

BRIGADIER GENERAL JAMES DEARING, C. S. A.

by

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CHAPTER I

THE LITTLE SOLDIER

The ancestors were quite as interesting as the man himself. His earliest maternal progenitors were of the Anglo-Saxon families that settled in Galway, Ireland. The first to come to America was Charles Lynch I, who left home sometime between 1715 and 1725 at the age of fifteen, allegedly because of his grandmother's cruelty. However, the young man soon had second thoughts. When the ship was some distance from shore, Lynch jumped overboard and began swimming back. The crew rescued him and brought him to America, where he became an apprentice to a tobacco planter named Christopher Clark.

About 1733, Lynch married Sarah Clark, moved to Albemarle (now Campbell) County, and began a successful career of public service. He represented his area in the House of Burgesses and became one of the first justices from Albemarle County. During 1749-1751, he served as sheriff. One of his sons, John, became the founder of Lynchburg.

Charles Lynch II, another son, served in the House of Burgesses in 1769 and during 1774-1775 as a delegate from Bedford County. In that capacity, he signed the Non-Importation Agreement.

Unfortunately, Charles Lynch's name continues to be associated with the term "Lynch Law." During the Revolutionary period, he implemented quick trials and immediate punishments for raiding Tories and other malfeasants. The usual punishment was flogging. To the flogging was sometimes added the traditional treatment of tar and feathers. No record exists of his ever having imposed a death sentence. During the Revolutionary War, he also served as colonel under General Nathaniel Greene. His wife was Anna Terrel.

Edward Deiring, the earliest paternal ancestor of record, moved from Orange to Campbell County sometime between 1780 and 1790. During the Revolutionary War, he had served as an officer under the immediate command of General George Washington. He married Betsy Adams.

On March 5, 1834, their son, James Griffin Deiring, married Mary Anna Lynch, the daughter of Charles Lynch and Anna Terrel.¹ He changed his name to Dearing at his wife's request.²

About 1840, Dearing purchased "Otterburne," a tobacco

¹Kent Gregory and Juliet Fauntleroy (comps.), "Lynches and Adamases" (typescript), Jones Memorial Library, Lynchburg, Va.

²R. H. Early, Campbell Chronicles and Family Sketches, Embracing the History of Campbell County, Virginia, 1782-1926 (Lynchburg, 1927), 398. Cited hereafter as Early, Campbell Chronicles.

farm embracing 920 acres, from his wife's relatives.

Thereafter, he owned about fifteen slaves.³

On April 25, 1840, James Dearing, one of two sons, was born at "Otterburne."⁴ The father, noting his son's erect posture, soon began calling him "the little soldier."⁵ The relationship was to be a short one; the father died when James was but three years old.⁶

Dearing's great uncle, John Lynch, adopted him and sent him to the best schools available. After attending New London Academy,⁷ Dearing went to William Reid's School in Lynchburg. Although still quite young, he rode horseback to and from the school and developed both a fondness for horses and his excellent riding ability. He would one day be known as the best rider in the Confederate

³"Otterburne" (typescript), in the possession of J. D. Fauntleroy, Altavista, Va. "Otterburne" is located a few miles north of Altavista and about three miles from the great Lynch estate, "Avoca," where General Dearing was originally buried. The original house at "Otterburne" is still standing.

⁴Don P. Halsey, Historic and Heroic Lynchburg (Lynchburg, 1935), 46. Cited hereafter as Halsey, Heroic Lynchburg.

⁵Ashbury W. Christian, Lynchburg and Its People (Lynchburg, 1900), 235. Cited hereafter as Christian, Lynchburg.

⁶Early, Campbell Chronicles, 398.

⁷Altavista (Va.) Journal, Nov. 21, 1913.

