horses”*. The ordeal was vain, for Saltville was seized before Duke arrived.<sup>68</sup> He probed the enemy’s line but decided he could not take the place.

When the Federal raiders withdrew on December 22, Duke followed closely, punishing them as much as possible. When the Federal force divided, Duke pursued Burbridge’s command that was retreating toward Kentucky. The weather inflicted terrible suffering upon both forces. *“There is no word in the English language which adequately expresses how cold it was”* Duke recalled. *“Our horses, already tired down and half starved, could scarcely hobble. Those of the enemy where in worse condition, and it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that for ten miles a man could have walked on dead ones. (...) The Federals lost hundreds of men, whose limbs, rotted by the cold, had*

<sup>64</sup> Stoneman to Major General Thoms, December 13, 1864, OR S. I, vol. XLV, pt. 1, p. 807.

<sup>65</sup> Duke to Breckinridge, December 13, 1864, OR S I, vol. XLV, pt. 1, p. 836; Duke to Breckinridge, December 14, 1864, *ibid*, pp. 836-38. On December 14 Duke sent at least five reports to Breckinridge and another followed at 1:00 A.M., December 15.

<sup>66</sup> Duke, *History*, pp. 561-62; Davis, *Breckinridge*, p. 473.

<sup>67</sup> Duke, *History*, p. 563; Duke, *Reminiscences*, pp. 190-91; Davis, *Breckinridge*, pp. 474-75.

<sup>68</sup> Duke to Breckinridge, December 21, 1864, OR S. I, vol. XLV, pt. 1, p. 838.

*to be amputated*". When Duke reached Wheeler's Ford, some 52 miles from Saltville, only 50 of his 300 men remained with him, and he abandoned pursuit at that point.<sup>69</sup>

The terrible weather did bring a halt to campaigning, and Duke was able to put his men into winter quarters near Abington. Forage was so scarce in that desolated area that he sent most of the brigade's horses to North Carolina under strong guard. Duke informed Breckinridge of his desperate need for food, clothing, guns, saddles - equipment of every sort was urgently required. Above all, Duke asked for money: "*nothing will more tend to satisfy the men than the receipt of their pay*".<sup>70</sup> But Breckinridge could do little to alleviate the shortages.

An army inspector reported in February that of the 328 present, "*About one-fourth of the men need arms and one-third lack accouterments*". Discipline was better than in most units in the department, but the inspector endorsed Duke's recommendation that the brigade should be moved farther away from Kentucky to make desertion more difficult. On February 23, 1865 when Duke reported 296 officers and men available for duty he listed 383 absent for various reasons. The inspector's complaint about the informal appointment of officers revealed a great deal about the deterioration of the Confederate forces. "*You will perceive*" he wrote his superior "*that many of the appointments in the brigade are, to say the least, very irregular. Officers seem to have been appointed and assigned to duty by persons having no authority whatever, many of them having been acting as such for years (...) In some instances whole regiments of Morgan's old division are without a single commissioned officer present and the records are very imperfect*".<sup>71</sup>

Duke's command grew in the spring with the return of prisoners, wounded, and stragglers. Their horses still away, the brigade fought as infantry in a vain effort to stem the tide threatening to overwhelm them. Foreseeing the inevitable withdrawal, General John Echols began shifting his troops eastward for closer cooperation with the Army of Northern Virginia. When Richmond was evacuated, Echols hoped to join Lee, perhaps at Danville, for the march southward. Duke's brigade was at Christenburg on April 10, 1865 when news arrived of the surrender at Appomattox. "*Men looked at each other as if they had just heard a sentence of death and eternal ruin passed upon all*" Duke said.<sup>72</sup>

At a council of war on April 12 the infantry officers told Echols that their men would not attempt to join Joe Johnston's army to continue the war. Giltner and Cosby decided to take their cavalymen to Kentucky and surrender there, but Duke and Vaughn agreed that they owed duty to the Confederacy as long as an army remained in the field. Duke was immensely proud that only ten of 600 officers and men of his brigade decided to remain behind. To expedite the march, Duke mounted as many of his men as he could upon the mules and horses taken from the abandoned wagon train. Bridles and saddles were lacking, but the men were more or less mounted again, and morale was high as they headed southward. His men had never been more obedient or better disciplined,

<sup>69</sup> Duke, *History*, pp. 564-65; Duke, *Reminiscences*, pp. 191-92.

<sup>70</sup> Duke to Breckinridge, December 31, 1864, OR S. I, vol. XLV, pt. 2, pp. 750-51.

<sup>71</sup> D.T. Chandler to Colonel R.H. Chilton, February 20, 1865, OR S. I, vol. XLIX, pt. 1, pp. 1000-1001; Duke's return, February 23, 1865, *ibid*, p. 1021; General J. Echols to Duke, February 25, 1865, Duke-Morgan Family Papers.

<sup>72</sup> Duke, *History*, p. 570.

Duke asserted, “*To command such men was the proudest honor that an officer could attain*”.<sup>73</sup>

When General Echols rendered a post-Appomattox report to General Lee he paid eloquent tribute to Duke’s brigade. “*The bearing of General Duke’s command, which with unbroken ranks faced the hardships of a march which was leading them at every step farther from home and to a destination full of danger and uncertainty, was beyond praise. Even had they been fully equipped their bearing would have been worthy of praise, but when it is remembered that they were mounted on barebacked horses and mules with blind bridles, and nevertheless preserved the same discipline and order as upon a regular march, their conduct reflects great honor upon them*”.<sup>74</sup> Basil Duke’s qualities of leadership are nowhere better demonstrated than in the last few weeks of his military service when the Confederacy was collapsing around him.

