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Texas Rangers at the Battle of the Alamo

by **Stephen L. Moore**

In Texas, there are few historical icons more legendary than the Alamo and the Texas Rangers. After 167 years, the Alamo continues to garner attention and the Texas Rangers continue to serve.

In the Alamo's darkest hour, the last full company to fight their way past Mexican soldiers into the fortress was a group of thirty-two men from Gonzales. Led by returning Alamo defender Captain Albert Martin and his Texas scout John W. Smith, this group included a small, separate company of Texas Rangers under Second Lieutenant George C. Kimbell.

Lieutenant Colonel William Barrett Travis, commanding the Alamo forces, acknowledged that the Gonzales men did reinforce him. In a letter written on March 3, he says, "A company of thirty-two men from Gonzales made their way into us on the morning of the first inst. at three o'clock."

In his new book, *Alamo Traces: New Evidence and New Conclusions*, author Thomas Ricks Lindley writes that these thirty-two Gonzales riders were only half of the force that attempted to enter the Alamo. He asserts that another group of Rangers and volunteers entered the stronghold several days later, eluding both the Mexican Army and most Texas historians.

Further review of available documentary evidence does show that at least sixty men were organized for the ride into San Antonio. Lindley's new account claims that the other Texas Ranger company, under Captain John Tumlinson Jr., reached Gonzales on February 28 and operated near San Antonio with Captain Martin's volunteers and Lieutenant Kimbell's Rangers. Finally, he claims that some of Tumlinson's men actually entered the Alamo during the morning of March 4, 1836.

Two mornings later, on March 6, the Alamo and its gallant

defenders fell to Santa Anna's Mexican Army. Any Texian defenders who entered the fortress after March 3 are not clearly identified, leaving this question open.

Based on Lindley's new assertions, it is worthy to debate several points concerning the Texas Rangers and their involvement at the time of the Alamo's fall in 1836:

- 1) Who commanded the Gonzales Mounted Rangers?
- 2) Did Albert Martin organize a second group of volunteers for the Alamo?
- 3) Did Captain Tumlinson's Rangers also enter the Alamo?

The Gonzales Mounted Rangers

Of the thirty-two Gonzales men who entered the Alamo on March 1, author Lindley writes that Albert Martin seems to have been the unit's captain and that First Lieutenant Thomas Jackson was second in command. Before exploring Martin and Jackson's company, it is important to first establish that Second Lieutenant George C. Kimbell was properly in command of his own Ranger company.

During early February 1836, the General Council of Texas (the acting government body) took steps to help develop frontier forces. A regional, three-company regiment of Rangers had been authorized in November 1835. The commander was designated as Major Robert McAlpin Williamson, better known in Texas history as "Three-Legged Willie."

On February 4, the council's special advisory committee found that Williamson's Ranger corps had failed in fully raising its three companies: only two companies had been partially organized. The council thus proposed that two new Ranger companies should be raised, one in the Gonzales municipality and one in Milam. The commissioners appointed to that task were Byrd Lockhart, Mathew Caldwell, and William A. Mathews.

The council's advisory committee decided that a full Ranger company would consist of fifty-six men and would be commanded by a captain, two lieutenants, and other subordinate officers. However, as soon as twenty-eight men were raised in either the Gonzales or Milam municipalities, the men there could elect a lieutenant to take command of the unit. The commissioners would continue to recruit men until another twenty-eight could be mustered into service. The volunteers of the company would then elect their own captain, first lieutenant, and other officers.

By February 23, Byrd Lockhart had mustered in a twenty-two-man unit that called itself the Gonzales Mounted Ranger Company. Although the unit was a little shy of its twenty-eight-man requirement, Lockhart and his fellow commissioners allowed the men to elect Second Lieutenant George Kimbell as their leader. Some historical accounts have referred to him as Captain Kimbell, although he was properly in command as a

lieutenant.

Kimbell's original twenty-two-man company was certainly a mixed bag. The ages of the men ranged from sixteen-year-old Galba Fuqua to fifty-year-old Prospect McCoy. John McCoy, thirty-two, had served as the sheriff of Gonzales. Jacob C. Darst, a forty-two-year-old farmer, was one of the "Old Eighteen" who had started the revolution.

