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## **An Interview with David P. Bridges**

*Major James Breathed: Fighting with JEB Stuart and the Confederate Horse Artillery* is a biography of an important Southern officer, a brave and virtuous young man who embodied all the qualities that enabled the Confederate army to be one of the finest in world history. Author David P. Bridges, who spent years researching Major Breathed's remarkable life and career, recently shared Breathed's story with a friend.

*Q: David, your decision to write a book about Major James Breathed, 1st Virginia Cavalry and Stuart Horse Artillery, has an interesting insight unlike most books written on the tragic American Civil War. How did the intrigue with your great -great uncle begin, please share with the readers?*

A: In 1993, while vacationing in the North Georgia Mountains, I visited a small used bookstore. I found a copy of Burke Davis' *JEB Stuart: The Last Cavalier* which had references to a Major James Breathed, who I knew was one of my ancestors. While reading the book, I found numerous battle descriptions which depicted the "recklessly brave" Breathed and the fights he was engaged in, but I knew virtually nothing of what he did during the Civil War? His story intrigued me. Consequently, I started collecting primary and secondary sources relating to Major Breathed.

*Q: What other important sources did you discover since 1993?*

A: Five years ago destiny played to my favor and I discovered four family scrapbooks that my great grandmother, Major Breathed's sister, had created during the years 1870 through 1934. This was an amazing find because historians had never seen the material. I would not have been able to write the biography of Breathed had it not have been for these scrapbooks because they contained a plethora of primary documents. When I began to read the newspaper clippings, personal letters, and remembrances, I realized Breathed had been overlooked by Civil War scholars. I was fascinated by the number of first-hand accounts of his bravery in battle and how well respected he was by his men, peers, and commanding officers.

*Q: So you might say that your family scrapbooks enabled you to write the biography?*

A: Yes, I would say this was true. I asked many national park battlefield historians and scholars why no one had ever written a biography on Major Breathed. They seemed to all agree that they did not have the primary documentation necessary and did not know enough about him to write a biography. I now had the corpus of material needed to write a comprehensive history. The promise of success with this biography was the four scrapbooks. These invaluable primary documents enabled me to resurrect Breathed's life and battlefield experiences. Without these family archives, the biography would have

been composed of secondary sources of the movements of the Army of Northern Virginia. I set out to the National Archives, Library of Congress, and local historical societies to find other primary sources that had been hidden away from historians for over a century.

*Q: You also visited numerous, in your through research, Civil War battlefields to increase your knowledge of the Stuart Horse Artillery and Major Breathed, a total of fifty?*

A: Yes, my visits to the battlefields enabled me to see the terrain and to envision the battles the way Major Breathed experienced them. In some visits to various battlefields I was able to locate the exact position of Breathed's cavalry charges and cannon fire, looking over the fields gave me great insight in order to write the biography. When guides helped me to understand how the chaotic battles took place, I was more capable to transpose what I saw into words. My visits helped me comprehend what a Civil War battle involved and what Breathed endured.

*Q: What else delighted you about following the foot steps of your uncle?*

A: I enjoyed reading primary documents that had been overlooked for more than 135 years since Breathed's death. They enabled me to piece together the life and times of Major Breathed. I immersed myself in the Civil War time period reading everything I could find that related to Breathed and the movements of the Army of Northern Virginia. This gave me further insight into the Major's motivations and work which facilitated my figuring out what was really in the head of this "recklessly brave" American Confederate hero.

*Q: Did you face any difficult research crossroads while gathering information?*

A: At first it seemed like an overwhelming task, because I only had an outline of the battles Breathed fought, which totaled eighty-six battles, engagements, actions and skirmishes. However, in Washington D.C., I had access to archives and historical societies where I was able to diligently research Breathed. I started by writing down an outline of Breathed's numerous fights. Now, I am thoroughly familiar with most of the skirmishes, engagements, and battles of the Army of Northern Virginia. I conscientiously tried to methodically move forward in my writing with the same tenacity with which my uncle fought!

*Q: Prior to the Civil War doctor Breathed, led a distinguished professional life as a surgeon, tell us about some of what you know of this time period in his life.*

A: James Breathed was born in 1838 into an old line Maryland family which led back to the colonization of the state. However, he was born a Virginian in Berkeley Springs, (today West Virginia). I can say with some assuredness that his Virginia roots played a dominate role in his fighting for the South. At age ten he moved to a plantation outside of Hagerstown, Maryland. There he was exposed to southern plantation life. He was

sociologically and philosophically motivated to protect his family and their lifestyle. His family wealth and influence enabled him to attend a top preparatory school called the College of St. James and then he attended the School of Medicine at the University of Maryland. He had set up his practice in Rushville, Missouri, when the war broke out back east. He would not return to his medical practice until after the war ended, but he did administer medical help to both union and Confederate soldiers during the war.

*Q: Why did Breathed join the 1st Virginia Cavalry instead of using his medical training in the Confederacy's Medical Corps?*

A: I believe Breathed's train trip home to Maryland from Missouri, before the war began, was an influential part of his decision to fight. It is a well known and a documented fact that he had the pleasure of sitting with Colonel J.E.B. Stuart, at that time a member of the U.S. military. I believe this may have motivated him to join the 1st Virginia Cavalry with his fellow Virginians, for Stuart was a very charismatic soldier and leader. He might have lived a safer life in the Medical Corps, but he chose to fight in the ranks with his fellow Virginians and Marylanders.

