Baptism of Fire: Holland's Company I and the Battle of Tebbs Bend, July 4, 1863

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It was early in the morning at a place called Tebbs Bend, Kentucky. The sun was just coming up and the summer heat was beginning to build. It was the Fourth of July, 1863 but no one at Tebbs Bend was celebrating. Tebbs Bend is what the locals call a sharp bend in the sluggish Green River that runs through south-central Kentucky. Far from Tebbs Bend, historical events were being played out in the great American tragedy known as the Civil War. Some 500 miles to the east at a small crossroads town named Gettysburg, the Army of Northern Virginia under Robert E. Lee was preparing its painful withdrawal, leaving thousands of their fallen comrades and their hopes of victory on the battlefield. Some 450 miles to the southwest from Tebbs Bend the city of Vicksburg, Mississippi, the last holdout of the Confederacy on the Mississippi River, was preparing to surrender to General Grant. The Confederate General surrendered on the fourth of July because he said, he could get better terms on that day from the Union commander. The small band of Union soldiers dug in at Tebbs Bend on that fourth of July in 1863 knew nothing of those momentous events. Here in the predawn darkness a skirmish had broken out between the Union force of 263 men and Confederate cavalry numbering close to 2,500. Among those who waited for the Confederate main attack were 83 young Dutch immigrant soldiers from the small town of Holland, Michigan. The story of how these young men so far from the country of their birth and now so far from their new Michigan homes and farms is a story of choice, chance and courage. They had chosen to enlist in the cause to save the Union and by chance they had been sent in harms way and now they would be asked to demonstrate their courage at Tebbs Bend, Kentucky. They were about to experience their baptism of fire on Americas's birthday and in a small way they would become American heroes.

It was less than a year ago that these young Dutch immigrants had volunteered to defend their adopted country from secession and treason. Holland's Justice of the Peace, K. Schadlee, had sworn them to uphold the Constitution of the United States and to defend it from all of its enemies. Over 80 had joined, many from Holland, the others from the small hamlets and farms surrounding the town. Each volunteer was awarded a five dollar bonus compliments of Holland's businessmen. The enlistees represented all social classes from the simple farm boy to two of Reverend Van Raalte's sons, Benjamin and Dirk. Dirk would loose his arm at Atlanta, while Benjamin would survive the war sending letters home that are now held in the Joint Archives of Holland. The Holland volunteers were then sent to Kalamazoo where they were organized into Company I of the 25th Michigan Infantry Regiment. The Company chose William Dowd of Holland to be its captain. However within six months Captain Dowd was dead from dysentery. Lieutenant Martin De Boe was then selected to be captain of the company. De Boe was the only man in the company that had combat experience. He had been wounded at Fair Oaks, Virginia in May of 1862 and had been sent home to recover. Six weeks later he reenlisted and now he was the captain of Company I of the 25th Michigan. He would serve in that capacity until the end of the war.

The 83 men that made up Company I came from the towns and farms of Holland and Ottawa County. They came from Dutch immigrant parents and many could barely speak or understand English. They bore the strange sounding Dutch names of Bos, Boot, De Feyter, De Kruif, De Vries, Grootenhuis, Huizenga, Van Appledorn, Van Raalte, Ver Schure, Wesslink and Wilterdink. Having lived in the United States for only a dozen years or so their accents, halting English, rustic dress and strong religious habits must have set them apart from the other nine companies of the 25th. Company I would be one of the largest companies in the regiment. This was probably because their immigrant and language characteristics made it difficult to assimilate the extra men into the other companies.

