MOSBY’S WAR
REMINISCENCES
AND STUART’S CAMPAIGNS

by
John S. Mosby
Mosby’s War Reminiscences
and Stuart’s Campaigns
by John S. Mosby

Originally Published in 1898
by Dodd, Mead and Company
New York

Reprint Edition © 2015
The Confederate Reprint Company
Post Office Box 2027
Toccoa, Georgia 30577
www.confederatereprint.com

Cover and Interior by
Magnolia Graphic Design
www.magoliagraphicdesign.com

ISBN-10: 0692548300
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CHAPTER ONE

“Rebellion!
How many a spirit born to bless,
Hath sunk beneath that withering name,
Whom but a day’s – an hour’s – success
Had wafted to eternal fame.” – Tom Moore.

In April, 1861, I was attending court at Abingdon, Va., when I met a person who had just stepped out of the telegraph office, who informed me that tremendous tidings were passing over the wires. Going in, I inquired of the operator what it was, who told me that Lincoln had issued a proclamation calling out troops. Fort Sumter had fallen two days before. The public mind was already strained to a high pitch of excitement, and it required only a spark to produce an explosion. The indignation aroused by the President’s proclamation spread like fire on a prairie, and the laws became silent in the midst of arms. People of every age, sex, and condition were borne away on the tide of excited feeling that swept over the land.

The home of Gov. John B. Floyd, who had resigned as Secretary of War under Buchanan, was at Abingdon. I went to his house and told him the news. He immediately issued a call to arms, which resounded like the roll of Ziska’s drum among the mountains of southwestern Virginia. Many of the most influential families in that region were descendants of the men who had fought under Morgan and Campbell at Eutaw Springs and King’s
Mountain. Their military spirit was inflamed by stirring appeals to the memories of the deeds their sires had done. Women, too, came forward to inspire men with a spirit of heroic self-sacrifice, and a devotion that rivalled the maidens of Carthage and Saragossa.

All the pride and affection that Virginians had felt in the traditions of the government which their ancestors had made, and the great inheritance which they had bequeathed, were lost in the overpowering sentiment of sympathy with the people who were threatened with invasion. It is a mistake to suppose that the Virginia people went to war in obedience to any decree of their State, commanding them to go. On the contrary, the people were in a state of armed revolution before the State had acted in its corporate capacity. I went along with the flood like everybody else. A few individuals here and there attempted to breast the storm of passion, and appeared like Virgil’s ship-wrecked mariners, “Rari nantes in surgite vasto.” Their fate did not encourage others to follow their example, and all that they did was to serve “like ocean wrecks to illuminate the storm.” In anticipation of these events, a cavalry company had for some months been in process of organization, which I had joined as a private. This company known as the Washington Mounted Rifles was immediately called together by its commanding officer, Capt. William E. Jones. Capt. Jones was a graduate of West Point, and had resigned some years before from the United States army. He was a stern disciplinarian, and devoted to duty. Under a rugged manner and impracticable temper he had a heart that beat with warm impulses. To his inferiors in rank he was just and kind, but too much inclined to cross the wishes and criticise the orders of his superiors. He had been a classmate of Stonewall Jackson at the military academy, and related to me many anecdotes of Jackson’s piety, as well as his eccentricities. He was a hard swearer; and a few days after the battle of Bull Run he told me that he was at Jackson’s headquarters, and Jackson got very much provoked at something a soldier had done, when Jones said, “Jackson, let me cuss him for you.” He fell in battle with Gen. Hunter, in the val-
ley of Virginia, in June, 1864. We went into barracks at Abingdon, and began drilling.

No service I ever had to perform during the war went as much against the grain as standing guard the first night I was in camp. I had no friends in the cavalry company, so I applied to Gov. Litchen for a transfer to an infantry company that had been raised in that part of the county where I resided. But on the very day I made the application, a telegraphic order came for us to start for Richmond immediately, and I never heard anything more of it. My company marched on horseback all the way to Richmond – about five hundred miles – while the infantry company went by rail. But how small is the control that mortals have over their own destinies. The company to which I unsuccessfully applied to be transferred became a part of the immortal division of Stonewall Jackson, in which I would have had only a slight chance of asserting my individuality, which would have been merged in the mass. I remember distinctly, now, how with a heart almost bursting with grief, in the midst of a rain, I bade my friends in the infantry company farewell just as they were about getting on the train. I had no dream then that I would ever be anything more than a private soldier.

