



**LIEUTENANT**  
**JAMES W. HEPBURN**



2<sup>nd</sup> Massachusetts Cavalry  
Company E  
February 5, 1863 – March 27, 1865

History of James W. Hepburn  
By Michael K. Sorenson

## LIEUTENANT JAMES W. HEPBURN

### 2<sup>ND</sup> MASSACHUSETTS CAVALRY

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James Worthington Hepburn was born January 9, 1838, the son of James Hepburn and Rebecca Cowden and the youngest of six children. His forbears originated in Scotland, but had established their homestead in Pennsylvania in the 1750's and now resided in Williamsport, Lymcome County, lush farm country with low rolling hills and well painted barns.

By the time James was 25 years old and as the year 1861 arrived, he was living in the West while trying his luck in the gold fields of California. He was a tall young man for the time at 5'8½" with light hair and blue eyes. And it seems he was ready for a fight.

When hostilities erupted between the North and South, California seemed a remote place from which to view the war. Most Northerners thought that the contest would be brief, and that the South would be quickly brought to submission. Many Southerners felt that Northerners would rapidly become disillusioned with the loss of life and property and would soon allow their Southern cousins to go their way peacefully. Regardless, the intensity of the contest had not yet been felt in far away California.

James no doubt watched with interest as the tensions increased and newspapers recounted details of battles

taking place at heretofore unknown places such as Manassas, Virginia, Shiloh Church and Antietam Creek. As casualties rose and the war fervor increased, it was only a matter of time before the Californians decided to become involved. Thus it seemed to have been with James.

A few enterprising men in California arrived at a roundabout proposal which they made to

Massachusetts that would allow these Westerners to return to the East and the seat of war. In October of 1862, Governor John Andrew of Massachusetts approved their plan to furnish a cavalry company

of one hundred Californians who would be credited toward the recruitment quota of Massachusetts. In return, the Massachusetts bounties usually paid to volunteers would be used to cover the costs of transporting the Californians to New England.

It is possible that James was one of the first wave of more than 500 volunteers who applied for the 100 spaces available. However his name was not among the members of the new "California Hundred" who departed from San Francisco on December 10, 1862 aboard the steamer *Golden Age*, bound for Boston where they were to become Company A of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Massachusetts Cavalry.



*Guidon of Company M, 2<sup>nd</sup> Mass Cav*

However, the enthusiasm seen in the raising of the Cal 100 caused others to offer their efforts in raising companies under the same agreement with Massachusetts. In February, 1863 James, along with 386 other enlisted men and 13 officers mustered into service with four cavalry companies known as the California Battalion, eventually to be named companies E, F, L and M of the same 2<sup>nd</sup> Massachusetts Cavalry. James, along with the balance of E Company and their Captain, Charles S. Eigenbrodt set sail aboard the steamer Constitution, crossed the Isthmus of Panama by rail and boarded another steamer bound for New York City. Here, they would join their earlier counterparts and begin their service in the Civil War, as part of the hard fighting 2<sup>nd</sup> Mass Cav. Each of the four companies took with them a silk guidon which had been presented by Daniel Norcross, a San Francisco

masonic outfitter. Of the 501 enlistees only 188 would be present for duty when they were discharged from the service at the end of the War. The remainder would be killed while fighting, lost to wounds or disabilities, or gone to Confederate Prison Camps.

Under the leadership of Colonel Charles Russell Lowell, recently of General McClellan's staff and of Massachusetts gentry, the rough and ready Californians gradually adjusted to service alongside their New England counterparts. They also learned the art of mounted warfare as they occupied the defenses around Washington D.C. and made forays into the Shenandoah Valley against Confederate Cavalry. In addition to their sidearms and sabers, they were well equipped with a mix of the new Burnside and Sharps carbines, both well liked weapons among the cavalry corps.

While in the Shenandoah Valley

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*Below, from left; Captain Charles Eigenbrodt, commanding Pvt. Hepburn's Company E until his death at Halltown, Virginia in 1864; Colonel Charles R. Lowell, commanding the 2<sup>nd</sup> Massachusetts Cavalry until he was killed in action at Cedar Creek, Virginia, October 19, 1864; Confederate ranger, John Mosby, against whom the Californians skirmished regularly in the Shenandoah Valley.*





they were constantly engaged with Confederate General John Mosby's Partisan Rangers. As a Cavalry Private, James 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 engagements and skirmishes gradually whittled away at the muster rolls on both sides. On August 24, Pvt. Hepburn's E Company 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 2<sup>nd</sup> Mass troopers were taken prisoner and 75 horses were lost. But Pvt. William Short of F Company had helped even the score by seriously wounding Genl. Mosby in the side and thigh.

The night raids and scouting expeditions seemed endless. A trooper in A Company 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." Private Hepburn must have assumed his duties well, as on November 1, 1863 he won promotion to Sergeant of E Company.

In February 1864 two companies of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Mass Cavalry were surprised by Mosby and a large Rebel cavalry force. A hot skirmish took place and a number of the cavalry troopers were killed or wounded. Among the dead was Captain J. Sewall Reed, the original founder of the California Hundred.