The unsightly column anticipated a Federal attack at Fancy Gap between Virginia and North Carolina, and Colonel J. Stoddard Johnston issued Echols’ precautionary orders in a verse that tells much about the morale of the bob-tail outfit.

*“Now if the Yankee, d-n their eyes,  
Shall strive to take us by surprise,  
And hope to catch us in a snap,  
As we file through Fancy Gap;  
Wycher will skirmish to the front,  
While Duke and Vaughn abide the brunt;  
To give the old Tycoon and staff  
A chance to climb a hill and laugh.”*<sup>75</sup>

But they marched unmolested into North Carolina where they split up. Duke headed for Lincolntown where he expected to find his horses. Toward the end he raced a Federal unit that moved on a parallel road. The Confederates lost the race because, as they swore bitterly, they couldn’t fight mules and Yankees at the same time.<sup>76</sup> But Colonel Tom Napier got the horses safely away, and the next day the happy cavalymen were reunited with their mounts. No one appeared to care what happened to the mules.

Many of the Confederate refugees assembled at Charlotte while deciding what to do next. President Davis spoke to the troops there, and Secretary of War Breckinridge brought news of the abortive Johnston-Sherman surrender agreement. Breckinridge rode out to Duke’s camp, spoke briefly, then visited informally and at length with the men. Duke obtained promotions and commissions for a number of deserving men, and President Davis made a personal effort to find saddles for Duke’s barebacked riders.<sup>77</sup> The days at Charlotte allowed time for men to begin to comprehend the consequences of the shattering events of the past few weeks, but Duke was disturbed by the lack of decisiveness displayed by the remnants of the government.

---

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, pp. 570-71; Duke, *Reminiscences*, pp. 380-81; Duke, *After the Fall of Richmond*, Southern Bivouac, August, 1886, pp. 156-58; Mosgrove, *Kentucky Cavaliers*, pp. 262-63.

<sup>74</sup> J. Stoddard Johnston, *Kentucky*, in C.A. Evans, ed., *Confederate Military History* (12 vols.; Atlanta, 1899), IX, p. 191.

<sup>75</sup> Duke, *After the Fall of Richmond*, p. 159. A slightly different version is in his *Reminiscences*, pp. 381-82.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, p. 160; Duke, *Reminiscences*, pp. 382-83.

<sup>77</sup> Duke, *Reminiscences*, pp. 384-85; Davis to General P.G.T. Beauregard, April 20, 1865, OR S. I, vol. XLVII, pt. 3, p. 816.

When they left Charlotte Duke commanded one of the five small cavalry brigades that escorted what remained of the Confederate government. Duke continued to be irked by their unhurried pace when he considered speed to be essential. He and some of the other officers whiled away time speculating which of the civilians had the best chance of escaping. They agreed that Judah P. Benjamin would be the most easily caught. Then he disappeared, Duke said, and “*When we next heard of him, he was practicing law in London*”.<sup>78</sup>

At Abbeville (South Carolina) President Davis presided over their last council of war. Breckinridge and Bragg were present in addition to the five brigade commanders. The President was visibly shaken when the brigade commanders told him that the war was lost, that their only concern before surrendering was his escape. Davis tried to convince them that the war could be continued. “*We were silent,*” Duke said, “*for we could not agree with him, and respected him too much to reply*”.<sup>79</sup>

Duke was given one of his most onerous tasks of the war when he was ordered to take charge of the \$ 400,000 to \$ 500,000 in gold and silver that constituted the last of the Confederate treasury. No one was sure that discipline would withstand that much temptation, so Duke carefully selected a fifty-man detail to transfer the coins from a train to wagons and to guard it. A considerable portion was paid to the soldiers on May 3, and Duke was delighted to turn the remainder over to an acting treasurer.<sup>80</sup>

When Davis pushed on ahead with a small party, Duke’s responsibilities were almost at an end. He took some men toward Woodstock (Georgia) to help divert attention from the President’s party, then, when a message arrived from General Breckinridge that they had done all that could be done, Duke called a last formation of the brigade. It was May 8, 1865, and Duke wrote: “*for us the long agony was over*”.<sup>81</sup>

When the brigade was passing through South Carolina an elderly lady had scolded them for taking forage from her barn. “*You are a gang of theiving, rascally Kentuckians*” she said, “*afraid to go home while our boys are surrendering decently*”. “*Madam*” answered one of them, “*You are speaking out of your turn; South Carolina had a good deal to say in getting up this war, but we Kentuckians have contracted to close it out*”.<sup>82</sup>

When Basil Wilson Duke returned to Kentucky after the war he had fulfilled the terms of his contract.

\* \* \*

---

<sup>78</sup> Duke, *Reminiscences*, p. 385.

<sup>79</sup> Duke, *History*, pp. 575-76.

<sup>80</sup> Brown, *Bold Cavaliers*, pp. 310-12; Duke, *Reminiscences*, pp. 386-89.

<sup>81</sup> Duke, *After the Fall of Richmond*, p. 166.

<sup>82</sup> Duke, *History*, pp. 574-75.