

John Atkins, 43rd Virginia Cavalry

John Atkins arrived in Richmond, Virginia from Ireland about April 7, 1864 with a letter from his brother, Captain Robert Going Atkins to be delivered to General Samuel Cooper, Adjutant and Inspector General for the Confederate Army. Robert G. Atkins had served as a captain on General Cooper's staff before returning to Firville, County Cork, Ireland to tend to his and brother John Atkins' ailing father, the Reverend Philip Going Atkins. As a result of his father's health, Robert G. Atkins had tendered his resignation from the Confederate Army but the younger John Atkins was to stay and fight for the Confederate cause.¹

John Atkins found his way to Fauquier County, Virginia and joined the 43rd Virginia Cavalry Battalion, enlisting in Captain Richard P. Montjoy's Company D.² The first account of Atkins' service with the 43rd came on July 18, 1864 when he joined with Samuel C. Alexander, Walter H. Whaley and two other rangers in scouting near Union Mills in Fairfax County, Virginia. The little party met with a detachment of about 10 Union cavalymen capturing five including a lieutenant and their horses.³

During the last week of September 1864, several rangers made a trip to Richmond on furlough. The party included Captain Adolphus E. Richards and his brother Thomas W. T. Richards, Charles H. Hall, J. Marshall Crawford, John Atkins and others. On September 29th, Fort Harrison fell to Grant's army creating a general emergency in the Confederate Capitol. The provost guards began rounding up all furloughed soldiers and officers for the purpose of marching them out to the trenches to help defend the city from a potential attack. All the visiting rangers were caught up in the near panic situation but all escaped to return to Fauquier County by various means. John Atkins was captured and forced to march out to the city defenses but was released the next day through the intercession of Captain Edward Hudson of General Arnold Elzey's staff. Hudson likely knew Atkins brother, Captain Robert Going Atkins who had also served on General Elzey's staff prior to accepting an appointment to serve on General Samuel Cooper's staff.⁴

There are no other known accounts of Atkins' service with the 43rd prior to his participation in the ill-fated cavalry fight between the rangers and the 8th Illinois Cavalry at 'Oakley', the home of Henry G. Dulany near Upperville in Fauquier County, Virginia. This engagement would become one of the worst defeats the battalion would suffer at the hands of the Union Army in which four rangers, including John Atkins, were killed or mortally wounded.⁵

Mary E. "Ida" Dulany, wife of Henry G. Dulany, owner of 'Oakley', noted in her diary the cavalry engagement at their farm including the treatment of the dead and wounded rangers. A portion of her entry for October 29, 1864 concerned John Atkins and read: "Poor Atkins the first one brought in suffered terribly. His wound was at once pronounced mortal. And he was let alone. I sat by his side holding his hand. He was a minister's son from Ireland. He said not long before his death "my mother, my poor mother"--- His last words were "Jesus Master have mercy upon my soul." His dead body lay all night near the other two wounded men. The next morning their friends came and carried away the bodys of Atkins and Gulick -----."6

The cavalry engagement at 'Oakley' and death of John Atkins was also noted in the diary of Amanda "Tee" Edmonds, the twenty-five year old daughter of Elizabeth "Betsy" Edmonds of 'Belle Grove' near Paris, Virginia. The entry in her diary for October 29, 1864 read: "Oh! Oh! Bettie, Ma and I were seated around the fireside when George came in giving us dreadful news that Mosby had been whipped at Upperville. The officers of the first and second squadron made a very injudicious charge and are routed, losing four men killed, six wounded and nine prisoners. Among the number, Mr. Atkins fell mortally wounded by George's side. George brought his horse off, but he left the poor fellow in Yankee hands."7

