

Confederate Veteran Article on William McKay

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[image-Photo of three men, two seated and one standing with a flag unfurled behind them.
Caption of the photo: THE FLAG THEY SAVED Three of the Color Guard of the 18th Tennessee Regiment—Capt. Nat Gooch (left), Logue Nelson (center), W. L. McKay (right)—who survived the fatal charge of Breckinridge's Division on January 2, 1863, at Murfreesboro, Tenn.]

Confederate Veteran.

THE GALLANT COLOR GUARD.

"February 9, 1863. CAMP 18th TENNESSEE VOLS.

"Corporal W. L. McKay was unanimously chosen by Company I, 18th Tennessee, to be presented to the President for promotion for his superior gallantry on the battle field of Murfreesboro on the 2nd day of January, 1863.

(Signed) S. H. FREAS, Commanding."

[image-WILLIAM L. M'KAY.]

In this little extract from the diary of Lieut. George W. Dillon, of the 18th Tennessee, is told a story of gallantry and endurance that stands out in the annals of heroism of the Confederate soldier. The picture on the front page of this number shows Comrade McKay in his late years with two other survivors of that heroic color guard who would not let their banner be trailed in the dust. All have now gone to join the gallant host on the other shore, but their memory will never part from the hearts of those who knew and loved them. In a little book of his reminiscences, Comrade McKay has given the story of his wounding and his experiences afterwards. He was at the home of one of his messmates near Murfreesboro, Tenn., when heavy cannonading was heard on the 26th of December, 1862, and just as he was going into breakfast that morning a message came for him to report to his command, as a battle was imminent. Without waiting to eat breakfast, he rode into Murfreesboro at a gallop and found his regiment at the front in line of battle. From then on to the 31st of December there was fighting of a kind, both artillery and infantry, but the real battle was on the 31st, of which he says:

"The fighting began early on the 31st, on our left wing, and the enemy were driven from every position and were almost in in [sic] complete rout. About three P.M. we were ordered to double-quick to the left wing, which we did, crossing the river in water from knee to waist deep, then across an open cotton field under a heavy fire of artillery, with

grape, canister, and bombshells wounding a number of our regiment. After crossing the field, we were halted in a cedar thicket, the original battle line of the Yankees, and found a great many wounded and dead Yankees. I carried water from a well to the wounded until about midnight. About two A.M. we were ordered back to our old position on the right wing, where we remained quietly except for an occasional bombardment from the enemy, which would force us to move about to keep out of range until the afternoon of the 2nd of January, when our division (Breckinridge's) was ordered to charge the enemy, who were massed on our right wing. We charged across an open field and were met by a large force of infantry, supported by about eighty pieces of artillery massed on the river bluff. After a short but bloody fight in the open field, the first line of the enemy broke and were followed to the river by our men with the rebel yell, when they were met by the reserve force of the Yankees and forced to retreat with heavy loss.

"I was shot through the right thigh with a Minie ball soon after starting after the retreating enemy. I was the last of the color guards to fall. George Lowe, the color bearer, was in the act of falling, being shot through the body, when I caught hold of the flagstaff to prevent the fall of the flag, and received my first wound, and we fell together. Capt. Nat Gooch then took the flag (and has told me since that the color bearer and the color guard had all fallen so close together that he could have covered us all with the flag) and was soon shot down. Logue Nelson, of Murfreesboro, then took the flag and carried it safely through the battle.

"I remained helpless and partially unconscious until our command retreated. I saw the Yankees coming and attempted to get up, but could not. Our men moved up a battery of three guns and planted them just over where I lay. The fire from the guns was nearly hot enough to burn my face; the Yankee bullets rattled on the gun carriages like hail, and our men were forced to leave the guns, as they did not have horses enough left to take them away. After the battery was deserted, I, being between the lines, received my second wound from a bombshell fired by the Confederates, breaking my left arm and terribly bruising my body (from concussion, I was told by the surgeon). I received several other slight wounds on my legs while lying between the lines. I lay where I fell until about midnight and received brutal treatment from some of the Yankees. Yankee Gen. Jeff Davis's Division marched by and over me, and the commanders of companies would say as they passed me: 'Look out, men, here is a wounded man.' Some of them would step over me carefully, while others would give me a kick and call me a damned rebel, and I was covered with black spots from the bruises.

