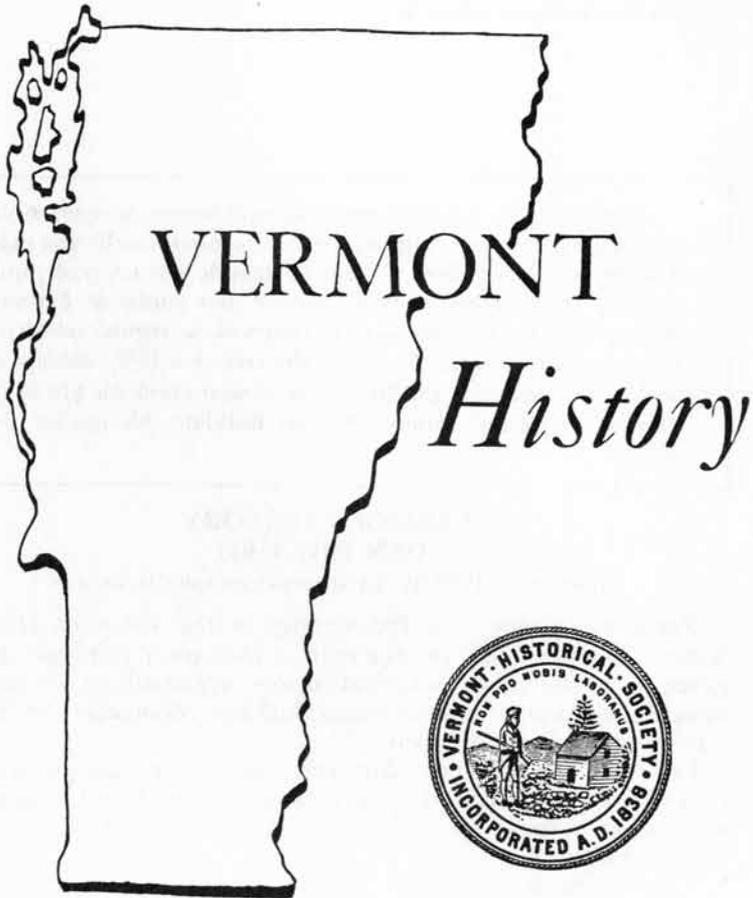


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"With a crash he landed at Mosby's feet in  
the room below . . . ."

## A Shot in the Dark

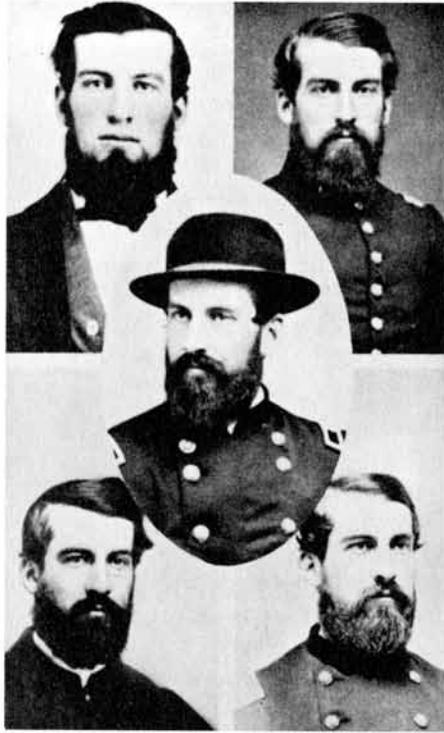
By ELLIOTT HOFFMAN

In the midst of scenes of carnage and cruelty war sometimes produces moments of levity and comic embarrassment. Civil wars are usually particularly cruel and vindictive, yet the American Civil War does have a legacy of fellowship and humor, which the singular details of the capture of General William Wells of Vermont provide but one example.<sup>1</sup>

In the raw, early spring of 1863 the First Vermont Cavalry, after having endured severe punishment in the Shenandoah Valley, picketed an area about twelve miles southwest of Washington. With the Army of the Potomac and Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia facing each other fifty miles away at Fredericksburg, the Vermonters had to face only small bands of guerrillas who occasionally harassed the picket lines. Broken up into detachments, the First Vermont was grouped with similar detachments from other cavalry regiments strung out over an eight-mile range of picket posts and camp areas.

