

Northern Kentucky Views Presents:

The Little Fight

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"THE LITTLE FIGHT"

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J. JEFFERY AUER

In late September, the second year of the Civil War, the bulk of Colonel John Morgan's already famous cavalry was ordered to eastern Kentucky in an effort to intercept the Federal General George W. Morgan in his march from the Cumberland Gap to the Ohio River. Meanwhile Colonel Basil W. Duke, with the rest of Morgan's command, was instructed to annoy the Union forces in the direction of Covington, Kentucky. Carrying out these instructions Duke resolved to attack the town of Augusta, in Bracken County, on the Ohio River about forty miles above Cincinnati. This expedition had a dual purpose. First, Duke recalled four years later, he had heard reports that a Union regiment was being formed out of the disbanding Home Guard companies in that area, and that "all sorts of men, whether willing or not, were being placed in its ranks. I determined therefore to break it up, before it became formidable." His second aim was to cross the Ohio at a ford just below Augusta, and march toward Cincinnati, threatening that city so that Federal troops near Walton would be drawn north to protect it. Leaving his base at Falmouth, Duke calculated, he could be near Cincinnati in less than a day.¹ An able cavalry commander, Duke was small in stature, but "sat large" on his horse, the personification of the traditional Kentucky gentleman with his goatee and mustache. Of all his brother-in-law's aides, Duke was the most dependable in a large operation or in a small foray such as the one planned for Augusta.

The town of Augusta was then, as now, a small but vigorous community, across the Ohio River from the Union, and dividing its sentiments between North and South. Among its residents was the Coburn family; their regular letters to relatives who had moved west to Bureau County, Illinois, offer latter-day insight on affairs in Augusta. In the fall of 1860, for example, young Carrie Coburn reported good crops and plentiful fruit, despite the dry summer. The country fairs were well attended and she felt a generally optimistic outlook among her neighbors and schoolmates. Some political unrest was also reflected, however, in an account of a scuffle involving Know-Nothing elements:

The next Sabbath following the Catholic church in Augusta was to be dedicated, and all the foreigners through the country assembled, and Sister Bet, Anna, Fannie, and myself were in the midst, but the weather being inclement the boats from Cincinnati could not come so the next Sabbath we all tried it again. about one o'clock it come with a nice band of music.

¹ Basil W. Duke, *History of Morgan's Cavalry* (Cincinnati: Miami Printing and Publishing Co., 1866), p. 247.

they went through a form something like dumb-nonsense to me but the worst of all they had a very exciting fight just before they left but the Americans came off triumphantly.² It was Carrie's mother, Mary H. Coburn, who later recorded her valuable observations of Duke's raid, which she called "the little fight."

On Wednesday before the Saturday raid a group of about forty rebels visited Augusta and pressed the Coburn family to provide them dinner and feed for their horses. "They told me they would be back by Sunday," said Mary Coburn, "but I did not believe them."³ On Saturday morning by seven o'clock, however, Duke's force was on the summit of the hill in the rear of Augusta, with a perfect northward view over the town and to the river just beyond. A courier, who first brought the news of Augusta's fall to Captain Duple, in Cincinnati, reported that the rebels, "one thousand strong," had been met by Colonel Bradford's Home Guard and militia on the road back of the town and engaged for thirty minutes before withdrawing.⁴ This was a skirmish neither commander could recall.⁵ According to Duke's account, after seeing that two stern-wheeler gunboats lay at the Augusta wharf, each boasting a twelve pounder and a group of sharpshooters, he turned his forces through the fields to take a position on top of a 200 foot hill about 600 yards from the river bank, and with the town between him and the water. From that position he could clearly see the Home Guards going into the houses in preparation for a fight, "but a portion of them were already esconced in the houses near the head of the street by which we entered the town a little while afterward. These latter kept themselves concealed while we remained on the hill and our ignorance of their location cost us dearly."⁶

Basil Duke's expedition numbered about 450 men, including his cavalry and a light artillery company. In the town Colonel J. Taylor Bradford and Lieut. Colonel Harris mustered a force of perhaps 150 men, although the first excited word to Captain Duple in Cincinnati reported 500. When Bradford's pickets reported Duke's force at about two in the afternoon, he assembled his men on the public square, assuring them "if they would fight, they, with the aid of the gunboats would whip the rebels. The men responded cheerily for 'Union and old Kentucky'."⁷ From his hilltop, meanwhile, Duke saw that the gunboats commanded the principal street into the town, by which he hoped to attack. To frighten them off he planted his howitzers on the highest point, "where they could probably chuck every shell into the boats," and sent Captain Cassell with his

² Carrie Coburn, of Augusta, Kentucky, to her cousin, Emma Walton, of Malden P.O., Bureau County, Illinois, November 1, 1860. The Coburn letters are in the possession of Mr. E. J. Reque, Wayne, Illinois; photostatic copies are in the Oberlin College Library, Oberlin, Ohio.