Army.⁸

After leaving Reid's School, Dearing studied at Hanover Academy, a private school near Richmond. The Academy, founded by Lewis Minor Coleman in 1850, was one of the first classical schools in the United States. All teachers held master of arts degrees. The course of study included Greek drama and Latin in addition to English literature. For Dearing, the choice of schools was a propitious one. Coleman, who believed students should develop physically as well as mentally, encouraged his pupils to hunt, fish and swim.⁹

At Hanover, Dearing was noted for his friendliness. His relationship with Charles Ellis Munford, who was later to be an officer in the Confederate Engineer Corps,¹⁰ was of particular importance to him. Although Dearing developed a superior ability in foreign languages, both he and Munford had definite preferences for English literature. The two young men spent many hours reading to each other. When

⁸Halsey, Heroic Lynchburg, 46.

⁹Unidentified newspaper articles, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond.

¹⁰U. S. War Department (comp.), The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies (Washington, 1880-1891), Series I, IX, 141. Cited hereafter as OR. All references are to Series I.

Dearing was at West Point, Joseph Addison was a subject he sorely missed.¹¹

In the spring of 1858, just before their graduation, Munford wrote Dearing: "It is painful to think we are on the eve of a long separation. So the call of duty may sever Friendship's golden chain, but the fragrance of living memories will then remain."¹²

Munford's comments indicated Dearing's ability to win and to maintain friendships. It was a skill he would never lose.

On July 1, 1858, having been appointed from the Fifth Congressional District by Representative T. S. Bocock, Dearing entered the United States Military Academy.¹³ On his way to West Point, Dearing stopped in Washington where Secretary of War John B. Floyd invited him to an interview. Dearing had hoped to start in a higher class at West Point, but Floyd informed him that such was impossible.¹⁴

¹¹James Dearing to Charles Ellis Munford, May 25, 1859, Charles Ellis Munford Papers, Duke University. Cited hereafter as Munford Papers.

¹²Letters and Papers of James Dearing and Family, owned by Mrs. C. W. Gooch, Jr., Richmond. The collection cited hereafter as Gooch Papers.

¹³Record of James Dearing, Military Academy, West Point, N. Y.

¹⁴James Dearing to Charles Ellis Munford, July 20, 1858, Munford Papers.

Once at West Point, Dearing complained with youthful vigor about the difficulties of drill, dress, study and discipline. Drill irritated him more than anything else. When in May, 1859, the cadets were preparing for the arrival of the Board of Visitors, Dearing wrote: "Cairn found the Drill. It is as hot as the D__L and [William J.] Hardee will 'double quick' us at least half a dozen times. We have drills of every kind daily now: Battalion--Cavalry--Reviews--Mounted Artillery, etc., etc."¹⁵ His attitude changed markedly once the Board actually arrived. "We have been drilling before the Board of Visitors for the past two weeks--more pretty ladies here than you ever heard of."¹⁶

Although his status as a plebe annoyed him, Dearing planned no mercy for freshmen once he became an upper-classman. He would, he stated, "make the 'Animals' exercise their agility on my behalf."¹⁷

Dearing found classroom demands quite strict. "The slightest mistake won't be countenanced--no slips of the tongue or guessing allowed." Although grades did not affect his class standing before November, he was determined to do as well as possible. He felt that his initial

¹⁵James Dearing to Charles Ellis Munford, May 25, 1859, Munford Papers.

¹⁶Ibid., June 13, 1859.

¹⁷Ibid., July 20, 1858.

standing would to some extent influence his standing in later months.¹⁸

Despite drill, study and discipline, Dearing managed to find time for extracurricular activities. It was Dearing who introduced the West Point cadets to the song "Dixie." In January, 1859, he joined a Whist Club. Because he had learned to enjoy a good pipe of tobacco, he became pipe and tobacco procurer for two unofficial tobacco clubs.

Many of those who were at West Point later remembered Dearing's banjo-playing and singing. Morris Schaff wrote in The Spirit of Old West Point that to those who had been in D company with him, "there will come into their visions groups of their fellow cadets, and in their midst will be Dearing, playing on his banjo and singing 'Dixie.'"¹⁹

When some cadets formed two "clubs," Dearing agreed to obtain pipes and tobacco for them through his friend, Ellis Munford. On June 13, 1859, he sent Munford thirty-seven dollars for fifty pipes, stems, and a large supply of tobacco.²⁰ Dearing's penchant for pipe-smoking earned him

¹⁸James Dearing to Charles Ellis Munford, Sept. 2, 1858, Munford Papers.