"About twelve or one o'clock, two Yankee boys who were searching the battle field for a friend came along. They seemed very sorry for me and determined to have me taken to the hospital. One of them would stay with me, holding my hand, while the other would

hunt for an ambulance. It was some time before they could get one, as they were hauling off their own wounded first. They finally secured one and helped to lift me in it. I was taken to a hospital camp and laid out on the ground, they thinking I was too near dead to waste time on me. It was then raining. I lay all day Saturday in the rain without any attention being paid to me; when I would ask for water, they would say: "You don't need water; we will take you to the graveyard after a while." I did not suffer, however, as I could suck the water out of my coat sleeve as it rained on me. About dark on Saturday, finding that I would not die, I was picked up and laid in a tent out of the rain. During the night two wounded Confederates died in this tent, one of them having fallen across my legs, and lay there several hours.

"Sunday, about noon, I was moved to another tent, where I could have more room and attention. This tent was occupied by both Confederate and Yankee wounded. On Monday I was given breakfast, the first food offered me, and the first I had eaten since Friday.

"This Monday morning, the surgeons, eight in number, going the rounds of the camp examining the wounded, one of them examined me and decided to amputate my leg; my arm could be saved. I at first rebelled and said they should not, but finding that this would not do, I then begged them not to cut it off. This attracted the attention of the chief, a big Dutch surgeon, who came and examined me and said: 'Let him alone. If de damn Rebel wants to die, let him go.'

So they left me and examined a Florida soldier who was wounded almost exactly like myself through the thigh, but did not have the arm and body wounds. He made no objection to the amputation; they took him out, cut off his leg, and brought him back, and the next day he died. On my other side was a handsome young Yankee soldier shot through the calf of his leg, no bones broken. He seemed unable to stand the pain—just gave up and died. The surgeon said there was no reason for him to die; he just simply gave up. The man at my head (a Yankee) died. So three men nearest me died, and neither of them seemed to be wounded so badly as I was. The young surgeon in charge of the tent was a nice gentleman and very kind to me; paid me especial attention. He was from near Chicago, and gave me his address so I might write to him, but, unfortunately, I lost it.

"About the 7th or 8th, Casper Freas (a Union, or Yankee, sympathizer), the only man in his neighborhood who would venture inside the Yankee lines, came with Mrs. R. R. Clemmons in search of her husband, who was missing, and his wife hoped to find him in the hospital (he was never found); his two brothers, Hall and Tollie, were both killed on Friday. I was reported killed on the field, and Bob Dillon reported that he had turned

me over and knew that I was dead; so Mr. Freas and Mrs. Clemmons were very much surprised to find me. Mr. Freas took a great interest in me; he procured a certificate from the surgeon that I was mortally wounded, and with this he got a pass to take me out of the lines.

“Elias Casper, Provost Marshal General, came and issued me a parole and gave me a good cursing, saying that a great many of my kind had been found behind rock fences and cedar bushes, bushwhacking, with paroles in their pockets. Mr. Freas came for me about the 10th (my memory is not clear as to dates during this time), with a spring wagon and feather bed. The young surgeon before mentioned gave me a pair of blankets, a bottle of whisky, some tea, coffee, and sugar; but as soon as the wagon was out of his sight the Yankee guards and camp loafers took from under my head the whisky, and the blankets from over me; the other things they did not find, as they were under the feather bed. Mr. Freas took me to his home, about ten miles from Murfreesboro, in Wilson County. His family consisted of a wife and six children, and his house had only one large room. I could not understand until afterwards why he would burden himself with a wounded man. He was a Union man and feared the Confederates would take his horses, but knew that if he had a wounded man in his house, they would not disturb him. He took especially good care of me and no doubt saved my life with his good nursing. When he got his affairs in shape so he could leave the country, he sent to Murfreesboro for a squad of men to be sent out to guard him to town. Capt. Faver Cason came with his company of cavalry and saw him safe to Murfreesboro, from where he went to Indiana. I have never heard from him since, but have tried repeatedly to do so.

