

James A. Downs, 43rd Virginia Cavalry

James A. Downs was born about 1839 in Prince William County, Virginia. He was the son of George W. and Maria Downs. The Downs family was enumerated as residing near Haymarket Post Office in the 1860 census of Prince William County.ⁱ

At the outset of the Civil War, James A. Downs joined the Confederate Army. He enlisted on May 8, 1861 in Company C, 8th Virginia Infantry Regiment at Haymarket, Prince William County, Virginia. Downs was enlisted by Capt. Edmund Berkeley for a period of one year.ⁱⁱ

The life as a foot soldier in the Confederate Army apparently wasn't what James A. Downs expected as he is documented, most of the time, as being absent from duty. The first record of his service being a February 1862 Regimental Return shows him as "Absent without leave." A muster roll dated April 30, 1862 shows Downs as "Absent for the last 8 months." A year later; a muster roll taken April 30, 1863 includes the note for James Downs' entry: "Name dropped from preceding rolls as deserter. Arrested by Lt. Bicksler. Returned March 7, 63." A June 30, 1863 muster roll indicated that Downs "Deserted May 19th near Hanover Junction." Muster Rolls taken August 31 and October 31, 1863 include the note: "Absent without leave since May 20, 1863."ⁱⁱⁱ

James A. Downs joined Major John S. Mosby's Partisan Ranger Command sometime before June 21, 1863 when he joined with about 35 other rangers and Mosby in scouting Hooker's Union Army around the Bull Run Mountains. The band was ambushed the next morning near Ewell's Chapel by a detachment of the 17th Pennsylvania Cavalry Regiment and about one hundred men from the 14th US Infantry. Three Rangers were wounded in the engagement. Later the same day, Mosby and about 20 men including James A. Downs attacked a 20 wagon train moving along the Little River Turnpike. Hearing the gunfire, a detachment of the 12th Illinois Cavalry came to the rescue of the Union wagon train and routed the partisans. When the smoke cleared, eight rangers had been captured including James A. Downs.^{iv}

The captured rangers were immediately questioned by Federal authorities. The statements given by six of the partisans were included in a letter from Provost Marshal, Captain Van. B. Bates to Assistant Adjutant General Lieutenant Colonel O. H. Hart dated June 22, 1863. James A. Downs submitted the following statement:^v

"I belong to the 4th Va. Cavalry, but am detailed to serve under Mosby. I resided about 3 miles from Centreville. Moseby was in command today, he had 30 men, the rest of his command went off, on another road, from the Bull Run mountain. We marched from Rectors Cross Roads, about 12 m., yesterday (21st inst.) After marching about three miles, we were fired on by Union Troops. We run our horses back to the Cross Roads and remained there until night. We then marched on another Road until about 1 o'clock a.m. & halted until sunrise, we then started and marched about 3 miles on the old Carolina Road. When near Ewell's church we were fired on by troops concealed in, and around the church. We lost two men severely wounded and 3 Horses Killed. We immediately fell back to the mountains. Moseby took thirty men & started off on another road. We came across the Country and struck the Pike about 150 rods below Centreville & Leesburg crossing. We captured four wagons, which Moseby ordered burnt. I was taken prisoner while charging the long train."

James A. Downs was sent to Old Capital Prison after his interrogation being received there on July 1, 1863. A register of prisoners shows Downs as having been captured on June 20, 1863 which is in error. He reported that he was a private in Company H, 4th Virginia Cavalry Regiment. The register also notes that he was forwarded to Point Lookout Prison on August 8, 1863.^{vi} The next account of James A. Downs is that he died from acute diarrhea on December 11, 1863 at Point Lookout Prison and that he was buried in the prison graveyard.^{vii}

The 8th Virginia Cavalry Regiment continued to believe that James A. Downs was absent without leave,. Muster rolls dated August 31, October 31 and December 31, 1863 all indicated he was "absent". The December 31, 1863 indicated he had been "dropped for desertion." It wasn't

until a muster roll for the 8th Virginia taken on April 30, 1864, that he was identified as “captured by enemy & died at Pt. Lk. Out.”^{viii}

Editor’s Comments: It is questionable whether or not James A. Downs ever served in the 4th Virginia Cavalry Regiment. The only account of his service in that unit is a record of his capture at Gum Springs on June 20 (22), 1863 detailed above.^{ix} It doesn’t seem reasonable that he would have had time to have joined the 4th Virginia if he had deserted the 8th Virginia Infantry at Hanover Court House on May 19, 1863, then be detached to serve with Mosby by June 21, 1863. He simply may have offered the “Black Horse” Cavalry as his unit as a diversion from the 8th Virginia Infantry where he knew he would be in trouble if the truth of his desertion from that regiment was known.

Let us never forget the sacrifice of James A. Downs.

© Hugh Keen, May, 2007

ⁱ National Archives, Washington, D.C., Record Group 15, Records of the Bureau of the Census, 1840 Census, Prince William Co., Va., series M704, Roll 574, page 289; 1860 Census, Prince William Co., Va., Series M653, Roll 1373, page 447.

ⁱⁱ National Archives, Washington D.C., Record Group 109, War Dept. Collection of Confederate Records, Compiled Military Service Records for soldiers serving in the 8th Virginia Infantry Regiment, Microfilm Series M324, Roll #468, record #434.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Keen, Hugh C. and Mewborn, Horace, *43rd Battalion Virginia Cavalry Mosby’s Command*. Lynchburg, VA: H. E. Howard, Inc., 1993, pages 70-71.

^v National Archives, Record Group 393, Records of the U.S. Army Continental Commands, 1821-1942. Army of the Potomac 1861-1865, Miscellaneous Letters, Reports & Lists Received, Box 11.

^{vi} Record Group 109, War Dept. Collection of Confederate Records, Microform Series M598, Selected Records of the War Department Relating to Confederate Prisoners of War, 1861-1865, Roll 110, Old Capital Prison Register, page 61.

^{vii} Stiles, Kenneth L. *4th Virginia Cavalry*. Lynchburg, Va.: H. E. Howard, Inc., 1985, page 107.

^{viii} National Archives, Compiled Military Service Records for soldiers serving in the 8th Virginia Infantry Regiment, Microfilm Series M324, Roll #468, record #434.

^{ix} Stiles, Kenneth L. “4th Virginia Cavalry,” page 107.