¹⁹Morris Schaff, The Spirit of Old West Point, 1858-1862 (Boston, 1907), 236. Cited hereafter as Schaff, Old West Point.

²⁰James Dearing to Charles Ellis Munford, June 13, 1859, Munford Papers.

a number of demerits. One night, after returning hot and tired from a day of drill, he propped his feet in his window and lit his pipe, "trying to drive away all care and dissatisfaction." The peacefulness of the situation came to a sudden halt. Just as Dearing became thoroughly comfortable, the commanding officer of D company walked past his window.²¹

His card-playing caused little apparent trouble. He did write that his grades had suffered because he had joined a Whist Club.²²

However much Dearing objected to the West Point regimen, he directed his real anger against those who threatened to extend the course of studies to five years. He was so disturbed that he threatened to resign. Although he believed that his mother would let him quit,²³ he correctly predicted that his uncle, Charles Henry Lynch, would not allow him to do so.²⁴

Dearing had three objections to the extension: his reclassification to fifth classman, his having to remain an extra year, and his having to drop French. Because he was

²¹James Dearing to Charles Ellis Munford, May 25, 1859, Munford Papers.

²²Ibid., June 13, 1859.

²³Ibid., May 11, 1859.

²⁴Ibid., May 25, 1859. Charles Henry Lynch had adopted Dearing upon the death of John Lynch.

doing quite well in French, Dearing felt he could use the course to raise his class standing. He did not feel that an extra year at West Point, despite the prestige and opportunities offered to graduates, would effect as much pleasure as a "good farm & niggers in old Virginia."

He had definite opinions of those responsible for the proposed extension: "The deuce take old Floyd and all the Cabinet. They can't keep in the same mind half an hour, one day dropping off one year, the next putting it on again, changing the course as often and apparently with as little concern as they would a suit of clothes. I wish I had old Floyd, Jef. Davis and some of the rest of them in a squad to drill for an hour or two."²⁵ About a year later, when Jefferson Davis again attempted to have the course of studies extended, Dearing wrote: "He [Jefferson Davis] was found deficient here once or twice himself and finally after being turned back twice, graduated in six years when the course of studies was only four. I think his penchant for long times here must be owing somewhat to that."²⁶

The real problem may have been that Dearing missed his old friends. "If I don't get permission to resign,"

²⁵James Dearing to Charles Ellis Munford, May 11, 1859, Munford Papers.

²⁶James Dearing to Mrs. M. A. Dearing, Mar. 11, 1860, Dearing Family Letters, 1832-1891, University of Virginia. Cited hereafter as Dearing Papers. Jefferson Davis entered West Point in 1824 and graduated four years later.

he wrote, "everyone of you old Hanoverians must take a trip up this way next summer. If I don't get at least forty or fifty Virginians up here next encampment, I will desert and leave for South America or Somewhere."²⁷

Dearing must have relieved his anger and frustration at times by watching the misfortunes of the other cadets during riding practice. He had less difficulty riding than did any of his fellow cadets. In one letter, he mentioned five accidents that had occurred during riding practice. Yet he concluded that the accidents were fortunate in one respect: those involved did not have to participate in drills and parades.

As Dearing prepared for his 1860 furlough, he evinced the usual concern of the young for clothes. He assured his mother that the tailors had received very good orders from him.²⁸

Despite Dearing's complaints and extracurricular activities, he was an excellent student who would have graduated in the upper quarter of his class. On June 6, 1859, at the end of his first year and in a class of fifty-six, he ranked twelfth in mathematics and thirteenth in English. In June, 1860, at the end of his second year and in a class of

²⁷James Dearing to Charles Ellis Munford, Apr. 11, 1859, Munford Papers.

