

## **The Battle of Wellington, Missouri and the Ironic Tragedies of War**

In only 17 months after the War of Northern Aggression William Clarke Quantrill had organized the most famous light cavalry force in the history of warfare. At the height of his success Quantrill commanded over 400 men, several of them as young as twelve years old, formed under the Confederate government's Partisan Ranger Act. Quantrill controlled over 3,200 square miles in a five county area surrounding his base of operations in Jackson County, Missouri, known as "Quantrill Country." With his outstanding band of guerrilla soldiers Quantrill participated in most all the major battles in Missouri. The number of daily skirmishes that his company took part in are innumerable. One such skirmish came to be known as the Battle of Wellington.

On September 18, 1862, Quantrill led his men to safety in the heavy timber in Lafayette County, along the banks of the Sni-A-Bar Creek just outside Wellington, following his successful raid on Olathe, Kansas. Capt. George Summers's Company I, of Colonel Henry Neill's Seventy-first Enrolled Missouri Militia, under the command of Lt. Matthew Reid, was camped in the town of Wellington. As was their usual practice, small groups of four to five soldiers would take meals at private homes. On this particular day a squad of Federals from Wellington was patrolling the banks of the Sni-A-Bar Creek in search of guerrillas. Quantrill had his camp along the banks of the Big Sni, on the farm of Harvey Gleaves. Quantrill and a small detail were doing exactly what the Federals were doing: eating meals in small groups at private homes. While Quantrill was eating breakfast, he heard distant gunfire. The Federal patrol had discovered his camp on the Gleaves farm, and in the attack that followed, the Union troopers had chased away the few guerrillas left to guard the camp. The Federals captured the camp equipment and also Quantrill's favorite horse "Ol' Charlie" that he had captured from a Federal officer during his victory at the First Battle of Independence a month earlier. On hearing the Yankees firing in his camp, Quantrill immediately rode to the scene. By this time the rest of his men rejoined him, and by noon he had forty guerrillas assembled. At first Quantrill thought the Federals were part of Colonel John T. Burris's Kansas Jayhawker Regiment who were in the vicinity but soon discovered it was only a local militia unit of seventy-five men from nearby Wellington. Quantrill deployed his men, and in the counterattack that followed, drove the Federals back toward the town. While the Union troops retreated through the main streets, they attempted to yell out warnings to their comrades still in town.

Resident C. M. Bowring reported that the guerrillas came riding down the Independence road at full speed. He remembered Quantrill leading the charge and that each guerrilla had a pistol in either hand and that they had their reins between their teeth. He reported that their long hair was blowing behind them and that their hats, held in place by a cord around their necks, hung down across their backs. As soon as the guerrillas entered the town, Quantrill divided his men into two platoons and ordered each to cut off the Federal retreat. When they reached the Sni Bridge, some of the Union soldiers attempted to make a stand, but Quantrill's men attacked without making a halt and drove past the bridge, scattering the enemy in every direction and killing many of them. Quantrill's own shooting was superb; he emptied six saddles. Guerrilla Andy Blunt emptied five; William Haller and Cole Younger four each; David Poole, Fletcher Taylor, and George Shepherd took out three apiece; and George Todd, William Gregg, Simeon Whitsett, John Koger, John Hicks George, and Ferdinand Scott each felled two. Of the seventy-five Federals, only ten were left alive. One guerrilla went to the home of G. C. Adamson, took a stick of burning wood and burned down the bridge over the Big Sni to keep the rest of the Federals from escaping. Only one guerrilla, Captain Ferdinand Scott, was wounded.

Captain David Poole and six or seven of his men dropped behind the charging column and began searching the houses in town for any trapped Federals. The first home Poole searched belonged to Peter Wolf. Three Federals were eating lunch inside when they heard the firing in town. One quick-thinking soldier managed to promptly slip away out a side door and into the nearby timber. While Poole kept guard by the front gate, he ordered two of his men to go around back to cut off any Federals left inside. As they entered the dining room, one of the Federals, George Williams, was shot and killed. The other, James Porter, attempted to escape via the front door when he ran into Poole and quietly surrendered. Poole wanted Porter desperately. Not long before, Porter led his gang of militia to the farm of Poole's sister and shot her husband, leaving his body unburied in the field where he was slain. Poole made a solemn vow to avenge the wrong done his sister. As Porter stood before the guerrilla, he anticipated his fate, knowing it was useless to try to run. For a few short moments, Poole aimed his pistol at Porter but with the recent memory running through his mind of what Porter had done to his sister he finally pulled the trigger, killing Porter instantly. Ironically, Poole and his victim were schoolmates and cousins.

Lieutenant Matthew Reid the Federal officer who had captured Quantrill's horse during the first stage of the skirmish on the morning of September 18, was found later to be using it as his own. A few days following the battle Quantrill spied it tied to a hitch in front of Wellington's General Store while the officer and another soldier were inside on business. Quantrill, dressed in a Federal uniform, walked up to his horse and coolly petted its neck patiently waiting for the officer to come outside. When he exited the store Quantrill accosted him by shooting him dead but not before reclaiming his horse. He then rode off for Jackson County to gather up the rest of his men in their camps among the hills of the Little Blue Valley.

Article by Paul R. Petersen  
Photo of Captain Dave Poole from  
the Cantey/Myers Collection  
courtesy of Emory Cantey.