*Q: Do you think Breathed's medical school training in Baltimore had any import on his battlefield leadership?*

A: It is certainly impossible to know without a doubt, but it seems as though he did not have a fear of death, nor was he prudish in relation to blood. His medical background exposed him to blood and guts as he worked on cadavers in his professional training. He may have developed leadership skills in medical school that enabled him to lead courageously and valiantly. His men were extremely devoted to him and somehow they believed that if Breathed led them into a battle, he could get them out alive. He was relentless in his discipline, and he learned his artillery tactics not from West Point, but from his firsthand experiences in battle.

*Q: Tell us about General J.E.B. Stuart and how he is depicted in your book?*

A: Stuart was highly regarded as a soldier before the war as he fought Indians out West. He proved during the war that he was one of the best cavalry leaders on either side of the armies and a gracious Southern gentleman. I manifest Stuart for what he was: a brave and bold cavalier, a leader of men, and a master of terrain and the battlefield. Breathed escaped death when he was shot in the stomach in June of 1864, Stuart was not as fortunate.

*Q: Did Stuart, Pelham, Beckham, Chew and Breathed worked well together?*

A: Yes, Stuart could always count on Breathed and his fellow commanders to do their duty and perform as brave and valiant soldiers for the Southern Cause. In fact, Breathed was at Yellow Tavern when Stuart was shot and mortally wounded. It is quite possible that Stuart gave his last "charge" command to Breathed. After the charge, as an ambulance moved Stuart off the field of battle, Breathed, despite his saber wound and

blood streaming from his head rallied the forces to thwart off the counter cavalry attack of Union General Custer who wanted the prize of the wounded Stuart.

*Q: Can you illustrate one particular experience where Breathed established his bravery, something that stands out for you, of which I am sure there are many examples?*

A: There are so many instances of Breathed's bravery and leadership on the battlefield that it is hard to pick one to highlight. In an 1893 Chicago Tribune newspaper article an example of his tenacious fighting was reported of his actions at the Battle of Spotsylvania Court House, this stands out in my mind. With his battery positioned on a knoll next to the Alsop House in the Wilderness Campaign, Breathed faced Union Major General Gouverneur K. Warren's V Corps. Warren was marching his infantry directly into Major Breathed's location where two roads converged on the route to Spotsylvania Court House. Breathed ordered his men to continue their heavy fire of artillery. They had positioned themselves on the high ground and were blasting gaping holes in Warren's infantry lines. As the Union forces closed in on the artilleryists, General Fitzhugh Lee ordered the cannons off the knoll. Three pieces were expeditiously moved, but Breathed stayed behind and risked death or capture.

*Q: How did Breathed continue to hold his ground, was it some sort of miraculous feat?*

A: Yes, with minie balls flying, his faithful remaining artillerymen continued to fire the lone cannon. Finally, Breathed's horse, "Billy," was shot and fell on top of him. Breathed freed himself, limbered up the last artillery piece to a team of four horses, and began to remove the gun from the field. As he jumped on the lead horse, it was shot and it fell to the ground! He met the soil of Old Virginia for the second time, cut the leather traces, and sprang onto the other lead horse. After the second lead horse was mortally wounded by Union infantry fire he was determined to make his escape. He was finally able to pull the cannon off the knoll with two horses. As the Union infantry closed to within 75 yards, eyewitnesses reported that "Breatthed put his thumb to his nose and wiggled his fingers in defiance, driving off in great haste."

*Q: I guess you might say he stuck to his guns and left no cannon behind!*

A: The Union accounts of Breathed's action at the Alsop House have had a profound influence on my thinking, even more than the Confederate accounts of the incident. Breathed never fled from a good fight, even if he was out numbered a thousand to one. His chief adversary, Union Lieutenant Alexander C. M. Pennington of the Horse Artillery, wrote after the war that he always knew when Breathed was on the field because Breathed's firing of the horse artillery had a deadly signature.

*Q: Do you think readers will enjoy these personal accounts in your work?*

A: I think readers will become immersed in the four years of battle that Breathed heroically endured. I hope modern-day Civil War enthusiasts and non-aficionados alike will find the fact that he was shot twice and saber slashed many times and survived will

rather amaze the reader. As for Breathed's remarkable will and determination, it is incredible that one man could achieve as much as he did and continue to defend his Southern Cause until the very end of the war.

*Q: How difficult would it have been for a once-gallant major to return to civilian life as a doctor after the war?*

A: I cover that in my second to last chapter of the biography. I think there must have been some sense of redemption for him personally, as he went back to saving lives instead of taking lives. For five years after the war he lived in pain from the gunshot wound in his stomach. With his bull-dogged determination for the Southern Cause he continued to ride his horse to the call of the needy patients near Hancock, Maryland. During my research I discovered that he delivered many babies in this area and even up into Fulton County Pennsylvania. Many of these grateful parents named their babies after Breathed in his honor. And others who knew of his affiliation with the Army of Northern Virginia shot at him as he rode above the Mason-Dixon Line. But, the brazen Breathed never flinched an eye or gave it a thought for this was not the first time he had been shot at with the intent to kill him!

*Q: Would you comment on the end of Breathed's life?*

A: The severity of his wounds eventually caught up with him, and in 1870, induced his early death. General Robert E. Lee said that Breathed was "the hardest artillery fighter the war produced." Other commanders have nothing but heart-felt praise for him, and I think it is well deserved. His story is told for the first time through diaries, firsthand-accounts, and archival documents. I think it is safe to say that Major James Breathed was a hero, and one of the South's finest artillerists among many others who fought like demons for the Southern Cause.

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