Union officers in Corinth fight each other, 1 dies

With war comes death and during the Civil War it came to Corinth in a number of forms. The hundreds of grisly battlefield deaths by bullets and cannonballs were overshadowed by the thousands who succumbed to disease. There were fatal accidents, an execution and even a guy struck by lightning. There was also a murder.

I'm not talking about a battlefield encounter between two soldiers or an atrocity against some poor resident. No, this was murder most foul and both men were wearing the same color uniform.

Colonel Francis Cornyn was the commander of the 10th Missouri Cavalry and his regiment was part of the Union occupation force at Corinth. Cornyn had started the war as a surgeon but found he had a knack for fighting. He served with an artillery unit at Shiloh and then was given command of a brand new cavalry regiment.

His promotion caused some bad blood with Lt. Col. William Bowen who felt he should be the leader of the regiment. Bowen had been in command of the cavalry battalion which had formed the nucleus of the 10th Missouri and it was only fitting he should be in charge. But Bowen had a spotty reputation from his service in Missouri where his men were quite skilled in stealing cotton and he profited by selling it to cotton brokers up north.

In the spring of 1863 the regiment was frequently sent on raids into Alabama and made life tough for the folks in Tuscumbia and Muscle Shoals. Several cotton mills were burned and they were involved in a pretty heavy skirmish right through downtown Florence. Under Cornyn's orders the troopers sacked the LaGrange Academy (eventually the University of North Alabama) and burned it along with a library of 4,000 volumes. The order was carried out with gusto by the "Destroying Angels" of the 10th Missouri.

When the regiment returned to Corinth Bowen saw an opportunity to rid himself of his competition and preferred charges against his colonel for exceeding his orders in the destruction and looting in Alabama. It was rather ironic that Bowen who practically wrote the book on depredations would accuse his boss of such activities. But Cornyn was no choir boy and had a reputation for having little regard for the rights of Southerners.

In August of 1863 Cornyn was brought before a court martial convened in a Corinth home. Witnesses were called and testimony was given and it looked pretty good for the defendant until August 10th, when Lt. Col. Bowen was called to the stand. Bowen's account painted a poor picture of his commander and at one point Cornyn jumped to his feet and shouted "You lie!" As he was led from the courtroom into the hall he called out he would "impeach that man's testimony." The trial was halted while the officers of the court discussed some legal aspect of the case.

Cornyn was waiting in the "ante-room" of the house, a parlor pressed into service as a waiting room. He had calmed down and was humming a tune and smoking a cigar when Bowen entered and a confrontation ensued. Harsh words and accusations flew back and forth, both men were hot under the collar and they began shouting. Cornyn had enough and punched Bowen squarely in the face.

The two grappled together and there was plenty of beard pulling and eye gouging. There were several other men in the room and the two assailants were pulled apart. Bowen, still in a rage, went for his pistol

and Cornyn, slower on the draw, tried to draw his as well. An officer yelled out “For God’s sake, Colonel, don’t shoot here!”

Cornyn was an easy target, only a few feet away and still held by one of the officers who had pulled them apart. Bowen yanked his revolver from its holster and the first shot exploded from the barrel and went right through the wooden floor. He cocked the pistol and took another try. The second round, as well as the third and fourth, found the target: Cornyn was hit in the belly, hip, and pelvis.

In a moment, the room became a madhouse. Men rushed out both doors and at least one dove head first through the window. Cornyn was still on his feet and managed to stagger into the courtroom before collapsing. Bowen followed him in with the smoking pistol still in his hand. Col. John Wilcox of the 52nd Illinois Infantry shouted “Bowen!” and the attacker looked up, backed away and explained, “He struck me, Gentlemen, he struck me.”

Cornyn lay on the floor, still conscious but fading fast. An officer of the court knelt over the stricken man and asked him where he was wounded. “I am shot all over, sir,” he replied, and within five minutes he was gone. It was later determined that any one of the wounds would have been fatal.

Bowen may have felt justified in the shooting but he knew he had killed a man and would soon be arrested. Rather than wait for the arresting officers he walked down the street to the Provost Marshal’s office and turned himself in. He was later tried for the killing and was acquitted, but his career as a cavalry officer was over. When General Grant learned of the not guilty verdict by the court martial he had Bowen thrown out of the army.

The power struggle for command of the regiment resulted in one man dead and another cashiered, which left an opening to be filled. The promotion was given to Frederick Benteen, the senior major of the regiment.

If you history buffs are trying to remember where you heard the name Benteen, think of the fight on the Little Big Horn. Captain Benteen commanded one of the battalions of the 7th Cavalry, and though he was later criticized for not coming to Custer’s aid, he managed to fend off numerous attacks and save his men from annihilation.