



CAPTAIN
J. SEWALL REED



The Cal Hundred
2nd Massachusetts Cavalry
Company A 1863 - 1864

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In the pre-dawn twilight Captain J. Sewall Reed made the rounds among his men of the 2nd Mass Cavalry, preparing for the dangerous second day of their scout down the Leesburg Turnpike through secessionist Virginia. He was unaware that from beyond the firelight, his movements were being studied by Confederate John Mosby and a small band of raiders who were measuring their odds for an ambush. Captain Reed had less than seven hours to live.

Reed was born April 3, 1832 at Milton, Massachusetts. He was the first child born to John Reed and Miranda Barker and was followed by two younger brothers, George and Edwin.

During his late teenage years, Reed's adventurous nature took hold and at the age of seventeen, he and his younger brother George left the family homestead in Boston and headed west, likely lured by the prospects of California gold. The brothers arrived at San Francisco in March of 1850 and soon relocated to Nevada City where they tried their luck at prospecting for a couple of years. Both eventually returned to San Francisco where James ran a small business and at the age of 23 became a member a local militia group known as the Vigilance Committee. Gold fever soon returned and over the next several years Reed's prospecting ventures carried him from South America to British Columbia.

In the spring of 1859 Reed returned to Boston. Here, he met and married Hattie L. Wales in Dorchester, Massachusetts and both returned to San Francisco in September. Married life seemed to bring some stability to Reed's endeavors, as his prospecting travels

came to an end. The year 1861 brought great change to Reed's life. On January 25, Hattie gave birth to a son, Walter Sewall Reed. (Young Walter would die of Nephritis at the age of 25.) The winds of war began to blow in the east as the strife between North and South became more heated. Many regular U.S. Army officers in the bay area resigned their commissions and returned to the East to fight for the side they favored. Doubtless caught up by this martial spirit, Reed rejoined the First Light Dragoons in November 1861 and rose to the rank of Captain at the young age of 31. However, any thoughts of fighting against the secessionists came to naught, as the 1st Dragoons found themselves patrolling the overland mail routes doing guard duty around the western posts with occasional encounters against Indians.

By late 1862, any thoughts that the war would end quickly had dissolved and a long and bloody struggle loomed ahead. Captain Reed appears to have been motivated to participate in the conflict as he began to explore what means might be available for his return to the East. Other transplanted Easterners in the Bay area were also eager to return, driven by patriotic fervor or simply a desire to get into the fight before it was over.

In the Fall of 1862 Reed proposed sending a cavalry company for the Union cause. If Massachusetts would provide their passage from the Pacific, the hundred men would fight under the Bay State's flag, and count against a portion of their quotas. The Governor readily agreed, allowing the state's bounties to pay for steamship passage to the East. The volunteers would be required to

supply their own uniforms and equipment with the help of local contributions. Captain Reed's role in these negotiations is not known. Recruiting for the "California Hundred" began immediately. Advertisements were run in California Newspapers, beginning with the Alta California on October 28, 1862. The response was substantial and many applicants had to be turned away. The hundred successful volunteers were likely chosen from among the more rural horsemen. Captain Reed resigned his commission in the Light Dragoons and assumed the Captaincy of the newly formed California Hundred.

Prior to his departure, Captain Reed was presented with twin revolvers and a complete outfit of saddlery made by Main & Winchester, a leather goods supplier in San Francisco. It is possible that he purchased his Emmerson & Silver sword from a local militaria outfitter while in the service of the Light Dragoons or at his enlistment into the Cal Hundred. He also made a stop at the studio of William Shew, a San Francisco photographer who made several photographs during his visit. The images from this sitting provide much of the photographic history available for Captain Reed.

Around this time a local Masonic regalia supplier named Daniel Norcross presented the Cal Hundred with their guidon, a red and white silk banner which bore the image of the California Bear. The Hundred were also loaned the use of 50 swords from the Light Dragoons for use in drills while aboard ship. The swords were to be returned when the troopers were issued proper sabres in the East.

