

MOSBY BAPTIZES THE CALIFORNIANS AT MT. ZION CHURCH

The California troopers had been itching for a fight, and today they were going to have one. Confederate John Mosby was poised for an ambush. Secluded with 150 men, and a howitzer for support, he waited in the trees alongside Virginia's Little River Turnpike, near a tiny brick chapel known as Mt. Zion church. The unsuspecting Federal column, which included a number of Californians, had no idea how rough things were about to become.

After making their way from the Pacific Coast and mustering into the 2nd Massachusetts Cavalry, the 500 troopers of the Cal Hundred and Cal Battalion had spent a year scouting Northern Virginia turnpikes. They had not yet

been able to square off in large numbers against their Confederate counterparts. For months, the daily game of cat and mouse, played against Colonel John Mosby and his guerillas only served to whet the appetites of the Goldenstaters for a stand-up fight. Now, they were about to get their wish. Although the rough and tumble Californians wouldn't run from a brawl, after today, they would never again crave the sound of angry gunfire.

The 2nd Mass had spent the 4th of July 1864 in camp at Falls Church, Virginia. The amusements of horse racing and jumping were abruptly forgotten, when word arrived that Jubal Early was moving up through the Shenandoah Valley on what appeared to be a



***Above:** Mt. Zion Church, located a short distance east of Old Carolina Road on the Little River Turnpike in Virginia. **Top right:** Major William H. Forbes, a Massachusetts officer, commanded the Union troops during the engagement. When his horse was shot and pinned him to the ground, his surrender allowed command to devolve to Captain Goodwin Stone (right). In the fracas, Stone received a bullet to his spine, paralyzing him, yet he managed to ride back to camp, where he died a few days later. **Left:** Lieutenant George E. Plummer enlisted from San Francisco as a member of the storied Cal Hundred. Plummer was wounded during the fight at Mt. Zion Church.² He remained with the regiment and survived the war.*



thrust toward Washington. Charles R. Lowell, the blueblood Colonel of the 2nd Massachusetts Cavalry, was expected to send out scouting parties to observe Early's movements, and to do what they could to disrupt Confederate communications.

Before dawn the next morning several companies of troopers left camp, riding in separate directions down the Virginia turnpikes. The largest of the expeditions was led by Major William H. Forbes, with a command of 100 troopers from the 2nd Mass and 50 from the neighboring 13th New York

Cavalry. Forbes was a Massachusetts born officer who had served in the cavalry since the first year of the war. Although the Californians in the column preferred being led by officers from their own state, they were reassured by each other's presence and wanted to stay together if gunfire erupted.

The blue line rode out on the Little River Turnpike headed toward Aldie and Leesburg, and into rolling Virginia countryside, crawling with secessionist sympathizers. They found everything quiet in the mountain gaps, but heard rumors that Colonel Mosby had just

struck a small Union force at Point of Rocks. Several wagons laden with Federal bounty had recently passed nearby, accompanied by a number of Mosby's rangers. To Major Forbes, this was worth pursuing. But his movements had not gone unnoticed.

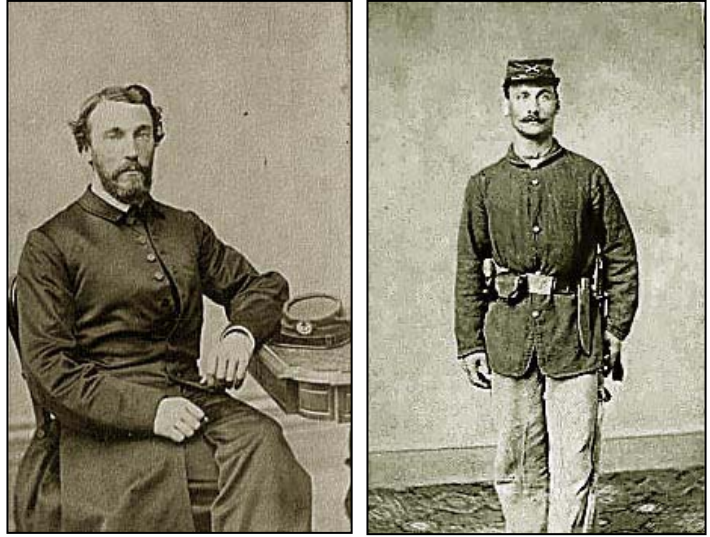
Colonel Mosby had also been informed of Forbes' scouting party, whose unhurried movements made for a tantalizing target in the countryside Mosby knew best. It was now unclear who the cat was, and who was to be the mouse.