³ Mary H. Coburn, to her niece, Mary E. Walton, October, 5, 1862.

⁴ *Cincinnati Daily Commercial*, September 29, 1862.

⁵ Colonel J. Taylor Bradford, letter of October 12, 1862, in Rev. F. Senour, *Morgan and His Captors* (Cincinnati: C. F. Vent & Co., 1865), pp. 73-6.

⁶ Duke, *op. cit.*, p. 248.

⁷ *Cincinnati Daily Commercial*, September 30, 1862.

company to the eastern end of the town where with rifle fire "they would be enabled to annoy the troops on the boats very greatly . . ."⁸

In the first accounts of the action sent to Cincinnati it was reported that the gunboats did not arrive at Augusta until after the surrender of the town. This was not true, but it might as well have been for all the help they gave. The *Belfast* and the *Florence Miller* lay above the town, and the *Allen Collier* below it, but of the three only the *Belfast* fired on the rebel battery, and then but three shells with no hits. Meanwhile Duke's "Bull pups" opened on the gunboats, with one of the first shells penetrating the hull of Captain Sedam's "Flag Ship." This was apparently enough, and the "fleet" withdrew.⁹ To say that Colonel Bradford resented the reluctance of the gunboats to stand fast would do an injustice to his bitter pen: if the fleet had remained, he contended a few days later, "the town would never have surrendered, and a complete rout and triumph would have crowned our efforts." But Captain Sedam, "without my knowledge or consent," sailed away: "Woe be to such officers! Let their conduct be 'bitter in every mouth, and infamous to all posterity!'"¹⁰

Knowing how heavily Colonel Bradford relied upon the departing Union gunboats for his defense, Duke mistakenly believed that the garrison would be surrendered without a fight. Thus, with two companies of dismounted cavalry, he entered the town by Front Street. Bradford's men who had earlier secreted themselves in houses on that street held their fire until Duke's companies were below them, and then opened up from the second story windows on both sides of the street. The entrapped Duke and his men sought such cover as the houses offered and hurriedly called into the town two more companies, and parts of two others, engaging a total force of about 350. Forcing their way into the houses from which the attack had come the rebels made some headway. Their difficulties were increased, however, by the arrival of a unit on horseback, thanks to the misguided ardor of Lieutenant Roberts who had forgotten Duke's order that no men should enter the town mounted. In the melee thus created Roberts paid for his error when a "Bull pup" shell killed him, several of his men, and a number of the horses. With equal enthusiasm, and as little judgment, the sergeant in command of the howitzers on the hill had commenced firing into the town when he first heard the Home Guard rifles. This haphazard enterprise, as costly to his own men as to the enemy, was halted when the sergeant was ordered to bring his artillery into the streets and turn it on the houses in which the militia resistance was most stubborn.¹¹

⁸ Duke, *op. cit.*, pp. 248-9.

⁹ *Cincinnati Daily Commercial*, September 29; *Cincinnati Daily Enquirer*, October 1, 1862; Duke, *op. cit.*, p. 249.

¹⁰ Bradford, in Senour, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

¹¹ Duke, *op. cit.*, pp. 249-50.

It was this planting of the enemy's cannon in the streets, "and disregarding the women and children, they were firing shell into the houses . . ." that most affected Judge Joseph Doniphan, who gave an account of the battle to the *Cincinnati Daily Enquirer*. But he could wax rhetorical about the defenders of Augusta, too: "From every window our true and trusty boys were firing, and for one half-hour the leaden hail was doing its work of death; rebel after [rebel] was made to bite the dust, while our boys, thus secreted, were fighting for their homes and firesides." Just how the honorable judge could know all this was a mystery to Mary Coburn, for she alleged that "he was in the seller dressed in womans clothes. he did not see any thing. it is nearly all false he had published . . ." ¹² Joe Doniphan's own version of his security measures were somewhat more dignified: only after learning that the Home Guard had surrendered did he hide in Colonel Bradford's garden, he said, eluding capture by staying there until the rebels retired from the town. ¹³

Duke's narrative of the raid continues with an account of his howitzers, planted about ten paces from the houses, double-shotted with grape and canister, and aimed about a yard below the window sills where the defenders were crouching, tearing great gaps in the walls, and making fires break out in several houses. Then, Duke charged, the defenders exercised their deceit:

