

He Was a Confederate Soldier

A few weeks ago I was in an antique store in Osceola, Missouri and came across an old frame with numerous Confederate officers and labeled "Confederate Heroes." Out of the dozen photographs of Lee, Jackson, Beauregard, Sterling Price and other notable Southern officers was included a photo of a lone enlisted soldier named George H. Harbaugh. Logically thinking this individual was also a known Southern hero I went home and started researching this person. Research indicated that the photo was of George Hastings Harbaugh. The photograph plainly depicts a youthful Southern soldier as a young teenager. He was a private in the Pelham-Breathed-Johnston-Shanks Battery of the Stuart Horse Artillery, enlisting on May 5, 1864. At his enlistment, he gave his birthplace as Dinwiddie County, VA., but that he was residing in Baltimore, MD. Census records show he was living in Hagerstown, MD. He was born circa 1848. From 1861 to 1862 at 13 years of age he was serving in the Quartermasters Department in Richmond, VA. He died on August 6, 1911 in the Maryland Line Old Soldier's Home in Pikesville, MD. His occupation was listed as a harness maker. He is buried in Washington, DC.

Reflecting on the image's youthful appearance the procedures for the recruitment of troops for both armies originated in the Militia Act of 1792 legislating that all white men of sound body between the ages of eighteen and forty-five were legally obligated to serve in the militia of their state. The Confederate Congress made several amendments to the Recruitment Act over the course of the war. In February 1864, the age limits were extended to between 17 and 50 years old although oftentimes individual ages were overlooked due to battlefield losses and disease.

While little is currently known of George H. Harbaugh much is known about the famous military unit he was part of. Research found that George H. Harbaugh was a Confederate soldier in the Army of Northern Virginia belonging to General J.E.B. Stuart's Horse Artillery. Men often enlisted in a company recruited in the counties where they lived though not always. Made up of men from various states, including Virginia, Maryland, Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, Louisiana and Tennessee, Stuart's Horse Artillery constituted an unusual mixture. Recruited in Virginia Stuart's Horse Artillery initially started out as a single battery led by Major John Pelham, until it was split in September 1862, into the 1st and 2nd Stuart's Horse Artillery commanded by Major Robert F. Beckham, a Virginian who had graduated from West Point just before the war. Command of the 1st Battalion was assigned to Captain James Breathed while the 2nd Battalion was at first led by Captain Mathis W. Henry who was soon replaced by Captain William M. McGregor. The Horse Artillery was recruited to support Stuart's cavalry. With all of the men mounted and accustomed to being constantly on the move with the cavalry, the batteries were always in the thick of the fight in the very midst of the enemy. To unlimber, fire, limber and move to unlimber in another position several times in one battle set the horse artillery apart from their counterparts who supported the infantry. The actions of both these battalions cannot be underestimated in securing Stuart's reputation as one of the most outstanding cavalry commanders of the Civil War.

The men in Stuart's Horse Artillery served from the inception of the Civil War clear through to Appomattox. A recruitment poster from 1862 promised: "Whenever or where ever there is likely to be a fight, they are bound to be in the front." The Stuart Horse Artillery would fight in all major campaigns of the Army of Northern Virginia. The Horse Artillery saw action on some of the most harrowing fields of battle in the war on some of the most bitter battlefields in American history including but not limited to: Brandy Station, Kelly's Ford, the Seven Days battle, Second Manassas, Antietam; called the "artillery hell of Confederate gunners, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, Rector's Cross Roads, Haw's Shop, Rio Hill, and in the Shenandoah Valley fighting in the 1864 Valley Campaign and also around Richmond and Petersburg, Five Forks, the Peninsula Campaign, Sharpsburg and

Appomattox Court House. A monument to Stuart's Horse Artillery is standing on the battlefield of Gettysburg noting their outstanding bravery and courage.

At Chancellorsville, The Horse Artillery won the admiration of 'Stonewall Jackson' by using its guns to help break the Union flank. The Horse Artillery won fame riding with Stuart as he rode completely around General George McClellan's Federal army in 1862. Stuart's three-day expedition was a complete success. It made the huge Army of the Potomac look like an inept and bumbling giant, and the intelligence gathered proved vital as General Robert E. Lee plotted his next move: a massive attack against McClellan's forces, a move that would push the Union back on its heels for months.

The soldiers in the Horse Artillery were normally placed in the traditional spot in a column on the march, in the rear of Stuart's column. As the war progressed Stuart's experience relegated the Horse Artillery to march to the front of the column where they could be more effective. This did not mean just a few serious days of hard fought battle. Their job as well as the cavalry was to gain information, screen the armies movements from the enemy and conduct raids to disrupt enemy communication and supply. In this role the horse artillery often saw combat daily. In fact they sparred so often, the opposing artillery could identify each other even at great distance. In many of these skirmishes Stuart's Horse Artillery learned to recognize each others "signatures of fire". After the war the Yankees who opposed them recalled identifying the accuracy and rapid fire from their guns. The tenacious Horse Artillery would often fight with unorthodox methods. While receiving accurate counter battery fire it was not uncommon rather than withdraw to a safe distance to instead "Advance the guns!" Instead of chasing them off the dueling would get closer, deadlier, and more intense.

Stuart's Horse Artillery was noted for fighting their guns to the front. They maximized the damage they could cause the enemy by leap frogging their guns forward tirelessly. The Horse Artillery advanced their guns so rapidly it's said they often moved in advance of the infantry. At every opportunity they would fire double shots of canister into the fleeing Yankees. One veteran eye witness left a graphic account of the damage done, "There was 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." Once during the war a raid by General George Armstrong Custer caught the Horse Artillery in camp without support. Custer could have bagged the entire lot, and took nearby Charlottesville, but hesitated. Did he see Rebel artillery with infantry and cavalry support? No, the Horse Artillery deployed their guns and then had every available man form up with a stick on his shoulder. From a distance they looked like a line of infantry. Custer's raid came to nothing and he reported he retreated because he was out numbered.

As in any research you discover many points of irony. My own families oral history mentions a Civil War ancestor that belonged to the Black Horse Cavalry which was also commanded by JEB Stuart. Like the George H. Harbaugh of Hagerstown, Maryland I also had relatives from Hagerstown as did also William Clarke Quantrill. The tragedy of the Civil War lies in the visual image of such a youthful face. There are many things we don't know about George H. Harbaugh but what we do know speaks volumes. The most complimentary epitaph that could be given him is that, "He was a Confederate soldier."

Article by Paul R. Petersen

Suggested reading:

By author Robert J. Trout:

They Followed the Plume: The Story of J.E.B. Stuart and His Staff, Stackpole Books 1993

With Pen and Saber: The Letters and Diaries of J. E. B. Stuart's Staff Officers, Stackpole Books 1995
By Author Gerald Patterson:
Gallopig Thunder: The Stuart Horse Artillery Battalion, Stackpole Books 2002