The copy of the muster roll that survives was written out by former Ranger Commissioner Byrd Lockhart in Gonzales on June 20, 1838. He certified that this "is a true copy of the original list officially made by myself."

Prudence Kimbell, widow of the late George, was issued a certificate that her husband had served as Second Lieutenant of Rangers. On the certificate for the company's commanding officer's name, no superior officer is given. Instead, the certificate shows that Lieutenant Kimbell's Rangers were commanded by Major R. M. Williamson.

John Sutherland, an Alamo courier, arrived in Gonzales on Wednesday, February 24, with word of the Alamo defenders' plight. "By Saturday we succeeded in getting twenty-five men who were placed under the command of Ensign Kimble," wrote Sutherland years later. While he does not mention the other group of men under Captain Martin and Lieutenant Jackson, it is important to note that he claims that Kimbell was in command. In another version of his Alamo recollections, Sutherland wrote:

John W. Smith started back with 25 men for the Alamo, the men under command of Ensign Kimble of the Ranger[s]. They added to their number on the Cibolo [River] seven more, in all thirty-two.

Benjamin Highsmith, another courier from the Alamo, also encountered the Gonzales Rangers. In an 1897 interview with A. J. Sowell, Highsmith said that thirty-two men from Gonzales entered the Alamo and were led by Captain Kimbell.

Dolphin Floyd, another Gonzales Ranger killed at the Alamo, was issued a posthumous certificate of service that verified that his service in Lieutenant George C. Kimbell's company which had entered the Alamo. It is important to note that Floyd is not on the February 23 muster roll for Lieutenant Kimbell's Rangers. This indicates that he was recruited after February 23 and that Kimbell was still considered to be in command of his own men after February 23.

Lieutenant Kimbell's men and other volunteers rode out from Gonzales on February 27 for San Antonio. Kimbell and thirteen other Rangers from his original February 23 muster roll are known to have entered the Alamo on March 1 and to have subsequently perished. One other man, William Philip King, was allowed to trade places with his elder father John G. King, the latter one of Kimbell's original enrollees.

We therefore know that fourteen Rangers of Kimbell's command made it into the Alamo. Therefore, at least eight of his original men were either replaced by other men, deserted command, or did not make it to the fort. The service papers of Dolphin Floyd

show that Lieutenant Kimbell did recruit at least some additional men into his company after February 23, either as additional recruits or as replacements for men who opted to stay behind. This would bear out Sutherland's recollections that Kimbell had twenty-five men total, versus the original twenty-two who were mustered. We also know from extant military papers that at least two of Lieutenant Kimbell's men tried to make it into the Alamo on March 1 and did not succeed. In a sworn service affidavit of May 24, 1836, Colonel Edwin Morehouse verified that one of Kimbell's original Rangers had been unable to make it into the Alamo on March 1.

John T. Ballard enrolled himself in the company of Captain Kimbell (who was killed in the Alamo) on February 24, 1836. . . and having been cut off by the enemies [sic] spies from the fort Alamo, was the cause of his being separated from his [illegible] officer. Then he joined the command of Tumlinson on the 1st of March for some days. When Tumlinson left, he joined Capt. [Thomas] Rabb's company and was in the battle of San Jacinto.

This Ballard affidavit thus shows that he was cut off and could not enter the Alamo. He thereafter joined Captain John Tumlinson's Rangers on March 1. (More on the location of Tumlinson's company in a moment.)

Another of Lieutenant Kimbell's Rangers was Prospect C. McCoy. His 1840 pension papers also show that his service was cut short at the same time that Ballard was terminated: "McCoy served until the 1st day of March AD 1836 in Captain Kimbell's company."

Another interesting point is that Kimbell's name is crossed out on McCoy's pension papers in two places and replaced with Captain Albert Martin's name. McCoy's pension application also covered his 1835 service in the fall through March 1836. He had originally served under Captain Martin in 1835 but was enrolled under Lieutenant Kimbell in February 1836. McCoy's choice on the application was Kimbell. Someone else apparently thought that Captain Martin was more appropriate because the larger amount of McCoy's service period in 1835 was under Martin.

