

CHAPTER X

Captain Robert M. Ramsey

My autobiography will of course embrace sketches of the public services of all my sons and indeed the more important incidents in the life of my entire family. And here I introduce to the reader's attention my son Captain Robert M. Ramsey of the Confederate States Navy, and principal courier and scout of General Longstreet, General Wheeler, and other commanders. He was our fourth son. After his preparatory education, acquired under the preceptorship of Reverend Thomas Davis and Reverend N. A. Penland, both at different periods holding for a time the pastorate of our church (Lebanon) and the position of principal in Mecklenburg Academy near us and on my own land, he was sent to Tusculum College—still under the presidency of Reverend S. W. Doak, D.D. His proficiency was respectable, but mixing from his boyhood with the gallant soldiery of the Volunteer State who had performed such adventures and achieved the remarkable conquest of Mexico, he could not relish the tamer pursuits of literature and science, and inheriting all the martial spirit of his late grandfather, Captain John Crozier, "had heard of war and longed to follow to the field some warlike chief." His taste, even when a boy, was for wild adventure and romantic daring. His youthful sports were all of this kind. Agile and strong, no one of his years could beat him in a foot race, throw him on his back in a wrestling match, dive deeper, or swim a wider river. At sixteen he was admitted to be the best marksman and the best and most graceful horseman in Knox County. While at Tusculum, a fellow student, in attempting to swim across the Chucky, a most rapid river, was heard to hollo for help and was seen to sink the first time. Robert denuded himself instantly, dashed into the river, swam nearly to the further shore and caught his friend in the moment of sinking the third and last time, and thus rescued him from a watery grave. This was pronounced to be a great feat not only of manhood but of devoted constancy to a friend and of unselfish generosity to a fellow student.

Another instance of his fearlessness occurred a year after. I witnessed it

myself. On the opposite side of the Holston from my residence lived a tenant of my own, Henry Payne, his wife, and three small children. During the remarkable freshet of 18__ the river had surrounded his house and of course cut off all chance of escape. I had admonished him all the p.m. that he ought to effect his escape to the hills as before morning his cabin and his family might be swept off. He persisted in saying that the river would soon attain its greatest height and refused to leave. Night came on. The river continued to rise and about ten o'clock p.m. he was heard to exclaim, "For God's sake, come over and take us out of this water." The night was dark, tempestuous and cold. The river was covered with floating masses of timber and the wrecks of bridges, barns, mills and other buildings. Even in daylight it would have been dangerous and rash to attempt the crossing. My three sons Alexander, Robert, and McKnitt were all at home with us that dreadful night. The wind was directly down the river and from the north. This increased the hazard and the danger of the attempted rescue. But I could plainly see that the young men were determined to make the desperate attempt. The river had not been crossed for twenty-four hours even in a canoe. They thought the only plan which promised either to be safe or effectual was to take the horse boat, and taking two other good Negro water-men and extemporizing an extra oar, they prepared to leave the shore. They insisted that I should not go with them. I replied that some caution was necessary and as they were all incautious I ought to go along. Finding my purpose unchangeable they reluctantly acquiesced. Leaving the lights burning in the dormitories nearest to the east bank of the river, we embarked and passing over the garden and the adjoining cornfields and bayou, now all submerged, we had little difficulty in ascending the river nearly half a mile opposite the lower end of Boyd's Island. "All hands to your oars," and we stemmed the impetuous stream. I held the steering oar and kept the boat in the direction of Payne's house. By almost superhuman efforts the prow rested against the open door of Payne's house. Robert sprang into it with the cable in his hand and secured the boat, while the others with their setting poles shoved off the floating timbers. We found the porch of the house already gone, the gates and outbuildings had preceded it. A brick chimney thus far had protected the house but that was almost on the point of floating too. Seeing the emergency did not allow a minute's delay, I walked to the end of the boat nearest the door. I looked in. Payne had piled up some rocks in the fireplace on which to keep light and fire. The water was

more than a foot deep on the floor—had not yet reached the beds, though a few inches more would have covered them. The underside of the wood was already in the water and the fire would in a few minutes more have been wholly extinguished. Payne and his wife were setting around the fireplace, holding the children on their knees, their feet placed on the rounds of the chairs to keep them dry. I exclaimed, "Payne, throw the children into the boat, such of your bedding as is dry, and then some fire chunks, and come in yourselves." This was the work of a minute, and with all aboard we struck into the cornfield west of the house, struck the high lands beyond it, and at length reached Riverside—a house then unoccupied. There we put out our cargo, five living beings and two beds. From this point we could see the lighted windows across the Holston. I steered the boat nearly half a mile across Mrs. Dickson's orchard and bottoms in the direction of the island again when the poles were dropped, the oars resumed, and by dint of hard and skillful pulling and steering we at length got among the top branches of a large sycamore tree standing at low-water mark near the ferry landing. It was now the dawn of day and we were able to appreciate the danger and exposure we underwent in this perilous night voyage. There were islands several hundred yards long of floating drift and timber passing almost continuously with the rapid current which not even in daylight we would have been willing again to encounter. One of these islands of driftwood we once did strike, but energetically disengaging our boat from it we reached the shade trees around my office and got out safely into the porch around it.

