

Introduction and notes to  
Major Breathed, of the Stuart Horse Artillery  
by William J. Miller  
decisionattomsbrook.com

As troopers of the 8<sup>th</sup> New York and 22<sup>nd</sup> New York cavalry regiments spurred their horses toward the crest of Coffman's Hill on October 9, 1864, 25-year-old James Breathed saw a crisis approaching. On that hill above Tom's Brook in the Shenandoah Valley, Major Breathed commanded six field pieces of horse artillery with the mission to support the cavalymen of Gen. Thomas Rosser's division. Breathed had built a reputation for daring and tenacity through three years of combat in the Stuart Horse Artillery. While fighting hand-in-glove with cavalry troops, he preferred close combat, so he placed his guns close to the enemy and kept them there as long as possible. The tactic usually produced good results, but on that high hill above Tom's Brook, the cavalymen around him failed to keep up their end of the bargain and abandoned Breathed's gunners. The Federals overran the six guns and took them all along with their crews. For the defeated Confederates, the loss of Breathed's cannon stood as the chief humiliation of the disaster at Tom's Brook.

The Virginia-born Breathed remains a minor figure in the history of Robert E. Lee's army, but for the men around him he proved a tower of inspiration on the battlefield. Col. Thomas T. Munford, whose cavalymen often fought alongside the artilleryman, thought Breathed "the hardest fighter the war produced." Breathed loved battle, and brigade commander William H. F. Payne, himself a born warrior, praised Breathed as a kindred spirit. Breathed craved front-line action and sometimes left his cannon behind to voluntarily participate in saber charges with the cavalry. Payne recalled an episode in early October 1864, when he greeted some of his men returning from a mounted charge into the streets of Bridgewater, Virginia. The elated Breathed came back with them, the exhilaration of battle lighting his eyes and gore literally dripping from his sword. It was Yankee blood, Breathed exclaimed to Payne as he exulted in having run his weapon through three enemy soldiers.

As a representative Confederate warrior—the type of man

who made the Army of Northern Virginia so successful for so long—Breathed has received much less attention than the similar John Pelham. Pelham earned a high reputation and R. E. Lee himself anointed him “the gallant Pelham.” Perhaps the combination of courage and proficiency with his youth and boyish good looks explains the enduring fame of the Alabamian. Pelham’s early death in combat adds to the romance of his legend. No less courageous, Breathed served beside Pelham in the Stuart Horse Artillery early in the war and learned much from the aggressive, West Point-trained Alabamian. Breathed was three months younger than “the boy artilleryman,” and his reputation in the army no less bright than Pelham’s. Inexplicably, history has remained largely silent about James Breathed. His undashing looks and his misfortune in not dying in battle failed to inspire would-be biographers until recently. Not until 2006, when David P. Bridges published *Fighting with Jeb Stuart: Major James Breathed and the Confederate Horse Artillery*, did a writer address the life of this exceptional American warrior. Whatever deficiencies made Breathed an unattractive subject for a biographer, courage and intelligence were not among them. A trained medical doctor, Breathed, ironically, proved both exceedingly eager to do harm to enemy soldiers and exceptionally good at doing so.

Although he did not die gloriously on a battlefield, Breathed met an early end at age 31. In 1871, a comrade published a fine tribute that suggests Breathed’s place in the hearts of the men who fought beside him. It is true this posthumous praise qualifies as romantic embellishment, but it is, after all, a eulogy by a friend not claiming objectivity. Such applause by contemporaries should not be judged as harshly as hagiography produced by later writers claiming to be historians. Honest bias is acceptable, even desirable, for the expression of biases can reveal much about both the writer and the subject. This anonymous homage is especially interesting because it almost certainly flowed from the pen of the novelist John Esten Cooke, a staff officer under Cavalry Chief J.E.B. Stuart. The tribute serves as a solid introduction to a man who stood in the front rank of artillerymen in the Army of Northern Virginia.

