

## CONFEDERATE ACTIVITIES IN AND AROUND HUNTSVILLE, ALABAMA

From the Papers of The Late  
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It is probable that no complete history of the operations of the Confederate Cavalry in connection with the Army of Tennessee will ever be written. The area of country over which they were scattered, extending from the Alleghany Mountains to the Mississippi River; the nature of the service in which they were engaged, requiring them to act whether upon the raid, the scout or the vidette post, not as a compact body but in small detachments; and the fact that the nature of the country prevented their being used upon the great historic battlefields, all conspire to render the task of the historian who shall make the attempt, extremely difficult. Yet no soldier who following the fortunes of Forrest or of Wheeler should be willing to

admit that the services rendered by this branch of the Army were less important, the hardships endured less severe, the dangers encountered less deadly, or the casualties fewer than in any other branch. Doubtless, there were many cavalry regiments the list of whose killed and wounded, in the incessant skirmishes, was as great as that of the most famous infantry regiments that ever stormed a battery or crossed bayonets with the foe. While no historian may ever succeed in so grouping all these as to present a fitting companion picture to the great infantry and artillery battles, yet much may be done in the way of personal reminiscence to rescue the memory of our Cavalry service from undeserved oblivion. And if a connected



history is ever written its material can be gathered in no other way. It is with a view to accomplishing something in this direction that I have undertaken my present task. Being only a soldier in the ranks, I shall attempt to recite only that which I saw and participated in from June 20<sup>th</sup>, 1862 to May 9<sup>th</sup>, 1865, the former being the date of my enlistment and the latter of my discharge by parole at the surrender of Forrest.

In April 1862 the writer was a schoolboy in Huntsville, Alabama. On the morning of the 11<sup>th</sup> of that month Huntsville was occupied by the Federal Army under Gen. O. M. Mitchell. The school was disbanded, and the building seized for military uses.

Soon after this event I undertook in company with a schoolmate to pass through the lines of the enemy and make my way to Southern Alabama. Being under military age, we had no trouble in getting

permission to go for a few days to visit friends in the country but having spent more than the specified time in a vain attempt to evade the enemy's pickets and cross the Tennessee River, we were afraid to return home. We communicated our fears to the friend at whose house we were staying, and he informed us of a small band of Confederate cavalry that was being organized in the mountains of Madison and Jackson counties, and advised us to place ourselves under their protection.

At this time there were many Confederate soldiers lurking in this section. A company of the 7<sup>th</sup> Alabama Infantry whose term of service had expired, reached their homes only a few days before the arrival of the Federal Army and were hiding about to avoid arrest. There were several from other commands who were at home on furlough or on account of wounds or sickness, and many persons of military age, who



had not yet joined the army, were also compelled to conceal themselves in order to avoid imprisonment. Gen. Bragg who was then maturing his plans for the march into Kentucky, gave to Frank b. Gurley of Forrest's Regiment a commission as a Captain of Cavalry, and ordered him to organize these men into a cavalry company, and operate in rear of the enemy. When we reached his camp he had collected only about one dozen men. This number was rapidly increased to new recruits, and within a week or ten days it had swelled to fifty or sixty.

Though not members of this band my friend and I being under their protection while awaiting an opportunity to go south, were compelled to move with them from place to place. At length seeing no opportunity of carrying out our original purpose, we, on the 20<sup>th</sup> of June entered our names on the Company's roll, being respectively 16 and 15 years of age.

The service assigned to this company was both difficult and dangerous. The Tennessee River, with an average width of about eight hundred yards, turns to the Southwest below Chattanooga and entering Alabama near Bridgeport purses this course to Guntersville, about fifty miles, thence turning again to the Northwest, it passes out of Alabama at the Northwestern corner of the State. The northern bank of this river was in the possession of the enemy and was closely picketed. In the four counties of Alabama lying north of this bend there was a large Federal Army, numbering perhaps twenty thousand, who occupied every town and hamlet of importance, and a due portion of the force was cavalry, engaged continually in scouting. This was the field of our operations. Our dangers were increased by the presence of a few unauthorized bands of Guerillas in the same region, whose operations



gave the enemy presumptive evidence that all the Confederates in their midst were connected with these irregular bands in consequence of which we were indiscriminately outlawed. Our commander therefore was compelled to discriminate nicely between the methods of war that were legitimate and illegitimate, and to exercise continually such control over the passions of his men as would prevent their wreaking cruel vengeance upon such of the enemy as fell into their hands. The rendezvous of the company was in the mountain region along the border of Madison and Jackson counties. In the fastnesses of these mountains we found a safe asylum after every contact with the enemy, and from here as occasion was presented we furnished information of the enemy's movements to the Confederate forces south of the river.