Many instances like these of adventure and enterprise I could here give. But there is one other I may not omit. When a full grown man Robert sought the wilds of Texas. On his journey he met another traveler. At Galveston, the latter was taken sick with yellow fever. He importuned my son not to leave him there to die. To remain with his friend was to expose himself to the deadly infection, but he assured him that he would not leave him. He stayed with him till he was able again to resume his journey. This I always considered as the true moral sublime of friendship, humanity, and heroism.

In 1860 the question of secession was agitated in the South and had reached Tennessee. My sons all declared at once for the South. Robert, after South Carolina seceded, wished to go at once to the defense of the Palmetto State. I suggested that Tennessee would, I believed, soon join her southern co-states and that he might then have a theater on which

to exercise and gratify his patriotic ambition. This seemed to quiet for a time his longing for the field. In March of 1861 he told me he believed our state would not go out and that he had determined to go to Fort Sumter. He met in Knoxville Captain A. M. Wallace, then recruiting troops for the State of Georgia. It was arranged that volunteers from Tennessee, though still in the union, should be embodied and organized for the Southern service. Robert got, I believe, seventeen to join him. He went over to Maryville where Captain Wallace then was and tendered his men. Returning and crossing Little River at night he reached our home. Taking affectionate leave of us, he intended to leave upon the first train. But at this time it was by some deemed *treasonable* to avow adherence to the Southern cause or sympathy for the Southern Confederacy. It was soon whispered around Knoxville that some officials were watching around the depot ready to arrest any belligerents that might be enrolled for the Confederate States service. It was even said that warrants had been issued and were then in the pockets of officers to prevent the departure of such as were then contemplating revolution or any change in the government. Robert and his men knew one another but wore no badge or uniform to distinguish to what service each belonged. The day fixed for their departure arrived. Groups of young men could be seen standing around the corners of the streets talking earnestly about something not known to everyone. Captain Wallace was at his hotel. I went there to see him. Many of the young men occasionally called there too. Yet nothing was definitely known. A good deal was suspected and even hinted aloud. The friends of the South, then vastly in the minority in town, at length began to assemble in and near General Ramsey's office on Gay Street. From this point they marched noiselessly in the direction of the depot. Some of them I know were armed. Arrived at the train not yet ready to start, we entered the cars. Some of us stood on the platform: Others remained within, not fearing so much the threatened arrest, certainly, as the disappointment of their cherished hope of seeing the field. I could plainly see where in that large crowd the virtue, intelligence, and patriotism of the country stood. Almost every countenance was radiant with approbation. A scowl, an averted eye, and ominous shaking of the head I could see here and there. There was no cheering, no indignant feeling uttered by any. A kind leave-taking followed. The officer believed to have warrants in his pocket was the last to come forward and say farewell. He did this very cordially to Robert. "I wish you well, but when

we meet it will be on opposite sides." "All right," Robert replied. He shook my hand too, cordially. We had always been friends, and there is no cleverer man than Colonel W. P. Crippen, and said, "Not you going, too." "Only to Lenoir's," I added, "to give the boys some good advice." At Lenoir's, I bade my gallant young countrymen adieu. At Atlanta they learned that the affair in Charleston harbor was already over. They joined the regiment of Colonel J. H. Williams, were sent to Fort Pulaski, thence to Tybee Island, where they remained till ordered forward to the First Manassas. When I arrived at the Spotswood House, Richmond, Virginia the following summer and was entering my name on the register I discovered upon it the name of Captain A. M. Wallace and hastened to his room. He told me Robert and his comrades were behind him and would probably be there that night. It was partly for this reason I was so anxious that if Colonel Williams' regiment was sent forward there next morning I might go to Manassas with it. But the battle was over and another destination was assigned him.