WJM

## Major Breathed, of the Stuart Horse Artillery.<sup>1</sup>

BY A COMRADE.<sup>2</sup>

James Breathed, whose death has been announced, was the oldest son and child of John W. Breathed, Esq., of Maryland. He was born in Morgan county, Virginia, in 1838. Whilst yet in his infancy his father removed to Maryland, and settled in the vicinity of the College of St. James, where James was reared and received his education. On leaving college he commenced the study of medicine in the office of Dr. Chas. Macgill, and after attending the usual course of lectures in Baltimore, received his diploma. He graduated meritoriously, and soon after removed to the State of Missouri, and settled in the vicinity of St. Joseph. Naturally apt in his profession, he quickly acquired a practice which more than sustained him, and at the breaking out of the war may be said to have been in a fair way of acquiring distinction in his profession.

Devoted to the State of his nativity, Virginia, as soon as she passed the ordinance of secession, he quitted his new home and his profession and hurried back to the border, and for several weeks remained at home, awaiting the action of Maryland, whose Legislature was about being convened in extra session. At Chambersburg, which was then occupied by troops, he fell under the surveillance of the Federal authorities, and had his trunks and baggage thoroughly searched, but after a short detention was permitted to proceed to his destination.

Finding that Maryland was hesitating about her course and was threatened with speedy invasion from the neighboring State of Pennsylvania, Major Breathed announced to his parents his determination to leave for Virginia and join his fortunes with

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<sup>1</sup> Citation: "A Comrade." "Major Breathed of the Stuart Horse Artillery." *The Old Dominion* (Richmond), vol. 5, no. 1 (1871), 37-48. Page breaks in original given in brackets.

<sup>2</sup> The author of this tribute is likely John Esten Cooke (1830-1886). The reference to *Surry of Eagle's-Nest* in the third-to-last paragraph calls attention to Cooke, who published the novel in 1866. The writer of this tribute would have little reason to declare that Breathed held the admiration of the author of the novel unless the writer of the one was also the writer of both. Furthermore, the writer several times inserts himself into his story of Breathed's service and mentions performing duties associated with a cavalry staff officer, a role Cooke filled for J.E.B. Stuart during the war.

Southern troops that were then gathering on the border. Their advice was against precipitate action, but his mind was burning with the excitement of war and its perils, and he could remain inactive no longer. Accordingly he crossed the river and joined a company of cavalry from Berkeley county, commanded by John Blair Hoge, of Martinsburg. This company was afterward known as Company B, First Regiment Virginia Cavalry, and together with several other companies from the Valley, were placed under the command of J. E. B. Stuart, and with this force he was ordered to watch and retard the advance of General Patterson upon Martinsburg.<sup>3</sup>

When Gen. Stuart took command, Breathed and himself at once recognized each other as two persons who had made an agreeable acquaintance, in riding across the State of Missouri but a few weeks [37/38] previous, both journeying toward Virginia and for the same purpose, but each retaining his secret from the other. Struck with the bold and manly bearing of his young acquaintance, and knowing that he was familiar with the country on both sides of the river, Stuart frequently detailed Breathed for scouting duty and other detached service, then considered responsible and perilous, and so well were these duties discharged, that he rose at once in favor and paved the way for the promotion which awaited him the succeeding fall.

In some skirmishes which occurred in retarding Patterson's advance on Winchester, and others preceding the first battle of Manassas, Breathed attracted additional attention by his dashing courage, and was an established favorite with the rank and file of his regiment.

Early in the winter of 1862, Stuart commenced the organization of a battalion of Horse Artillery to accompany his cavalry and to give additional strength and vigor to that arm of service. In looking around for officers for the first battery of six guns, he selected as Captain, John Pelham, an undergraduate from West Point, whose name and fame have passed into history, garlanded with the soubriquet of the "gallant," and as First Lieutenant, James Breathed. With this battery, and as Lieutenant, Breathed passed through all the battles and skirmishes on the

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<sup>3</sup> General Robert Patterson ineffectually led Union forces in the Shenandoah Valley in early 1861.