The 25th Michigan Infantry Regiment was under the command of Colonel Orlando Moore of Schoolcraft and consisted of ten companies totaling 896 men. They were all volunteers from the small towns and farms of south-western Michigan. Moore who had entered the service in 1856, had served for a year in Kansas Territory during the bloody strife known as Bleeding Kansas, fought against the Cheyennes and then was transferred to Benicia, California, the headquarters of the U.S. Army's Department of the Pacific. It was here that he learned of the secession of South Carolina. Knowing that his Commander, General Albert Sydney Johnson was sympathetic to the Southern cause, he and a group of northern soldiers prevented General Johnson from seizing the weapons at Benicia for shipment to the South. For his efforts the Central Committee of the California Republican Party recommended to the Lincoln administration that Moore be promoted to Lieutenant Colonel and given a field command in the Union Army. Moore received his promotion and was given command of the 13th Michigan Volunteers. He led them into combat at Shiloh where ironically his old commander, General Johnson was commanding the Confederate forces and where he was killed. On June 18, 1862 Moore was promoted to Colonel and given command of the soon to be formed Michigan 25th Volunteers. The 25th was officially organized at Kalamazoo in September of 1862 and sent to Louisville, Kentucky where they were trained to serve as prison guards at a prisoner of war camp. Colonel Moore as the commanding officer of a prison guard regiment served as Provost Marshall.

Provost Marshall Colonel Moore was in charge of prisoners of war and runaway slaves. As a result of his supervision of runaways, Colonel Moore soon became embroiled in a controversy with his immediate superior, General Boyles. Boyles was a Kentucky Democrat who was sympathetic to the local slaveowners. When Colonel Moore, a Republican with abolitionists leanings, began to protect runaway slaves from being returned to their owners, General Boyles protested. President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation had exempted the loyal border states like Kentucky in order to keep them in the Union and the matter of emancipation was left up to these states. On a number of occasions runaway slaves had sought refuge with the Union Army at Louisville and Colonel Moore as Provost Marshall had interceded on their behalf and had prevented their return to their owners. He also stopped the sale of free blacks to slaveowners. The final break between Colonel Moore and General Boyles came when Moore sent a letter to the editor of the "Louisville Democrat" requesting that the paper stop its attacks upon the Lincoln administration and its military policy.

On June 5, 1863, General Boyles ordered Colonel Moore to take five of the ten companies of the 25th Michigan, south to the Green River bridge to guard the road leading into central Kentucky. Union reconnaissance had discovered that an invasion was being planned by

the Confederates and that the road leading across the Green River was the most likely invasion route. Later Lieutenant Travis of the 25th would speculate that he thought Colonel Moore was being punished by General Boyles for his abolitionist activities and that they were in effect being sent on a suicide mission. Travis wrote that General Boyles wanted Colonel Moore, "out of the way."

Thus as chance would have it, five under-strength companies of the 25th Michigan totaling 263 men, 83 of which were from Holland's Company I, found themselves moving southward into harms way. They traveled down the main road from Lebanon to a spot just north of the Green River bridge and some ten miles north of the town of Columbia Kentucky. Their closest reinforcements were 30 miles to the west. On July 1, 1863 a Confederate column of cavalry commanded by General John Hunt Morgan, known as the "Rebel Raider" for his raiding exploits into Kentucky a year earlier, struck. They crossed into Kentucky and seized the town of Columbia. General Morgan's troop numbered around 2,500 mounted cavalry supported by three artillery pieces. Colonel Moore now ordered his small army across the Green River bridge to the south bank where the river took a sharp turn. It was a place known to the locals as Tebbs Bend. Later a Confederate officer would remark that the Union colonel could not have picked a better defensive position. Tebbs Bend was on high ground and flanked by thick woods. Here the Michigan soldiers began to dig in. Their first line of defense was an earthworks that sat astride the obvious approach to the bridge and where cavalry would more than likely attempt to come through. A second line of defense was a log barricade that stretched across the entire flat some one hundred yards behind the earthworks. The last line of defense was a wooden stockade built some three hundred yards to the rear where a last stand could be made. In less than two days the entire defensive position was in place. These Michigan soldiers had a great deal of experience in cutting timber and building log structures. Confederate pickets reported they could hear axes ringing some two miles to their front.