On the same day in rain and mud we started on the march to Richmond. A few days before a flag had been presented to our company by a young lady, with an address in which she reminded us that “the coward dies a thousand deaths; the brave man dies but one.” I am sure there was not a man among us who did not feel the ambition of the youth in Longfellow’s poem, bearing

Onward amid the ice and snow of Alpine heights
His banner with its strange device.

The march to Richmond under a soldier who had bivouacked on the plains was a course of beneficial discipline. The grief of parting from home and friends soon wore away, and we all were as gay as if we were going to a wedding or a picnic. Gloom was succeeded by mirth and songs of gladness, and if
Abraham Lincoln could have been sung out of the South as James II. was out of England, our company would have done it and saved the country all the fighting. The favorite songs were generally those of sentiment and sadness, intermingled with an occasional comic melody. I remember this refrain of one that often resounded from the head to the rear of the column as we passed some farmer’s house:

He who has good buttermilk a plenty,
and gives the soldiers none,
He shan’t have any of our buttermilk
when his buttermilk is gone.

The buttermilk, as well as everything else that the farmer had that was good, was generally given to the soldiers. The country was brimful of patriotism.

The gayety with which men marched into the face of death is not so remarkable as the fortitude and cheerfulness of the wives and mothers who stayed at home and waited for the news of the battles. In nearly every home of the South could be found an example of that Spartan mother who sent her son to the wars with her last injunction to return with his shield or return upon it. This courage, exhibited in the beginning, survived to the last, through all the long agony and bloody sweat of the struggle. On reaching Richmond, after a few days’ rest, we were ordered to the Shenandoah Valley. A day or so before we started, Capt. Jones made a requisition on the quartermaster’s department for clothing for his company. We were furnished with suits of a very rough quality of goods manufactured in the Virginia penitentiary. It almost produced a mutiny in the camp. The men piled the clothes up in front of the captain’s tent. All but two refused to wear them – Private Fountain Beattie and myself. I do not think any clothes I ever wore did me more service than these. When I became a commander I made Beattie a lieutenant. I think we were both as contented on the picket line, dressed in our penitentiary suits, as we ever were in the gay uniforms we afterwards wore. Our march from Richmond to the Shenandoah Valley was
an ovation – our people had had no experiences of the misery and desolation that follow in the track of war; they were full of its romance, and expected us to win battles that would rival the glories of Wagram and Marengo. They never counted the cost of victory.

Our company was incorporated into the 1st Regiment of Virginia cavalry, commanded by Col. J. E. B. Stuart. It was stationed at a village called Bunker Hill, on the turnpike leading from Winchester to Martinsburg, and was observing the Union army under Patterson, which was then stationed at the latter place, on the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad. Gen. Joseph E. Johnston then had his headquarters at Winchester. I first saw Stuart at Bunker Hill. He had then lately resigned from the United States army to link his fortunes with the Southern Confederacy. He was just twenty-eight years of age – one year older than myself – strongly built, with blue eyes, ruddy complexion, and a reddish beard. He wore a blouse and foraging cap with a linen cover, called a havelock, as a protection against the sun. His personal appearance indicated the distinguishing traits of his character – dash, great strength of will, and indomitable energy. Stuart soon showed that he possessed all the qualities of a great leader of cavalry – a sound judgment, a quick intelligence to penetrate the designs of an enemy, mingled with the brilliant courage of Rupert.

There was then such a wide chasm between him and me that I was only permitted to view him at a distance, and had no thought of ever rising to intimacy with him. He took us the next day on a scout down toward Martinsburg and gave us our first lesson in war and sight of the enemy. We saw the hills around the town covered with the white tents of the Union army, and caught two soldiers who had ventured too far outside the picket lines. Since then I have witnessed the capture of thousands, but have never felt the same joy as I did over these first two prisoners.

A few days after this, Patterson started out on a promenade toward Winchester, and then turned squarely off, and went back toward Charlestown. Patterson made a good deal of noise with the shells that he threw at us, but nobody was hurt. Stuart
kept close on his flanks, both to watch his movements and to screen Johnston’s, who had just begun to move to join Beauregard at Manassas. Fitz John Porter and George H. Thomas, who afterward became distinguished generals, were on his staff. Patterson has been greatly censured for not pressing Johnston and detaining him in the Shenandoah Valley, instead of making the retrograde movement to Charlestown that permitted his escape. He alleges that he acted under the advice of his staff officers. Patterson was a conspicuous figure as well as failure in the first scene of the first act of the drama of war; after that he disappeared forever. His campaign in the Shenandoah Valley was a mere prologue to the great tragedy that was afterward acted there. Stuart left him in a position where he could neither be of advantage to the cause he upheld nor injury to that he opposed, and crossed the Blue Ridge to take part in the battle of Bull Run, on the 21st of July.
“O! shadow of glory – dim image of war - The chase hath no story
– her hero no star.” – Byron, Deformed Transformed.