Peninsula, Fair Oaks, the seven days fighting around Richmond, the second battle of Manassas, the battle of Antietam, hanging as it were upon the outer rim and most perilous edge of all these engagements, and reaping laurels in all, for stubborn, effective fighting and dashing enterprise. It is a fact which should become notable and historic that the great battle of Antietam was opened on the Confederate side, early on the morning of the 17th of September, 1862, and on the extreme left wing, by Breathed's guns, commanded by himself and almost within sight of the house where he had been reared to manhood.<sup>4</sup> He directed the firing of the first gun in that sanguinary engagement, and remained engaged until 11 o'clock A. M., when he was relieved. The writer of this brief sketch met him as he was going to the rear, with his guns yet warm and his face sooty with the smoke of the conflict, and although he had suffered much in loss of men and horses, he was hilarious over the heavy gaps which his grape and canister had made in the advancing columns of the Federal troops.<sup>5</sup>

It is also noteworthy that Breathed's guns were the last to recross the river at Shepherdstown, on the occasion of Gen. Lee's withdrawal at Antietam.<sup>6</sup> Tired with the fatigues of the previous battle, and severely injured in the loss of men and horses, he had bivouacked the night of the withdrawal near the toll gate, between Sharpsburg [38/39] and the river, and morning found him and his command asleep and without orders. Fitzhugh Lee's brigade of Cavalry traversed the entire line of battle during the night, withdrew the out-posts, entered Sharpsburg about 4 o'clock A. M., and about seven started for the ford, hoping and expecting to find the way clear, but about midway the road was found blocked with wagons and ambulances moving at a slow pace towards the river.<sup>7</sup> Off to the right of the road and a short distance from it was a battery, with its horses tethered to the wheels of the gun-carriages and caissons,

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<sup>4</sup> The position held by Breathed's guns on Nicodemus Heights on the left of the Confederate line north of Sharpsburg stood about 6 miles from the College of St. John's, where Breathed had been schooled.

<sup>5</sup> In the nineteenth century, "hilarious" had not yet taken on its current meaning of extremely funny and instead meant extremely merry or cheerful.

<sup>6</sup> General Robert E. Lee commanded the Army of Northern Virginia.

<sup>7</sup> General Fitzhugh Lee remained a prominent commander of Confederate cavalry throughout the war.

and the men strewn about in groups on the ground asleep. The writer was dispatched by General Wms. C. Wickham (then Colonel) to ascertain whose battery it was, rouse up the men, and order them to proceed in all haste to the ford and cross the river. To his surprise he found it to be Breathed's, and after acquainting him with the state of affairs, told him to hurry up—that if McClellan pressed us his capture would be inevitable. He gave his orders to his men and coolly replied: "I'll open an alley through them before they get these guns." He did recross without firing a shot, McClellan not making his appearance in the rear until 10 o'clock.

After the Federal army recrossed the river and commenced moving upon Richmond by way of Warrenton and Fredericksburg, the Confederate cavalry were incessantly engaged in disputing its advance, and Breathed, as usual, with his guns always close up to the enemy's front was dealing death in their ranks.

Just before the battle of Fredericksburg, Breathed received his promotion to a Captaincy, Pelham having received a Major's commission, and retained by Gen. Stuart as a member of his Staff and Chief of the Horse Artillery. He bore a distinguished part as usual in that decisive engagement, and was with Pelham, when with one gun he maintained for two hours a terrific cannonading against four Federal six gun batteries, and only withdrew after losing in killed and wounded more than one-third of his men, and at the command of Generals Lee and Jackson, who witnessed the unequal contest. Gen. Jackson, fired with enthusiasm at the unprecedented courage of the young artillerists, exclaimed: "Give me a Pelham on either flank and I would not fear the combined armies of the Federals!" and Gen. Lee in his preliminary report of the battle to the authorities of Richmond, gracefully styled the heroic youth: "The gallant Pelham," a distinguished honor well won and knightly carried. In the ensuing spring, Major Pelham was killed in the engagement at Kelly's Ford. The chivalric Alabamian was struck on the head by a piece of shell as he was standing in the stirrups of his saddle with his sabre drawn, shouting encouragement to a column of cavalry that was charging past his guns.<sup>8</sup> [39/40]

