Alfred James Byrd
C.S.A.
Private, Co. F, 50th Tennessee Infantry, CSA
Nov. 10, 1861 - Oct. 28, 1864

Alfred James Byrd was born in Christian County, Kentucky in 1843. His parents, James B. Byrd (b. 1801 Christian County, KY - d. 1845 Stewart County, TN) and Catherine Bell Cook (b. ? - d. 1893 Stewart County, TN) were married on May 16, 1838 in Stewart County, TN before moving to Kentucky where Alfred James and his sister Missouri B. Byrd were born. Alfred was the grandson of Shadrack (or Shederick) Byrd (b. 1750 Bertie County, NC - d. Apr. 30, 1814 Stewart County, TN) and Nancy Guy Young (b. 1757 - d. Oct. 21, 1833 Stewart County, TN). The uncle and aunt of Alfred James Byrd, John Wesley "Jack" Byrd (b. Jan. 1792 GA - d. July 3, 1866 Stewart County, TN) and Luna Louisa Brigham Byrd (b. 1797 NC - d. Dec. 5, 1875 Stewart County, TN) and several of Alfred's first cousins who also served in the CSA lived along what is now Byrd (earlier Lick) Creek in Land Between The Lakes National Recreational Area between the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers. The death of Alfred's father resulted in his family moving to Kentucky where they appear in the 1850 census for Trigg County.

Alfred met and married his first wife, Martha Manning (b. Oct. 6, 1845 - d. Nov. 30, 1887 Stewart County, TN) – supposedly the daughter of a full-blooded Choctaw Indian mother - in Stewart County, TN on March 27, 1864. Their children were Print, Claude, Gus, Roena, Mattie, Georgia Ann, and James Lawrence.

According to his CSA service records, Alfred James Byrd was enlisted as a Private in Co. F, 50th Tennessee Infantry by then Lt.-Col. Randal W. McGavock at Fort Donelson, Tennessee on Nov. 10, 1861 for the period of one year. According to Tennesseans In The Civil War, Vol. 1, this company, along with companies B, D, H, and I was composed primarily of men from Stewart County, TN. Pvt. Alfred J. Byrd, along with many relatives and neighbors, then began to drill and prepare Fort Donelson for the anticipated Federal assault against it.

CSA Brigadier General Lloyd Tilghman took command of both Fort Henry (on the Tennessee River) and Fort Donelson (on the Cumberland River) in January of 1862. The 50th Tennessee Infantry reported 499 effectives present for duty out of a total force of 847 on Jan. 21, 1862. The 30th, 49th, and 50th Tennessee Infantries were formed into a brigade commanded by Col. J.H. Head on Feb. 9, 1862 and assigned to garrison Fort Donelson proper and also to support its water batteries on the Cumberland River - this assignment occurred after the fall of Fort Henry on Feb. 6, 1862. Previously, the 50th
Tennessee Infantry had helped in making ready both Fort Henry and Fort Heiman (across the Tennessee River from Fort Henry in Kentucky).

Pvt. Alfred J. Byrd likely heard the artillery duel between the Federal ironclads and the small garrison at Fort Henry on Feb. 6, 1862 - only 12 miles away from Fort Donelson. His first cousin, Pvt. George W. Byrd, Co. B (Taylor's), 1st Tenn. Artillery (see biography of Pvt. George W. Byrd) was surrendered by General Tilghman after helping man the cannons at Fort Henry that day. The defenders at Fort Donelson heard Fort Henry's capture and knew their turn was next.

Federal General Ulysses S. Grant began his assault against Fort Donelson on Feb. 12, 1862; marching from now Federal-occupied Fort Henry through the heavily forested countryside. Periodic skirmishing took place between General Grant's soldiers and Confederate cavalry under then Col. Nathan Bedford Forrest. The next day (Feb. 13), three separate battles took place at Fort Donelson during the morning hours, all with no apparent benefit to the advancing Federal soldiers. U.S. Grant then gave the "green light" to USN Flag Officer Andrew Hull Foote and his flotilla of ironclads - victors at Fort Henry on Feb. 6 - to assault Fort Donelson by the Cumberland River.

On Feb. 14, 1862, "iron valentines" were delivered by Confederate gunners at Fort Donelson against the Federal ironclads. The accurate, plunging fire of the Confederate water batteries totally dominated and disabled Flag Officer Foote's flotilla - 3 of the 4 ironclads drifted helplessly downstream after being shattered by the Southern artillery. Pvt. Alfred J. Byrd witnessed this stunning victory and undoubtedly joined in the cheers and Rebel yells. This defeat, however, only served to convince the tenacious General U.S. Grant that Fort Donelson, unlike Fort Henry, would be taken by infantry and not naval attacks.

Also on Feb. 14, the commanding CSA general at Fort Donelson, Gideon Pillow convened a war council that decided to break out of U.S. Grant's encirclement and escape to Nashville, TN. This attempt to escape the Federal siege began before dawn the next day on the East Road, outside the actual perimeter of Fort Donelson. The Confederate attack surprised and overwhelmed Federal soldiers camped in Bufford Hollow and along Wynn's Ferry Road in the icy darkness of early morning.

