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Kilpatrick's and Dahlgren's Raid to Richmond

By George E. Pond

On the night of Sunday, the 28th of February, 1864, General Judson Kilpatrick, leaving Stevensburg with four thousand cavalry and a battery of horse artillery, crossed the Rapidan at Ely's Ford, surprised and captured the enemy's picket there, and marched rapidly by Spotsylvania Court House toward Richmond.

His object was to move past the enemy's right Bank, enter the Confederate capital, and release the Union captives in its military prisons. This bold project had grown out of President Lincoln's desire to have his amnesty proclamation circulated within the Confederate lines; and General Kilpatrick, with whom Mr. Lincoln directly conferred, had reported to General Meade, on this officer's application, a plan which included the release of the Richmond prisoners and a raid upon the enemy's communications and supplies. His force was to be chosen from the cavalry corps, mostly from his own - the Third - division; and Colonel Ulric Dahlgren, separating from him near Spotsylvania, with five hundred picked men, was to cross the James, enter Richmond on the south side, after liberating the Belle Isle prisoners, and unite with Kilpatrick's main force entering the city from the north at 10 A. M. of Tuesday, March 1st. General Meade aided the enterprise with simultaneous demonstrations of the Sixth Corps and of Birney's division of the Third against Lee's left, and of Custer's cavalry division toward Charlottesville.

Reaching Spotsylvania Court House at early dawn of February 29th, Kilpatrick moved south through Chilesburg to the Virginia Central Railroad, which he struck during the day at Beaver Dam Station. The telegraph operator was seized, the wires were cut, the track was destroyed, and the station buildings were burned. Detachments were also sent to destroy bridges and track on the Fredericksburg Railroad, and during the raid the amnesty proclamation was distributed. At nightfall the main body moved forward and crossed the South Anna at Ground Squirrel Bridge. Early on Tuesday, March 1st, the column was again in motion, and by 10 o'clock faced the northern lines of Richmond, on the Brook pike, five miles from the city. Its arrival was wholly unexpected; still a telegraphic dispatch that Union cavalry were raiding south of the Rapidan having reached Richmond the day before, General Elzey had that morning, as a precaution, sent out troops to the west of the city under General G. W. C. Lee, and to the north under Colonel Stevens, those sent to the Brook road consisting of five hundred men and six guns. Kilpatrick's advance quickly drove back the pickets of this last force and their supports, and thus found itself close up to the inner lines of the Richmond defenses. Some skirmishing with artillery firing went on for several hours, Kilpatrick meanwhile awaiting signs of the approach of Dahlgren.

The latter officer, on separating from the main body below Spotsylvania, moving south-westerly, had, before noon of the 29th, struck and broken the Virginia Central Railroad a little east of Frederick's Hall Station, capturing a detachment of Maryland artillerymen and also about a dozen commissioned officers, who were holding a court-martial. At Frederick's Hall Station were eighty or more pieces of Lee's reserve artillery, and the news that it was exposed to attack created some excitement in Richmond; but Colonel Dahlgren's information and purposes