Flags of truce, about this time, were hung out from several windows, and believing that a general surrender was meant, I ordered the fires to be extinguished. But only those who shook the white flags meant to give up, and the others continued to fight. One or two men putting out the fires were shot. I immediately ordered that every house from which shots came should be burned. A good many were soon in flames, and even then the fighting continued in some of them. ¹⁴

None of the contemporary newspaper accounts mention the episode of the false flags of truce, but Mary Coburn, who was there, assured her niece that the strategy was deliberate: "the woman and Children waved their white flags out of the winders and the men was behind them and done their shooting out of the windows . . ." ¹⁵

"My men were infuriated by what they esteemed bad faith, in a continuance of the fight after the flags of truce were displayed . . ." wrote Basil Duke, and "I never saw them fight with such ferocity." Few lives were spared, he admitted, in the savage hand-to-hand fights as his men forced their way into the houses of resistance. He saw more than one Confederate private pin his opponent to the ground with a bayonet, or beat in an enemy skull with a pistol butt. Indeed, after fifteen or twenty minutes of furious combat, when Colonel Bradford surrendered, it was with difficulty that Duke could save his life or those of the Home Guardsmen. ¹⁶

¹² Mary H. Coburn to Mary E. Walton, October 5, 1862.

¹³ *Cincinnati Dairy Commercial*, September 30, 1862.

¹⁴ Duke, *op. cit.*, p. 250.

¹⁵ Mary H. Coburn to Mary E. Walton, October 5, 1862.

¹⁶ Duke, *op. cit.*, pp. 250-1.

One account had it that the rebels killed several of the defenders after they had surrendered, including William Story, "deliberately murdered," presumably for his having shot Captain Samuel D. Morgan, a cousin of the famous Colonel.¹⁷ This may have been another of Joe Doniphan's exaggerations, of which Mary Coburn warned, however, for he also reported to the *Enquirer* that 75-100 rebels were killed, while the Confederate commander counted but twenty-one of his men dead and eighteen wounded. Of the defenders, twelve were killed and three wounded.

While general denials of charges of pillage and sacking have often been entered for "Morgan's men," and Duke omits any reference to irregular behavior on the part of his troops in Augusta, contemporary evidence indicates that the attackers were unrestrained. Every man for himself, the Confederates broke open the stores, ransacked them, and carried off clothing, goods, and provisions. Even Mary Coburn, who was not totally unsympathetic with Duke's raiders, reported that "they broke open stores and took all they wanted . . ."¹⁸ The chief material loss to the town, however, was the destruction by fire of nearly two and a half squares, containing some of the finest dwellings in Augusta. All told, the damage was estimated by the Cincinnati newspapers to be \$100,000.

One resident, at least, seemed not to regret his loss, for when Duke's men attempted to put out the fire in James Armstrong's house, he bade them "let it burn," and urged the Confederates to collect and destroy all the arms of the Home Guards, so that they could invite no more trouble for the town. Duke may well have been right in assuming that "the majority of the people of this town, or a large proportion at least, were Southern sympathizers," and that they resented seeing Southern men pressed into the Union militia.¹⁹ As Mary Coburn wrote her verdict of the affair, "they tried so hard to have a fight in Augusta and they accomplished it to their sorrow. I don't pity them one bit for it was their own fault. they have no one to blame but their selves . . ."²⁰

When Duke retired from the town about four o'clock, after an affray that took but two hours, he impressed all the carriages and light wagons he could find to carry his dead and wounded, gathered up about 200 prisoners, and fell back toward his base at Falmouth, about twenty-five miles away at the south fork of the Licking River. Burdened by his own wounded and prisoners, and with all of the ammunition for his howitzers shot away, the excursion into Ohio was impossible. He had accomplished his aim of breaking up the Augusta regiment, but only with the loss of some of his best officers and men. That night at Brookville,

¹⁷ *Cincinnati Daily Commercial*, September 30, 1862.

¹⁸ *Cincinnati Daily Commercial*, September 30; *Cincinnati Daily Enquirer*, October 1, 1862; Mary H. Coburn to Mary E. Walton, October 5, 1862.

¹⁹ Duke, *op. cit.*, p. 253.

²⁰ Mary H. Coburn to Mary E. Walton, October 5, 1862.

en route to Falmouth, was "the gloomiest and saddest that any man among us had ever known."²¹

The impact of Duke's raid upon Augusta is sharply mirrored in the letter Mary Coburn wrote a week later to her young niece and namesake, Mary Walton, in Bureau County, Illinois. Ordinarily Mary Coburn wrote with a careful pen, but on this occasion her words scrambled onto the paper, often difficult to decipher as her emotions hastened her hand. Except for making sentences in a series of words devoid of punctuation, the letter is unedited.