After my return from the bank convention at Richmond I received from Mr. Memminger a dispatch inquiring for the whereabouts of my son Robert. I gave it to him. He shortly afterwards received in camp a commission from President Davis appointing him lieutenant in the Confederate States Navy, giving him a furlough of several days before he would be required to go into active service. He repaired immediately to the seat of government, got his uniform and his sword, and came to us at Mecklenburg. The considerate kindness of allowing him a short furlough suggested the probability that he owed his promotion to my good friend Mr. Memminger, though I had met the secretary of the navy at Mr. Davis' reception on the occasion of the adjournment of the bank delegates as heretofore mentioned. . . .

At the expiration of his furlough he received orders to join his captain * and associate lieutenants at Pensacola. Thither he repaired with all possible promptitude, and discharged, besides the duties of his immediate command, others not less important or onerous, between Pensacola, Mobile, and New Orleans. He was afterwards sent to Norfolk, was present when that place was evacuated, went then to _____, and finally went to the defense of Richmond—being at Drewry's Bluff when the attack on that place was so signally repulsed. He acted as one of the sharpshooters there. The accuracy and efficiency of his aim were loudly applauded. The Federal

* Captain Simms I believe.

navy was compelled to abandon the James as the channel of assault and Richmond was for the time secure.

The battle of Malvern Hill was going on almost simultaneously with that of Drewry's Bluff, and at the close of the latter, several young officers of the Confederate navy asked for and obtained leave of absence for a day to go into the fight at the former place. The leave was granted. They rode rapidly in the direction of the guns, and finding the headquarters of General [T. J. Jackson?], who commanded on that occasion, asked for "a place in the picture." The post of danger was assigned to them. The conflict was prolonged far into the night, was resumed again early next morning. The lieutenants' leave of absence had expired. The battle raged without intermission. New forces were brought into the fight but the enemy were at length repulsed and driven from the field. Until the battle was decided, the young men had never once thought of the Bluff—nor their orders to return to their commands after one day's absence on leave. It was unsoldierly to leave before the victory was won. At the time they had achieved it—the commander-in-chief had barely announced the result—the young men turned the heads of their horses in the direction of the Bluff, and not taking time to give them their oats or take any refreshment themselves they were galloping off to their cantonment. Arrived there they were mortified to learn that their captain had them arrested for *absence without leave*. This was technically true. But in such a case Napoleon would have promoted them on the field. Andrew Jackson would have said gracefully, "Young gentlemen, you have nobly won your spurs and other epaulettes—Lieutenant, you are a Captain. Lieutenant, you have won the command of a battalion. Lieutenant, I put you at the head of a regiment—your commissions to bear date from yesterday morning." These illustrious chieftains would have said, "You did right in standing by your colors, leave or no leave of absence. The rule is never to leave your field of duty while the battle is undecided." The young men pleaded their excuse, but pleaded in vain. They resigned their commissions at once and retired to the ranks. History, honor, posterity, will sustain their manly conduct.

Lieutenant Ramsey returned from Virginia to Tennessee at the time General Kirby Smith was inaugurating his celebrated campaign to the Ohio River. He was invited to join the command. He gladly accepted the invitation. He had frequently crossed the Cumberland Mountains and had gone as far as Richmond, Kentucky, where his sister lived who had

married Colonel Daniel Breck, Jr., the son of Honorable D. Breck, M.C. from that district. This service exactly suited the genius and taste of Captain Ramsey. The theater on which he was now to act was congenial to all his tastes and preferences. He was born insensible to fear. He loved adventure and courted danger: withal he was an expert rider, an experienced woodsman. His unerring and trusty rifle never deceived him. He was General Smith's chief courier and scout.

General Smith was at this time organizing his campaign to Kentucky. His headquarters were at Knoxville. I saw him every day. He called with Mrs. Smith to see my family. We were on good terms. He asked for the whereabouts of my sons Robert and Alexander. They accompanied him on his march. If to any two men under his command, the success of *his* invasion is indebted, it was to them. Especially the grand affair near and at Richmond owes its great result to their minute knowledge of its localities, and so of other places. They were with him in his dash upon Lexington. They procured supplies for his army, of subsistence, clothing and leather. This latter they obtained in large quantities at the eminent hazard of life in _____. General Braxton Bragg had now the whole command in Kentucky and when Smith, in thirty-six hours more, would have been battering down Cincinnati, Bragg gave orders for an inglorious retreat. The former had the Queen City of the West within his easy grasp: the latter made him relinquish it and thus extinguish the hope and paralyze the efforts of all Kentucky then preparing to espouse our cause. In conducting this retreat the aid of my two sons was again called in requisition. By Robert's skill and experience and energy the trains were safely brought over the big hill seventeen miles this side of Richmond. Without pursuit, and with but little comparative loss, the whole was brought safely back to Knoxville. Without the delay of more than a day Bragg went forward to Richmond, Virginia, explained away to the credulous and confiding Davis the *errors* he had plainly committed—*blunders* I will not call them—changed the whole program of Confederate action, disaffected in a tender point our true ally, Kentucky, and thus remotely but certainly ruined the Confederate cause.