The next day was the Fourth of July. The Confederate cavalry was on the road before sun up probing for the Union pickets they knew were out there. At 4:30 a.m. contact was made and scattered shooting was heard. Soon the Union pickets began falling back to the earthworks. In the shooting young Pieter Ver Schure of Holland was killed. Company I's baptism of fire had begun. Quickly a Confederate canon was set up and three shots were fired into the earthworks breaching it and causing many of the Union defenders to flee to the log barricade to their rear. Some remained.

General Morgan then ordered his Chief of Staff Colonel Alston to ride out, under a flag of truce, to meet with the Union commander and give him a chance to surrender in order to avoid further bloodshed. "Sir," Colonel Alston announced, "In the name of the Confederate States Government I demand an immediate and unconditional surrender of the entire force under your command together with the stockade." Colonel Moore responded immediately and directly. "Present my compliments to General Morgan" he said, "and say to him that this being the Fourth of July I cannot entertain the proposition to surrender." Unlike the Confederates at Vicksburg the Fourth of July was not a day to surrender. Colonel Alston then pointed out that Moore's situation was desperate with his earthworks already breached and his men outnumbered ten to one. It would be a massacre. "I have a duty to perform to my country" responded the Union colonel, "and therefore cannot reconsider my reply to General Morgan." Colonel Alston nodded, saluted Colonel Moore and returned to his lines. Later in his memoirs the Confederate

officer would recount how impressed he was with Colonel Moore's courage and skill and that if he had served in the Confederate Army he would have been a general. It is doubtful that Colonel Alston knew about Colonel Moore's abolitionist leanings.

Now the battle at Tebbs Bend began in earnest. Colonel Moore ordered Union sharpshooters to silence the canon in their front which they did with deadly accuracy, killing or wounding all eighteen Confederate canoneers. General Morgan then ordered 600 of his cavalrymen to assault the earthworks which they did, clearing it of its remaining defenders who ran for cover behind the log barricade. Morgan then ordered his second assault against the log barricade. Here is where the killing began. From their positions behind the logs, the 25th poured a withering fire into the charging horses and men, shooting down dozens of them. Charge after charge was ordered, all with the same results. The field in front of the log barricade was littered with the dead and the dying. Finally after almost two hours and after the seventh frontal assault had failed, Morgan ordered a flanking movement against the Union's right with the hope of enfilading the log wall.

The attack came at 7:00 a.m. with an entire Confederate regiment of almost 1,000 men in motion. Now Colonel Moore ordered Holland's Company I into action. Company I, the largest company of the five had been held in reserve until now. Captain De Boe ordered his men to form a long skirmish line along the right of the Union defensive position. They were ordered to fire as rapidly as possible and to move up, counter attacking the Confederate flanking threat. This they did with deadly efficiency. "Captain De Boe," wrote Lieutenant Travis," had climbed to the top of a fence nerving his men to drive ahead. This, "he noted," they were doing in a style worthy of emulation." Colonel Moore also ordered the regimental bugler to sound artillery and cavalry calls indicating the arrival of phantom reinforcements. The Confederate assault shuddered, stalled and fell back. Among those killed were Colonel Chenault, the Confederate regimental commander and his aide Major Brent. The failure of the eighth assault with its large number of casualties forced General Morgan to break off the engagement and withdraw. Holland's Company I had broken the attack and sealed their defeat. By 8:00 o'clock in the morning the Battle of Tebbs Bend was over. The Confederates had lost over 200 killed or wounded, including a colonel, two majors and a number of captains and lieutenants. Morgan's officer corp had been decimated. Many of the dead and dying were left on the field and were later buried by Captain De Boe and a burial detail in a mass grave. The Confederate raiders retreated west and after a twelve hour delay crossed the river six miles downstream a safe distance away from Tebbs Bend and its defenders. Some historians suggest that this costly delay helped to prevent the fall of Louisville and although Morgan continued his raid through Kentucky, Indiana and Ohio his army was seriously damaged. He and 300 of his men were captured two weeks later in Ohio.

For the 25th Michigan and for Company I this had been a significant victory for they had survived against overwhelming odds. In all, seven had been killed and twenty-three were wounded. Company I had lost 18 year old Pieter Ver Schure and three or four wounded. For the most part they had survived their baptism of fire and had done so with bravery and courage.