On December 10, 1862 Captain Reed and the Cal Hundred set sail on the steamship Golden Age, bound for Boston via Panama. While at sea, Captain Reed quickly established himself as the military leader and superior officer to his independent California men. Some of the men accepted his leadership quickly and easily. Others were not so willing in the beginning and mild disputes arose, mostly centered on the less

than desirable meals they were receiving aboard ship.

On their arrival in Massachusetts, they were designated Company A of the 2nd Mass Cavalry under the command of Charles R. Lowell Jr. a young officer of genteel birth in Boston. (Of the Lowells and their high-born neighbors, the Cabots, it was said in Boston, "The Cabots speak only to the Lowells and the Lowells speak only to God.") Despite his blueblood upbringing Colonel Lowell proved himself to be an exceptional tactician with remarkable coolness under fire. Captain Reed and Lowell doubtless enjoyed a close association. (Colonel Lowell would be killed in battle in October of 1864 at Cedar Creek.) During this time, Captain Reed oversaw the use of funds which had been donated by citizens in California for the outfitting of the Company, toward purchases of boots, caps and other equipage for the benefit of the men.

The initial weeks in Boston were filled with accolades from the citizens who were awed by the arrival of these seemingly tough and savvy Californians. Public interest was high and newspaper articles appeared almost daily describing the activities of the Cal 100. Of particular interest to the women of Boston was the fact that among the entire Hundred, only Captain Reed and one other trooper, Joseph Burdick were married. (Burdick was destined to become the first unit fatality at South Ana Bridge in June 1863.)

On the evening of January 13, at a reception held in their honor, the Cal 100 were presented a silk U.S. flag by a young Boston debutante, Abbie Lord. Her moving and patriotic speech was followed by remarks from Captain Reed. "Soldiers of the California Hundred, do you see that flag? Will the rebels ever get that flag? (followed by shouts of "Never! Never!")...Miss Lord, in behalf of the California Hundred I accept your beautiful and noble gift...when we behold it fluttering in the breeze we will remember that a lady of (Boston) presented it to us. If ever we live to come back to this place, that flag will come back. It shall come, if there is only

one man left to bring it. And that one, I hope, will come back as a suitor. (Great applause). Little did Captain Reed know that the flag would indeed soon return along with its suitor. A year later, it was brought back to Boston, draped in sad memory over his lifeless body.

The Cal Hundred would later be joined by four additional companies from California comprising Companies E, F, L and M of the 2nd Massachusetts. The seven remaining companies were composed of Massachusetts men. For a short time the rough and ready Californians enjoyed a strained honeymoon with their citified Massachusetts counterparts. Regional differences and attention being given to the Californians by the public led to inevitable rivalries among the men, and black eyes and bruises were not uncommon. But combat would soon join the men in a much tighter bond.

After only a few weeks of preparation, Captain Reed and the Cal Hundred went south to Virginia where from April through July of 1863 they scouted out of Gloucester Point and skirmished with Confederate Cavalry on a number of occasions.

Reed and the Cal Hundred were outfitted with sabres, sidearms, and a mix of Burnside and Sharps carbines. While in the Shenandoah Valley they were constantly involved in the deadly game of cat and mouse with Confederate John Mosby's partisan rangers. As a cavalry captain Reed was involved in numerous scouts, expeditions, and skirmishes which included South Ana Bridge, Hanover Court House, Ashby's Gap, Fairfax Court House, and Leesburg, Virginia.

These small skirmishes gradually whittled away at the muster rolls on both sides. On August 24, Company F was escorting 100 horses past Gooding's Tavern when they were surprised by Mosby and about 30 of his men. A hot skirmish took place and two men from both sides were killed, five 2nd Mass troopers were taken prisoner and 75 horses were lost. But the

Californians had helped even the score by seriously wounding Mosby in the side and thigh.

