

CAPTAIN
RUFUS W. SMITH



CAL HUNDRED & CAL BATTALION

2ND MASSACHUSETTS CAVALRY

COMPANY F & COMPANY A, 1863 - 1864

BIOGRAPHY OF RUFUS W. SMITH
By Michael Sorenson

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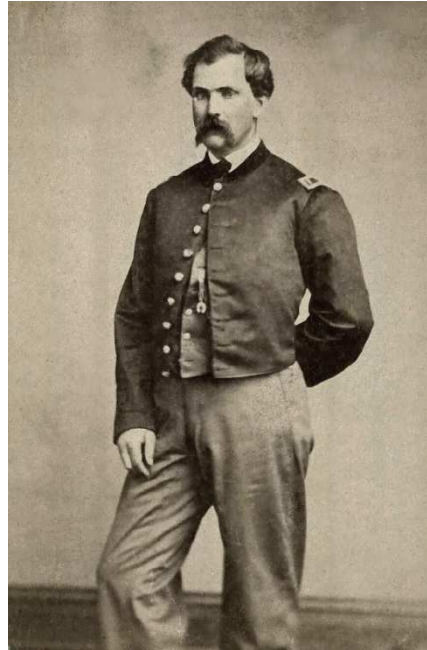
“California will not blush when the smoke arises from the battle-field in which her sons are engaged.” Evening Bulletin, San Francisco, Tuesday June 2, 1863

Rufus W. Smith was a California bachelor, and a determined Civil War cavalry officer. Having left the golden state to join the war effort, he found himself in Virginia’s Shenandoah Valley as a Captain serving with 500 Californians who had traveled to the East and joined the 2nd Massachusetts Cavalry. To a visitor in camp, Smith made his objectives for promotion to the rank of Colonel clear; “I will either wear the eagle on my shoulder or perish on the battlefield.” During the fourth year of the war, his prediction was fulfilled.

Rufus W. Smith was born in 1823 in the state of Maine. While still a young man, he made his way to the West, eventually settling in San Francisco. While there, he served as a member of a local Militia called the San Francisco Light Guard, where he rose to the rank of Captain.

In 1861 when hostilities erupted in the East between the Northern States and the new Confederate government, Rufus saw tensions increase between members of opposing groups, even out west in California. Local newspapers were soon filled with reports of fighting at unfamiliar spots like Bull Run and Shiloh Church.

Soon, the war fever reached California. Rufus and his friends from the California Light Guard prepared to resign their commissions to enlist in the Federal Army, hoping to take part in the War. To their disappointment, these California volunteers learned that they would serve garrison duty on the West Coast, pacifying Indians and guarding mail routes thousands of miles from where the action was taking place.



A few Union men in the Bay area arrived at a roundabout scheme to make their way East. 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 enlistment quota for Massachusetts. In return, the Massachusetts bounties usually paid to volunteers would be used to cover the costs of transporting the Californians to New England.

From the flood of early volunteers, one hundred were selected and mustered into service, with favor having been shown to the more rural horsemen. Smith was not among them and watched as his associates, now known as "The California Hundred" departed on the steamer Golden Age on

December 10, 1862, bound for Boston where they were to become Company A of the 2nd Massachusetts Cavalry. The Hundred were led by a friend of Smith's named J. Sewall Reed. Little did Rufus know at this point the role he would play in leading a Cavalry charge at the head of the California Hundred, after filling the vacancy left by Captain Reed who had been killed only months before.

The enthusiastic response by volunteers at the raising of the California Hundred prompted further offers of service under the same agreement with Massachusetts. In March, 1863 Rufus resigned his commission as Captain of the "Light Guards" in San Francisco and joined 386 other enlisted men and thirteen officers as they mustered into service as four cavalry companies known as the California Battalion. They set sail aboard the steamer Constitution, crossed the Isthmus of Panama by rail and boarded another steamer bound for New York City.

Rufus's martial experience in California led him to be commissioned as Lieutenant of Company F, in the 2nd Massachusetts Cavalry.