What is also possible is that McCoy failed to enter the Alamo on March 1 and continued to serve for a short period of time with the remnants of Captain Martin's other men who also did not enter the doomed fort. McCoy remained in service until March 10, when he was compelled to flee with his family for their safety.

Service papers filed by two different attorneys make it a point to clearly show that Lieutenant Kimbell was in command of his Rangers. Dolphin Floyd's service papers were filed on May 24, 1839, by attorney John Clark. On this service certificate, the pre-printed word *Captain* is crossed out. In its place is written *Lt. Geo. C. Kimbell*. Less than a year later, attorney Joseph Clements filed papers for several other Kimbell Rangers: Andrew Kent, Jesse McCoy, and William Fisbaugh. An audited claim filed in February 1840 for John Gaston shows that he had also served as a private in Lieutenant Kimbell's company of Rangers from February 24, 1836, until the fall of the Alamo.

Captain Martin and Lieutenant Jackson's Company

While there is little controversy that a Gonzales Mounted Ranger

Company rode into the Alamo, there is some difference of opinion on the accompanying volunteers. Some sources have indicated that Captain Albert Martin commanded this group who returned to the Alamo.

Albert Martin was a twenty-eight-year-old storeowner, originally from Rhode Island. He was one of the "Old Eighteen" who had helped defend the Gonzales cannon at the start of the Texas Revolution. Martin had entered the service of Texas on September 26, 1835, as captain of the Gonzales Volunteers. By October 1, his company was under the direction of Colonel John Henry Moore and later fought at the battle of Concepcion in November.

Martin rode into Gonzales from the Alamo late on February 24 or during the early morning hours of February 25. At that time, another volunteer company was in the process of organizing itself there. First Lieutenant Thomas Jackson was the senior officer present at the original mustering. Again, per revolutionary government regulations that the Gonzales commissioners must have been enforcing, the company could not have a true captain until fifty-six men were mustered in.

What is evident is that Lieutenant Kimbell's company and Lieutenant Jackson's company were not considered one and the same. Kimbell's men were mustered into service on February 23 (some pension papers cite February 24). Jackson's company was mustered into service the following day, February 24.

During March 1836, Joseph Clements had been in charge of procuring food to supply the Texas Army. Four years after the fall of the Alamo, he filed papers for the widows of some of the Gonzales men who had fallen. He filed a number of claims on March 4, 1840. In these, he made it clear that some men had served under Lieutenant Jackson and some had served under Lieutenant Kimbell. Other than the Clements claims, there are no other military documents or credible sources which show a Lieutenant Jackson as having been an officer at this time.

Clements filed papers attesting to the service of First Lieutenant Jackson, George Washington Cottle, and John E. Garvin. He claims that Garvin and Cottle served in Lieutenant Jackson's company from February 24 to March 6, 1836. It is important to notice that these three men were not on the Gonzales Mounted Ranging Company muster roll of the previous date, indicating that they were part of a separate company that was formed. Clements is clear in indicating that various men served under either Lieutenant Kimbell or Lieutenant Jackson, and in no case did he confuse one of Kimbell's original Rangers to have been among Jackson's command. Although mustered in on February 23, Kimbell's Rangers are also shown by attorney Clements to have entered Texas service one day later, on February 24.

From all indications, Albert Martin rode out of Gonzales with about sixty men for the Alamo. Not all of them made it there, of course. Two sources point toward Martin having departed Gonzales with more than just Kimbell's Gonzales Mounted Rangers. First, Martin's obituary, printed in July 1836 in the *Manufacturers and Farmers Journal* and the *New Orleans True American*, makes an interesting claim:

He had left the fortress and returned to his residence, where he was apprized of the perilous situation in

which in his late comrades were placed. His determination was instantly taken. In reply to the passionate entreaties of his father, who besought him not to rush into certain destruction, he said, "This is no time for such considerations. I have passed my word to Colonel Trav[is] that I would return, nor can I forfeit a pledge thus given.