Major William Wells commanded the Vermont detachment at Dranesville, Virginia. One of four brothers from Waterbury, Vermont, serving in the Army, Wells had enlisted as a private. By the end of the war he became the most decorated Vermont soldier, ranking as a brevet major general and winning the Congressional Medal of Honor for bravery at Gettysburg. The Dranesville post included units from Vermont, Ohio, and Pennsylvania commanded by Major Charles Taggart of the Second Pennsylvania Cavalry, who later left the service under a cloud after being dismissed for cowardice in a skirmish with John Mosby, the chief Confederate guerrilla in the area.

On the morning of March 17, 1863, Taggart rode into camp drunk, and Wells decided to avoid a confrontation by leaving to inspect a nearby picket post of twenty-five Vermonters located at Herndon Station. Two



*General William Wells (1837-1892)*

fellow Vermonters, Captain Robert Scofield and Lieutenant Perley Cheney, joined Wells on his outing. The trio of Vermonters formed a commission which dealt with civilian complaints against the Union forces, and they had received charges of stealing against the troopers at Herndon Station. All three saw the ride as an opportunity to relieve the boredom of camp as well as to eat a good, home cooked meal at the house of a Mr. Hanna, a Union sympathizer at Herndon.

After first stopping to inspect the pickets, the officers went directly to Mr. Hanna's nearby house, hitched their horses to the front porch, and inquired about supper. Hanna kindly offered to prepare a meal - for cash. Wells and his companions enjoyed the repast and had nearly finished when they heard yells and a volley of shots. Racing to the window, they saw about fifty Confederates attacking the picket post, which quickly surrendered. The three Vermonters panicked. Instead of trying to reach their horses and ride off or escape through the back door and hide in the woods, they ran upstairs to the attic and hid in the darkness.

Mosby, the leader of the sudden raid, noticed three officers' cavalry horses in the front of Hanna's house. With a squad of men he came over to investigate as the rest of his raiders rounded up the Union prisoners at the picket post.

When Mosby entered the house, it looked empty save for Hanna who tried to cover for his guests by claiming that they had run away. Mosby ordered the house searched. The Rebels worked their way from room to room coming last to the attic where nothing could be seen in the darkness. The Rebels called in; Wells and his companions tried desperately not to make a sound. Ames, a deserter from the Fifth New York Cavalry who had joined Mosby, decided to fire a shot into the darkness to flush out any Yankees in hiding. He carefully advanced to the entrance, raised his pistol, and fired. The flash of the pistol and the whiz of the bullet startled Wells who involuntarily flinched. When Wells jumped backward, he planted his foot between the rafters and came down heavily on unsupported lathe and plaster - and kept going. With a crash he landed at Mosby's feet in the room below, his uniform white with plaster dust, his hair and beard looking a score of years older.

This unexpected descent startled the Confederates, who recovered in time to enjoy a hearty laugh at Wells' predicament which Cheney and Scofield also joined after they came down from their attic perches. The Rebels pulled Wells to his feet, brushed him off, and discovered for the first time the rank of their prisoner.

Trying to stall for time in the hope that Union reserves would arrive and rescue him, Wells complained that he was too injured to ride. A cocked pistol held at his head effected a sudden cure, and Wells, mounting his horse with sudden alacrity, rode off with his captors. That night Wells, omitting the details of the event, wrote to his brother from Mosby's camp that he and the other prisoners had received good treatment and that the entire affair had been without any fatalities.<sup>2</sup> A two-month imprisonment in Richmond lay ahead for the unfortunate officers who had succeeded far beyond their expectation in warding off the dull routine of camp life. All returned to the First Vermont in time to take part in the Gettysburg Campaign. Mosby and Wells probably never met again, but the Confederate raider enjoyed recalling his bizarre capture of the Yankee major.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>This account of the capture of William Wells relies heavily on John Mosby, *Mosby's War Reminiscences* (New York: Dodd, 1898), pp. 71-72.

<sup>2</sup>Wells MSS, Wells to Charles Wells, March 17, 1863, Wilbur Collection, Bailey Library, University of Vermont, Burlington, Vermont.