Captain Reed was finding that these small skirmishes were just as deadly as the large engagements he had only heard about. A trooper in the Regiment, William Cochran later wrote bitterly "of the stealthy night raids and Marches, house searchings, surprises, fruitless attempts to get fair engagements, and detested dress parades...How we used to long for fair engagements in which to meet an open foe." Some of the Captain Reed's troopers expressed mild dissatisfaction toward the war in their letters home and around this time, the grumbling of a few of the troopers made the newspapers in California. These events gave Colonel Lowell an opportunity to write in a letter to his wife, an expression of his confidence in Captain Reed:

"I have not seen the letters in the California papers and do not think I care to. (Capt.) Reed is a very good officer, takes the greatest pride in his company, and since that trouble, has done well by them."

Early on the morning of February 21, 1864 Reed arose and departed camp at Hunter's Mill Post with three companies, B, E and M, and a few members of the 16th New York Cavalry to scout the countryside near Dranesville, Virginia. After camping near the Kephert Farm beyond Leesburg, the men again rode out, now on the Leesburg Turnpike toward Vienna. Lying in wait, Mosby used a well-planned ambush and far superior numbers to surprise the Union troopers. A brief but intense engagement erupted. John Munson, one of Mosby's guerrillas was badly wounded that day. He later wrote of the Federals, "...all of a sudden it became a hand-to-hand affair. It was soon evident to Reed that he was in for a whipping, and his men began breaking through the fences and into the field, but fighting all the while. His Californians, especially notoriously good fighters, were standing up to the rack like men, dealing out to us the best they had. They rallied at every call on them and went down

with banners flying." In the closing moments of the fight, Captain Reed wounded one of the rebel guerillas. Another Confederate trooper, Major John Scott describes the scene; "Captain Reed, whom he passed in his rapid career, by a shot from his revolver inflicted upon him a dangerous wound, which brought him to the ground. Chapman, seeing his friend fall from his horse, spurred forward to engage the man by whom he had been shot, and, when within three feet of Reed, fired, killing him instantly."

When the smoke cleared nine Californians were dead, eight wounded and many more unaccounted for. Among the dead was Reed. He was the first California officer to be killed in combat in the Civil War. The remaining Union cavalry troopers were either captured or scattered across the countryside.

When word reached camp that a fight had occurred Company A quickly mounted up and rode to the scene of the bloodshed, the search being led by Captain Forbes. As the rescuers approached Dranesville, they encountered some of Reed's men who had taken to the cover of the woods after the ambush.

Now led by George Buhrer who had been present during the shooting, the search party pressed on towards Dranesville. The night sky was clear and the roadway brightly lit by the full moon. When the men arrived at the scene of the fight they found it deserted except for the dead and dying. The ground was littered with the nonsensical debris of combat. Reed had been stripped of his uniform. On the ground nearby was one of his two revolvers, an earlier gift from his California comrades. Captain Reed's body was brought back into the federal camp where his wife (who was visiting the camp at the

time) had been given the news of his death by Chaplain Charles Humphreys.

The Californians, distraught by Reed's loss, paid for their Captain's mortuary services in Washington D.C. (A few weeks later Captain Reed's successor, Rufus W. Smith would arrange for delivery of a large sum of money to the family's home. It was comprised of selfless donations given by the men and meant for Reed's young son Walter, born a cripple and now facing life without his father.)

Reed's body was returned to his boyhood home of Dorchester, Massachusetts for burial, making the journey north shrouded in the flag presented to the regiment earlier by Abbie Lord in Boston. Reed was interred at Mt. Hope Cemetery, Mattapan, Massachusetts on March 13, 1864. His dreams of fortune and love were now in the past, but the Californians he had helped to inspire went on to make their mark over the balance of the Civil War, playing a solid role in a number of battles and building a reputation for service and tenacious fighting.

The words of Charles A. Humphreys, regimental chaplain and friend of Captain Reed aptly close the account of his life:

"Last evening, as the slant rays of the declining sun threw their sheen over the Hudson and up the bluff by the Riverside, a soldier's bugle sounded over the great Captain's grave the call to sleep. Today, in the proud hearts of a nation saved, he rises to live again and forever.

"His battles fought, his duties done,
His country's life by valor won,
That call was but a reveille
To wake to immortality."

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