

UNION FORCES MASSACRED SEVERAL AT OFFICER HOUSE 150 YEARS AGO

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One hundred and fifty years ago, the Upper Cumberland was suffering from the ravages of the Civil War. Most of the atrocities were committed by guerrilla forces, renegades and outlaws; however, one of the worst events occurred on a Saturday morning, March 12, 1864, by the men of Col. Stokes' 5th Tennessee (Union) Calvary. The William Alexander Officer family was having breakfast with their seven guests when 200 of Stokes' men surrounded the Officer home, broke into the house and terrorized the family and guests. Within moments, six unarmed Confederate guests were massacred, and Alexander Officer's wife, Cynthia, was gravely wounded. Their home was set on fire twice, but Alexander Officer put the fire out each time under threats of being killed by the attackers.

Located in Overton County, the Officer home still stands to this day – approximately 3.5 miles from Monterey. The fence post to which one of the Confederates was tied and executed may still be seen in the Overton County Museum in Livingston.

The incident at the Officer house must be labeled as a “War Atrocity” (an extremely wicked or cruel act, typically one involving physical violence or injury). At its meeting on June 18, 2004, the Tennessee Historical Commission approved the historical marker located downtown Monterey titled Stokes' Atrocity.

In June 1862, former DeKalb County Congressman William B. Stokes was authorized to raise a cavalry regiment to counter the increasingly wide-spread guerrilla activity in Tennessee. On Jan. 24, 1864, General George Thomas, commander of the Union Department of the Cumberland, ordered Stokes' 5th Tennessee Calvary to Sparta for a prolonged campaign to “break up and destroy” Confederate guerrilla bands infesting the region. On Feb. 18, 1864, Col. Stokes' men occupied Sparta, and immediately began their assignment.

Col. Stokes was operating under General Orders Number 100. (In militaries and paramilitary organizations, a general order is a published directive, originated by a commander, and binding upon all personnel under his command, the purpose of which is to enforce a policy or procedure unique to his unit's situation which is not otherwise addressed in applicable service regulations, military, or public law. A general order has the force of law; it is an offense punishable by court martial or lesser military court to disobey one. What makes it a general order (as opposed to a direct order), is that the actor is not explicitly named, nor precisely that which (or whom) is to be acted upon.)

General Orders No. 100 promulgated by President Lincoln, 24 April 1863, consisted of 10 Sections containing a total of 157 Articles. In the Officer Massacres, Col. Stokes was

operating under Article 82 of Section IV: (as stated by the national Register of Historic Places, Dept. of the Interior). Article 82. (Section IV).

Men, or squads of men, who commit hostilities, whether by fighting, or inroads for destruction or plunder, or by raids of any kind, without commission, without being part and portion of the organized hostile army, and without sharing continuously in the war, but who do so with intermitting returns to their homes and avocations, or with the occasional assumption of the semblance of peaceful pursuits, divesting themselves of the character or appearance of soldiers – such men, or guards of men, are not public enemies, and, therefore, if captured, are not entitled to the privileges of prisoners of war, but shall be treated summarily as highway robbers or pirates. Col. John Hughs, a regular officer with the 25th Tennessee Infantry, was ordered by Bragg to go to the Upper Cumberland region on a mission to collect absentees in August 1863. Col. Hughs – cut off from his unit by Federal forces moving toward Chattanooga – embarked on an eight-month campaign to hunt Union bushwhackers in the Upper Cumberland.

Within days of Col. Stokes setting up headquarters in Sparta, Stokes; 5th Tennessee Cavalry clashed with Col. Hugh's men. A report filed by Stokes said, "Four of my pickets were killed – three after they had surrendered and the other after he had been captured. A great many of the rebels were dressed in our uniform (Yankee) at the time the two companies were attacked, and several of my men were killed after they were captured. Hughs himself does not allow this barbarity, but his subordinated officers practice it." (Note here that Stokes refers to such action as "barbarity," the same action his men rendered at the Officer farm on March 12, 1864).

Col. Stokes raised the black flag against all known Confederates in the Upper Cumberland, and sent out word that he would give no quarter. This was a language that the Confederates understood and a threat they could return in kind.

Confederate soldiers on leave, who lived in this section of the Upper Cumberland, naturally made every effort to reach their homes, but the risk was great. They were often killed and their homes burned. More often than not, the Confederate soldiers who made it home safely, found their people imposed upon, abused, and in every way degraded by the Federals (guerillas and regulars) roaming the region.

Under such circumstances, it was customary for the Confederates to band together in guerilla warfare in retaliation against the Federal forces, and the conflict between them was bitter indeed. John H. Officer, the son of William Alexander Officer and Cynthia Officer, was home on leave from Company "F," 13th (Dibrell's) TN Cavalry Regiment. "Uncle Abe" Officer hid 19-year-old John in the loft above the kitchen while the atrocity was taking place below him.

Stokes' men killed five of the Confederate guests inside the Officer house and dragged the wounded Lt. Davis to the front yard and tied him to a gatepost. "Uncle Abe" pleaded with the men that they knew what they were doing was wrong, and they should not shoot

Lt. Davis in cold blood. “Uncle Abe” did all he could, but was unable to avert the murder.

The six Confederate guests at the Officer home had been separated from their original units, and were trying to make it back to safety. There is no proof that these men were of the nature described in a report by Col. Stokes; i.e., “men of the most daring and desperate character...” It is clear that Stokes’ ‘Black Flag of Atrocity’ was flying high on that fateful Saturday morning, March 12, 1864!

After the massacre, “Uncle Abe” cut locks of hair from each man, and carted their bodies off to bury them in a common grave on the Officer Farm. The locks of hair were in possession of Mrs. Sally Sehon (granddaughter of William A. and Cynthia Officer), but were presumed burned with other items upon her passing.

The seventh guest in the Officer home that morning was a young orphan boy who was visibly shaken, but otherwise unharmed.

*Read more Cumberland Tales at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>