



**Major General Earl  
Van Dorn, CSA**

## ***"Van Dorn's Raid", December 21, 1862 at Davis' Mills***

On October 28, 1862, members of the 25th Indiana Regiment (Union), were sent to Davis Mills (today Michigan City), to protect a railroad crossing over the Wolf River which was a life-line for General Grant's push towards Vicksburg.

In December, 1862, several Confederate Cavalry commanders petitioned Pemberton for permission to raid Holly Springs. There was a rifle manufacturing plant there and they wanted to disrupt the rail lines and shipment as well. Grant had accumulated thousands of tons of supplies there. General Pemperton liked the idea and ordered Van Dorn to assemble a force. There were three brigades assembled to participate and consisted of Col. Red Jackson's Tennesseans, Col. Robert McCullough's Missouri and Mississippians and Col. Griffith's Texans. They marched in the dead of winter in rain and mud and reach the outskirts of Holy Springs. They were being lead by General Van Dorn himself. At dawn on the 20th of December they pounced upon the town of Holly Springs. The Texas Brigade broke into a gallop and rent the chill silence of early morning with their wild rebel yell. The distant roar grew louder as the galloping hooves and clanking sabers drew near. The Texas Brigade approached from the east, swept through the infantry camp at the depot, and dashed onto the heart of the town. As the Texans poured across the campground near the depot, the terrified Yankees dashed out of their tents in their underwear and finding themselves surrounded, without firing a shot. The raiders circled the courthouse, captured its occupants and began to look around them in the early morning light.

The capture of the stores and equipment was complete and vast. There were long trains loaded with rations and clothing. Heaps upon heaps of boots, blankets, whiskey, cigars, canned goods, unopened cases of carbines and pistols. Hundreds of bales of cotton lined the court house square as the towns people came out and shouted, "Hurrah for Van Dorn", "Hurrah for the Confederacy!" " Hurrah for Jeff Davis." For about ten hours the Cavalry Brigade ran carefree through the streets and most of the equipment that could not be taken out was destroyed and burned. The trains burned, the quartermaster's stores and some 1500 prisoners were taken. Many of the confederate horses were in very bad shape and were gleefully exchanged for excellent mounts formerly of the Yankee cavalry. Within twenty-four hours the Cavalry Brigade was gone from Holly Springs, much to the anger of General Grant who had dispatched a force to meet them, but it arrived late.

Van Dorn then set his sights on destroying the vital supply bridge at Davis Mills. In quoting from the diary of a 25th Indiana infantryman: "When we heard of the capture of Holly Springs, we sat out to work to make our position strong. There was an Indian mound out in the field near the railroad bridge and around the mound we threw up breast works of dirt and bailed cotton which made a good fort."

The diarist went on to say they made a blockhouse out of the mill, and stationed 16 men as a picket. When the Rebs came up many of them were wearing blue uniforms, (from the commissary at Holly Springs) and they fooled the pickets into thinking they were Union soldiers, thus capturing them. "The Rebs asked our captured pickets how

many men we were and they said we were about 250. "Oh well," the Rebs said, "We won't stop there for very long."

Around 9:00 AM on the morning of December 21, the diarist wrote: "We objected to their crossing and we opened fire on them with musketry for we had no cannon. We raise a tremendous yell and poured mini-ball at them at a lively rate. Our Chaplain, Gus Ewing, ran our regimental flag up on a pole and planted it on top of the mound during the hottest of the fight. The Rebs made a charge on the wagon bridge but the firing from the mound and the old mill was a crossfire and in such easy range that their men fell, shot down on the bridge like wheat straw. They tried to make another desperate charge but they could not make it."

General Van Dorn stopped the slaughter and sought the surrender of the gallant Indiana boys, but their Commander, Colonel Morgan refused. General Van Dorn advised Colonel Morgan that if he had to sacrifice more men to take the position, he would show them "no quarter" when it was taken. (No quarter meant no prisoners). The men of the gallant 25th still refused to give up.

"The Rebs made a desperate charge on the bridge, yelling and firing," noted the diarist. "They succeeded in getting their colors over and planted on our side and a few of their men got over, but the main column fell back. Their color bearer was killed, another man ran over to get their colors and was killed, and a third man was killed trying for their colors, but they finally got them back. Later they sent a man over with turpentine to burn the bridge, and after two or three men were killed, they fell back." Finally, fearing that thousands of Union Cavalry would be pursuing them, General Van Dorn called off the attack and bivouacked a few miles away.

According to the diarist, after the long hard days fighting, the number of Confederates killed or wounded was equal to the number of about 250. Only 2 men of the 25th Indiana were wounded. The diarist said, "The Rebs told us that we was the worst 250 men that they had ever ran across."

With so little space, I can't give more detail on this battle. Suffice to say this was one occasion - and there were many during the Civil War on both sides - when a few brave men withstood insurmountable odds and almost certain death to fulfill their duty as soldiers.