In pursuance of this high resolve he raised a company of sixty-two men and started on his way back. During the route, the company, apprized of the desperate situation of affairs, became diminished by desertion, to thirty-two. With this gallant band he gained the fort and the reinforcement, small as it was, revived the drooping spirits of the garrison.

From this, one can pick up two important points. First, Martin reached Gonzales with a pledge from Travis that he would raise help. He immediately recruited more men, despite pleas from his father. Second, he left Gonzales with sixty-two men, but only made it into the Alamo with thirty-two. Some apparently dropped out along the way; others were cut off and unable to make it through the gates.

In support of Martin riding out with a large number of men is a Major Robert Williamson letter to Travis written from Gonzales on March 1, 1836. He wrote: "From this municipality 60 men have now set out, who in all human probability are found, at this date, with you."

The sixty men Captain Martin left with included twenty-five of Lieutenant Kimbell's Gonzales Mounted Rangers. It also included Lieutenant Jackson's new company that was recruited on February 24, the day after Kimbell's men were mustered into service.

Throughout the San Jacinto campaign, companies of Texas Rangers blended into the army. Following the Battle of San Jacinto, these companies then resumed their ranging duties. Oftentimes, the captains held rank as a private in the cavalry before resuming command. It is possible, therefore, that Lieutenant Kimbell's command attached themselves to that of Captain Martin for the immediate crisis. Following the fight at the Alamo, they likely hoped to carry out their pledged ranging commitments in the Gonzales municipality.

Captain Tumlinson's Company

On the very date that Captain Martin and Lieutenant Kimbell made their historic rides through the Alamo's gate, another Ranger company was north of Gonzales at Bastrop. In *Alamo Traces*, Lindley suggests that this unit joined the Gonzales companies and that at least some of its members entered the Alamo during the early morning hours of March 4. A closer look at the movements of this company, commanded by Captain John Jackson Tumlinson Jr., shows that it did not join the Alamo defenders.

Captain Tumlinson was already well known in Texas for his fighting abilities. Before being killed by Indians in 1823, his father had been instrumental in laying the groundwork for the creation of the Texas Rangers.

Commissioned on November 28, 1835, to organize a Ranger company under Major Willie Williamson's supervision, John Tumlinson Jr. was briefly delayed in doing so by the December siege of Bexar. Returning back to the Colorado River settlements, he did organize a Ranger company on January 17 at Hornsby's Station, thirty miles north of present Austin. Three days later, his men fought a battle with a band of Comanche Indians, killing four and rescuing a captive Texas boy. Following this battle, Tumlinson's company recruited more men and then spent the better part of the month of February building a cedar blockhouse on the headwaters of Brushy Creek, north of Austin in present Leander.

At the time of Lieutenant Colonel Travis' calls for men to come defend the Alamo in late February 1836, Captain Tumlinson's Rangers were at their new blockhouse. In response to Travis' pleas, Major Williamson sent orders from Gonzales on February 25 to Captain Tumlinson to fall down to Bastrop and await further orders from him.

Williamson sent a copy of these orders to the General Council in San Felipe, which in turn recommended on February 27 that Captain Tumlinson's Rangers should proceed immediately to Bexar to aid the army there. From all indications, these recommendations either did not reach Tumlinson's hands or were countermanded.

According to one of Tumlinson's Rangers, Noah Smithwick, "The invasion of Santa Anna necessitated our recall from the frontiers. Somewhere about the first of March we were called in to Bastrop." This actually coincides well with Williamson's orders of February 25. According to Smithwick, Captain Tumlinson's company was ordered to operate from Bastrop, conducting spy patrols toward San Antonio. Once word of the Alamo's fall spread, the fleeing citizens of the Runaway Scrape needed protection. "We were ordered to cover their retreat, and afterwards join General Houston," says Smithwick.

Although everything in Smithwick's recollections seems to have documentary support, Lindley discounts it completely, claiming that Smithwick was not even serving with Tumlinson's company at this time. Before dealing with Smithwick, an examination of facts showing the location of Tumlinson's company is in order.