After the first battle of Bull Run, Stuart’s cavalry was engaged in performing outpost duty on our front, which extended from the falls above Washington to Occoquan, on the lower Potomac. There were no opportunities for adventurous enterprise. McClellan’s army was almost in a state of siege in Washington, and his cavalry but rarely showed themselves outside his infantry picket line. We had to go on picket duty three times a week and remain twenty-four hours. The work was pretty hard; but still, soldiers liked it better than the irksome life of the camp. I have often sat alone on my horse from midnight to daybreak, keeping watch over the sleeping army. During this period of inaction, the stereotyped message sent every night from Washington to the Northern press was, “All quiet along the Potomac.”

While I was a private in Stuart’s cavalry, I never missed but one tour of outpost duty, and then I was confined in the hospital from an injury. With one other, I was stationed at the post on the road leading from Fall’s Church to Lewinsville, in Fairfax. At night we relieved each other alternately, one sleeping while the other watched. About dusk, Capt. Jones had ridden to the post and instructed us that we had no troops outside our lines on that road, and that we must fire, without halting, on any body of men approaching from that direction, as they would be the enemy. The
night was dark, and it had come my turn to sleep. I was lying on the ground, with the soft side of a stone for a pillow, when I was suddenly aroused by my companion, who called to me to mount, that the Yankees were coming. In an almost unconscious state I leaped into my saddle, and at the same instant threw forward my carbine, and both of us fired on a body of cavalry not fifty yards distant. Fortunately, we fired so low our bullets struck the ground just in front of them. The flash from my carbine in my horse’s face frightened him terribly. He wheeled, and that is the last I remember about that night. The next thing I recollect is that some time during the next day I became conscious, and found myself lying on a bed at the house of the keeper of the toll-gate. Capt. Jones and several of the men of my company were standing by me. It appears that the night before Stuart had sent a company of cavalry to Lewinsville for some purpose. This company had gone out by one road and returned on the one where I had been posted. My horse had run away and fallen over a cow that was lying down, and rolled over me. The company of cavalry coming along the same way, their horses in front started and snorted at something lying in the road. They halted, some of them dismounted to see what it was, and discovered me there in an insensible state. They picked me up and carried me into the village, apparently dying. I was bruised from head to foot, and felt like every bone in my body had been broken. I had to be carried to Fairfax Court House in an ambulance. There is a tradition that when Capt. Jones looked on me that night he swore harder than the army in Flanders. The feelings he expressed for the officer in fault were not so benevolent as my Uncle Toby’s for the fly.

While the cavalry did not have an opportunity to do much fighting during the first year of the war, they learned to perform the duties and endure the privations of a soldier’s life. My experience in this school was of great advantage to me in the after years when I became a commander. There was a thirst for adventure among the men in the cavalry, and a positive pleasure to get an occasional shot “from a rifleman hid in a thicket.” There were often false alarms, and sometimes real ones, from scouting parties
of infantry who would come up at night to surprise our pickets. A vivid imagination united with a nervous temperament can see in the dark the shapes of many things that have no real existence. A rabbit making its nocturnal rounds, a cow grazing, a hog rooting for acorns, an owl hooting, or the screech of a night hawk could often arouse and sometimes stampede an outpost or draw the fire of a whole line of pickets. At the first shot, the reserve would mount; and soon the videttes would come running in at full speed. There was an old gray horse roaming about the fields at Fairfax Court House during the first winter of the war that must have been fired at a hundred times at night by our videttes, and yet was never touched. I have never heard whether Congress has voted him a pension. The last time that I was ever on picket was in February, 1862. The snow was deep and hard frozen. My post was on the outskirts of Fairfax Court House, at the junction of the Washington road and turnpike. I wore a woollen hood to keep my ears from freezing, and a blanket thrown around me as a protection against the cold wind. The night was clear, and all that’s best of dark and bright. I sat on my horse under the shadow of a tree, both as a protection from the piercing blast and as a screen from the sight of an enemy. I had gone on duty at midnight, to remain until daybreak. The deep silence was occasionally broken by the cry of “Halt!” from some distant sentinel, as he challenged the patrol or relief. The swaying branches of the trees in the moonlight cast all sorts of fantastic forms on the crystal snow. In this deep solitude, I was watching for danger and communing with the spirit of the past. At this very spot, a few nights before, the vidette had been fired on by a scouting party of infantry that had come up from McClellan’s camps below. But the old gray horse had several times got up a panic there which raised a laugh on the soldiers.