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<sup>8</sup> General Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson commanded the wing of Lee's army

On the 27th of April, 1863, Hooker commenced moving his army across the Rappahannock river and threw down the gauntlet of battle on the heights of Chancellorsville.<sup>9</sup> In this great battle, or rather in the great flank attack of Jackson on the Federal right, Captain Breathed bore a part which was more than ordinarily distinguished even for him. After the flank of the Federals had been lightly but definitely felt and fixed, and Jackson, in the approaching sunset of the splendid spring evening, had formed his triple lines of battle for the onset, Gen. Stuart ordered Breathed to take two guns, to move down the old turnpike road on even line with the outer infantry skirmishers, and open on the enemy with vigor as soon as he came in sight of their line.

In the dense wilderness which fringed both sides of the road, the skirmishers could only precede the forward line of battle a few rods, and with the firing of their first shots almost the whole line became engaged. The roar of musketry was fearful, the smoke soon became dense, but above all, could be faintly heard and seen the rapid reports and flashing light of Breathed's guns. The attack was fearfully terrific, the rout sudden and complete. Down the road went Breathed at a full gallop, men, horses and guns rushing pell mell over the first barricade—and closing up on the backs of the fugitives, he gave the command to unlimber and into them with double shots of canister. There was a havoc then—bones were not broken, they were severed; flesh was not pierced, it was shredded; blood did not trickle, it left the victim in torrents.

The pursuit stopped in darkness, but the firing was kept up until a late hour in the night. The fight was renewed the next morning, and Breathed's participation ceased only when the converging columns of the Confederates, under Stuart and Lee, met upon the bloody heights of Chancellorsville.<sup>10</sup>

The writer read Gen. Stuart's manuscript report of his operations both before and after the wounding of Jackson and his assumption of the command of Jackson's Corps: The tribute he

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nearest Pelham's remarkable performance. Pelham was mortally wounded at Kelly's Ford March 17, 1863.

<sup>9</sup> Maj. Gen. Joseph Hooker commanded the Federal Army of the Potomac in the spring of 1863.

<sup>10</sup> Most of the actions described in the first two paragraphs occurred on May 2, 1863.

paid to Breathed's services would have knighted him in any army where patents of nobility could be carried away from the cannon's mouth or from the point of the sabre.<sup>11</sup>

In the fierce cavalry engagements which were fought along through Fauquier and Loudoun counties, to cover Gen. Lee's subsequent advance upon Pennsylvania, culminating in the great but disastrous battle of Gettysburg, the subject of this sketch held an industrious and bloody hand.<sup>12</sup> He suffered himself frequently and severely, but his vengeful guns always close up on the enemy's front and rear, opened up avenues of retaliatory expiation—and it was the same [40/41] after the carnage of Cemetery heights and the subsequent retreat back into Virginia.

Passing near his father's house on his return with the army from Gettysburg, he left his command and with two friends ventured to call at his old home. In passing the college grounds he fell under the observation of a distinguished prelate. He had not yet dismounted from his horse, before he observed this minister of "peace on earth and good will toward men" breaking toward Jones X Roads where some Federal cavalry had been lurking during the day, and before many minutes had passed they were upon him, but he galloped defiantly away, much to the disappointment of his pursuers and a little to the chagrin of his clerical friend. Breathed often laughed heartily over his old preceptor's first effort in military strategy.<sup>13</sup>

The campaign of '63 closed with the threatened battle at Mine Run, between Orange Court House and Fredericksburg, and the subsequent partial engagement at Catlett's Station. Breathed was promoted to a Majority and instead of a company now commanded a battalion of the Horse Artillery, composed of Johnson's, McGregor's and Moorman's batteries of four guns each. He went into winter quarters near Charlottesville and busied himself in caring for and preparing his command for the ensuing summer's

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<sup>11</sup> Breathed is not mentioned in Stuart's reports as they appear in volume 25 of the *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*.

<sup>12</sup> The principal engagements fought in Fauquier and Loudoun counties in June 1863 were at Aldie, Middleburg and Upperville, June 17, 19 and 21 respectively.