²⁸James Dearing to Mrs. M. A. Dearing, Mar. 11, 1860, Dearing Papers.

fifty-four, he ranked fifteenth in mathematics, fourteenth in English, and twelfth in French. His out-of-class activities, meanwhile, had their effect. He accumulated 69 demerits in his first year and 128 the second year.²⁹

While Dearing indulged in common laments and diversions, the dispute between North and South became increasingly acute. Dearing was aware of the controversy. In a letter to his mother, he commented that abolitionist fanatics after death would not go where the good people went; they would go elsewhere.³⁰

At West Point Dearing met several men against whom he would later fight. He would severely wound Francis Washburne in a saber duel at High Bridge. At the same place he would kill Theodore Read. Another classmate, Ranald McKenzie, would parole Dearing shortly before the latter's death in Lynchburg.

Among those later to serve in the Confederate Army was Thomas L. Rosser, who became one of Dearing's closest friends.³¹

²⁹Record of James Dearing, U. S. Military Academy, West Point, N. Y.

³⁰James Dearing to Mrs. M. A. Dearing, Mar. 11, 1860, Dearing Papers. Dearing had no objections to slavery and no reservations about the propriety of owning slaves. He hoped eventually to own slaves himself. James Dearing to Charles Ellis Munford, Apr. 11, 1859, Munford Papers.

³¹Thomas L. Rosser to Mrs. M. A. Dearing, Mar. 26, 1861, Thomas L. Rosser Papers, University of Virginia. Cited hereafter as Rosser Papers.

With Rosser, Dearing would begin his military career in the Washington Artillery. Under Rosser's command, four years later, he would fall mortally wounded.

On April 22, 1861, shortly after Virginia committed herself to the Confederacy, Dearing and several fellow Southerners resigned from West Point in order to offer their services to the South.³² Encountering hostile threats almost everywhere, the little band had some difficulty returning to their homes. Allegedly, a mob in one Pennsylvania town intimidated the group by proposing to hang the "traitors" from lamp posts.³³ To arrive home safely, Dearing had to use a circuitous route through Ohio and the West.³⁴

The young man who presented himself for service in the Confederate Army was strikingly handsome and clean-shaven.³⁵ He stood six feet two inches tall. Lean and muscular, Dearing would soon earn a reputation for strength and endurance.³⁶ At West Point, Dearing evinced a natural

³²Record of James Dearing, U. S. Military Academy, West Point, N. Y.

³³Altavista (Va.) Journal, Mar. 16, 1933.

³⁴Christian, Lynchburg, 235.

³⁵Photographs and portraits, Gooch Papers. Dearing began to grow a beard and mustache after becoming a cavalry colonel.

³⁶Gregory Kent and Juliet Fauntleroy (comps.), "Lynches and Adamses" (typescript), Jones Memorial Library.

friendliness, a buoyant disposition, and a cheerful voice. Despite the most adverse circumstances that the Civil War could effect, his remarkable personality would endure.³⁷

On June 4, 1861, the Washington Artillery passed through Lynchburg on its way to war.³⁸ On July 16, Major E. B. Walton, at the suggestion of Lieutenant Thomas L. Mosser, appointed Dearing a second lieutenant in the artillery.³⁹ Dearing was no longer the "little soldier" father had proudly called him.

³⁷Schaff, Old West Point, 238.

³⁸Lynchburg Daily Virginian, June 5, 1861.

³⁹Halsey, Heroic Lynchburg, 48.

CHAPTER II

ARTILLERY OFFICER

Major Walton assigned Dearing to Captain Merritt B. Miller's third company as drill instructor. After his two years of drills at West Point, Dearing was well-qualified for the job. The training was urgent for the recruits without previous military experience.¹

Five days after Dearing joined the Washington Artillery, the value of such training became apparent. The artillerists became engaged in the battle of First Manassas. At 8:30 a. m., July 21, 1861, Walton ordered five guns to the Lewis farmhouse.² Both Walton and Dearing accompanied the guns. At the house, they learned that Federals had crossed Bull Run just above the stone bridge.³ For about an hour the Confederates shelled the Federal lines. The Union forces were in the process of outflanking the artillery when Walton ordered the batteries to withdraw, the bulk of their work having been completed.⁴

¹William Miller Owen, In Camp and Battle with the Washington Artillery of New Orleans (Boston, 1885), 16, 448. Cited hereafter as Owen, Washington Artillery.