Now I confess that I was about as much afraid of ridicule as of being shot, and so, unless I got killed or captured, I resolved to spend the night there. Horatius Codes was not more determined to hold his position on the bridge of the Tiber, than I was to stay at my post, but perhaps his motives were less mixed than
mine. I had been long pondering and remembering, and in my
reverie had visited the fields that I had traversed “in life’s morn-
ing march when my bosom was young.” I was suddenly aroused
by the crash of footsteps breaking the crust of the hard snow. The
sound appeared to proceed from some thing approaching me with
the measured tread of a file of soldiers. It was screened from my
view by some houses near the roadside. I was sure that it was an
enemy creeping up to get a shot at me, for I thought that even the
old horse would not have ventured out on such a night, unless
under orders. My heart began to sicken within me pretty much
like Hector’s did when he had to face the wrath of Achilles. My
horse, shivering with cold, with the instinct of danger, pricked up
his ears and listened as eagerly as I did to the footsteps as they
got near. I drew my pistol, cocked it, and took aim at the corner
around which this object must come. I wanted to get the advan-
tage of the first shot. Just then the hero of a hundred panics ap-
peared – the old gray horse! I returned my pistol to my belt and
relapsed into reverie. I was happy: my credit as a soldier had been
saved.

A couple of days after this my company returned there, as
usual, on picket. On this same morning Stuart came, making an
inspection of the outposts. It happened that there were two
young ladies living at Fairfax Court House, acquaintances of his,
who did not like to stay in such an exposed situation, and so Stu-
art had arranged to send them to the house of a friend near
Fryingpan, which was further within our lines. At that time the
possibility of our army ever retiring to Richmond had not been
conceived by the rank and file. Stuart had then become a
brigadier-general, and Capt. Jones had been promoted to be colo-
nel of the 1st Virginia Cavalry. Although I served under Stuart
almost from the beginning of the war, I had no personal acquain-
tance with him before then. He asked Capt. Blackford to detail a
man to go along as an escort for the two ladies. I had often been
invited to the house of one of them by her father, so I was se-
lected on that account to go with them. I left my horse with my
friend Beattie to lead back to camp, and took a seat in the car-
riage with the ladies. This was on the 12th of February, 1862. It began snowing just as we started, and it was late in the afternoon before we got to Fryingpan. I then went in the carriage to Stuart’s headquarters a few miles off, at Centreville. It was dark when I got there. I reported to him the result of my mission to Fryingpan, and asked for a pass to go back to the camp of my regiment, which was about four miles off on Bull Run. Stuart told me that the weather was too bad for me to walk to camp that night, but to stay where I was until next morning. He and Gener-als Joseph E. Johnston and G. W. Smith occupied the Grigsby house and messed together. I sat down by a big wood fire in an open fireplace in the front room, where he and the other two generals were also sitting. I never spoke a word, and would have been far happier trudging through the snow back to camp, or even as a vidette on a picket post. I felt just as much out of place and uneasy as a mortal would who had been lifted to a seat by the side of the gods on Olympus. Presently supper was announced. The generals all walked into the adjoining room, and Stuart told me to come in. After they had sat down at the table, Stuart ob-served that I was not there and sent for me. I was still sitting by the fire. I obeyed his summons like a good soldier, and took my place among the dil majores. I was pretty hungry, but did not enjoy my supper. I would have preferred fasting or eating with the couriers. I know I never spoke a word to any one – I don’t think I raised my eyes from off my plate while I was at the table.