<sup>13</sup> The episode involving "the distinguished prelate," presumably occurred at the College of St. John's between Hagerstown and Sharpsburg, Maryland.

campaign. It was during this winter encampment under the shadows of Monticello, that he had occasion to exert the ready valor for which he was so remarkable, and which spread his reputation far and wide in that section of old Virginia. He was encamped on the north side of the town, about two miles distant and near a small tributary of the Rivanna. Suddenly one day about noon, Captain Kirk Cunningham, now a resident of Berkeley county, came riding into Breathed's camp from the direction of Madison Court House and announced to him, that the Federals were coming rapidly down the road and would soon be upon him. He was staggered with the information; he had heard nothing of it. No scouts had reported any movement or approach of an enemy in that quarter, and he was at first disposed to believe it a joke; but a citizen came hurrying into camp and told him the enemy were then crossing the stream about a quarter of a mile off. Having no time to gather up his horses or move off his guns, he determined to fight, and hastily summoning his men he ordered them to draw two of his pieces on a hill in the road close by, and as many as could catch horses and mount them, to form behind the guns. Fitz Lee's command which had been encamped in the same vicinity had gone off in quest of Hunter, who was then operating in the direction of Lexington and Lynchburg, leaving him unsupported and single handed. In a short time the enemy hove in sight, proving to be Custer's brigade, which had started on a secret and rapid raid [41/42] from the valley upon Charlottesville. The first or forward regiment came charging wildly through Breathed's camp, cutting down his caissons and scattering fire in the abandoned huts, but as they advanced they presented their flank to his guns loaded up to the muzzle with canister. He gave the word to fire and under cover the smoke and temporary confusion, charged at the head of about twenty men, armed with pistols—one a Frenchman with a fence rail—and threw the enemy into a panic from which they did not recover, but fled rapidly back upon the main body of their command. They had been informed by negroes that Charlottesville was entirely uncovered, but meeting with this hot and unexpected reception from an unforeseen, though really feeble quarter, they hesitated, wavered and finally abandoned their attempt, retreating as they came and closely followed and harassed for twenty-four hours by Breathed and his few artillerymen. The citizens of

Charlottesville thanked him for their deliverance, and the ladies testified their appreciation his signal service by presenting him with a magnificent stand of battery colors, which waved above his guns until the sun rose over the field at Appomattox Court House. A full account of the exploit was published in the Richmond papers and Breathed's same was handed around and up to army headquarters with much praise.<sup>14</sup>

The campaign of 1864 opened with Grant's advance across the Rapidan from his winter encampment in Culpeper, and the sanguinary battles of the Wilderness.<sup>15</sup> The Federal troops crossed at Ely's and Germania Fords, and Gen. Lee, pushing up from the direction of Orange Court House, soon encountered them in the densely wooded country which sweeps from the Rapidan in a southerly direction toward Richmond. The series of engagements which were there delivered were not much distinguished for artillery fighting. The nature of the country did not permit it. There were few roads and fewer open fields along the bloody route of battle, in which an artillerist could move his guns with facility, or deliver fire with any thing like accurate effect. Muskets were the weapons relied on, and they were used at the closest range. Hence these battles were very sanguinary and excelled in fierceness any preceding them. Breathed carried his guns with the cavalry and on the flank of the extended Confederate line, fighting with his usual valor, either as a cavalryman when his guns were unengaged, or when opportunity presented rushing his whole eight pieces up into the face of the enemy, and showering shell, shot and canister upon them.

A fair opportunity for his rare and distinguished courage, however, did not present itself until Gen. Grant had hammered away thousands of his best troops on Gen. Lee's front, in an unsuccessful effort to break through, and took up his celebrated flank and fighting [42/43] march upon the Confederate Capital. On the 7th of May the march of the Federals commenced. Their route was on an interior line toward Richmond, and their first objective point was Spottsylvania Court House, an elevated and commanding point on the main and direct road

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<sup>14</sup> This occurred north of Charlottesville, Virginia, February 29, 1864.