When the Cal 100 and the Cal Battalion were to finally muster out of service in 1865, only 188 of the 501 enlistees would be present for duty. Some were promoted to command in other units, a few deserted, and the rest would be killed, lost to wounds and disabilities, or captured and sent to Confederate prison camps.

Under the command of Colonel Charles Russell Lowell, recently of General George McClellan's staff, Lieutenant Smith was garrisoned outside Washington D.C. where his company stood picket at the outposts and scouted in front of the fortifications defending the national capital. The rough-and-ready Californians spent their time getting acquainted with the citified New Englanders who were their newly found Cavalry associates.

During the next six months, Lieutenant Smith and F Company, armed

with their sabers, side arms, and a mix of Burnside and Sharps carbines, were constantly engaged with Confederate John Mosby's Partisan Rangers in the byroads of secessionist Virginia.



Smith proved himself a capable leader in the field. After a sharp fight with Mosby's rangers on July 12, 1863, a member of his company, Private Robert Williams, sent a photograph home to family. On the back, he noted, "I have been in one fight at Ashby's Gap, we lost one Lieut Norcross & one Private prisoners, two killed, ten wounded. Lt. Smith shot five Rebs."

Over the coming months, Smith was involved in numerous scouts, expeditions, and skirmishes at the deadly game of cat and mouse. These small engagements gradually whittled away at the muster rolls on both sides.

On August 24, Lieutenant Smith's 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 2nd Mass troopers were taken prisoner and seventy-five horses were lost. But the Californians had helped even the score by seriously wounding Mosby in the side and thigh. Around this time, Captain DeMerritt of Company F seems to have suffered a mental breakdown and while on a scout suddenly left his men and disappeared. The following morning, tired, dirty and disoriented, he wandered back into

camp and for a time he was lost to the service. On September 1, 1863 Lieutenant Smith is noted as having taken command of the company.

The night raids and scouting expeditions seemed endless. Another trooper under the command of Lieutenant Smith, Private William Cochran 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."

In February, 1864 two companies of the 2nd Mass Cavalry were surprised by Mosby and a large cavalry force near Dranesville, Virginia. 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. On March 29, 1864 Smith was promoted to the Captaincy of Company A, replacing Captain Reed. Speaking to a visiting friend from California about his aspirations of glory and promotion, Rufus stated that he would either wear the eagle on his shoulder or perish on the battle-field.

Captain Smith continued to build upon his reputation for courage and daring. When Confederate General Jubal Early threatened Washington D.C., considerable action took place and the Rebels were repulsed, with heavy rear guard skirmishing as the Southern forces were driven back across the Potomac. At Rockville, Maryland the Californians were nipping at the heels of the Rebel army as it returned to Virginia. Suddenly, the butternut forces whirled and slammed into the surprised Californians who were swallowed up in the counterattack. Dismounted troopers were shot or captured before they could return to their mounts, and others fought in the streets as they edged back toward the Union lines. There were numerous casualties and prisoners lost.

Above: Captain J. Sewall Reed – 1863.

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summer passed and the cooler days of autumn arrived, Captain Smith and Company A saw action at 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 a considerable advantage in firepower over their Confederate counterparts. From each of these actions, as always before, Smith emerged unharmed as though he was leading a charmed life.

At Halltown, in August, Captain Smith saw his long time friend, Captain Charles S. Eigenbrodt shot from his horse while leading a charge against the enemy. The following day another friend, Lieutenant



Charles
E. Meader
and his

mounted troopers carried enemy works where hand to hand fighting ensued among the Confederate infantry and Lieutenant Meader was killed.

