

Red River Campaign, Part 26 – Steele’s Retreat to Little Rock (April 30th – May 3rd)

Although un-pursued by the Confederates, the battle at Jenkin’s Ferry was not the end of troubles for Steele’s men – not by a long shot. After crossing the Saline River, they found the going on the other side to be even worse. In some places the water and mud were waist-deep, and there was little timber with which to corduroy the road. Teams from sutler’s wagons were commandeered to replace exhausted government horses and mules, and when those gave out as well the wagons were burned. Animals too weak to be led were set free or left to die where they fell. Many wagons and artillery caissons become hopelessly stuck, the mud completely covering their axles..

They marched from early morning on May 1st straight through the day and night until 4:00 a.m. on May 2nd. Union cavalry lit fires along the road to help guide the marching troops. Hunger was turning to starvation – the Union troops had been on half rations for weeks, but their last distribution of food at Camden had consisted of little more than a couple of hardtack crackers and a pint of corn meal. It is doubtful any union soldiers ever had an opportunity to cook the corn meal, and probably ate it raw. A strange barter system arose: a soldier offered a dollar for one hardtack cracker, another traded a silver watch for two crackers. Those that knew about the bacon, hardtack, and other food which had been destroyed at Camden before the retreat began must have been quite bitter.

By afternoon on May 2nd Steele’s army reached the Benton road, and a little later the Union troops saw a welcome sight: a relief wagon train from Little Rock was arriving with provisions. Rations were quickly distributed and eaten, and the troops rested for yet another cold and wet night, but for once they had a full stomach. On May 3rd the head of the column caught sight of the outskirts of the Little Rock fortifications.

Steele halted to straighten up the columns as best he could. He put his “trophies” on prominent display at the head of the column – a handful of prisoners and the three cannon captured by the 2nd Kansas at Jenkin’s Ferry - and then the army marched into town as if on parade.

Afterwards, Steele would refer to this campaign as simply the “Camden Expedition” – as if he had intended for Camden to be his destination all along for, and that he hadn’t planned on staying there very long, anyway.

As for the Confederates, the lack of a pontoon bridge once again kept them from pursuing Steele's army, this time for good. The army rested until May 3rd when Smith ordered three infantry divisions to return to Camden, after which it would move south to assist Taylor in defeating Banks, which was now stuck with Porter's Navy at Alexandria. Whether there was still time to destroy one of the invading Union armies depended upon the flow of the Red River.