<sup>15</sup> Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant directed the Federal advance through the Wilderness in May 1864.

leading from the town of Fredericksburg, on the Rappahannock, to the Capital. On the afternoon of the 8th, Fitz Lee's division of cavalry encountered the head of the Federal column of infantry at or near Todd's tavern, about four miles from the Court House, and dismounting his men, and fighting with carbines, fell slowly and stubbornly back. The fighting was dreadfully severe. Many of the flower of Virginia's youth went down before the terrific volleys of the Federal infantry, and they laid where they fell, unburied and blackening in the sun. It was of the last importance that Fitz Lee should delay the advancing column and cover the position at the Court House as long as possible. About 11 o'clock on the night of the 8th, after a most fatiguing day's operation, the writer was dispatched from the direction of Orange Court House, by Gen. Stuart, with a verbal message to Fitz Lee informing him of the march of the first division of Longstreet's corps under its senior officer Anderson, to his relief, and urging him to hold out to the last and at any sacrifice. It was full three o'clock in the morning before Fitz Lee's bivouac was reached and the message so full of cheer and comfort to the jaded commander delivered. A short talk and a shorter rest ushered in the first streaks of the coming morning, and with their coming, the Federals reinforced by a fresh corps of infantry, threw themselves upon the devoted band of dismounted troopers who stood between them and the heights of Spottsylvania.<sup>16</sup>

The fight became very hot. Fitz Lee held his forces well in hand, and close up, and knowing the importance of every moment's delay, tested the courage of his men to the last extremity.

This was Breathed's time—the time in which he never failed to show how finished and intrepid a soldier nature had made him. Fitz Lee called upon him to check the head of a fresh column of infantry that could be discovered marching through the tangled wilderness to pounce upon his already overmatched line.

How he responded can best be told in the language of Fitz Lee himself. In a communication to the author of the "Lost Cause," page 505, after saying Breathed "was the most reckless brave man he ever knew," he continues: "Major Jas. Breathed by my order

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<sup>16</sup> Maj. Gen. Richard H. Anderson executed this movement on the night of May 7, 1864.

placed a single gun in position on a little knoll, and as we were falling back, disputing the enemy's advance towards Spottsylvania Court House. We knew the enemy's infantry were marching in column through a piece of woods, and the object was to fire upon the head of the column as it debouched, to give the idea that their further [43/44] advance would be contested and to compel them to develop a line of battle with skirmishers thrown out, &c. The delay which it was hoped to occasion by such demonstration was advisable in order to increase the chances of our infantry then marching by another and parallel road to the Court House. Under Major Breathed's personal superintendence, shells were thrown and burst exactly in the head of the column as it debouched. The desired effect was obtained: the head of the enemy's advance was scattered, and it was only with some difficulty a line of battle with skirmishers in front was formed to continue the advance. I was sitting on my horse near Breathed and directed him to withdraw his gun, but he was so much elated with his success that he begged to be allowed to give the enemy some more rounds. He fired until their line got so close that you could hear them calling out: 'Surrender that gun, you rebel—Breated's own horse had just been shot. The canonneers jumped on their horses, expecting of course the gun to be captured and retreated rapidly down the hill. Breated was left alone. He limbered the gun up and jumped on the lead horse. It was shot from under him. Quick as lightning he drew his knife, cut the leaders out of the harness and sprang on a swing horse. It was also shot from under him just as he was turning to get into the road. He then severed the harness of the swing horse, jumped upon one of the wheel horses and again made the desperate trial for life. The ground was open between the piece and the woods; the enemy had a full view of the exploit; and Breated at last dashed off unharmed, almost miraculously escaping through a shower of bullets."

