

CIVIL WAR TALES
VOLUME I

DAMN LUCKY

John Padgett may have been very brave or very foolish, but all agree that he was damned lucky. When battle raged hot and minie ball and shell filled the air, soldiers hugged the ground behind their breastworks and prayed hard for deliverance. Most soldiers, that is. In the thickest of battles, it was not uncommon to see John “climb out from behind the breastworks and present himself as a target to be shot at.” Almost half of a million men met their Maker during those four years, but John Padgett marched home “without a scratch.”

Courtesy Rudy Padgett

PRIVATE FARLEY CHANGED THE WAR

When historians gather and talk about the war, they talk about the brilliant strategy of Lee, the tenacity of Grant, the daring of Forrest, and the steadfastness of Sherman. They talk of the great battles of Manassas, Shiloh, Gettysburg, and Vicksburg. But they never talk of Private Wesley Farley and the minor rear guard action that changed the course of the war.

History couldn't have picked a less likely hero than Wesley Farley. He was born in Virginia in 1838. His home was nestled among the crags of present-day Logan County, West Virginia. Wesley had a limited education and worked on a rocky, dirt-poor farm in the mountains.

When war came, the majority of the mountain boys elected to join the forces of their native state. Logan Wildcats was

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their name, and they felt like young tigers when they mustered into Confederate service as Company G, 22nd Virginia Infantry Regiment.

Most of his neighbors joined the 22nd, but Wesley's heart was not in their cause. He became a member of Company I, 7th West Virginia Cavalry. The Logan area became bitterly divided before the war's end. It was one of the few places in the nation where old men or young boys could elect to join a home guard unit that was either Northern or Southern.

The man who would be Wesley's claim to fame was also a Virginian, born ten years before Wesley. He too was a farmer and a cavalryman, and his outfit was also number seven; but that is where the similarities stopped. The worlds of Farley and the man he would kill were far apart.

Turner Ashby was the son of Virginian aristocracy, born on the family plantation of Rose Bank in the heart of the rich, flat land of Fauquier County. Young Turner's family supplied him with a series of private tutors and he became well educated.

When John Brown raided Harper's Ferry, Turner raised his own company of men to put down the revolt. Although too late to assist Colonel Robert E. Lee, Turner's initiative and personal leadership were noted.

At the war's start, Turner's men became part of the 7th Virginia Cavalry. In a few months, Captain Ashby was saluted as General Turner Ashby by his men. He was known for his "daring and brilliance" in Jackson's valley campaign. The mighty "Stonewall" appointed Ashby to the command of his entire cavalry division.

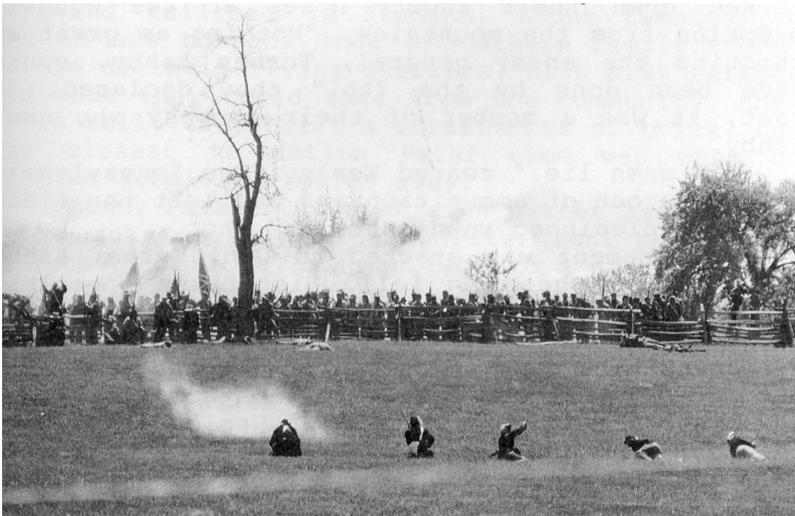
If it had not been for war, the widely separate worlds of Wesley and Turner would never have collided, and the

number seven would have never fought the number seven. The paths of the private and the general would never have crossed.

Early in the war, Jackson had pulled off one more amazing strategy and was moving off the battlefield with the infantry. Ashby moved the cavalry to cover the rear of Jackson's army. He was directing a minor, inconsequential action a few miles from Harrisonburg.

Wesley and other members of the 7th (Union) saw a Southern officer on a white horse at some distance. Several guns from the 7th roared, including Wesley's. The horse and rider both went down. The distance was too great to see the rank or assess any wound that may have been inflicted to the officer. It was the next day before the 7th learned that enemy General Turner Ashby was dead!

Once the death of the famous general was announced, there were many pretenders to Private Wesley Parley's claim



Federals fire on Confederate position (reenactment)

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to fame as “the man who killed Turner Ashby.” Men from other companies of the 7th West Virginia said they had slain the great general. Captain Curtis, Company E, said, “I did it.” “No,” said Sergeant Smar, “I did it.” The colonel of the regiment, Cluseret, puffed himself up and said, “I did it.” Wesley argued with those lying jerks until he was red in the face. “Judging from the time that I fired until the rider was struck, no other bullet but mine could have possibly struck the general,” Wesley said, or words to that effect (sometimes interspersed with profanity).

The 7th was divided and almost ready to make war on each other when a bunch of uppity Pennsylvania boys came grinning by. The boys from Pennsylvania called themselves “Bucktails” and looked down their snooty noses at the country bumpkins from the mountains. “Nothing as great as shooting the enemy general, Turner Ashby, could have been done by the 7th,” they declared. In fact, it was a member of their company who shot Ashby.

“A damn lie,” roared Wesley. The Pennsylvania boys were out of ammunition and had left the field to be replenished when Ashby was shot.

A monument was erected to General Turner Ashby on the spot where he fell. Historians speculate “what if” Ashby had lived to continue to lead Jackson’s cavalry, “Would the war have turned out differently?” Ashby is buried in the Stonewall Cemetery in Winchester.

No one ever speculates “what if” Wesley Parley had not been near Harrisonburg in June 1862. There is no monument to him. Few people know where in Logan County he is buried.

Courtesy W. Darrel Miller