

In the closing months of the Civil War, much chaos and confusion reigned within the Southern states. This was the catalyst for Union forces to create further disruption through raids and other attacks on Confederate lines of communication and supply.

By March 8, 1865, General William T. Sherman's forces had crossed over the state line into North Carolina, after their destructive tour de force of secession leader, South Carolina. [1]

Brigadier General John M. Schofield, commanding the forces at Wilmington, North Carolina, knew of Sherman's approach into the state, but was unaware of his exact whereabouts. Schofield intended to communicate with Sherman by one means or another, and, in early March, called for volunteers from troops within the vicinity of his command to carry messages through enemy lines, and have them delivered to Sherman.

Having gotten wind of this request for volunteers for this hazardous venture, several personnel from the gunboat USS Nyack took it upon themselves to answer this call. Acting master Henry Walton Grinnell, together with acting ensign H.B. Colby, seaman Thomas Gillespie and ship's painter, Joseph Williams, were chosen to carry these dispatches to Sherman's forces. They were aware of the consequences of failure, with the ultimate result being either capture or death. On March 4, 1865, while Sherman's forces were still operating within the state of South Carolina, General Schofield handed a cipher dispatch to Grinnell, with the instruction that he was to make his way through enemy lines, attempting to locate General Sherman, and to personally hand him the dispatch.

Arming themselves with Sharps rifles and revolvers, as well as two days rations, the party of four sailors proceeded in a small dugout, on the evening of March 4, up the Cape Fear River, from Wilmington, until they spotted the Confederate pickets, some 12 miles or so from their point of departure. Without being discovered, Grinnell and his party, on the morning of the 5th, abandoned their boat at a point near Livingston's Creek, and continued on foot, heading in the general direction of the Pee Dee River, in South Carolina, where last reports had indicated that Sherman was. They headed towards the Wilmington and White Hall road, passing through the village of Summerville. Here the party destroyed some arms found in the

possession of the citizens, and also received information that a party of Confederate cavalry were attempting to cut them off at Livingston's bridge. Obviously their movements had been discovered, possibly through the information supplied by citizens living along the route of their journey. On hearing of this, Grinnell and his men secretly hid themselves in a negro hut nearby, and waited for two days, before coming out of hiding. They had received word that the Confederate pursuers had gotten tired of waiting and recrossed the river. At dark on March 7, Grinnell and party secured the services of a negro guide and cautiously commenced their journey towards Whiteville, moving only under the cover of darkness. Moving cautiously, and with much difficulty, through swampy terrain, they reached the outskirts of Whiteville on the morning of the 9th. The town was held by Confederate forces, which prompted the party to bypass the town and head for the crossroads leading to White Hall. Here they spotted a couple of Confederate picket posts which they quickly made a dash at, quietly disarming and capturing two members of company A, 51st North Carolina Infantry. The captives were forced to accompany Grinnell's party for about 5 miles before being paroled. From this point on, their journey was made easier through the acquisition of several horses, and after some hard riding by night and by day, they reached Drowning Creek, near the small town of Lumberton, on the afternoon of the 11th. It was at this point that they first learned of the approximate whereabouts of Sherman's troops. A small Confederate scouting party fled to the woods on the approach of Grinnell's party, and they continued on their journey without any further danger. On the morning of March 12, Grinnell and his party had the pleasure of meeting up with scouts of General Sherman's army on the Lumber Bridge road, about 20 miles from Fayetteville. Due to the roads being blocked up by Sherman's wagons, artillery and other forces, Grinnell's party did not reach Sherman's headquarters until after noon. On handing the dispatch to the General, he expressed surprise at receiving it from Naval personnel and by such a route. By this time the dispatch had been outdated, due to other parties reaching him a day or two earlier, via the river route. However, this did not lessen the dangerous method by which the message was delivered. Grinnell later sent a message to his immediate commander, expressing great satisfaction with the conduct of the other three sailors who had accompanied him. Shortly after this they returned to more mundane duties aboard their vessel. [2]

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Source Notes:

[1] "Sherman's March Through the Carolinas" by John G. Barrett, page 122; published by the University of North Carolina Press, 1979 edition.

[2] The details of the expedition are contained within a message sent by Grinnell to Lieutenant Commander George W. Young, senior Naval officer off Wilmington, North Carolina, dated at the Headquarters of Sherman's Army, Fayetteville, North Carolina, March 12, 1865, and included on pages 90-91, series 1, volume 12, of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion. See also page 82 of the same volume.