This timely act of daring helped to impede the march of the Federals, and as every moment's delay at this particular juncture was of the last importance, its influence upon the ultimate issue of the campaign can scarcely be estimated. As it was, the advance of the enemy's cavalry and infantry occupied the coveted position at the Court House, but a brigade of the first division of Longstreet's corps arrived in time to drive them out before their main body

reached the ground. The advance of the Federal infantry was a Maryland brigade. It suffered severely. Col. Phelps, since a member of Congress from Baltimore, was brought in wounded and a prisoner, and laid upon the sward near a locality known as the Block House.<sup>17</sup>

In the early part of July, 1865, Major Breathed was severely and dangerously wounded in one of the combats which occurred on the lines below Petersburg.<sup>18</sup> Serious apprehensions were at first entertained that he would not survive the injury, and knowledge of the fact having reached the great Commander-in-Chief, he hastily dispatched the following assurance of his confidence and sympathy to the suffering soldier: [44/45]

HEAD-QUARTERS ARMY NORTHERN VIRGINIA,  
7th July, 1864.

Major JAMES BREATHED, Richmond.

MAJOR:—I heard with great regret, that you were wounded and incapacitated for active duty. I beg to tender you my sympathy and to express the hope that the army will not long be deprived of your valuable services. The reports I have received from your superior officers of your gallantry and good conduct in action on several occasions have given me great satisfaction, and while they increase my concern for your personal suffering, render me more desirous that your health will soon permit you to resume a command that you have exercised with so much credit to yourself and advantage to the service. Very respectfully,  
Your obedient servant,

R. E. LEE, General.

A more complimentary tribute has seldom been paid to deserved merit and valor, and will give some idea of the high rank in which Major Breathed held in the throng of brave men who shed undying lustre upon Southern Arms.

I will relate one more instance of his extraordinary valor and let it close this imperfect sketch. It resembles more the days of

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<sup>17</sup> Col. Charles E. Phelps led the 7<sup>th</sup> Maryland Infantry (U.S.).

<sup>18</sup> The date should read "July, 1864" Breathed was wounded in the abdomen at Reams's Station, June 29, 1864.

knight errantry than of modern battle. It seems extravagant, but its truth in every particular can be vouched for by many living witnesses. After Grant had broken the Confederate lines around Petersburg and Lee had taken up his memorable retreat which terminated at Appomattox, and in its last stages, when a surrender had been discussed in a council of war held near Farmville, and the hopes of many brave men sank never again to be revived, Breathed's courage grew fiercer and more conspicuous than in the palmiest days of Confederate triumph. He left the marks of his artillery and his own sabre all along the route.

With a view of preventing the destruction of the celebrated "High Bridge" which spans the Appomattox and its adjacent low grounds, a force of Federal troops consisting of a brigade of infantry with a squadron of cavalry that had been detailed as a body guard for Gen. Ord, under command of Gen. Ried, of Philadelphia, were detached and sent by a flank march to take possession of the bridge.

This movement having been ascertained, Gen. Rosser's division of cavalry was sent to attack them, Breathed with one battery of his command accompanying him.<sup>19</sup> [45/46]

When Rosser reached the bridge, he found the Federal force in possession and instantly attacked them with vigor. The fight became hot and furious and close handed. Gen. Ried himself fell at the hand of Brig. Gen. James Deering, a promising young Confederate cavalry officer, and the smoke of his pistol was yet curling about his person, when he too fell, pierced through the vitals by a minnie ball from the musket of a by-standing Federal infantryman. Col. Boston, of the Fifth Virginia Cavalry, and Maj. James Thomson, an artillery officer from the neighboring county of Jefferson, Va., also fell about the same time.<sup>20</sup>

The fight had about reached its climax and was of doubtful

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<sup>19</sup> Maj. Gen. Edward O.C. Ord commanded the Army of the James in the spring of 1865. Lt. Col. Theodore Read, a Federal staff officer, was mortally wounded on April 6, 1865, at High Bridge. Maj. Gen. Thomas L. Rosser commanded Confederate forces at High Bridge.