The morning of October 19, 1864 began as usual for Captain Smith and other members of the 2nd Mass with "boots and saddles" sounding before sunrise in their camp near Cedar Creek, Virginia. They were to ride on a scout across the river to feel for the enemy in the hills beyond Cedar Creek. Sheridan was away at Winchester, 12 miles behind the lines. As the men readied their horses, they began to hear the mutter of gunfire from the left of the Union line. No one gave it much thought until the picket fire was overpowered by artillery pounding and the crash of musketry. Confederate forces commanded by Genl. Early surprised the Federal 6th and 19th Corps as they burst from the pre-dawn fog and caused the federal line to collapse and retreat in confusion. A complete Confederate rout seemed in the making. Far away in Winchester, General Sheridan heard the guns in the distance. He mounted his horse and hastened forward to the fighting, knowing

This slouch hat belonged to Captain Smith and is typical of the hats worn by many of the officers who were his peers. Written in Smith's hand on the sweatband is "R. W. Smith, 2nd Mass Cav."

that his presence on the field might make the difference for his men. He was unaware of the desperate situation of his army who badly needed a break to somehow slow the rebel advance.

For the Captain Smith and the 2nd 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 6th Union corps in attempting to hold points of defense and stem the onslaught of the Confederate forces. During the morning's commotion, the Californians prepared for a mounted charge against the oncoming rebel infantry. The company trotted forward until they were within sight of the Rebels who had the protection of a stone wall and a battery of artillery for support. Then came the familiar command "Forward! Trot! Gallop! Charge!" and away went the Californians over the open ground with sabers flashing. The troopers endured volleys of cannister and musket fire but still reached the wall although they were unable to carry its



Above: By late in the war, the men of the 2nd Massachusetts Cavalry were armed with Spencer repeating carbines like this one, carried by Wesley Howe of Company M. While firing a .52 caliber metallic cartridge, these arms were an advanced and well designed weapon that gave the Union soldier considerable advantage in firepower over his Confederate counterpart. **Below:** Captain Smith sometime after his promotion to Captain on March 1, 1864.

ramparts. Colonel Lowell's horse was shot from beneath him, the thirteenth in the last three months.

As the butternut troops tried to press their advantage, the regiment dismounted and fought alongside the infantry, taking cover behind a stone wall and firing their carbines. Again it was determined that the cavalry was to charge and attempt to break the Confederate line who were making their way among the structures of Middletown. The troopers mounted and went over the wall, trotting forward until they were able to entice a volley from the butternut line. After this was received, they spurred their horses forward and engaged the Confederate troops. Fire was exchanged until the cavalry was forced to withdraw. But the momentum of the Confederate advance had been turned. As the mounted troops retired to their own lines, Captain Smith remained on the field, shot through the abdomen.

Smith lay wounded between the lines through the afternoon until he was rescued and taken to safety in a small parlor in a house in Middletown. Here he was placed beside his Brigade Commander and close friend, Colonel Charles Lowell who had also been severely wounded.

Lowell's injuries had paralyzed him. Mercifully he could feel no pain but remained lucid. Captain Smith was not so lucky and was suffering severely. A memorable interchange took place in the

closing moments of their lives as both knew they were dying.

Colonel Lowell spoke quietly, trying to calm Captain Smith, reminding him that his wound had come at a pivotal moment in the battle. The Confederate line had been checked long enough for the blue infantry to regroup. Lowell closed, *"I have always been able to count on you...you were the bravest of the brave, now you must be strong, you must meet this as you have other trials. Be steady, I count on you."* A short time later both were dead.

Major Dewitt Thompson of the Cal Battalion offered his eulogy to Captain Smith. *"Early in the day, at the hard-fought battle of Cedar Creek, October 19, 1864, Captain Rufus W. Smith, formerly commander of the Light Guard of San Francisco, was killed while in command of his squadron, endeavoring to check the then successful advance of the enemy. This brave officer left home, friends, and business to serve with the battalion, and after participating in many engagements lost his life on the field of Sheridan's greatest victory."*



Neither Captain Smith nor Colonel Lowell would see the stirring conclusion of the battle, the Union army having been energized by the arrival on the field of General Sheridan. 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.

Ah! Never shall the land forget
How gushed the life-blood of her brave,
Gushed warm with hope and courage yet
Upon the soil they fought to save.

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