

Lawrence Sullivan “Sul” Ross

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Lawrence Sullivan “Sul” Ross
(Wikipedia)



A wise man once said that if you want to be remembered by history, don't do lots of things very well – do one thing *supremely* well. Perhaps this is the reason Paul Revere is far better remembered today than most of Washington's generals from the Revolutionary War.

This is why Confederate General Lawrence Sullivan “Sul” Ross has been largely forgotten, even though he was a versatile and highly successful man who did lots of things very well. He is perhaps the clearest example of so many great

generals, North and South, who had greatness and intermittent fame but not lasting glory. These generals were like comets who flashed across the face of history without ever doing that one supreme deed that might have transformed any one of them into a fixed and immortal star from our most-remembered war in all of American history.

As a student at Baylor University in his home state of Texas, he completed what was then a two-year program in a single year. After graduating in 1857, he became an equally successful student at Wesleyan University in Florence, Alabama, where the plan was for students not just to learn the basic academic subjects, but to live with prominent local families who would give them “daily exposure to good manners and refinement.”

By then, Ross had lived under several flags. He was born in the Iowa Territory on September 27, 1838. While an infant, his family moved to the Republic of Texas, which in his boyhood became a state of the United States. Still later it would become one of the eleven states of the Confederacy, and finally after Reconstruction, a U. S. state for the second time.

While home from Wesleyan in the summer of 1858, Ross participated in the first of some 140 military engagements during his adventurous life. His father Shapley Ross was an Indian Agent at the

Brazos Indian Reserve. The U. S. Army conscripted Indians from the reserve to help the Wichita Expedition of the 2nd Cavalry in the search for Comanche Chief Buffalo Hump, who had led a number of deadly raids on Texas settlements. When his dad became ill, "Sul," as everyone knew him, was elected by the Indians as their new war chief. Young Ross, then only 19-years-old, led his 135 warriors to accompany 225 troops commanded by Brevet Major Earl Van Dorn. Young Sul was given the courtesy title of "captain" during his command.

Native scouts found about 500 Comanches, including Chief Buffalo Hump, camped outside a Wichita village in Indian Territory, near the site of present-day Rush Springs, Oklahoma. Captain Ross and his warriors successfully stampeded the enemy's horses, leaving the trapped Comanche warriors at a disadvantage as they faced mounted troops.

Together with Lt. Cornelius Van Camp of the 2nd Cavalry, and accompanied also by one of his own scouts and one of his own troopers, Ross rode out against the fleeing Comanche. A party of noncombatants also trying to escape appeared to contain a white child. On Ross's orders, his men grabbed the child. As the four soldiers turned to rejoin the battle, they were confronted by 25 Comanche warriors. Van Camp and Ross's trooper were immediately killed by arrows. Ross took an arrow through his shoulder. Then he took a .58 caliber bullet through his chest, fired by a Comanche who had

picked up the dead trooper's carbine.

Ross recognized his attacker. It was Mohee, a brave whom Ross had known since childhood. As Mohee approached the temporarily paralyzed Ross with a scalping knife, Lt. James Majors of the Second Cavalry took down the Comanche with a load of buckshot.

After five hours of fighting, 70 Comanche had been killed or mortally wounded, including just two noncombatants. Although Buffalo Hump had escaped, the battle had been won. This first encounter was emblematic of Sul Ross's military career – successful far more often than not, but more than once he was left wounded or ill afterwards.

Ross's injuries were so severe that for five days he could not be moved from the tree under which he lay. His wounds becoming infected; Ross begged others to kill him and take him out of his pain. At long last able to travel, he was first carried on a litter suspended between two mules and then on the shoulders of his men.

Ross made a miraculously full recovery even though he continued to feel pain for the rest of the year. The *Dallas Herald* made him a statewide hero when it published Lt. Van Horn's written report recounting the young captain's exploits in the Wichita Village fight. Based on the young man's proven performance in battle, General Winfield Scott offered Ross a direct commission in the U. S. Army.

Remarkably for such a young man, Ross chose instead to go back to Wesleyan in Alabama, where he

earned his degree the following year, in 1859.