Both sides knew that to survive in secessionist territory, small Federal columns had to keep moving, and regularly change their routes. Major Forbes stalled his movements, retracing roads through hostile farmlands as he searched for signs of the wagons. This was a critical mistake and Mosby, an excellent tactician in this type of warfare, was not going to let him get away with it.

On July 6th, the Union troopers stopped in front of the Skinner farm for a leisurely rest. Half the horses were alternately unbridled and allowed to graze, the other half remaining at the ready in case of trouble. Finally, as the column mounted up to leave, Mosby made his first move.

Twelve of his men rode into the open and exchanged skirmish fire with Forbes' men. The Union major smartly ordered his troopers to form ranks. Company L of the Cal Battalion deployed as the forward rank, commanded by Captain Goodwin Stone. Lieutenant Charles Amory of Company G led the second rank, and the third was in the process of forming, made up of New York men. Things seemed to be looking good as the Federals prepared to receive Mosby's charge. Although their numbers were nearly equal, the Union cavalry appeared to have the advantage because they were in battle formation and were armed with Spencer repeating carbines.

But then things began to unravel. Mosby had a cannon, and very few of the



***Among the captured:** Twenty-six union troopers were captured during the July 7th fight. Six died in prison or were never seen again. Among the lucky survivors was Chaplain Charles Humphreys (top, left) who later wrote a detailed memoir of his war experiences. Another, (top, right) was Abraham Loane, a member of the Cal Hundred who spent the balance of the war in captivity. Surviving Andersonville, Loane returned to California after the war.*

Union troopers, or their horses, had been under artillery fire before. Abruptly, the howitzer bellowed, firing its only round of the engagement¹. The shell exploded harmlessly above the Union troopers, but the result of this lone salvo, although bloodless, was all Mosby could have hoped for. Momentary confusion erupted in the Union ranks, as men ducked and nervous horses were reined back into line. Major Forbes ordered the front element to fire carbines in return, but the volley only served to heighten the disorder of the horses. Colonel Mosby saw his chance, and the butternut troopers charged. The partisan onslaught struck the Union line with such force that bedlam ensued, as saddles were emptied and horses scrambled in all directions, some carrying frightened troopers who were spurring them towards safety.

Major Forbes, known to Colonel Lowell as his "fighting major" was not going to give



The weapons: *The Lost Ordinance Report*³ submitted by Captain William M. Rumery lists 11 Spencer carbines, five Colt pistols and six Remington pistols as lost to Mosby during the fight. **Top:** 2nd Mass Cav Spencer carbine brought home after the war by Wesley Howe of San Francisco. Howe (right) enlisted in California in 1863, and eventually rose to the rank of Lieutenant in the Cal Hundred. **Above:** Colt Army brought home from the war by Pvt. Nathan H. Fogg of Company L. Pvt. Fogg, also from the bay area, stood in the front ranks when the fighting started at Mt. Zion Church and was wounded in the scrap. He returned to the regiment and survived the war.

up without a fight. Above the din, his men heard him shout for them to reform near some woods, a few hundred yards away. While some of the bluecoats fled, the Californians and their officers from Companies A and L tried to rally around Forbes. As the fracas gradually moved toward Mt. Zion Church, the two California companies rallied and volleyed twice into the

Southern horsemen. During the chaos, William H. J. Hilliard, a 24-year-old sergeant of the Cal Hundred distinguished himself in his efforts to rally the men.

Pvt. Nathan C. Huestis wrote (in a letter to his parents two days later):...*About 200 of them charged on us, bursting into our midst and causing death and destruction...that excited the horses and away they scampered, some without and some with riders. It seemed as though a kind Providence watched over me - the balls whistled around me like hail.*"⁴

Like a pair of gladiators, Major Forbes

and Colonel Mosby somehow found themselves facing each other. Major Forbes slashed with his saber at Mosby. His blow was deflected by another southern trooper, whose raised pistol parried the blade, causing it to strike deeply into his own shoulder. Mosby whirled on his horse and at point blank range fired his pistol at Forbes, narrowly missing him. At the same instant, the Major's horse was shot, and falling heavily, pinned him to the ground. Now helpless, Forbes was forced to signal his surrender to Mosby. In the seconds that followed, other Union troopers were shot trying to rescue the fallen major from his captors. (The furious moments of this life and death struggle, and the luckless surrender that followed were the beginning of a lifelong friendship between Forbes and Mosby.)

While Forbes was going down, blue and grey saddles continued to be emptied. Captain Stone, another Californian who had been promoted only two months before, saw that he was one of the last Federal officers remaining in the fight. As he rallied the men for a final volley, he was struck in the spine with a bullet that partially paralyzed him. Incredibly, Stone would remain on his horse and ride the many miles back to Falls Church camp where he would die a few days later.