Now, while I felt so much oppressed by the presence of men of such high rank, there was nothing in their deportment that produced it. It was the same way the next morning. Stuart had to send after me to come in to breakfast. I went pretty much in the same dutiful spirit that Gibbon says that he broke his marriage engagement: “I sighed as a lover and obeyed as a son.” But now my courage rose; I actually got into conversation with Joe Johnston, whom I would have regarded it as a great privilege the day before to view through a long-range telescope. The generals talked of Judah P. Benjamin’s (who was then Secretary of War) breach of courtesy to Stonewall Jackson that had caused Jackson
to send in his resignation. They were all on Jackson’s side. There was nothing going on about Centreville to indicate the evacuation that took place three weeks after that. Stuart let me have a horse to ride back to camp. As soon as I got there, Col. Jones sent for me to come to his tent. I went, and he offered me the place of adjutant of the regiment. I had had no more expectation of such a thing than of being translated on Elijah’s chariot to the skies. Of course, I accepted it. I was never half as much frightened in any fight I was in as I was on the first dress parade I conducted. But I was not permitted to hold the position long. About two months after that, when we had marched to meet McClellan at Yorktown, my regiment reorganized under the new act of the Confederate Congress. Fitz Lee was elected colonel in place of Jones. This was the result of an attempt to mix democracy with military discipline. Fitz Lee did not reappoint me as adjutant, and so I lost my first commission on the spot where Cornwallis lost his sword. This was at the time an unrecognized favor. If I had been retained as adjutant, I would probably have never been anything else. So at the close of the first year of the war I was, in point of rank, just where I had begun. Well, it did not break my heart. When the army was retiring from Centreville, Stuart’s cavalry was the rear guard, and I had attracted his favorable notice by several expeditions I had led to the rear of the enemy. So Stuart told me to come to his headquarters and act as a scout for him. A scout is not a spy who goes in disguise, but a soldier in arms and uniform, who goes among an enemy’s lines to get information about them. Among the survivors of the Army of the Potomac there are many legends afloat, and religiously believed to be true, of a mysterious person – a sort of Flying Dutchman or Wandering Jew – prowling among their camps in the daytime in the garb of a beggar or with a pilgrim’s staff, and leading cavalry raids upon them at night. In popular imagination, I have been identified with that mythical character.

On the day after Mr. Lincoln’s assassination, Secretary Stanton telegraphed to Gen. Hancock, then in command at Winchester, Va., that I had been seen at the theatre in Washington on
that fatal night. Fortunately, I could prove an alibi by Hancock himself, as I was at that very time negotiating a truce with him. I recently heard an officer of the United States army tell a story of his being with the guard for a wagon train, and my passing him with my command on the pike, all of us dressed as Federal soldiers, and cutting the train out from behind him. I laughed at it, like everybody who heard it, and did not try to unsettle his faith. To have corrected it would have been as cruel as to dispel the illusion of childhood that the story of “Little Red Riding Hood” is literally true, or to doubt the real presence of Santa Claus. It was all pure fiction about our being dressed in blue uniforms, or riding with him. I did capture the wagon train at the time and place mentioned, Oct. 26, 1863, at the Chestnut Fork, near Warrenton, Va., but we never even saw the guard. They had got sleepy, and gone on to camp, and left me to take care of their wagons – which I did. The quartermaster in charge of them, Capt. Stone, who was made prisoner, called to pay his respects to me a few days ago. I can now very well understand how the legendary heroes of Greece were created. I always wore the Confederate uniform, with the insignia of my rank. So did my men. So any success I may have had, either as an individual scout or partisan commander, cannot be accounted for on the theory that it was accomplished through disguise. The hundreds of prisoners I took are witnesses to the contrary.

Fauquier County, Va., Feb. 4, 1863

General: – I arrived in this neighborhood about one week ago. Since then I have been, despite the bad weather, quite actively engaged with the enemy. The result up to this time has been the capture of twenty-eight Yankee cavalry together with all their horses, arms, etc. The evidence of parole I forward with this. I have also paroled a number of deserters. Col. Sir Percy Wyndham, with over two hundred cavalry, came up to Middleburg last week to punish me, as he said, for my raids on his picket line. I had a slight skirmish with him, in which my loss was three men, captured by the falling of their horses; the en-
emy’s loss, one man and three horses captured. He set a very nice trap a few days ago to catch me in. I went into it, but, contrary to the Colonel’s expectations, brought the trap off with me, killing one, capturing twelve; the balance running. The extent of the annoyance I have been to the Yankees may be judged of by the fact that, baffled in their attempts to capture me, they threaten to retaliate on citizens for my acts.

I forward to you some correspondence I have had on the subject. The most of the infantry has left Fairfax and gone towards Fredericksburg. In Fairfax there are five or six regiments of cavalry; there are about three hundred at Dranesville. They are so isolated from the rest of the command, that nothing would be easier than their capture. I have harassed them so much that they do not keep their pickets over half a mile from camp. There is no artillery there. I start on another trip day after to-morrow.

I am, most respectfully, yours, etc.,

John S. Mosby.


_________________

Headquarters Cavalry Division, Feb. 8, 1863.

Respectfully forwarded as additional proof of the prowess, daring, and efficiency of Mosby (without commission) and his band of a dozen chosen spirits.

J.E.B. Stuart,
Major-General Commanding.

_________________

Headquarters, Feb. 11, 1863.

Respectfully forwarded to the Adjutant and Inspector-General as evidence of merit of Capt. Mosby.

R.E. Lee,
General.