

# A Scouting Expedition During the Civil War

By FRANK HUME

In April 1864 an order came from General J. E. B. Stuart to Frank Hume, then a private in the Confederate Army, to report to Headquarters at Orange Court House, Virginia, for instructions. General Stuart directed Hume to ascertain the destination of Burnside's Corps, then fitting out at Annapolis, Maryland. In his interview, the General expressed his admiration for Hume's brother Charles who had just been killed while on one of his scouting expeditions in lower Maryland, and suggested that Frank take the position made vacant by his death.

The General impressed upon him the danger of this undertaking, advised him to be cautious and wary, and to return as soon as possible after obtaining the information.

Hume left Orange Court House after a visit to General Taylor, General Robert E. Lee's Adjutant General, receiving additional instructions from him, and a small amount of cash in [Northern] greenbacks to pay expenses after crossing the Potomac River.

The ride to Port Royal on the Rappahannock was an exceeding quiet one as it lay through the "Wilderness" and other former battlefields. The roads were in wretched condition through the heavy traffic of loaded teams and artillery. Little mounds lay in every direction, showing where some poor fellow's grave, shallow though it be, had been made.

On reaching Port Royal, Hume left his horse at a farmer's house. Crossing the Rappahannock, he started at a brisk walk for Mathias Point on the Potomac. Here he was challenged by a man who demanded to know what he was doing there. He replied that he intended crossing the Potomac that night to carry out a commission intrusted to him by General Stuart.

"What have you to identerfy yourself?" the man asked.

"Nothing," was the reply, as by instructions from his commander, Hume had destroyed his pass after leaving the Rappahannock.

"If you are all right, you cannot object to visiting Captain Frayser who is nearby commanding the Confederate Signal Corps," said the stranger who then introduced himself as Pendleton Grimes of Eagle's Nest. He explained that the enemy had made many attempts to capture the Signal Corps and that it was necessary that extreme caution be used.

NOTE: Frank Hume lived at Warwick in Alexandria County (later Arlington County) and was active in the political and civic life of the community. Among other posts held by him were those of member of the Virginia House of Delegates, representing this area, and member and Chairman of the County Board of Supervisors. He served in Company A, 21st Mississippi Regiment, Barksdale's Brigade, Longstreet's Corps of the Army of Northern Virginia. The manuscript of this account, written in the third person, was found among Mr. Hume's papers by his granddaughter, Mrs. Warren Birge, member of the Arlington Historical Society.

Hume desired to know if he could obtain a boat to cross the river which at that point was nearly five miles wide. Grimes showed him a box on the river bank less than seven feet long and square at both ends, which he informed Hume was a coffin case in which a Yankee deserter had crossed the river from the Maryland shore.

"You can have this, but I would not trust myself fifty yards from shore. It is all we have as every boat has been taken from this side by the enemy."

"Well," said Hume, "if a Yankee deserter crossed in it, I can do the same."

He was then taken to a log hut in a piece of thick pines and met Captain Frayser who stated for their safety it was necessary to signal to General Stuart at Orange Court House. He said he would do this after dark, and if the reply were favorable, Hume could cross the river.

While awaiting the reply, he received a slight repast and lay down on the floor and soon was oblivious to his surroundings. He was awakened about eleven o'clock and informed by the Captain that General Stuart desired him given all possible aid in crossing the river.

Hume left the cabin and wended his way to the place where he had inspected the unique craft shown him by Grimes. Finding it did not leak much, he looked around for a paddle and finding none, took two palings from a nearby fence, one to be used as a seat and the other as the propelling power. Not having a watch, he decided to leave as near midnight as possible. Unfortunately he waited too long, for he had not gotten over a mile before the sky in the East began to brighten. His craft was exceedingly slow and cumbersome, but having told the Signal Corps men that nothing would deter him from landing on the Maryland side that night, he redoubled his efforts to cross though in doubt of success. The sun rose when he was only halfway over.