By now, any order in the Union line had disintegrated. The field was strewn with dead and wounded men, horses, and every imaginable accoutrement. The Federal troopers, realizing that it was every man for himself, fanned out into the woods and byways, each feverishly trying escape Confederate



Above: After the fighting ended, several Union troopers were buried near Mt. Zion Church. The Union burial detail broke up pews from inside the church for makeshift coffins, prompting the congregation to register a claim to the government for compensation. Asking \$35.00 per pew, they eventually received only \$2.00 for each.

The troopers graves were marked only by creekstones. In 1997, interested parties placed suitable headstones in the church's cemetery. Pictured are those of two Californians, Cpl. Samuel Hanscom of the Cal Hundred and Cpl. James McDonald of Company F.

gunfire. Southern troopers struck out after the fleeing Yankees, trying to ride them down.

The only Union officer left standing was the 2nd Mass chaplain, Charles Humphreys.⁵ Riding swiftly down the pike, Humphreys found himself gaining on two Confederates who, in turn, were trying to catch a distant Federal trooper. The Union soldier turned out to be the same Pvt. Huestis who felt Providence had been watching over him a few minutes earlier. He no doubt hoped that Providence had also given him a good horse.

Huestis writes, *"Two rebs started after me, it was a race for life, and as their horses were better than mine they soon came up with me. One of them, who was ahead, had the point of his sabre within four inches of my back, when our Chaplain rode up and shot him through the back; if ever I thanked God it was for that. The other reb made a slash at my head with his sabre...taking me on the head*

*and shoulder. I nearly fell from my horse, but the fellow paid for it with his life, for as he rode by I had just strength enough to raise my revolver and get sight on him and fired, he fell from his horse like lead, I am sorry for it but could not help it.”*⁶

Then, as quickly as it had begun, the struggle was suddenly over. Mosby and his rangers melted into the Virginia countryside. Word of the fight arrived in the Union camp at Falls Church that night. Colonel Lowell set out with a large rescue party at midnight. When they arrived at Mt. Zion Church, their eyes beheld the scene of bloodshed. Some of the Union dead were then gathered and buried in a corner of the small cemetery in the churchyard, their lonely graves marked only with small creek stones. Union losses were eleven killed, eight wounded, twenty-six captured.

The clash had been an obvious defeat for the Federal cavalry. Colonel Lowell did not pull any punches in his report, but admitted the errors that led to the loss of Union lives. Some of the rank and file soldiers, characteristically, blamed the whole affair on their commander, Major Forbes.⁷ However, when the dust finally settled, the Californians in the ranks had proven their mettle. They were willing to rally when the chips were down, and duke it out with the best of their enemies. But it would be a long while before they grew anxious for another fight.

William M. Rumery and Adjutant C. Mason Kinne provides a brief description of the skirmish and a detailed list of forfeited stores, even down to curry combs and carbine brush wipes. Report in possession of the author.

⁴Rogers, *Their Horses Climbed Trees*, 2001. Letter from Nathan Heustis, dated July 9th, 1864. Published by courtesy of Wayne Saffer, Leesburg, Virginia.

⁵Humphreys, William, *Field, Camp, Hospital and Prison*, 1880, pp. 100-103.

⁶ Rogers, *Their Horses Climbed Trees*, 2001. Letter from Nathan Heustis, dated July 9th, 1864. Published by courtesy of Wayne Saffer, Leesburg, Virginia.

⁷Samuel J. Corbett diary, U.C. Berkeley, Bancroft Library. Entry dated July 6, 1864.

Notes:

¹ Official Records of the War of the Rebellion JULY 6, 1864-Action at Mount Zion Church, near Aldie, Va. Report of Colonel Charles R. Lowell, Jr., Second Massachusetts Cavalry

²Samuel J. Corbett diary, U.C. Berkeley, Bancroft Library, entry dated July 8, 1864, Valorus Dearborn diary, July 7, 1864 entry.

³Lost Ordinance Report signed by Captain

OFFICIAL RECORDS OF THE WAR OF THE REBELLION **JULY 6, 1864-ACTION AT MOUNT ZION CHURCH, NEAR ALDIE, VA.**

Report of Colonel Charles R. Lowell, jr., Second Massachusetts Cavalry, commanding brigade.

NEAR FALLS CHURCH, VA.,

July 8, 1864.

