

## **Memoir of Randolph Harrison McKim, Confederate Soldier**

Randolph McKim was a 19 year old university student going to school in Virginia at the outbreak of the Civil War. From Baltimore, he visited a camp and became embarrassed upon meeting many friends and relatives who had enlisted for the Southern cause. With a high sense of honor and deep sense of duty, he enlisted in the Army.

This excerpt from his diary (along with a letter to his beloved mother) gives a sense of an educated young man as he finds out that the glory of war might not be comparable to the horror of battle.

### **Memoir of Randolph Harrison McKim**

#### **OUR FIRST BATTLE**

As we disembarked from the cars on that Sunday morning, July 21st, 1861, the distant booming of cannon fell upon our ears, and we realized that now we were indeed on the fiery edge of battle. We had orders to cast off our knapsacks that we might march unimpeded to the field. Leaving them in a pile by the roadside under a small guard, we were soon marching at the double quick for Manassas. Our pulses beat more quickly than our feet, as we passed on, the sounds of battle waxing nearer and nearer every moment. It was a severe test of endurance, for the field was six miles away, and the heat of that July day was very exhausting. The weather had been very dry, and the dust rose in clouds around us, as we double-quickened on -- so thick was it that I distinctly remember I could not see my file-leader.

We were by and by near enough to hear the rattle of the musketry, and soon we began to meet the wounded coming off the field in streams, some limping along, some on stretchers borne by their comrades. Stern work was evidently right ahead of us, and it did not steady our nerves for our first battle to be told, as the wounded told us, especially those whose wounds were slight, that it was going very badly with our men at the front. At length the dreadful six-mile double-quick [p. 35] march was over, and the firing line was right in front of us. Some few -- very few -- had dropped out exhausted. All of us were nearly spent with the heat and the dust and the killing pace; and a brief halt was made to get breath, moisten our lips from the canteens, and prepare for the charge. I remember how poor "Sell" Brogden, panting and exhausted, turned to me and asked for a drink of water from my canteen. I had scarcely a swallow left, but he was so much worse off than I, and his appeal was so piteous, that I gave him the last drop.

We had arrived on the field in the nick of time, at the very crisis, when victory or defeat was trembling in the balance. The Federal general, McDowell, had turned General Beauregard's flank, and only Gen. Joe Johnston's timely arrival on that flank of the Confederate position had saved him from disaster. Jackson at the head of his Virginia troops was "standing like a Stonewall" -- those were the words of General Bee as he sought to rally his retreating South Carolinians. But the Confederate line was wavering, and the result of the day hung in grave doubt, when Elzey's brigade arrived on the field

and deployed for attack. Of this brigade, the leading regiment (the one first on the field) was the First Maryland under Colonel Steuart, and it was the blow struck by this fine body of men, 600 strong, that turned the balance of battle in favor of the Southern Army. Looking back now, I think the moral effect of the great cloud of dust which rose as we double-quickened to the field, and which was easily seen by the Federals, was worth quite as much as our 600 muskets in action. For it gave the enemy the impression that it was at least a brigade instead of a [p. 36] regiment that was being launched against them at the moment of our charge. This was intensified by the shout, "*Go in, Baltimore,*" which rose above the din of battle as we swept forward. It so happened that the same Massachusetts regiment which was so roughly handled by the people in the streets of Baltimore on the 19th of April was in our front on the 21st of July, and prisoners afterwards told us that when we charged the Massachusetts men said, "Here come those d -- d Baltimore men! It's time for us to git up and git!" Then, after the day was won, and General Elzey, our brigade commander, was saluted as the Blücher of the day, we men of the First Maryland were proud to say that our regiment was the head of the spear that Elzey drove into the vitals of the enemy that eventful day.

I remember that after the first rush, when a brief pause came, some of us dashed down to a tiny little brook for a mouthful of water -- only to find the water tinged with blood. Nevertheless not a few stooped and lapped it up where it was clearest.

The first man I saw fall in the battle was Gen. Kirby Smith, who was riding by the side of our column before we deployed for the charge. He fell in the most spectacular way -- the reins falling from his grasp, he reeled in the saddle, threw out his arms and fell to the ground, seriously but not fatally wounded.