determined him not to risk an attack on the artillery camp. At night he crossed the South Anna, and early the next morning reached the James River canal, about eight miles east of Goochland. There he directed Captain J. F. B. Mitchell to take the detachment of one hundred men of the 2d New York, and, proceeding down the canal, to destroy locks and burn mills, grain, and boats, and then to send the ambulances and prisoners to General Kilpatrick at Hungary Station. Meanwhile Dahlgren himself was to cross the river at a ford which a negro guide had promised to indicate. Captain Mitchell destroyed six grist-mills, a saw-mill, six canal-boats loaded with grain, the barn of Secretary Seddon, and the coalworks at Manikin's Bend, with a neighboring lock. But Colonel Dahlgren did not find the expected fording place, and proceeded instead on the north side of the river. About eight miles from Richmond he was overtaken by Captain Mitchell, at 3:30p.m. A picket of Custis Lee's city battalion had there been captured, and during a halt the men had coffee and the horses were fed on captured corn. Guns supposed to be Kilpatrick's were heard, and Dahlgren, moving forward, about five miles from the city encountered sharp musketry. The resistance grew heavier, darkness came on, and the firing attributed to Kilpatrick ceased. In fact, the latter officer, ignorant how small a force he really had in his front, wondering what had become of Dahlgren, and seeing what he took to be reinforcements for the enemy, had now abandoned the attempt to enter the city, and had fallen back several miles to camp at Atlee's Station. Dahlgren, on his part, feeling it to be hopeless at that hour and with his small force to advance, gave the order to withdraw. The attempt to release the Union prisoners had failed. Extrication from this position was the next step. Bradley T. Johnson's cavalry had followed Kilpatrick down from Beaver Dam, and, uniting with Wade Hampton's, now sharply attacked him late at night at Atlee's Station. The following day his rear-guard was harassed somewhat as he moved down the peninsula. According to the original plan he proceeded to Williamsburg, within the lines then occupied by the troops of General B. F. Butler. Dahlgren was less fortunate. Putting Captain Mitchell in charge of the rear-guard on Tuesday night, he, with Major Cooke, had gone forward with the advance. In the darkness the column became scattered, and Captain Mitchell found himself in charge of the main portion, about three hundred strong, Dahlgren having moved with the remainder in a direction unknown to him. By great exertions and with sharp skirmishing, Captain Mitchell broke his way through the enemy, and joined Kilpatrick the next day, the 2d, at Tunstall's Station, near White House. Meanwhile Dahlgren had crossed the Pamunkey at Hanover town and the Mattaponi at Aylett's; but late on Wednesday night, March 2d, he fell into an ambush near Walkerton. formed by Captain Fox with home guards of King and Queen County, furloughed men, and Magruder's squadron, and by Lieutenant Pollard with a company of the 9th Virginia. Dahlgren, at the head of his men, fell dead, pierced with a bullet. The greater part of his command was captured.

On the second morning after Colonel Dahlgren's death, Lieutenant Pollard carried to General Fitzhugh Lee, in Richmond, some papers which he said had been taken from Dahlgren's body, together with the artificial leg which the young officer wore in place of a limb amputated a short time before. The documents were published in the Richmond newspapers, and afterward in the newspapers at the North. One of them, signed Ulric Dahlgren, purporting to be an address to his men, contained this passage: "We hope to release the prisoners from Belle Isle first, and having seen them fairly started, we will cross the James River into Richmond, destroying the bridges after us, and exhorting the released prisoners to destroy and burn the hateful city; and do not allow the rebel leader, Davis, and his traitorous crew to escape." The second document, a paper of instructions not signed, declared that "once in the city it must be destroyed, and Jeff Davis and

cabinet killed. Pioneers will go along with combustible material." On observing these publications, General Meade at once, on the 14th of March, directed an inquiry to be made into their authenticity. On the 16th, General Kilpatrick, having carefully examined officers and men who accompanied Colonel Dahlgren, and having received a written account from Captain Mitchell, reported to General Meade that the unanimous testimony was that Colonel Dahlgren published no address whatever to his command, nor did he give any instructions"; but he added that Colonel Dahlgren had submitted to him an address which he had accordingly indorsed in red ink "approved" over his official signature. This address, he said, conformed to the one published in the Richmond newspapers, "save so far as it speaks of I 'exhorting the prisoners to destroy and burn the hateful city and kill the traitor Davis and his cabinet.' All this is false, and published only as an excuse for the barbarous treatment of the remains of a brave soldier." A fortnight later, General R. E. Lee sent to General Meade photographic copies of the two documents, with a letter making the extracts already quoted with their context, and requesting to know whether these alleged designs and instructions of Colonel Dahlgren were authorized by the United States Government, or by his superior officer, or were now approved by them. This letter being referred to General Kilpatrick, he replied substantially as in his previous report, adding, however, that the photographic papers "do not contain the endorsement referred to as having been placed by me on Colonel Dahlgren's papers. Colonel Dahlgren received no orders from me to pillage, burn, or kill, nor were any such instructions given me by my superiors." This letter was inclosed by General Meade to General Lee with the statement that "neither the United States Government, myself, nor General Kilpatrick authorized, sanctioned, or approved the burning of the city of Richmond and the killing of Mr. Davis and his cabinet, nor any other act not required by military necessity and in accordance with the usages of war."