There are no direct sources claiming that Tumlinson's Rangers rode to Gonzales or that some of his men actually entered into the Alamo. This belief by Lindley is based loosely on the previously cited John Ballard affidavit that says that he joined Tumlinson on March 1. Lindley believes that Tumlinson's men were left camped at the Cibolo River near San Antonio on March 1 as Martin's Gonzales volunteers entered the Alamo. What is also possible is that Ballard, when cut off by the enemy spies from the fort, was forced down the Old San Antonio Road toward Bastrop, where he must have found and joined some of Tumlinson's scouts.

The fact that Captain Tumlinson's Rangers were stationed at Bastrop during early March is supported by sources other than Noah Smithwick. When Tumlinson reached Bastrop, his men found a volunteer company there under the direction of Captain Jesse Billingsley. This group was preparing to march out for Gonzales. Among Billingsley's volunteers was Lyman W.

Alexander, who later served as a witness to another man's service. In 1858, Alexander swore to the fact that J. G. Dunn belonged to the company of Rangers left or stationed at Bastrop under R. M. Williamson in 1836 at the time that Billingsley's company marched out for Gonzales on March 3.

On the same date, Captain Tumlinson donated one of his oxen to the Mina Volunteers for use in hauling their supplies to Gonzales. Two of Billingsley's men, Edward Burleson and John McGehee, signed an appraisal note that they had received from J. J. Tumlinson one ox for the use of their men. Signed at Mina on March 3, 1836, this note valued Tumlinson's ox at twenty-seven dollars, as appraised by Edward J. Blakey and Reuben Hornsby. Hornsby was a man who was serving with Tumlinson's Rangers.

Another man, Harrison Owen, claims that Tumlinson's Rangers were still at Bastrop as of March 10. On that day, Owen and several young men left the settlement of Tenoxtitlan for the purpose of giving assistance to the brave boys with Colonel Travis. When they reached Bastrop, the people of the town were beginning to pack up and leave. "We met them two miles east of Bastrop," relates Owen. R. M. Williamson was there under the order of General Sam Houston to cover the retreat of the families.

Major Williamson and the Tumlinson Rangers remained at Bastrop until March 18. From the Texas Army camp on the Colorado River, Colonel Edward Burleson sent scout David Halderman back to Bastrop with a dispatch. Williamson wrote, "I received an additional order from Colonel Burleson, on the 18th of March."

General Sam Houston did get this letter from Williamson, which he still had in his possession in 1855. While mentioning the correspondence, Houston clearly shows that the Tumlinson Rangers had remained stationed at Bastrop after the Alamo's fall.

I have a letter from Major R. M. Williamson of the battalion of Rangers, who was stationed at Bastrop to defend that portion of the frontier, as well as to watch the upper division of the Mexican Army under Gen. G [a]ona, on its advance to the Trinity.

Captain Jesse Billingsley agreed that Houston called on Colonel Burleson to furnish him a man from his regiment of volunteers. The purpose of this soldier was to bear dispatches to Major R. M. Williamson, commander of Rangers at Bastrop.

In addition to Captain Tumlinson's Rangers, another small scouting company was operating between the Alamo and Bastrop during late February and early March. Prior to Captain Billingsley's Mina volunteer company being organized, former army commander Edward Burleson ordered out a small group of scouts on February 24, 1836. Captain Thomas G. McGehee was placed in command of the unit, which included David F. Owen, Martin Walker, David Halderman, and Michael Sessum. Sessum was an interpreter of Spanish and Indian languages.

Concerning the service of Captain McGehee's spies, the pension papers of Halderman state:

. . . the company was on duty in the country between

San Marcos and San Antonio and continued in said service until about the 1st of March 1836. At this time, applicant joined Captain Jesse Billingsley's company of volunteers then at Gonzales and was with said company as a soldier until about the 1st of April 1836, that being crippled with rheumatism in the retreat of the army near the Brazos River, applicant received a 20-day furlough from Captain Jesse Billingsley.

Captain Billingsley clarifies in another service document for Halderman that these men were in Bastrop later than March 1. The service papers of David Owen shows that Captain McGehee's scouts continued to operate near San Antonio until joining Sam Houston's Texas Army on March 16.