Later in the Summer, the men of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Mass Cav held the honor of "right of the line" as Confederate General Jubal Early threatened Washington D.C.

Early had appeared suddenly near the outskirts of the Capital, having made a surprise march from his camps in the Shenandoah Valley. After considerable action Early was repulsed. As his army sullenly withdrew, the men of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Mass were troubling his flanks and rear guards like dogs nipping at the hooves of a running bear. But suddenly the bear turned with fangs bared and a hot clash of arms took place. Pvt. Hepburn and the Californians found themselves badly outnumbered and fighting for their lives on the streets of nearby Rockville, Maryland. By late afternoon, one hundred and six of the troopers were fallen or prisoners.

Beginning in August, the men were under fire for 21 consecutive days at places with odd names such as Snicker's Gap, Strasburg, Winchester, Opequan Creek, Berryville, Front Royal, Fisher's Hill, Port Republic, Waynesborough and Tom's Brook (a.k.a. Woodstock Races). They were now armed with their long awaited Spencer repeating carbines and enjoyed considerable advantage in firepower over their Confederate counterparts.

The morning of October 19, 1864, began as usual for Sergt. Hepburn and other members of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Mass. with "Boots and Saddles" sounding before sunrise in their camp near Cedar Creek, Virginia. The day's orders were to take the men on a scout across the river to "feel" for the enemy in the hills beyond Cedar Creek. General Sheridan was away at Winchester, 12 miles behind the lines. As the men fed their horses and made their own breakfasts, they began to hear the mutter of gunfire at the left of the Union line. No one gave it much thought as General Wright was expected to make a reconnaissance in force that morning to press Early's rebel army. But

the popping of picket fire gradually increased to a crescendo and was soon joined by artillery pounding and the crash of musketry.

Confederate forces commanded by Genl. Early surprised the Federal 6<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Corps as they burst from the pre-dawn fog causing the federal line to collapse and retreat in confusion. A Confederate rout seemed in the making. Far away in Winchester, General Sheridan heard the guns, mounted his horse and hastened forward to the fighting. He was unaware of the desperate state of affairs of his army who badly needed a break to somehow slow the rebel advance.

For the 2<sup>nd</sup> Mass Cav, all thoughts of a departing on a scout vanished when the fighting erupted. After mounting up, they made a wide sweep behind the unsettled Union lines and struck the Confederate right in a desperate effort to slow their advance. They then joined small bands of infantry from the 6<sup>th</sup> Union corps and attempted to hold points of defense to stem the onslaught of the Confederate forces. Colonel Charles Lowell led a mounted charge against the oncoming rebel infantry and his horse was shot from beneath him, the thirteenth in the last three months. Continuing on foot, he received a mortal wound to his chest, purchasing precious time with his life and those of his troopers.

On a neighboring field, Sergeant Hepburn was part of a similar charge. The line of troopers moved forward until the distance between their lines was close enough to allow the enemy only enough time to deliver one volley into the oncoming Cavalry. Then came the familiar command "Forward! Trot! Gallop! Charge!" and away went E Company with sabers flashing. The two lines crashed together and sometime

during the charge, Sergeant Hepburn received a bullet wound to his head which bled profusely. However, he returned to the Union lines and survived the battle. Moments after the charge into the enemy lines, General Sheridan made his stirring return to the field atop his black steed "Rienzi". Sheridan's presence rallied the troops, the momentum of battle shifted to the Federals and the day was eventually won. Along with the brave efforts of many officers and soldiers, the sabers of the Californians helped purchase the precious time needed to turn the tide of the Battle of Cedar Creek.

As Sergeant Hepburn recuperated from his wound, he remained active with his unit. Although the 2<sup>nd</sup> Mass had taken part in a large number of skirmishes and battles earlier in the war, their recent experience at Cedar Creek had been their first taste of battle on such a grand scale.

The balance of the Civil War would find them in harm's way on a regular basis. Through the Fall and Winter, they took part in skirmishes at Kernstown, Madison Court House, Charlottesville, Waynesborough and South Anna Bridge. As the end drew near and the Army of Northern Virginia was coming to bay at Petersburg, Sergeant Hepburn received the news that he was to be honorably discharged from his service with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Massachusetts, in order to return to California and accept a commission as a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant in the California Cavalry. His time of service in the Civil War had drawn to a close.

On July 8, 1865 Independence Day festivities were held at Mokelumne Hill, in Calaveras County, California. The day's celebrations were to include a parade, brass bands playing "soul stirring airs in honor of the glorious event" and

orations from speaker at a stand in the center of town. The balconies on the opposite side of the street were filled with ladies and the day was indeed a jubilee. Among the honorees was to be the newly returned Civil War hero of the small town, Lieutenant James Hepburn. A speaker took the stand and with oratory that would make a President proud, recounted the honorable service of Lieutenant Hepburn and the men of the Cal Battalion. He concluded his remarks thusly:

“Sir, it is as a token of our appreciation of the services which have upheld the glory of our flag, and vindicated the cause for which our fallen brethren laid down their lives, that I, in behalf of the Citizens of Mokelumne Hill, present to you this sword.

