

## The Last Battle of the Civil War: Palmetto Ranch

Unlike the rest of the Confederacy, Texas was spared from most of the ravages of the war. Aside from a few isolated Federal coastal outposts, the Lone Star state remained unoccupied and was subjected to nothing other than a few Union raids to shut down border supply points into Mexico. Brownsville, Texas was one of those supply points. Several times during the war, the Union outpost at Brazos Santiago (present day South Padre Island) sent expeditions jabbing toward Brownsville 18 miles away.

With the war almost over, Col. Theodore H. Barrett decided to mount one more strike along the Rio Grande, toward White's Ranch, then on to Palmetto Ranch where a small band of Rebels were based. Though not stated in his official report, Barrett's goal for the raid may have been to obtain horses for the 2nd Texas cavalry, 52 of whom accompanied the 62nd US Colored Infantry on the expedition.

May 11, 1865, 4 A.M.

Under a fierce storm, Lt. Col. Branson was preparing his 250 men for the crossing of the Boca Chica, a narrow neck of water separating Brazos Santiago Island from Point Isabel on the mainland. Delayed by mechanical failure of the ferry, and the storm, Branson's men weren't in position to begin to march the 16 miles to Palmetto Ranch till 9:30 that night. Quick of foot, his men reached and surrounded White's Ranch around 2 a.m. the morning of the 12th, intending to capture the suspected rebel force of sixty-five men, horses, and cattle camped there. Unfortunately, it was discovered the enemy had evacuated the area the day before. Exhausted, Branson marched his men another mile and a half toward Palmetto Ranch before camping for the night in a thicket along the Rio Grande. They remained undiscovered till about 8:30 when they were spotted by Mexican nationals on the far bank who proceeded to spread the alarm to the Confederates. Branson immediately charged toward Palmetto Ranch, reaching it about noon after punching through a thin screen of Rebel cavalry. Branson scattered the 190 Confederates that were stationed at Palmetto and captured 3 prisoners, ten days rations plus a few horses and cattle.

Taking position on a hill near the Ranch, Branson then halted again to feed his men and animals. The Rebels weren't about to let the Federals roam about the country at will, so at 3 p.m., a large rebel force appeared and began skirmishing with Branson's troops. Considering the hill he occupied indefensible, Branson and the 62nd fell back to White's Ranch for the night. Taking defensive positions, Branson dispatched the day's haul back to Brazos Santiago, along with a call for reinforcements from Col. Barrett.

Early the next morning, the 13th, Col Barrett arrived on the scene, with 200 additional troops from the 34th Indiana Infantry. Taking field command, Barrett advanced again to Palmetto Ranch, skirmishing with Rebel troops all the way. Capturing the Ranch again, Barrett set fire to the buildings being used as barracks by the Confederates.

Barrett continued the advance 2 miles past Palmetto when a sharp fight ensued. Brought to a halt by Rebel resistance and with night coming on, Barrett fell back a mile to a bluff on the river intending to rest for the night. The rebels were not inclined to let them.

About 4 p.m. a large force of Confederate cavalry, supported by six 12 pound cannon, appeared on the scene and managed to sneak around Barrett's right flank (his left resting on the river) and were discovered trying to get into his rear, cutting him off from Brazos Santiago. With no artillery of his own, Barrett had no choice but to retreat or be captured. Under heavy fire from his front and 250 enemy horsemen trying to race around his right, Barrett threw out a  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile long "umbrella" of skirmishers to slow down the Rebels. With their backs to the river, the Federal force fought their way back down the river the way they had come, fighting to keep the rebel cavalry from cutting them off. Not all could succeed; 48 men of the 34th Indiana were cut off and captured while keeping the rebels at bay. Retreating under fire is one of the most difficult moves to make in warfare but Barrett managed to extricate his forces, arriving back to Brazos Santiago the morning of the 14th of May.

After four deadly years of war, the last volley of the Civil War was fired by the 62nd U.S. Colored Infantry about sunset on the 13th of May, 1865. Barrett's wounded and captured in the engagement was 4 officers, and 111 men. Only one man was killed on either side, Private John J. Williams of Company B, 34th Indiana, the last man to die in the Civil War.