After the dead and wounded had been attended to, Colonel Moore gathered his companies in formation and read to them a hastily prepared Special Order Number 42. It read, "My brave, my noble men, it is with pride and pleasure that I congratulate you upon the great victory won today. While you numbered but two hundred men, the enemy numbered thousands. Being

advised of their strength and of their advantage of heavy artillery bearing upon us, their demand for surrender was answered with a response that echoed the feeling of this gallant little band of the Twenty-Fifth Michigan Infantry that was about to engage them. Our brave companions who fell, fell gallantly fighting for their country and in defense of their starry flag." This last sentence must have resonated deeply with the immigrant soldiers from Holland. Moore continued noting that, "Although no marble slab have we placed over their heads to mark their last resting place, yet in the hearts of the people of our Peninsular State will be erected a monument that will perpetuate their names to all eternity."

Two weeks later the Headquarters of the Twenty-third Corps issued a general order which read, "The Commanding General of the Corps extends his thanks to the two hundred and sixty-three officers and soldiers of the 25th Michigan Infantry under Colonel O.H. Moore, who so successfully resisted by their gallantry and heroic bravery, the attack of a vastly superior force of the enemy under the rebel General John Hunt Morgan at Tebbs Bend on the Green River on the Fourth of July 1863 in which they killed one fourth as many of the enemy as their own little band amounted to, and wounded a number equal to their own."

The Battle of Tebbs Bend was of little consequence in terms of the outcome of the Civil War. Company I and the 25th Michigan would see a great deal more action at the battles of Atlanta, Georgia, and Nashville, Tennessee and in dozens of smaller battles until it was mustered out of service at Salisbury, North Carolina on July 24, 1865. Captain De Boe remained in command of Company I throughout the war. Company I would lose fifteen men either in combat or to disease. Another twenty were wounded in combat or disabled by disease. Captain De Boe returned to Holland and lived out his life. He died in 1908 and was buried in the Civil War veterans plot in the Pilgrim Home Cemetery alongside his comrades in arms. Pieter Ver Schure, the young man killed at Tebbs Bend was buried with military honors in the National Military Cemetery at Lebanon, Kentucky under grave marker number 347. The stone carver, who probably was not Dutch misspelled his name and he rests under the name of Peter Ver Schune. Colonel Moore remained on active duty, first in the reconstructed South and then in the Indian wars. He died in 1890. General Morgan was killed in 1864 near Greenville, Tennessee on yet another raid.

Today two monuments, mark the site of the battle. One, a white obelisk was placed there in the early 1900s by the Daughters of the Confederacy in honor of the Confederate dead. The other, a small descriptive plaque was placed there in 1976 by the United States Bicentennial Commission. It honors Colonel Moore and the men of the 25th Michigan who fought and died there. For the young men from Holland, Tebbs Bend was their baptism of fire and the ultimate test of their new American citizenship. They had left Holland in the late summer of 1862 to defend a country they hardly knew. They returned tested patriots and Americans. Like thousands of immigrants and African-Americans, the Civil War had expanded their understanding of America. Torn from their familiar surroundings, their culture, their society, they had been exposed to the rigors and experiences of camp life, military discipline, the drudgery of the march and the fright of combat. They had heard strange languages, seen strange sights, met strange people, eaten strange food and had
learned of the vastness of their new country. Returning home, they picked up their lives but not where they had left them. The war had fundamentally changed them, they had become Americans. They had perhaps, in spite of themselves, become more tolerant and more aware

of the delicate nature of democracy and equality. for as Lincoln had warned his friend, Joshua Speed, back in 1855, "The United States began with the declaration that all men are created equal; it now was practically read as "all men are created equal, except Negroes," and if the bigots get control he warned, "it would real all men are created equal except Negroes and foreigners, and Catholics."

The Civil War and the Dutch immigrant soldiers from Holland had helped to win this equality for blacks, for immigrants and for themselves and they had helped to secure a "new birth of freedom" for their adopted country and for their new home, Holland.

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