Ross then returned to Waco, Texas, where his younger sister Kate had been the first white child ever born in that rugged frontier town. Finding that no one had been able to trace the family of the young Caucasian girl rescued in the fight where he had been the hero, Ross himself adopted the baby and named her Lizzie Ross in honor of his new fiancée, Lizzie Tinsley.

In early 1860, the year after his graduation from college, Ross enlisted in the Texas Rangers to continue his Indian-fighting career as a member of Captain J. M. Smith's Waco Company. Smith appointed Ross his second lieutenant. When Captain Smith was promoted, the other men unanimously voted to make Ross their new captain.

The highlight of his Indian-fighting career as a Ranger was the Battle of Pease River in late 1860. Ross and 39 Rangers had tracked some 500 raiding Comanche who had murdered a pregnant white woman. As the Rangers neared the Comanche winter village along the Pease River, Ross personally scouted ahead. Hidden by a dust storm, he was able to get close enough to see that the tribe was preparing to move. Realizing that his own horses were too tired for a long pursuit, Ross resolved to attack immediately even though he was separated from a much larger force that had been unable to keep up.

After fierce fighting, the Comanche Indians fled. Ross and several of his men pursued both Chief Peta Nocono and a second, unknown

rider. The second rider slowed and held a child over her head. The men surrounded her while Ross rode after the chief, eventually shooting him three times. Nocona was the only Comanche male to die in the fighting. Thirteen Comanche women were killed. Ross suffered no casualties among his men.

When Ross saw that the captured woman had blue eyes, he questioned her. She neither spoke English nor remembered her birth name or details of her life before joining the Comanche. The few details of her capture that she could remember matched what Ross knew of the 1836 Fort Parker Massacre. Ross summoned Colonel Isaac Parker, who said that his niece, kidnapped at the time of the massacre, had been named Cynthia Ann Parker. The blue-eyed Comanche captive heard the statement, slapped her chest and said, "Me Cincee Ann." Although "Cincee" Parker never returned to the Comanche people, she insisted thereafter that she was not happy to have been rescued.

Ross also rescued a nine-year-old Indian boy hiding alone in tall grass, whom he named Pease. When he was later given the chance to return to his people, Pease refused and was raised by Ross.

The Battle of Pease River was Ross's second big success. Biographer Judith Benson wrote, "Ross's aggressive tactics of carrying the war to Comanche fireside, (as it had long been carried to that of the white) ended charges of softness in dealing with the Indians."

Ross's third success was the Civil War. One week after his wedding to

Lizzie Tinsley on May 28, 1861, Ross was asked by Texas Governor Edward Clark to negotiate treaties with the Five Civilized Tribes so that they would not help the Union Army. The task was accomplished before Ross could get there, but once again his talents had caught the eye of a superior.

Ross enlisted in Stone's Regiment, later known as the Sixth Texas Cavalry, which elected Ross to the position of major. Twice in November, 1861, Ross was chosen by General McCulloch, with whom he had served in the Texas Rangers, to lead scouting expeditions in Missouri. Both times Ross successfully slipped behind Union lines, gathered the requested information, and retreated before being caught.

In early 1862, after a short leave to visit his wife in Texas, Ross was again assigned to raid enemy lines. With 500 men, he gathered intelligence, destroyed supplies, captured 60 horses and mules, and took 11 prisoners.

This was followed by the low point of Ross's military career. Serving under Major General Earl Van Dorn, with whom Ross had also served during the Wichita battle, Ross was blamed by his commanding officer for the defeat at the Battle of Pea Ridge. Van Dorn blamed the defeat solely on Ross, for over-marching and underfeeding his troops and for failing to properly coordinate the plan of attack.

Ross's cavalry troop was ordered to Arkansas. Because of a scarcity of forage, the men were ordered to dismount and send their horses back to Texas. The unit traveled on

foot to Memphis, only to arrive two weeks after the Battle of Shiloh. In the meantime, Ross lay close to death for eight weeks due to a lingering fever.

Against his own wishes, in 1862, the men of the Sixth Regiment elected him colonel. He served well, and during absences of commanding General Charles W. Phifer, he assumed Phifer's command. During the summer of 1862, he was nominated for a promotion to brigadier general. Thanks in part to his success, his unit was the only one of some eight or ten dismounted cavalry units to be promised the return of their horses.