Ranger and friend of Atkins, J. Marshall Crawford wrote in his post-war history of the 43rd Battalion, the following: "Among the killed was John Atkins, of County Cork, Ireland, and brother of Captain Atkins, late of General Elzey's staff, but now Lord-----". No higher compliment could be paid to a brave soldier than that paid by Mosby to the noble patriot, as he

lay stretched on this bier in Henry Dulaney's house. Some one came in the room while the Colonel was there, and commenced explaining the part played in the affair by certain officers. The Colonel replied, pointing to the dead body of Atkins, --- "There lies a man I would not have given for a whole regiment of Yankees." John Atkins left home, friends, wealth, and position, and came three thousand miles to fight for a cause which every true Irishman holds most dear. He was brave as he was generous. He knew not what danger was. Fearless as a lion, he was gentle in his manners as a lamb. How touching are those last words he spoke while pouring out his heart's blood at the foot of the shrine of liberty: "Oh, my mother! My poor mother!" He was a man of fine education and most agreeable manners, and enjoyed the esteem and confidence of the whole command. A neat coffin was furnished by his friends, and he was buried in the cemetery at Paris."⁸

"Tee" Edmond's entry in her diary for October 31st read partially as follows: "I hear that Mr. Atkins (who died an hour or two after he was badly wounded) is buried today in Paris. ----- The coffin was opened for us all to behold his face again. Oh! Who could gaze upon his noble, handsome face without shedding tears of sympathy for the dear brave soldier far away from every relative and home, but thank God not bereft of friends here. No, no, many tears are shed arund his cold form. He was taken to Mrs. Dulaney's where he breathed his last words, and she was kind enough to write his last words, for his friends, which were, "I have come three thousand miles to fight for the Confederacy, but it is all over now. My poor mother – Jesus have mercy on my soul." Poor fellow, we followed him to the grave, where sixteen of his comrades saw him interred with sad faces. I feel as though a near relation is gone. We will see him no more at Bell Grove. He had promised to spend yesterday with us, but alas, where man proposes, God disposes."⁹

John Atkins was born in 1840 in Firville, County Cork, Ireland, the son of the Reverend Philip Going Atkins and Jane Morrison. He was the younger brother, by nine years, of Robert Going Atkins who served with distinction as captain of Company E, in Roberdeau Wheat's Louisiana Tigers Infantry Battalion, before being appointed to General Arnold Elzey's Staff and later to General Samuel Cooper's staff.¹⁰ As mentioned above, John Atkins was buried after his death in the Paris Community Cemetery on Republican Street, Paris, Fauquier County, Virginia. Unfortunately the old cemetery is a vacant lot today with no evidence of the few citizens and soldiers that are buried there.

Let us never forget the sacrifice of John Atkins.

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¹ National Archives, Washington, D.C. Record Group 109, War Dept. Collection of Confederate Records. Compiled Military Service Records of Confederate General and Staff Officers and Non-regimental Enlisted Men, Microfilm 331, Roll 11.

² Williamson, James J. *Mosby's Rangers*. 2nd ed., New York, N.Y.: Sturgis & Welton Company, 1909, page 537.

³ Crawford, J. Marshall. *Mosby and His Men: A Record of the Adventures of that Renowned Partisan Ranger, John S. Mosby, Colonel C.S.A.* New York, N.Y.: G. W. Carleton & Co. Publishers, 1867, page 234.

⁴ Crawford, pages 261-3; National Archives, Compiled Military Service Records of Confederate General and Staff Officers and Non-regimental Enlisted Men, Microfilm 331, Roll 11.

⁵ Keen, Hugh C. and Mewborn, Horace, *43rd Battalion Virginia Cavalry Mosby's Command*. Lynchburg, VA: H. E. Howard, Inc., 1993, pages 206-8.

⁶ Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, VA. Mary Elizabeth Dulany Papers. "The Diary of Mrs. Ida Dulaney (sic.) Oakley Plantation Upperville, Va." Typescript transcription, part V, page 7.

⁷ Baird, Nancy Chappellear, ed. *Journals of Amanda Virginia Edmonds - Lass of Mosby's Confederacy, 1859-1867*. Stephen City, Va.: Comercial Press, 1984, page 208. "George" was ranger George William Triplett of Company B who boarded at "Belle Grove."

⁸ Crawford, pages 283-4.

⁹ Baird, page 208.

¹⁰ Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah. International Genealogical Index, Vol. V. On-line ed. (www.familysearch.org). Family Group Record #1694594, Robert Going Atkins.