U.S. Grant managed to halt his fleeing soldiers and organized Federal counterattacks by the early afternoon of Feb. 15. Seeing the Confederates had made their massive assault against his right, General Grant reasoned the Confederate lines were weak on his left; he therefore ordered General C.F. Smith to attack directly against the outer earthworks along the Eddyville Road, SW of Fort Donelson. General Smith's soldiers breached these defenses with an uphill bayonet attack and were threatening Fort Donelson itself. A Confederate counterattack by Brigadier General Simon Buckner's division against this Federal challenge was reinforced by garrison soldiers from Fort Donelson under Col. Sugg, including the 50th Tennessee Infantry and possibly Pvt. Alfred J. Byrd. The bloody activity on Feb. 15 halted at sundown with the Confederate and Federal lines...
returning to essentially their earlier positions - at a cost of over 3,000 casualties, many frozen fast to the ground by their own blood.

That night, Confederate generals Pillow and Floyd held another meeting with their subordinate commanders and decided to surrender to U.S. Grant. Col. Nathan Bedford Forrest refused to do so and escaped with his cavalry about 4:00 a.m. the morning of Feb. 16. Commanding Confederate generals Floyd and Pillow escaped by steamboat on the Cumberland River, leaving behind about 15,000 Confederate soldiers, including Pvt. Alfred J. Byrd, to fend for themselves. A member of the 50th Tennessee Infantry secured a white sheet for then commanding CSA General Simon Buckner to use as a sign of surrender before U.S. Grant informed General Buckner that "No terms except unconditional and immediate surrender can be accepted."

According to Benjamin F. Cooling, in his book Forts Henry and Donelson. The key to the Confederate Heartland (1987), General U.S. (now "Unconditional Surrender") Grant had between 16,500 and 17,500 Confederate soldiers surrendered to him by his former West Point classmate, General Buckner. According to his CSA service records, Pvt. Alfred J. Byrd, along with thousands of his Confederate comrades, was loaded onto a Federal transport at Dover, TN. and sent down the Cumberland, then Ohio Rivers to Cairo, Illinois. There he was loaded onto a cold, drafty railroad car and delivered to Chicago, Illinois for imprisonment in POW Camp Douglas.

Pvt. Alfred J. Byrd arrived at Chicago probably on Feb. 20 or 21, 1862 and was marched through the streets of Chicago to the Camp Douglas grounds (between modern-day 31st Street, 34th Street, Indiana Avenue, and Greenwood Avenue) after leaving his railroad car. He may have seen or perhaps participated in the collective act of defiance documented for the Confederate prisoners as they were marched to the main entrance of Camp Douglas at 32nd and Ellis Avenue on the South Side of Chicago. As the Confederate POW's were marched towards a large Federal flag hanging over the street, their ranks parted and the disgruntled rebs passed on either side without passing under the "stars and stripes".

Pvt. Alfred J. Byrd next appears on a roll of POWs for Camp Douglas dated Aug. 1, 1862 and also on a Cash Account document for POWs signed by Col. James A. Mulligan of the 23rd Illinois Infantry; Alfred had $78.00 in his account at that time. Documents indicate that Pvt. Byrd was released from Camp Douglas on Sept. 5, 1862 and then sent to Vicksburg, Mississippi for formal exchange. The 50th Tennessee Infantry was then reorganized by Confederate authorities at Jackson, Mississippi on Sept. 23-24, 1862. According to his CSA compiled service records, Pvt. Alfred J. Byrd then "absented himself without leave" on Oct. 26, 1862 and was declared to have "deserted at Coldwater, Mississippi on 28th of October, 1862". Perhaps he figured that he had done his share and/or that one dose of General Ulysses S. Grant was quite enough.

In 1876, perhaps influenced by his experiences at Fort Donelson and Camp Douglas, former Pvt. Alfred J. Byrd gave his life to God and was ordained as a Baptist minister in 1877. He preached at Baptist churches in Stewart County, TN (Crocketts Creek, Nevil's
Creek, Model, Mt. Sinai) and also in Kentucky (Pleasant Hill). Family history states that on those Sundays when Rev. Alfred J. Byrd preached on the opposite side of the Cumberland River from his home in Stewart County, he would go to a secluded area on the riverbank, disrobe, and swim across the Cumberland while holding his clothes dry above his head (!!!!!!!). On the opposite bank, Rev. A.J. Byrd would dress, preach, collect his payment (usually a chicken or bag of potatoes) then swim back across the Cumberland River to home.

During the early 1900s, Rev. Alfred J. Byrd and his second wife, Mary Wiggins, moved to Granite, Oklahoma where he was the pastor at the First Baptist Church. His last ministry was at the Salse Creek Baptist Church there in Granite OK. Rev. Alfred J. Byrd, formerly a Private in Co. F, 50th Tennessee Infantry, died Feb. 17, 1908 and is buried in Granite, Greer County, Oklahoma.

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