The New York Zouaves, in their red breeches, were deployed as skirmishers in our front, and did us some damage before we formed our line. One of the amusing incidents that occurred (and the Confederate soldier was always eager to see some fun in the serious work of war) was when Geo. Lemmon in his excitement [p. 37] fired his musket too close to Nick Watkins' head and shot a hole in his cap -- fortunately not in his head -- and Nick turned and said in the coolest way, "George Lemmon, I wish you'd look where you're shooting -- I'm not a Yankee."

How well I remember our eager expectancy that night. We had seen the rout, and had followed the fleeing Federals some distance along the road back towards Washington. It was full of the evidences of the panic into which the Union Army had been thrown. I need not describe a scene so often described before. But with all the evidences of the demoralization of our enemy, we were confident they could be pursued and Washington taken, if the Confederate Army pressed on. This we confidently expected, and were bitterly disappointed when the next day, and the next, came and went without any serious advance.

As I lay down to sleep on the battle field that night, I had much to think of. The weariness of the day and the peril of the battle were lost sight of in the awful scenes of death and suffering to which we had been introduced that day for the first time. I had seen the

reality of the battle field, its carnage, its desolation, its awful pictures of the wounded, the dying, and the dead.

Somehow I was especially moved by the sight of the battery horses on the Henry Hill, so frightfully torn by shot and shell. The sufferings of the poor brutes, not in their own battle or by their own fault, but for man's sake, appealed to me in a peculiar way.

Mingled with my devout thankfulness for my own safety was my sorrow as news came in of friend after friend, and some relatives too, who had fallen.

[p. 38]

It was reported all over Virginia that I had been among the killed. One of my cousins, Col. Randolph Harrison, when he saw me, exclaimed, "Why, I thought you were dead." These unfounded reports were often the occasion of much needless distress to the relatives of the men in the field.

The following letter referred to the battle:

Fairfax, Co. H, July 30, 1861.

My dear Mother:

I have written twice since the battle to tell you I was safe; still I will embrace this opportunity, as I know you will be glad to hear from me whenever you can. We have been here some time, ever since the fight in fact. How grateful I feel that none of our close friends in the Maryland regiment were killed, or even wounded in the fight. Yet we have to mourn the loss of two very near to us in ties of blood, and others dear by friendship. Cousin Peyton Harrison -- dear sweet fellow -- I saw him only a week before his death, -- and Cousin Carter Harrison who fell in the battle of Thursday while bravely bringing up his men to battle.

My dear mother, I am so grateful to God for sparing me in safety through the dangers of the day for your sake and the sake of the dear girls and Telly and papa as well. I thought of you all on the field of battle, and prayed God to spare me, or, if not, to comfort you, for I know that it would be a severe blow to you to lose me in this way so soon. Still, confident in the justice of our cause, and looking to the great God of truth and justice to be our salvation, I was ready to yield up myself, if necessary, on the altar of my country. Our regiment behaved beautifully on the field; they *would* pick blackberries, though, notwithstanding the indignation of the officers. We were in that brigade which came up so opportunely just as the fortune of the [p. 39] day seemed to be going against us. We fired several times on the Yankees and drove them before us, though our numbers were far inferior to theirs. It was truly the hand of Providence which gave us the victory on that day, and our Congress very appropriately gave thanks to Him and appointed last Sunday as a day of thanksgiving. The panic which spread among the Northern Army was almost unaccountable; they were beaten back with half their numbers, but there was no need of such a flight as they made to Alexandria, leaving behind them all their baggage trains,

ammunition, etc. We only had fifteen to twenty thousand men engaged, because we had so many points to defend, and did not know where they were going to attack us. In the same way, I suppose, they had only about 35,000. The people in this neighborhood said that when they saw the army pass here they thought we would never return again, but that the Southern army would be certainly crushed. How different the result! When they passed here on the way up, they destroyed all the private property, broke into the houses and pillaged everything; but when they returned they *hadn't time* for anything of that sort. They were perfectly demoralized; thousands had no arms at all. I have a splendid overcoat gotten from a number they left behind. Cousin Wirt Harrison was wounded in the foot. Holmes and Tucker Conrad were killed side by side.

---

Questions  
Memoir of Randolph Harrison McKim

1. What type of cars are they departing from?
2. Why do they throw their knapsacks down?
3. Whose side is McKim on?
4. Why was he so moved by the suffering of the horses?
5. What battle is he writing about?
6. Comment on McKim's writing style.
7. Describe McKim's relationship with his mother.
8. Relate the use of humor in this diary.
9. Is McKim a fool for joining the side he chooses?