The Trouble With Smithwick

The trouble with throwing out the memoirs of Noah Smithwick—which place Tumlinson's company at Bastrop during the Alamo's final days—is that the basic facts he asserts in his recollections can be verified. In my years of detailed research of the Texas Rangers from 1835 to 1841, I have found that extant archival documents and muster rolls generally bear out his writings.

Aided by his daughter in the late 1890s, Smithwick wrote a book of recollections of his early Texas days, which was published in 1900. Obviously written from little more than his own memory, these reminiscences have few exact dates for events. His recollection of names is quite good, however.

During his service in the Texas Rangers in 1836 and 1837, Smithwick served under the commands of Captains John Tumlinson, Isaac Watts Burton, Dickinson Putnam, and Micah Andrews. In *Alamo Traces*, Lindley claims that Smithwick was confused about his Ranger service. Instead of fighting Comanches on January 20 with Tumlinson's company near Austin, Lindley believes that Smithwick had gone to the Sabine River and joined Captain Burton's Ranger unit, which was newly formed. This was another company under Major Williamson's direction. Based on this belief, Lindley says that Smithwick could not have been anywhere near Bastrop.

In reality, Smithwick did serve under Captain Burton, but it was not until late April 1836, after the battle of San Jacinto. Smithwick's memoirs are clear on his having served under Captain Tumlinson during January to March at the height of the Alamo crisis. Two men who were in Tumlinson's company, Reuben Hornsby and William Johnson, later swore that Smithwick was a member of John J. Tumlinson's ranging company in the year 1836.

Smithwick served his term of twelve months and finally, after spending time in different companies, finished his tour under Colonel R. M. Coleman. Smithwick's public debt papers and pension claims support this fact. John Tumlinson's Rangers signed on for a twelve-month service period. Noah Smithwick served from January 1836 through January 1837, originally enlisting under Captain Tumlinson. On November 2, 1836, Smithwick received payment for his services thus far, including three months' payment for service under Captain Tumlinson. The

same November 2 payment also covered Smithwick's service under Captain Burton and finally Captain Dickinson Putnam.

John Tumlinson left the system in August 1836, but discharged a number of his Rangers just days after San Jacinto. Remaining men such as Smithwick were moved into other Ranger commands as the Texas Army moved down toward Victoria. By June 24, Captain Burton was promoted to major, and Putnam was promoted to captain of his company. Thus, Smithwick served first under Tumlinson, then Burton, then Putnam, and finally in Colonel Robert Coleman's Ranger battalion during his first year of Ranger service.

Smithwick's memoirs also list and describe a number of the men he claims to have served with in Captain Tumlinson's company between January and April in 1836. They include: George M. Petty, Jim Edmundson, Ganey Crosby, James Curtis, Andy Dunn, and Felix Goff, all of whose service with Tumlinson is verified by audited military claims and pension papers. The service periods for these men begin as early as January 17, 1836, and end as early as April 17, 1836, prior to the battle of San Jacinto. George M. Petty, first lieutenant and acting commander of Tumlinson's company during the Runaway Scrape, resigned from the company on May 13, 1836. Taking these dates into consideration, Noah Smithwick had to have served his verified three months of service with Tumlinson's company somewhere between January 17 and May 13, 1836.

Smithwick's payment voucher of November 2, 1836, states that he was due all pay for nine months as a Ranger. Soon after San Jacinto, he then transferred into Captain Burton's company. Burton was promoted to major on September 24, passing his command to Captain Putnam, whose company just happens to have been disbanded on November 1, one day prior to Smithwick's receiving his final payment.

Revolutionary Rangers

In short, Lindley's new research is good for showing that more men than the Gonzales Thirty-Two attempted to enter the Alamo during its final days. It is possible, as he suggests, that another group of men did make it in on March 4. While Captain Tumlinson's Rangers were not among those reaching the Alamo, there is no discounting the fact that the Texas Rangers played a role in the Texas Revolution. More than eighty revolutionary Rangers were present at the historic battle of San Jacinto, six weeks after the Alamo fell. These men were either guarding the army's baggage at Camp Harrisburg or defeating the Mexican Army on the battlefield.

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