After returning home Robert was sent to Cumberland Gap to superintend the erection of further defenses at that important but now vulnerable pass. His chief passed the highest eulogy upon him when he said to

me that without his skillful and energetic assistance the magazine and other works would not have been built. The tortuous and serpentine road up the mountain he obviated by his contrivance of steering the hind wheels of a wagon to one side while the tongue of his wagon was directed to the other. An army engineer from West Point would not have thought of this simple contrivance, with which every East Tennessee boat builder is familiar and has seen often used in bringing gunwales more than a hundred feet long and four or five feet wide over the most crooked and zigzag roads. Without doubt, common sense is more indispensable in the affairs of life than much dignified with the name of sense though acquired from books or from the schools.

My son Robert remained with Bragg's army and was in several engagements with the enemy. Many of the incidents of Joseph Wheeler's cavalry to which he belonged have escaped my recollections. One only of these will be here given. Wheeler, with his command of some thousand horsemen crossed the Tennessee at Kelly's Ferry and struck for the rear of the Federal army with the hope of diverting their attention from further conquest in Georgia. The command made several raids in Middle Tennessee, cutting off supply trains, tearing up the railroads and bridges and capturing several small Federal detachments. When not met by not less than two to one, Wheeler's men were in every case the victors. Returning from one of these successful raids, the detachment to which my son Robert belonged encountered a Federal force which quadrupled ours. Striking it near its center, the detachment was surrounded and captured. Robert, and his boy Wesley among the rest, were made prisoners. Riding near to one of his officers Robert disclosed to the officer that he had determined to effect his escape. The officer remonstrated against the attempt as suicidal, on account of the small number and unarmed condition of the Confederate prisoners as well as the large armed force that now surrounded and guarded them. Robert repeated his purpose as taken; the officer persisted in dissuading him from the mad attempt. They were all riding in a very long lane and just then they came in view of the encampment of the Federal army nearly a mile distant. Realizing that every rod he advanced nearer to that army only diminished his chance of possible escape, he saw on the fence on his left hand a panel one rail lower than the rest. He reined up his horse to it, put his spurs into his flanks. He

leaped over it at a bound, and was turned by the fearless rider in the direction of a distant clump of cedar trees. As he dashed across the field several shots were fired at him. Like a Comanche rider the moment he had jumped the fence he threw his whole weight on his left stirrup and clasping the horn of his saddle in his right hand and clinging as close as he could to the left side of his horse, little of his own body was exposed to the fire of a great number of muskets fired at him. Several shots nearly spent struck the right side of his saddle; a few reached his horse and his clothes had some bullet holes made in them. He reached the clump of cedars in safety. His sword arm had been slightly paralyzed in the morning when he was captured by the stroke of a heavy saber in the hands of a Federal light-horseman. This was the only personal injury he received during the war. Being the chief scout of General Wheeler, he knew all that commander's movements, promulgated or concealed in his own bosom. And knowing the point at which he would aim to be that night, he joined his camp next morning before day. The boy Wesley, a prisoner too, riding far behind his young master in the rear, had heard the firing at the escaped prisoner without knowing though who he was. He told afterwards that no one of the enemy's cavalry could get over the fence till their riders dismounted and laid down the rails and that they made no pursuit after crossing the fence. The horse, the efficient cause of Robert's escape, was the best I ever saw. He was a stately and magnificent black, with a flowing mane and tail,—gentle and docile ordinarily but in a combat and amid the clangor of arms seemed to be instinct with ambition and rage—vaulted high and loftily, leaped a fence, a wall, a ditch, a ravine, was impetuous and foremost in a charge and when the enemy's bugle sounded a retreat, so eager was he in the hot pursuit that on some occasions his rider could scarce escape another capture. He will be mentioned again.

Wesley continued with the captors till they bivouacked at night. Then, learning from the other prisoners that it was his young master who had effected his escape, determined to escape also: mounted his mule, dashed by the sentinels at night, took the direction of the Tennessee River, got on Wheeler's track and overtook his command just as the last company was crossing the river. He brought off his booty, a large army sack filled with officers' best clothing and uniform, revolvers, etc. His sack had not been opened at the encampment. It and its contents had been captured at McMinnville.