Dear Mary: I have just sit down to tell you all about the battle in Augusta. the Rebels whiped and made them Surrender. the loss of men was from 50 to 60 killed and wounded. The woman and Children waved their white flags out of the winders and the men was behind them and done their shooting out of the windows. they Could not get them out of the houses and they sit fire to the houses where the union men was firing out of the windows. Tom Myers, Bars, Mccibbon, Marshal, Ryon, Taylor, Weldons, Cooks, Ditts, and 2 hay stack, that is what they burnt. they all passed right by our door going and Coming. it was done in 2 hours. Dr. Taylor, George Byers, Alf Mccibbon, Helpart, they was shot and burned up alive in the houses. they was six Hundred Rebels. the loss on both sides was about somewhere in 50 killed and wounded. they was 40 Rebels Came here on wednesday before the Fight and pressed us to get them dinner and feed their horses. we done so. they told me they would be back by Sunday but I did not believe them. they appeared to be perfect Gentlemen.

Captain Morgan was laid out in our house. 7 others was wounded and their wounds was dressed here. of all bloody sights you ever saw I never witnessed such a scene. they took 1 hundred and 20 prisoners from Augusta. we are looking them back every day. God forbid, they broke open stores and took all they wanted and left town. they took the prisoners walking. they made them keep up with the horses. we give them all water. they took Parke buggy and horse. they took all the buggys and horses they Could pick up. Omnibus hearses they Could pick up. my buggy was the only one that Come back. Parke was *the* proudest Negro you ever saw. they left me 2 horses. 1 is a splendid horse. Aunt Polly Mccoy Grandson was killed in our fight. they will be a fight in Maysville in a few days. I expect it will be a bloody battle. I have often heard of war and read of it but now I witnessed it. I heard from Clay. he is well and harty. do write soon. the Rebels have Kentucky. I have not told you half. I dont believe I can ever write another line correctly.

Joe Doniphan has put out a piece in the enquirer about the brave fight. he was in the seller dressed in womans clothes. he did not see any thing.

²¹ Duke, *op. cit.*, p. 253.

it is nearly all false he had published. I have told you the exact truth.
 good bye. God bless you all.
 do write.

the prisoners have returned Peroled prisoners. now if they take up arms they will be hung. we are Completely dried up. our crops are poor. I expect we will all go naked and starve to death.—

I must tell you about the unions in Augusta sent after Ned with their guns to take him to town to arrest him. they only kept him to days. now you now how I feel towards them. seeing and hearing is nothing but feeling is the thing. they tryed so hard to have a fight in Augusta and they accomplished it to their sorrow. I dont pitty them one bit for it was their own fault. they have no one to blame but their selves. we are all freed. we can go without pass now.

I read that negroe Proclamation. that is all he wanted. I gess the people will take any notice of.

Mary H. Coburn

I cannot put enough on letter paper. I wish I could tell you more. do write soon.²²

Two months later, Mary Coburn was again writing to her niece: "The talk now is peace peace but I would rather see it than hear of it." Meanwhile she could report on domestic affairs and dispel her earlier prediction of starvation: "I have sold my wheat for 1 dollar and fifteen cents a bushel. I had 3 hundred and sixty 9 bushell. I have about 6 thousand pounds of tobacco and been offered Sixteen dollars hundred and refused it. I want twenty. goods are very high. My corn is very poor. I will not have more than 2 hundred bushels lift after my hogs are fattened. last year I had 1 thousand bushels. we have plenty of apples and cider. I have made 40 gallons of apple butter and made 20 five gallons of Cane Molassess. we just planted a little to try it. I will plant more next year. I think it very nice. . . . I got 35 yards of the nicest jeanes and 2 blankets the nicest things you ever say. I have forty 2 sheep. . . . I have 30 turkeys. I wish you had ten of them."

The problem created by the exchange of horses with the Confederates after the raid is a nuisance: "I believe I told you the Rebels gave me two horses. I kept them 4 weeks and 7 Union men, they was not soldiers, came and claimed them and took them off for Government horses, but the Lawyers encouraged me to get out and attachment and I could [retrieve] them. I done so and got one yesterday and was offern 1 hundred dollars for it this morning. it is a fine horse. I intend to bring sout for the other one now."

Apparently her "sout" for the horse is the only unfinished business of the raid on Augusta. Things have calmed down, thinks Mary Coburn: "we have no excitement here at this time. the little fight done so much good they can behave now . . ." ²³

²² Mary H. Coburn to Mary E. Walton, October 5, 1862.

²³ Mary H. Coburn to Mary E. Walton, December 3, 1862.