Ross became a hero once again at the Battle of Corinth in North Mississippi. By now he had acquired a horse, which bucked him off during the battle and left his men with the fear that he had been killed. Fortunately, he was unharmed, and he led 700 riflemen to engage the Union troops at Hatchie's Bridge, where the Confederate Army had retreated from Corinth. For three hours, his 700 men held off 7,000 Union troops and repulsed three major enemy assaults. The fierce resistance from Ross's small unit covered and made possible a successful Rebel retreat. It was this high-water moment that more than any other led to his being appointed a general.

Soon after this battle, the Sixth Cavalry regained its horses. In 1863, the regiment was transferred to the cavalry brigade of Colonel William H. "Red" Jackson. In early March, Ross's unit under Jackson

helped to win the Battle of Thompson's Station, with additional help from Nathan Bedford Forrest.

In July, Major General Stephen D. Lee joined the Sixth Texas Cavalry with Colonel R. A. Pinson's First Mississippi Cavalry, creating a new brigade commanded by Ross. The rise in his military fortunes was offset by news from home that his first child had died.

Ross himself fell ill again for six full months with fever and chills symptomatic of tertian malaria. Despite his suffering, it was typical of his character that he never missed a day of duty.

In early 1864, he was promoted to brigadier general. At 25-years-old, he became one of the youngest general officers of the Confederate army. Following his promotion, every one of his men reenlisted.

In March 1864, Ross's brigade fought against African American soldiers for the first time at Yazoo City, Mississippi. The fighting was bitter. During the surrender negotiations following Ross's victory, the Union commander accused the Texans of murdering several captured African American soldiers and Ross countered with the claim that two of his men had been killed after surrendering.

Beginning in May, the brigade encountered 112 consecutive days of skirmishes, involving 86 separate clashes with the enemy. The regiment lost 25% of its manpower. At the bloody Battle of Brown's Mill in Newnan, Georgia in July, Ross was captured but then quickly rescued by a Confederate counterattack.

Between November 1 and December 27, 1864, Ross and his men led the Confederate advance into Tennessee during the Franklin-Nashville Campaign. They captured 550 prisoners, several hundred horses, and enough overcoats and blankets to survive the winter. Only 12 of his men were killed.

By the time Ross went on 90-day furlough on March 13, 1865, the 26-year-old had participated in 135 engagements with the enemy and had five horses shot out from under him. The end of the fighting was less than one month away. President Andrew Johnson personally approved Ross's application for parole on October 22, 1866.

In 1873, Ross was elected Sheriff of McLennan County, Texas. According to the *Dictionary of American Biography*, "In his two years in office he ended a reign of terror and helped form the Sheriffs' Association of Texas. He urged needed reforms and helped write the document that governs Texas today, the Constitution of 1876."

Two decades later, he was elected Governor of Texas. He left the statehouse to step into the presidency of the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas – now known as Texas A & M University. Under his capable leadership, the state of Texas and A & M University were left on a solid financial basis, with high public trust in both institutions. Current Aggie students still honor his memory by placing good-luck pennies on the boots of his bronze statue just before entering the main academic complex for any test, including their final exams. Another Texas institution of

higher learning, Sul Ross State University in Abilene, is named in his honor.

“It has been the lot of few men,” declared an editorial after his death in 1898, “to be of such great service to Texas as Sul Ross.”

But for a few exceptions, Sul Ross’s career was pretty much one unbroken success after another. All his career lacked in the end was just one of those supreme defining moments that made Generals Jackson and Forrest the subject of study by students of war and military history to this day.

Every scholar who has written about him agrees that Ross was a courageous and effective military commander who was loved and admired by his men. He was a loyal and loving husband and father to nine natural children (six survived him), to an adopted daughter, and to an adopted Indian son. He was highly effective as a political leader, having served as sheriff and state Senator before becoming governor. More than any other individual, he was responsible for the survival of Texas A & M University. Sul Ross died on January 3, 1898.



The Narrative can be found in the TVCWRT book published in 2012 titled, *North Alabama Civil War Generals; 13 Wore Gray, the Rest Blue*. Complements of the TVCWRT.