There were frequent skirmishes between small detachments of our

company, and scouting parties of the enemy, and from time to time many of the enemy were captured, and either sent south of the river, or released on parole. I shall not attempt, after so many years, to record each of these small engagements. A few affairs of greater magnitude I will relate.

The first of these was not creditable either to our discipline or to our courage. Soon after the company was organized, we started upon some errand the nature of which I do not now recall. Our route lay to the south, as if we would strike the river in the neighborhood of Guntersville. It was necessary to cross the railroad along which lay the largest bodies of the enemy. To avoid observation, we made a night march. Many of the men had never been under fire, and as we approached the point of greatest danger there was an evident feeling of trepidation, which increased as we advanced. Just before day we



discovered that we were in close proximity to a cavalry camp. The company was halted for a moment, but before the position or strength of the enemy could be ascertained, the bugles sounded reveille. In an instant there was a panic. Vainly the officers commanded a halt and attempted to form the company in order. Both men and horses were so completely possessed by fear as to be uncontrollable. Many a man who at a later day showed the most admirable coolness and courage in the midst of real dangers, was not terror-smitten and turned and fled. As is usual in such cases as soon as the stampede began the contagion spread like fire in stubble. Soon we were all in headlong flight. Every bush and tree was magnified into an enemy; every fleeing horseman thought the comrade just in his rear was a federal cavalryman about to deal a saber stroke. We ran until daylight revealed to us our

folly. In the meantime, we had become badly scattered and many days passed before the command was reunited. It is but just to state that at this time many of us had no arms.

On another occasion we received information of a wagon train approaching Huntsville on the Fayetteville turnpike, and accompanied by a small escort. By a night ride we succeeded in surprising and dispersing this party, and capturing a quantity of supplies, such as were needful.

Soon after this, we were ourselves surprised, in daylight, at a point near New Market, in Madison County, and suffered a loss of one man badly wounded and several captured. Despite our surprise and discomfiture, we retreated in good order, and escaped among the mountains.

While these events were taking place, Captain Hambrick of Forrest's Regiment succeeded in crossing the Tennessee River with his company,



and united with us. Our entire force at this time consisted of two companies, mustering about one hundred and fifty men. Thus reinforced, we were enabled to act with greater boldness, and to undertake some enterprises of greater magnitude than any we had previously attempted. The enemy were using the Memphis and Charleston R. R. for the purpose of moving troops and supplies. Even when our numbers were small we had several times interfered with their use of this railroad, by removing rails at different points, so that they were forced to station garrisons near each other all along the railroad from Huntsville to Stevenson. One of the stations occupied by a garrison was the Flint River Bridge, twelve miles east of Huntsville. This covered, wooden bridge was converted into a block house and furnished with bullet proof gates at each end.

When Capt. Hambrick united with us, Bragg's

army had already turned the enemy's flank, and were upon the march to Kentucky. Part of our duty now was to obstruct the retreat of the force in North Alabama, and a plan was matured for capturing and burning this bridge. Our scouts learned that the doors were kept open during the daytime and that many of the garrison amused themselves bathing in the river. We hoped to be able to get near enough to capture this bridge by a sudden dash. We dismounted in the woods and approached as near as we could under cover. Many of the Federal soldiers were bathing in the river, others were amusing themselves in various ways. We felt that the prize was almost in our grasp. Just then the sentinel on duty discovered us and fired; those of the garrison nearest the bridge rushed to their arms; the bathers in the river grabbed their clothing and ran into the bridge and the heavy doors closed with a bang. Those of our party whose



guns were of long enough range amused themselves by firing a few shots. Our plan had failed, and we drew off. The progress of Bragg's army through East Tennessee now began to necessitate the removal of large bodies of Federal troops from West Tennessee and Mississippi to East Tennessee. Their line of march lay just along the line of Tennessee and Alabama. Learning of their passage through the country we moved in that direction for the purpose of interfering as much as possible with their progress and observing their movements. While watching what is locally known as the Ginn Spring road, we learned that a Federal General, ignorant of our proximity had passed with an escort of only four or five hundred cavalry. He was several hours in advance of us, but the prize was too alluring to be easily relinquished, and we followed upon roads parallel to his line of march. At night he encamped at

Rock Springs. It was night when we reached the neighborhood of his camp. Nearly the whole night was spent in securing guides and getting the necessary information as to the location of the camp. When these were secured the night was far advanced and a plan was hastily communicated to the men for surprising the camp and capturing the General.

