



By Serge Noirsain

Adapted in English by Gerald Hawkins

By 1864, the war had drawn to the east most of the Texas boys old enough to be drafted in the Confederate armies. The main forces assigned to the defence of the Texas borders consisted of the Frontier Regiment and the Border Regiment. These were practically the only ones because the companies of Texas Home Guards or militia were not permanently on the stand-by and thus not swiftly available in case of emergency. In 1864, the Frontier Regiment was mustered into Confederate service as the 46th Texas cavalry, with James E. McCord as its colonel. At the end of the war, McCord's regiment was transferred to the Brazos River.

At the outbreak of the war, although he was already sixty years old, James Bourland raised a cavalry unit that bore his name and that belonged to the Texas State Militia. Bourland's Border Regiment should not be confused with Colonel J.P. Border's Regiment. From the beginning to the end of the conflict, Bourland's unit guarded the northern borders of Texas, its companies being scattered among a network of forts strung between the Red River and the Rio Grande. Some of these military posts, like Fort Belknap, had been erected before the Civil War. Others, like Fort Murrah, had been built on the order of Governor Murrah of Texas.

Since Bourland and McCord's regiments didn't count enough men to protect the white population of the Frontier, Northwest Texas became a lawless area. Outlaws and Confederate deserters from Texas, Indian Territory and Arkansas poured into the area to be out of range of the Confederate authorities. Moreover, the hostile Indians constituted a permanent danger for the white settlements and the lonely ranchers.

Kickapoo's and Lipan's depredations were not rare but the worst foe of the settlers and especially of the Texans were the Kiowas and the Comanches. These "princes of the prairie" were ferocious fighters and hard riders who had a long history of struggles with the Texan pioneers. Before the war, the federal garrisons in West Texas maintained some form of order since they had compelled the bands of Kiowas and Comanches warriors to remain in reserves or stay away from the white population.

Unfortunately, the weakening of the military forces in Northwest Texas due to the Civil War gave the Indians the opportunity to grow stronger and to renew their depredations with an audacity that the Texans had never seen before. As the number of Indian raids grew, many white settlers deserted the area to start a new life in Eastern or Middle Texas. Other left their lands temporarily to take refuge in the Confederate forts.

Like many other pioneers, Francis M. Peveler decided to move to Fort Belknap (centre-north of Texas) as long as the Indian unrest had not been quelled. On October 13, 1864, he left the fort to accompany a wagon train bound for Fort Murrah. On its way, the column noticed unusual smoke signals and fearing an Indian ambush, it decided to return to safety. Back at the fort, Peveler was dining when a loud and excited voice attracted his attention. It was young Lieutenant Carson carrying alarming news: several of his men had been killed by Comanche warriors who were ransacking the nearby county. Peveler was an old frontiersman accustomed to clashes with the Indians. Convinced that the tenderfoot lieutenant had simply been scared by a couple of Red Skins, he went about finishing his meal. However, settlers arriving at the fort a while later confirmed Carson's announcement.

On that very day, several hundreds of Comanches and Kiowas created havoc in the village of Elm Creek, near the Brazos River, some fifteen miles north of Fort Belknap. They killed eleven civilians, abducted seven women and children and ransacked eleven houses before setting fire to them. The slaughter was almost over when Lieutenant Carson arrived from Fort Murrah with fourteen cavalymen from Bourland's Regiment. Unabashed by the arrival of a handful of Confederate soldiers, the Indians opened fire and the two parties began exchanging shots. Indian snipers were aiming at Carson's men while at the same time a shower of arrows was pouring on the exposed riders. Overwhelmed by their opponents, the Confederates abandoned their pack mules and fled like hell, followed by a party of red devils. The clash had not lasted long. Nobody knows exactly how many Indians were hit by the Confederates but they lost five or six killed and several wounded during the action and the ensuing pursuit.

When Carson and other settlers spread the news that the county was full of hostile Comanches and Kiowas, soldiers and citizens able to fight ran for their arms and horses. It was however too late: a party of bold Indians had already stolen almost all the animals from the fort's corral. (In those days, the military posts in the West had no stockades!). With their spyglasses and telescopes, the Texans could see the Indians pillaging and burning everything around the fort. Peveler counted 375 mounted warriors including a Kiowa war party. They looked so confident and were even accompanied by their pet dogs. The warriors quickly surrounded the fort, clearly decided to wipe it away it from the surface of the earth.

At nightfall, Peveler and another daring companion cautiously slipped with their horses between the Indian lookouts and quietly made it to the next white settlement. When both came back at the head of a strong company of militia and about sixty cowboys and mounted pioneers, the Indians lifted the siege and vanished in all directions. The Texan column pursued them until October 20 when it was forced to halt since the men were not adequately equipped nor had supplies for a long journey. The column finally returned to the fort to be cheered by its occupants. The Texans had prevented a major disaster but the venture had given them the fright of their life.

Selected sources

- Kerby R.L., *Kirby-Smith's Confederacy*, p. 364, NY 1972.

- Simpson, *Texas in the War 1861-65*, pp. 122-23, 142-43.
- Williams H., *The Indian Raid in Young County, Texas, 13/10/64*, U. of Texas archives, Austin.