<sup>20</sup> Col. James Deering, Col. Reuben B. Boston, 5<sup>th</sup> Virginia Cavalry, and Maj. James Thomson (not "Thompson") were all mortally wounded April 6, 1865, at High Bridge.

result, when Breathed was ordered to take command of a portion of the dismounted line and to charge them upon the enemy. Breathed rode to their front and gave the order, but the men faltered, and failed to respond. The two lines of battle were close together, and the ringing words of command were as plainly heard by the enemy as by his own men. Breathed saw and knew this and felt that the success of the entire engagement depended upon the promptness with which his order was obeyed. He drew his sabre and galloping about forty paces in front of his line and pointing to the near line of the enemy, shouted to his men to follow him. Just as he uttered the words, two Federal cavalry officers of the rank of Captain, belonging to Ord's body-guard, left their line at a full gallop, and came thundering down upon him. Breathed often told the writer that when he saw them coming, a flashing thought passed through his mind as to how he should receive them—whether with his sabre or pistol, but as they came with their sabres he decided to meet them with their own weapons.

Both lines had ceased their scattering fire, the one to make and the other to receive the threatened charge, and both looked with intense concern upon the individual combat as it began. Breathed never moved his position, but bringing his sabre to a guard, he received the onslaught. One of the two officers was a few paces ahead of the other and as he reached Breathed made a front-cut at him, which was successfully parried, and the Confederate drawing his sabre to a tierce point, gave his foe a mortal thrust. This was the work of a moment, but Breathed had not fully disengaged and recovered his sabre from his one antagonist, before the other was fiercely upon him with his uplifted weapon poised above his head. As the blow descended he threw his body to the right of his horse and the falling sabre just grazed his left leg, but in the effort he lost his balance and fell to the ground, his right foot remaining in the stirrup. As he fell his antagonist drew his sabre to a tierce point and would have thrust him through the body, but at the critical [46/47] moment, Sergeant Scruggs, of Gen. Munford's non-commissioned staff, reached the spot and a timely ball from his pistol stretched the Federal captain dead upon the field.

The Confederates raised a cheer of triumph over the issue of the combat, and fired with enthusiasm at Breathed's desperate

exploit, charged the Federal line. It broke and the bloody engagement terminated. Nearly the whole force was captured. Breathed took from the finger of the officer he killed a ring, and from his pockets some papers which identified his name and locality. He was from Boston, but his name is not now recollected. About a week after the surrender, in the presence of the writer, he intrusted the ring to a Federal officer to be sent to the widow; gave him the manner of her husband's death and locality, and requested him to say "that her husband was a brave man and died like a soldier."<sup>21</sup>

The facts, incidents, &c., here narrated are but a few of the many which illustrated Major Breathed's career as a soldier, and these are taken at random. They will serve to show what manner of man passed away from amongst us, and to throw some light upon the manner in which the fortunes of the late Confederacy were maintained upon the field. Gen. Robert E. Lee once said to the father of James Breathed in Richmond, "If my soldiers had all been such as your son we would never have been a subjugated people."

The part he played so well in the great struggle will never be accurately known, because the reports in which his military history is recorded, in common with all the archives of the Confederate government, have passed into possession of the Federal authorities. His reputation whilst it lasts will be traditionary, resting on the recollection of his comrades and cotemporaries, or used by aspiring romancers to give point to some thrilling narrative of "the war in Virginia." Already the pen of fiction has employed his name and deeds to adorn such pleasant tales. Amongst his many admirers none knew him better or loved him more than the ready and popular author of "Surry of Eagle Nest," and now that the young warrior is gone to his grave, the narrative of his deeds and darings yet unknown save to his friends, will possess the additional interest and charm, which death always throws over the exploits of the hero.

The news of his death was received with painful interest by his surviving comrades in arms, and by thousands of people in Old Virginia and Maryland to whom his deeds and daring during the late war were familiar talk.

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<sup>21</sup> Captain William T. Hodges, 4th Massachusetts Cavalry, of Roxbury, MA, was killed under the circumstances described.

It may be some consolation to his friends and companions in arms to know that he sleeps well and fitly. As in life he was always found upon the outmost edge of his country's fortunes, so in death he sleeps upon the extremest limit of its northern territory. On the [47/48] north bank of the Potomac, and on a high hill overlooking the beloved State of his birth, and in full view of the people for whom he fought so long and well, his remains were deposited by a few of his surviving comrades, and in the midst of a large concourse of relatives and friends.