We approved as near as was prudent on horseback, dismounted and divided into two parties to attack on opposite sides. One of these parties reached its position at a fence about one hundred yards from the camp and found the Federals already astir. They waited patiently for the preconcerted signal. Before the other party was ready for the attack the Federals had mounted and begun their march.

This officer who came so near to falling into our hands was General George H. Thomas.

We had followed him further than we could



prudently go and turned again in the direction of our rendezvous. We marched rapidly by the most obscure roads and without halting to eat or rest, about nine o'clock in the morning crossed again the Ginn Springs road at a point about six miles north of New Market. As we crossed this road we observed that troops had been passing. We were halted and formed in line parallel to the road in the open woods. Captain Gurley, mounted on a large grey mare turned down the road in the direction from which the Federals had come and rode two or three hundred yards to see if others were near at hand. We saw him wheel and start back at a gallop, and in another moment we saw four cavalymen in close pursuit. As soon as he reached our position he turned and ordered a charge. The Federals discovered us at the same moment and fled. Our column entered the road, left in front, which threw Gurley's own company in

advance. We had pursued about a quarter of a mile when we ran into a body of cavalry, among whom we discharged our double barrel shotguns with fatal effects. Those of us in front passed many of them and left them to be captured by the men behind us. As we became intermingled with them in their flight we emptied several saddles. Next, we passed a wagon camp by the roadside, and then entered a long lane.

Everything in front of us was panic-stricken. In the lane we overtook a buggy containing two Federal officers. Firing on these as we came up with them, one was wounded and the other surrendered and hastily stating that the wounded officer was Gen. McCook, appealed to us for help. Capt. Gurley who was with the head of the column stopped and cause the General to be carried into a hose nearby, where he expired in a short time. The fatal shot had passed through his body from the rear, coming out near the



buckle of his sward belt. By whose hand the fatal shot was fired is not known, as three or four were firing at the same instant. During the pause which occurred at the killing of Gen. McCook, this writer with one other companion pressed forward and for a considerable distance kept close to the rear of the fleeing Federals. As we reached the end of the land a Federal officer just in front of me, threw himself from his horse and fled into the woods. Being determined to kill or capture him, if possible, I turned my horse into the woods, being at a full run. About twenty feet from the road my horse ran under a swinging grapevine which caught me about the middle of the body. I was suspended for a moment in midair with my feet entangled in the stirrups until the saddle girth broke and I fell heavily to the ground. Just after I left the road my companion overtook and captured several musicians on foot,

these being the first infantryman encountered.

While I was hastily repairing the effects of my disaster several of our comrades passed, and about one hundred yards further on these were saluted with a volley fired by an infantry column which had hastily formed across the road. At this volley they turned and fled, except one whose horse, being beyond control carried him into and through the column of infantry, and he escaped with no greater harm than a slight wound in his horse.

Though we had now discovered the presence of a large force of infantry we took advantage of their demoralization and deliberately returned over the ground that had been covered in the melee and gathered up the spoils of our victory. These consisted of a considerable supply of arms and other material of war, and a large number of prisoners, though many of the latter not being placed under guard as soon as



captured, escaped to the woods and soon rejoined their friends.

Some parties who passed over the entire distance of our pursuit and claimed to have counted the dead gave the number as twenty-one, including General McCook. Among our prisoners was Capt. Brock of Gen. McCook's staff. Most of the prisoners were Germans and could not speak English.