About half a mile ahead, two fishermen were taking shad from a driftnet. He made for their boat and stated that he wanted to visit friends in Maryland but wished to avoid the soldiers who could be plainly seen on the bluff ahead, and if they would allow him to get in their yawl, they could land him when through work. This they declined to do, though offered good pay, stating that they were permitted there by special license under oath not to give aid to any one coming from the Virginia side. They advised him not to go ashore but to row to a gunboat anchored about a mile down the river as in the event he went ashore he would have to walk to Washington but if to the gunboat he would ride! Disregarding their advice, he pulled hard for the shore, making a straight line for the headquarters of the Federal patrols situated on the bluff.

A large sailboat containing eight men going up the river passed by and turning they came about very close though not hailing the lone scout whom they no doubt took for a deserter as he had on a full Confederate uniform.

As Hume neared the shore, about fifty men came out and stood on the

bluff awaiting quietly the news from Dixie Land which he was supposed to bring.

A farm house lay north of the bluff, and between these ran a small stream ending in a marsh on the river. When within about three hundred yards, Hume suddenly pulled his boat for the opening mentioned and notwithstanding the commands and swearing of his audience, steered to the far left of the marsh and hurriedly landed.

Seizing his coat from the bottom of his craft, Hume ran up the steep sides of the bank and out on a big level corn field on the other side of which was a thick piece of timber and for which he bent his energy as he expected he would be pursued. His main object was to put as great a distance as possible between himself and the river, but feeling quite exhausted, he crawled under a low-spreading pine tree, rolled up his coat for a pillow, and was soon sound asleep.



FRANK HUME CROSSING THE POTOMAC. (DRAWING BY FRANK DOBIAS AFTER A NEWSPAPER SKETCH, FOUND IN MR. HUME'S PAPERS, BY AN UNKNOWN ARTIST.)

A report as that of a pistol shot awakened him followed by the familiar sound of "Whoa! dah, Truman, whah you gwine?" and again the whip crack greeted the now thoroughly aroused scout. Quickly taking in the situation, he rapidly moved around and got over the fence into the road and awaited the coming up of the ox team and the captain of the loud cracking whip.

“Well, uncle, tell me the nearest body of soldiers to this place so I may get to them this evening and enlist.”

“Well, boss,” he replied, “the highest pint is at Maryland Pint, which is about five miles from this here place.”

After getting the information of the whereabouts of other troops, Hume thanked his informer and left for the direction of the river, but as soon as out of sight, he doubled his course and pushed on for his destination. Since he still had on his full Confederate uniform of gray with Mississippi brass buttons, the scout concluded he was rather too conspicuous, and on calling at a house in Charles County for something to eat, a lady, a Miss Green, agreed to take his coat in exchange for a black one, which better suited his situation. He learned afterwards that the gallant Captain Dement, commanding a section of the Confederate Artillery, lived on this plantation.

After passing Surrattsville and while walking quietly in the middle of the road, with dark clouds overshadowing the earth, he was startled by a voice from a thick hedge asking, “Ain’t that Frank Hume?” As this section of Maryland was known to be friendly to the Southern cause, he crossed over to the hedge and was surprised to find an old friend, Richard Mulliken, who said he had recognized his walk, and though he had not seen him for three years, had not forgotten his quick step.

Obtaining refreshments, though it was then after midnight, the scout moved on towards Marlborough, the county seat of Prince Georges, reaching that place about daylight. Having been directed to a certain doctor of that town to aid him in obtaining the desired information, he knocked at the door of the doctor’s residence. A servant answered, and soon the doctor was seen. After Hume had stated his mission, he feared he had committed manslaughter for the doctor paled and stammered out, “My friend, for Heaven’s sake leave here; you will cause my ruin and maybe my death.”

As neither calamity did Hume desire to be the cause of, he bade the thoroughly frightened man good morning, and left for a friend’s house near Collington where he was most cordially welcomed and everything done to aid him in his undertaking.

EDITOR’S NOTE: Thus ends the manuscript. In his diary, also in the possession of Mrs. Birge, Mr. Hume tells how he returned after General Stuart’s death and so made his report directly to General Lee.