COLONEL: I have the honor to report of Major Forbes' scout as complete as is yet possible. I have not talked with Lieutenant Kuhls or Captain Stone, who is badly wounded, but send what I learned on the ground:

Major Forbes left here with 150 men (100 Second Massachusetts Cavalry, 50 Thirteenth New York Cavalry) Monday, p. m. Tuesday a. m. went through Aldie, and found all quiet toward the gaps. Tuesday p. m. went by Ball's Mill to Leesburg. Heard of Mosby's raid at Point of Rocks, and learned that he had sent four or five wagons of plunder through Leesburg, under a guard of about sixty men, the afternoon before. Heard nothing of any other force this side of the ridge. He returned that night to the south of Goose Creek, as directed, and on Wednesday a. m. went again by Ball's Mill to Leesburg. Still heard nothing of Mosby or any force. From what I learn from citizens I think Mosby passed between Leesburg and the Potomac some time on Tuesday, crossed Goose Creek, and moved westward toward Aldie on Wednesday; learned of Major Forbes' second visit to Leesburg, and laid in ambush for him at Ball's Mill. Major Forbes returned from Leesburg by Centre's Mill (four miles above), came down by Aldie, and halted for two or three hours about one and a half miles east, on the Little River pike; when Mosby learned this he moved south, and struck the pike about one and a quarter miles east of the major's position, being hidden till he had reached about half a mile west on the pike. Major Forbes was duly notified by his advance guard, mounted his men, and moved them from the north to the south of the pike. As the rear was crossing Mosby fired one shell from his 12-pounder (the only time it was fired), which burst entirely too high. As Major Forbes formed on the south his advanced guard, which had dismounted and fired as Mosby came up, fell back, still keeping a little north of the pike, and took an excellent position somewhat on the flank. Up to this time I think all the dispositions were admirable. Major Forbes' two squadrons were formed, his third squadron and rear guard not formed, but nearly so, and no confusion. Mosby's men, who were not in any order, but were down the road in a "nick," had just reached the fence corner some 225 yards off, and a few had dismounted, under a fire from the advanced guard, to take down the fence. When two panels of fence were down the men trotted through for about seventy-five yards, and came gradually ordered to fire with carbines. Here was the first mistake. It created confusion among the horses, and the squadron in the rear added to it by firing a few pistol shots. Had the order been given to draw sabers and charge the rebels would never have got their gun off, but I think Major Forbes, seeing how uneasy his horses were at the firing, must have intended to dismount some of his men. At any rate, he attempted to move the first squadron by the right flank. The rebels saw their chance, gave a yell, and our men, in the confusion of the moment, broke. The two rear squadrons went off in confusion. Attempts were made, with some success, to rally parts of the first squadron in the next field, and again near Little River Church, one mile off.

Captain Stone was wounded here, and I believe all the non-commissioned officers of A and L

Companies present wounded or killed. There was little gained. I have only to report a perfect rout and a chase for five to seven miles. We lost Major Forbes, Lieutenant Amory, and Mr. Humphreys (chaplain), from Second Massachusetts, and Lieutenant Burns, Thirteenth New York Cavalry, prisoners, all unhurt. Captain Stone, Second Massachusetts, and Lieutenant Schuyler, Thirteenth New York, very badly wounded. Lieutenant Kuhls alone came safely to camp. Of men, we lost, killed outright, 7, Second Massachusetts; 5, Thirteenth New York. Wounded we brought in 27 will die. About 40 others have come to camp half mounted, and Mosby was reported to have 44 prisoners; quite a number, you will see, still unaccounted for. Some of them are probably wounded, and some still on their way to camp, and others will be made prisoners.

Mosby went up toward Upperville with his prisoners and his dead and wounded about midnight Wednesday. I reached the ground about 11.30 a. m., and remained in plain sight for about three hours; then searched through all the woods and moved to Centreville, where I again waited an hour in hopes some stragglers would join us. We only picked up half a dozen, however.

The soldiers and the citizens all speak in high terms of the gallantry of the officers; Major Forbes especially remained in the first field till every man had left it, emptied his revolver, and, in the second field, where Company A tried to stand, he disabled one man with his saber, and lunged through Colonel Mosby's coat. His horse was then killed and fell on his leg, pinning him till he was compelled to surrender.

More than 100 horses were taken. Accouterments, arms, &c., will also be missing. I cannot yet give the precise number.