“The night he left me proved to be the most horrible of all my trials. He sold all of his effects that he could not move to the negroes in the neighborhood, who had been notified of his intention to leave. The small bed that I was on had been sold to a big negro fellow who lived near, and he promised Mr. Freas that he would stay with me until morning (the family left about midnight). The wagons were not out of hearing before the negro began bringing in fence rails to make a fire by putting one end on the fire and the other out on the floor, as he did not take time to cut or break them. I begged him to desist, but he would not obey me; said he would make me a good fire and then go home. He filled the fireplace with the rails and then left me. I had a fine fire for a time, but did not enjoy it, as I expected the house to burn and me with it, as I was perfectly helpless; fortunately, the rails were cedar and the fire died out before reaching the floor.

“The next morning, Mr. John M. Cason, hearing from the negroes that Mr. Freas had gone, came over early to see what had become of me. He found me very cold and despondent. He hurried back home and got some breakfast and bed clothing for me. He

then notified Mr. M. W. Huddleston of my condition, who at once came with wagon and feather bed and took me to his house and nursed me until I was able to walk on crutches, some time during the early summer of 1863.”

Mr. McKay remained in that neighborhood (Cainsville) for some months, on crutches a part of the time, and when he felt able he joined a company of cavalry under Capt. J. M. Phillips and tried to go with them. The effort of riding put him to bed again, and he realized there could be no more active service for him. So he got his parole renewed, that he might return home, and reached his grandfather’s house on a Sunday morning early in 1864.

On the morning of Tuesday, May 18, 1926, in Nashville, Tenn., just as his comrades were preparing to leave for the reunion in Birmingham, the spirit of William L. McKay was wafted to that heavenly reunion with his comrades of the gray. He had passed into his eighty-fourth year, yet age was never associated with him, for his was ever that spirit which animated and cheered. After a life of suffering, of patient endurance, and faithfulness to duty, he has passed to the reward of the faithful.

Comrade McKay was an Alabamian by birth, but the family went from Madison County to Clarksville, Tenn., in his early life, and it was from there that he enlisted in Company I, 18th Tennessee Infantry, under Colonel Palmer, in July, 1861, at Camp Trousdale. He was in the battle of Fort Donelson and there became a prisoner. After being exchanged, he rejoined his regiment at Murfreesboro. He was one of the color guard of his regiment, and in the fierce charge made by Breckinridge at Stone [sic] River on January 2, 1863, he was shot down, a Minie ball shattering the bone of his right leg between the hip and knee. It was many months before he could use it again, and though the wound never healed, he could walk fairly well with the help of stick, and he was grateful for its preservation. Through a long and active life, he patiently endured the suffering from that wound, never complaining, always cheerful and hopeful, an example of fortitude seldom, if ever, equalled.

The extract from Lieutenant Dillon’s diary was preserved by our comrade in his little book, but with it was this modest comment: “I inclined to think the compliment was paid me simply because I was the worst wounded man in the company that did not die. It seemed almost a miracle that I ever got up at all.”

After the war, W. L. McKay found employment in various occupations, later on as deputy in the office of the county trustee, and then for many years a member of the Davidson county revenue commission. Of late years he had been special examiner on the Confederate Pension Board, which he held at the time of his death. He was ever

held in the highest esteem by the people of Nashville and Davidson County, widely known for his outstanding character and faithfulness to duty.

Comrade McKay is survived by his wife, who was Miss Harriet Word, a son and a daughter. Three sons and a little daughter preceded him to the spirit world.