As soon as we had gathered up the spoils we retreated to our stronghold in the mountains. As soon as the demoralized troops of Gen. McCook were reorganized they began to execute their vengeance upon the defenseless inhabitants of the country. Every house within several miles of the scene of strife was burned to the ground. Even the family who had sheltered and ministered their unfortunate commander in his dying moments suffered the common fate. These citizens were wholly innocent of complicity with

us. The community was one in which we had not been before, nor had we been in communication with the people. It is to be hoped that this terrible vengeance was but the venting of the blind fury of the common soldiers, and that it was not authorized by the officers in command.

Among the trophies of this fight, was the sword which was presented to Gen. McCook by the Congress of the United States, which bore upon its blade an inscription commendatory of his gallantry.

The immediate results of this skirmish were highly beneficial to the inhabitants of that section, excepting those who were in the immediate vicinity and who suffered as above described. It put an end to the depredations of stragglng parties and forced the enemy to keep in compact bodies in marching.

To those who were the immediate actors, it brought another benefit. Through the Federal officer



who was captured, communications were opened with the Federal authorities, and our officers were enabled to show their commissions and obtain for us recognition as regular Confederate troops with all the rights of belligerents. In a few days our prisoners were paroled and these paroles were recognized by the Federal authorities.

The reputation of a brave, skillful and honorable officer of the Confederate Army demands that I, a participant in this affair, and a witness of the fatal wounding of Gen. McCook, should so far depart from the thread of my narrative as to relate the remote effects of this affair upon Capt. F. B. Gurley. The reports of this skirmish that reached the north caused great indignation. It was stated that Gen. McCook fell by the hand of Gurley himself, after he had surrendered. One report was that he was murdered while lying sick in an ambulance. Capt. Gurley

was represented as a Guerrilla and a desperado.

In 1863 this officer was captured. Instead of being treated as a prisoner of war, he was incarcerated in the Tennessee State Penitentiary and held there until the close of the war, when in the general prison delivery, he was released. He returned to his home in Madison County, Alabama. In the first election after the war he was honored by his fellow citizens with the office of Sheriff of his county. While holding that office the malice of political opponents trumped up the old charges against him and he was arrested, heavily ironed, incarcerated in jail, tried by a military court for murder, and sentenced to death. In all these proceedings there was great haste, and the conviction was entirely upon ex parte evidence. A reprieve was granted by the President until he could himself investigate the evidence, and after a careful hearing of the same he



overruled the sentence and set Capt. Gurley at liberty.

The question “Who Killed Gen. McCook”? can never be answered, but this writer does not believe, nor does Capt. Gurley that he (Gurley) fired the fatal shot.

It is certain that the McCook fight was as great a surprise to us as it was to the enemy. We accidentally ran into the enemy. We fought without premeditation, deliberation, plan or purpose. Our success was wholly due to the fact that (to use one of Gen. Forrest’s expressions) “We got the bulge on them”. Had we know what lay before us it is probably that we would have retreated without firing a gun. Or had we with deliberate purpose made a cavalry charge upon a Division of Federal Infantry would have shown us as courageous and well-disciplined as the noted “Light Brigade” whose charge into the valley of death at Balaklava will live in history, in story, and in song as long as humanity retains its admiration of

valor and heroism. As I am the first participant in this affair who has ever published an account of it from the Confederate standpoint, I have thought it but just to enter into these details, that a gallant and honorable officer may be vindicated from alleged crime, and that the affair itself may be put upon record by one of the few participants who still survives.

Of the four Confederates who were nearest Gen. McCook when he fell, one was killed in the cavalry attack on Fort Donelson February 3, 1863, another was killed in battle near Kennesaw Mountain, Ga., June 9<sup>th</sup>, 1864. The other two were Capt. Gurley and the writer.

During the imprisonment of Capt. Gurley, though I was in a distant place, I communicated with him through friends and offered to share with him the hardships of persecution. This offer he magnanimously declined. I then put all the information



in my possession at the command of Hon. D. C. Humphries and Mr. Benjamin Jolly of Huntsville, Ala., placed it before President Johnson, and secured amnesty both for Capt. Gurley and myself.

In consequence of the exaggerated rumors as to our strength, which were circulated among the enemy after this skirmish, they seldom moved from

their garrisons except in large numbers, and we had the whole country open to us, and moved about with great freedom. Our scouts frequently fired on the enemy's pickets, and thus kept up the impression as to our strength. In this way a general engagement was prevented, our safety secured, and the country relieved from the depredations of stragglers. who