Take it, wear it as a memento of the respect and love which we shall always cherish toward you, and if need be, use it in the service of your country...Should foreign tyrants wish to share in the humiliation of domestic traitors...let us hope that this sword will write up as bright and enduring a record



as that other which flashed and triumphed upon the battle fields of the rebellion.”

Lieutenant Hepburn then took the podium and gave this stirring yet concise reply:

“Captain Hopkins and Gentlemen: The army is a poor school in which to learn the arts of oratory, and I cannot find words to express my feelings

of gratitude to my old friends of Mokelumne Hill for their noble gift which you have just presented me. Whatever may be the sum of the services I have rendered to our country in the war which has just closed, and whatever the peril incurred, thousands and hundreds of thousands of others have freely done the same. And in the future we may be sure of this: that our country will ask no service of any of her sons which myriads will not cheerfully volunteer to perform.

This gift – the precious token of esteem from my old friends – will ever be most dear to me; and I shall endeavor that no act of mine shall ever disgrace it, or its donors. - Through you, sir, I tender to them my thanks, My debt of gratitude I cannot express, and never can repay.”

At the conclusion of his remarks, the crowd gave three rousing cheers, after

which a rendition of “When Johnny Comes Marching Home” was played, followed by a benediction offered by Reverend Pierpont and Lieutenant took his step into history.

## Epilogue

The year following his return from service in the Civil War, James Hepburn married Emmaline Baker. She was a local girl from Visalia, Tulare County, California and they were married November 1, 1866. James was now 28, she was 21. To this union would come two sons and four daughters over the next thirteen years.

Eventually, the family would move to Santa Ana, California where James made his living working on the Railroad and farming. He died on October 22, 1881. His wife Emma lived to be 92 years of age and finally died of old age in Lynwood, California in 1937.



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### Images:

1. 2<sup>nd</sup> Mass Cav Guidon, Company M – author's Collection
2. Sharps Carbine & Accoutrements – author's Collection
3. Cavalry saber inscribed to Sergt. Henry W. Hale, 2<sup>nd</sup> Mass Cav, Co. H
4. Presentation Sword inscribed to Lieutenant James W. Hepburn – author's collection
5. Import sword belonging to J. Sewall Reed, Capt. A Company – author's collection
6. CDV Pvt. Jacob Walther, 2<sup>nd</sup> Mass Cav, 23 years old, died October 17, 1864 at Frederick, Maryland. - courtesy Wanye Sherman
7. CDV Pvt. Waldo LeFay, 2<sup>nd</sup> Mass Cav, 18 years old. - courtesy Wayne Sherman
8. Slouch hat belonging to Capt. Rufus W. Smith, 2<sup>nd</sup> Mass Cav. Killed in battle October 19, 1864 at Cedar Creek. - author's collection
9. Details - Presentation Sword inscribed to Lieutenant James W. Hepburn



## LIEUTENANT JAMES W. HEPBURN 2<sup>ND</sup> MASSACHUSETTS CAVALRY

### Civil War Service Chronology

1863	Feb 05	Musters into 2 <sup>nd</sup> Massachusetts Cavalry, Company E
	Mar	Departure from San Francisco aboard steamers for East Coast
	May 11	Commence picket duty around Washington D.C.
	Jun 26	Action at <b>Hanover Court House</b> , Virginia
	Aug 24	Skirmish near <b>Coyle's Tavern</b> , Virginia against Mosby
1864	Nov 01	Promoted to Sergeant
	Feb 4	Promoted to 1 <sup>st</sup> Lieutenant
	Jan 26	Fighting at <b>Ellis Ford</b> , Virginia
	Feb 22	Heavy fighting, <b>Dranesville, Virginia</b> against Mosby, many casualties
	Apr 28	Fighting at <b>Leesburg</b> , Virginia
	Jul 06	Action at <b>Mt. Zion Church</b> , Virginia against Mosby, 55 men lost
	Jul 11	Defense of <b>Ft. Stevens, Washington D.C.</b> , 106 men lost
	Aug 10	Beginning of 21 consecutive days engaged with enemy troops
	Sep 19	Heavy fighting at <b>Opequan Creek</b> , Virginia
	Sep 21	Fighting at <b>Front Royal</b> , Virginia
	Sep 22	Battle of <b>Fisher's Hill</b> , Virginia
	Oct 19	Severe fighting with heavy losses at <b>Cedar Creek</b> , Lt. Hepburn wounded
1865	Feb 27	Movement to the works at Petersburg, Virginia
	Mar 22	Commissioned 2 <sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant of 2 <sup>nd</sup> California Cavalry
	Mar 27	Discharged from 2 <sup>nd</sup> Mass Cav to return to duty in California
1866	Jul 08	Sword presentation ceremony, Mokelumne Hill, California