Mosby's force is variously estimated at from 175 to 250, Mrs. Davis and her daughter putting it at 250 to 300 men. I think he had probably about 200. What his loss was I cannot say, as he picked up all his dead and wounded and took them off in the night. The Union people in Aldie report that he took them off in the night. The Union people in Aldie report that he took them in five wagons. A wounded sergeant reports hearing the names of 3 or 4 spoken of as killed; 1 mortally wounded man was left on the ground. I think the chance was an excellent one to whip Mosby and take his gun. I have no doubt Major Forbes thought so too; as the wounded men say there was not enough difference in numbers to talk about. The chance was lost. I have scouting parties out to Centreville to watch Thoroughfare Gap and the country south, but have not at present any party to the north beyond Chantilly and Dranesville. A part of my picket-line had not been relieved for two days. I shall try to see the general this p. m. for a few minutes, if there is nothing new here and if the orderly brings word that he had returned to the city.

Very respectfully, your obedient servant,
C. R. LOWELL, JR.,

Colonel Second Massachusetts Cavalry, Commanding Brigade.
Lieutenant Colonel JOSEPH H. TAYLOR,
Assistant Adjutant-General.

Reports of Colonel Henry M. Lazelle, Sixteenth New York Cavalry, commanding brigade.

HEADQUARTERS CAVALRY BRIGADE,
Near Falls Church, Va., July 7, 1864.

COLONEL: I have the honor to report that intelligence reached here about 3 o'clock this a. m. of an attack on Major Forbes' party near Aldie at about 6 o'clock last evening, brought in by men who were separated from the column and have found their way to camp.

The most intelligible account that can be gathered is that while on its return to camp the party was attacked by about 300 men, with one piece of artillery, near the old church at Aldie, the rebels remaining concealed in the woods and firing upon our party with their artillery and small-arms. The men know nothing as to the result of the attack, but agree in reporting that a portion of our party was thrown into disorder, and that many riderless horses were seen running loose. The supposition is that our men were dismounted and instructed to fight on foot. Nothing is known concerning Major Forbes or any officers of the command. Colonel Lowell started out about 4 o'clock this morning to the scene of the engagement with a party of about 250 men and four ambulances. Any reliable information which may be received from him or from members of Major Forbes' party who may return will at once be forwarded. We will doubtless have correct reports soon of the result.

This report has been delayed in expectation of getting accurate accounts. The necessary arrangements have been made here for the protection of property in case of an attack during Colonel Lowell's absence.

I have the honor to be, very respectfully, your obedient servant,
H. M. LAZELLE,

Colonel, Commanding Camp, Falls Church, Va.
Lieutenant Colonel JOSEPH H. TAYLOR,
Assistant Adjutant-General and Chief of Staff.

HEADQUARTERS CAVALRY BRIGADE,
Near Falls Church, Va., July 7, 1864.

COLONEL: I have the honor to report that lieutenant Kuhls, of the Second Massachusetts Cavalry, one of the officers, with Major Forbes' party, reached here this afternoon about 4 o'clock, being the only officer that has as yet returned. He reports our detachment badly beaten by the enemy in an engagement with a party of Mosby's men, estimated by him to number about 200, about half a mile this side of Mount Zion Church (near Aldie).

Of the party of 150 sent-out there have to-day returned to camp as follows: One officer and 26 men, Second Massachusetts Cavalry; 7 men, thirteenth New York Cavalry, the rest are missing. Lieutenant Kuhls thinks a few of them are either killed or wounded, but the majority taken prisoners. The particulars of the fight will be delayed until the return of Colonel Lowell, who will probably be able to give you more satisfactory accounts than I can.

The following officers were with the party and have not been heard from: First Lieutenant R. S. Schuyler, Thirteenth New York Cavalry; Second Lieutenant Michael Burns, Thirteenth New York

Cavalry; Second Lieutenant Michael Burns, Thirteenth New York Cavalry; Chaplain C. A. Humphreys, Second Massachusetts Cavalry. Major Forbes, when last seen by Lieutenant Kuhls, was completely surrounded by the enemy and fighting bravely. He is without doubt a prisoner, if not killed or wounded. Captain G. A. Stone, Second Massachusetts Cavalry, who was also with the party, is reported badly wounded, in the house of Mr. Thomas Taylor, near Centreville, and a party has been sent to bring him into camp. Colonel Lowell has not been heard from since he started, but is expected in to-night. Nothing has been heard of any party of rebels from the direction of either Thoroughfare Gap or Manassas, though scouting parties have been sent out continually, who would be likely to obtain information of an advance from those directions.

Very respectfully, your obedient servant,
H. M. LAZELLE,

Colonel Sixteenth New York Vol. Cav., Commanding Brigadier
Lieutenant Colonel JOSEPH H. TAYLOR,
Assistant Adjutant-General and Chief of Staff.