

Gillespie Robbins Thornwell, 43rd Virginia Cavalry

Gillespie Robbins Thornwell was born August 15, 1844 in Columbia, South Carolina, the son of James Henley Thornwell and Nancy White Witherspoon.¹ In 1860, the Thornwell family resided in Columbia where James was a clergyman.²

On July 17, 1861, Gillespie Thornwell was enlisted in Company H, 2nd South Carolina Cavalry Regiment for one year by Thomas Taylor at Columbia.³ Thornwell was involved in the May 5, 1862 battle at Williamsburg, Virginia where he was severely wounded receiving six saber thrusts to the chest.⁴

Thornwell was detached in December 1862 to scouting duty in Stafford County, Virginia under Sergeant Woodward Barnwell. The detachment was soon assigned to join other 2nd South Carolina Cavalry scouts in Prince William County, Virginia under Sergeant William A. Mickler.⁵ Federal cavalry in the area named these Confederates 'Iron Scouts' due to their ability to elude capture and when wounded, would recover quickly.⁶ During this time, Gillespie Thornwell along with five other scouts was involved in a fight with a detachment of Federal Cavalry at the residence of Samuel A. Marsteller near Catlett's Station.⁷ Thornwell and the 'Iron Scouts' relocated to the eastern side of the Blue Ridge Mountains in 'Mosby's Confederacy' in late April 1863 due to Prince William County becoming too hot for them.⁸

Thornwell and the other 'Iron Scouts' under Mickler, totaling about 20 men, joined Major John S. Mosby with about 78 additional men at Salem on May 2, 1863 for a planned raid on the Orange and Alexandria Railroad. After staying in Warrenton that night, Mosby's command of about 98 men struck the cavalry camp of the 1st Virginia Federal Cavalry at Warrenton Junction on the morning of May 3.⁹ Gillespie Thornwell had been sick that morning and had been seen leaning over the neck of his horse vomiting. At Warrenton Junction, he was with a small lead party including Mosby and Mickler that approached the large house at the Junction that was being used as the 1st Virginia's headquarters. The Federals in the house opened a withering fire on the Confederates before Mosby ordered a charge.¹⁰

Mosby had the Junction under his control after capturing the large house. One of the 'Iron Scouts', Prioleau Henderson, while picking up stray horses near the house, recorded in a postwar memoir that "we saw young Gillespie Thornwell, sitting leaning back against a tree; he was as pale as death, and his clothes being open, we could see the blood flowing from a wound in his abdomen. We went to him, and he said, 'Henderson, for God's sake, get me some water.'" As Henderson returned with the water, a large force of Federal cavalry from nearby Cedar Run, approached the Confederates. Mosby was unable to rally his men against the superior Federal force and quickly employed the 'skedaddle'. Henderson had to leave Thornwell behind.¹¹

Gillespie Thornwell was captured by the Federal Cavalry and taken along with five other wounded Confederates to Mansion House General Hospital in Alexandria. He died there the next day, May 4. A Federal report of POW's who died at Mansion House Hospital indicated under Gillespie Thornwell: "body taken away by his friends".¹²

Upon hearing of the death of Gillespie Thornwell, General Wade Hampton issued a letter to be forwarded to Thornwell's mother in which he referred to her son as "a brave and noble soldier".¹³

Gillespie Thornwell's body was taken to his home at Columbia, South Carolina where he was interred in Elmwood Cemetery.

Editor's Comments: The 'Iron Scouts' were only one of several examples of detachments from other cavalry units that joined with Mosby for raids on Federal cavalry camps, lines of communications, warehouses, etc. Other examples include Captain William G. Brawner and the Prince William Rangers joining with Mosby in the June 11, 1863 attack on Seneca Mills, Maryland, and Captain Frank Stringfellow and ten of his scouts joining with the 43rd in the ill-fated January 10, 1864 raid on Cole's Cavalry Camp at Loudoun Heights.¹⁴

Let us never forget the sacrifice of Gillespie Robbins Thornwell.

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- ¹ Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah. International Genealogical Index, Vol. V. On-line edition (www.familysearch.org). Family Group Record #23418185, James Henley Thornwell.
- ² National Archives, 1860 Federal Census, Richmond County, South Carolina, Series M653, Roll 1227, page 57.
- ³ National Archives, Washington DC, Record Group 109, War Dept. Collection of Confederate Records. Compiled Military Service Records for officers and men of the 2nd South Carolina Cavalry, Microform M267, Roll #14, #1334.
- ⁴ Henderson, E. Prioleau. *Autobiography of Arab*. Oxford, Ms.: The Guild Bindery Press, 1991, page 34.
- ⁵ Brooks, U. R. *Butler and His Cavalry in the War of Secession 1861 – 1865*. Reprint edition Camden SC: J. J. Fox, 1989, page 139.
- ⁶ *Ibid*, page 136.
- ⁷ Henderson, page 80.
- ⁸ *Ibid*, page 84.
- ⁹ *Ibid*, page 87. Keen, Hugh C. and Mewborn, Horace. *43rd Battalion Virginia Cavalry – Mosby's Command*. Lynchburg VA: H. E. Howard, Inc., pages 54-5.
- ¹⁰ Henderson, pages 88, 100.
- ¹¹ *Ibid*, page 89.
- ¹² National Archives, Washington D.C., Record Group 109, War Dept. Collection of Confederate Records. Compiled Military Service Records for officers and men of the 43rd Battalion, Virginia Partisan Rangers, Micro. M324, Rolls 207-9. National Archives, Compiled Military Service Records 2nd South Carolina Cavalry, #1334.
- ¹³ The South Carolina State Library, Columbia SC. Hampton Family Papers. General Wade Hampton letter to unknown, dated May 19, 1863.
- ¹⁴ Keen and Mewborn, pages 67, 100.