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18th TN INF
C.S.A.
Pvt W.L. MEKAY
Co. I

Stone's River Battlefield

[Fifty-Ninth Ohio Volunteer Infantry]; none for me. . . .

I must now close, as I am not sufficiently recovered from the exhausting effects of the terrible struggle we have gone through to pretend to write much. My love to all. . . .

Yours affectionately,

J. P. Fyffe

P.S. Adj. Charles King goes to Nashville today to send Gus Pems body home. Henry Liggett is also going to take his brother's remains. . . . Tom Macabeer got back from Nashville yesterday. I had a hard time while he was gone—no wagon—no tent—no blankets—no cooking utensils—nothing to cook if we had; I tell you—we have had a "Bad time. . . ."

Colonel Fyffe, in spite of his troubles, was actually fortunate, if compared to William McKay, a Tennessean in the ranks of the Rebel army. Badly wounded in the thigh during Breckinridge's assault, McKay experienced a seemingly unending nightmare of pain and anguish. "I remained helpless and partially unconscious until our command retreated," he wrote. "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, and the Yankee bullets rattled on the gun carriages like hail."

Finally the Confederates, with most of their horses killed, had to leave their guns. As McKay lay between the lines, suddenly shrapnel and concussion from a bursting shell, fired by the Rebels, broke his left arm and badly bruised his body. For hours he remained in the field while a cold drizzle mixed with sleet came down and Federal soldiers marched by him and over him. "I lay where I fell until about midnight and received *brutal* treatment from some of the Yankees," McKay later recounted. "The commanders of companies would say as they passed me, 'look out men; here is a wounded man' and some of them would step over me carefully while others would give me a kick, call me a damned Rebel, and I was covered with black spots from the bruises."

At last two Federals, searching the battlefield for a friend, took pity, secured an ambulance, and had McKay taken to a Federal hospital. The horror was far from ended however. Overworked attendants, thinking he was too near dead to waste their time, laid him out on the ground. McKay's own words speak for themselves: "I lay all day Saturday in the rain without any attention being paid 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.' . . ."

McKay then felt fortunate that it was raining. He found he could suck the water out of his rain-soaked coat sleeve. After dark on Saturday night some of the attendants, concluding that he was not going to die after all, picked him up, laying him in a tent out of the rain. During the night two wounded Confederates died in the tent and one of them fell across McKay's legs where his body lay for several hours.

Sunday, at noon, McKay found himself moved to another tent where both Rebel and Federal wounded lay. Not until Monday morning was he given breakfast, his first food since Friday, before he was wounded. Next came the surgeons, who decided that his wounded leg must be amputated. McKay rebelled, saying that they could not do it, and then he begged and pleaded with them not to do it, until the chief surgeon put an end to the matter: "If the damned Rebel wants to die let him go," was the conclusion.

The surgeons moved on, amputated the leg of a Florida soldier near by, and the next day he died. The foul air and the sight of suffering and death were all around McKay. Two Yankee wounded were close at hand, one right beside him, and they also died. "So the three men nearest to me died," wrote McKay, "and none of them seemed to be wounded as badly as I was."

Having barely survived, and avoided the amputation of his mangled leg, it was not until January 7 or 8 that real hope was kindled when a man named Casper Freas, in company with a Mrs. Clemons, came upon McKay in the Federal hospital at Murfreesboro. The woman was in search of her husband (he was never found), whose two brothers had both been killed on the last day of the battle. Surprised to find McKay, who had been reported dead by a soldier claiming to have actually examined the corpse, Mr. Freas took an immediate interest in him. Procuring a surgeon's certificate which testified that McKay was mortally wounded, Freas secured a pass to take him to his own home. After a harsh cursing from the Provost Marshal who issued his parole, McKay found himself loaded into a wagon. The one friend he had made among the Federal surgeons packed in a pair of blankets, a bottle of whiskey, and some tea, coffee, and sugar—but the blankets, and whiskey disappeared as soon as the surgeon was out of sight, swiped by the Yankee guards.

At last McKay's wagon completed the ten-mile trip to the home of Freas. "I could not understand," McKay wrote, "why he would burden himself with a wounded man." Eventually, he realized.

Freas was a Union sympathizer, merely using McKay for his own interests, as he hoped to prevent the Confederates, who would know that he was caring for a wounded Rebel, from harming his property. In the meantime, Freas was planning a quick departure to Indiana. "The night he left," remembered McKay, "proved to be the most horrible of all my trials."

Freas and his family exited the house about midnight, placing McKay in the care of a big black man who promised to look after him through the night. As soon as the family had gone McKay said that the black man began bringing in fence rails to make a fire by putting one end on the fire and the other out on the floor. "I begged him to desist," wrote McKay, "but he would not obey me." Instead he kept bringing in rails, saying he was going to make a *good* fire—and then go home!

Indeed McKay soon had a tremendous fire, but, unable to move, spent part of the night in terror, fully expecting that the house would catch fire and he would be burned to death. Finally the fire died down, and then the severe cold set in, leaving McKay badly chilled and despondent when a neighbor happened to find him the next day. It would be summer before McKay, nursed by a Confederate family, eventually regained enough strength to struggle about on a pair of crutches.⁶

Perhaps McKay was a fitting symbol of the mangled armies, with their combined total of over 24,000 casualties at the battle of Stones River, for neither army moved again until the summer of 1863.

⁶ William L. McKay "Memoirs," Confederate Collection, Tennessee State Library and Archives.