²OR, II, 515.

³Owen, Washington Artillery, 34.

⁴OR, LI, pt. 1, 34-35.

Surveying the battlefield afterwards, Dearing and another officer found the colors of the 2nd Wisconsin Infantry. The two officers delivered the flag to General P. G. T. Beauregard's tent.⁵

Although Dearing's role in the battle had been minor, his superior officers had noted his bravery and ability. Major Walton gave Dearing the first of what was to be a large number of commendations.⁶

Militarily, for Dearing, the remainder of 1861 was wearisome. Companies of the Washington Artillery took turns answering the rare calls for assistance. On October 21, a courier informed Beauregard that a large detachment of Federals had attacked at Leesburg. Despite rain and mud, the third company left camp eagerly, hoping that another chance to chastise the Yankees had come. Five days later, the dejected company returned. The Union soldiers had fled before the artillery arrived; and the company had not fired a single round.⁷ The soldiers returned to boredom and inactivity.

To General Joseph Johnston, commanding the Confederate Army, the situation was more ominous. As Major General

⁵Owen, Washington Artillery, 41.

⁶OR, II, 515.

⁷Owen, Washington Artillery, 61-62.

George B. McClellan's army increased steadily in numbers, it extended its lines on the Virginia side of the Potomac from Georgetown to Alexandria. On October 19, Johnston withdrew the Confederate army from Fairfax Courthouse to Centerville, but the movement did little to relieve the tedium.⁸ By November, Dearing was acutely homesick. He hoped to receive a fifteen-day leave of absence in the middle of December. He intended to have his uncle write Secretary of War Judah Benjamin if he did not receive a furlough.⁹ The maneuver was an unfortunately common one. Johnston frequently complained because the Secretary of War granted leaves without consulting him.¹⁰

Through some method, Dearing obtained a thirty-day furlough. By December 21, he was at his brother's home at Cascade, Va. While there he wrote a poem to his cousin, Mary Dearing. The poem, although in obviously poor form, revealed many of Dearing's feelings about his war experience. Dearing was temporarily safe, but he wrote:

What does Christmas bring to us, a few feathers
and more fuss.
But to us it does not bring happy hearts and
sleighbells' ring.

⁸Joseph E. Johnston, Narrative of Military Operations Directed during the Late War between the States (New York, 1874), 77. Cited hereafter as Johnston, Military Operations.

⁹James Dearing to Mrs. M. A. Dearing, Nov. 27, 1861, Gooch Papers.

¹⁰Johnston, Military Operations, 92.

To some it brings fast-flowing tears and to all
heart-rending fears
For those loved ones far away who may join in
battle's fierce array.

Yet Dearing's usual good humor did not desert him. In the same poem he expressed his opinion of Yankees.

Do ask my sister Susie if she has learnt to use
a fusie
While staying with our brave boys who can use
them like toys,
Hit a Yankee every pop, in the head, right on
top.¹¹

Late in January, Dearing returned to the Manassas area. The inactivity, the reception of bad news from other areas, and the seeming apathy of Joseph Johnston caused him to question the possibility of Confederate victory. He and others criticized General A. Sidney Johnston who, by mid-February, had lost Forts Henry and Donelson to General U. S. Grant. Joseph Johnston's belief that the Confederacy was beaten did nothing to reassure Dearing; but however pessimistic the young officer became, nothing impaired his determination. "I am sure 'tis the universal feeling of this army to gain a victory when attacked or die," he wrote. Yet he added: "The only way the North can overcome us is by a vastly superior force & that they have."

Like other junior Confederate officers, Dearing was ambitious. When he learned that Major J. B. Walton had

¹¹James Dearing to Mary A. Dearing, Dec. 21, 1861, Dearing Papers.

prepared a list of officers ranked according to merit, Dearing assumed that a number of promotions would result. No one had seen the list; but Dearing, feeling he had been doing the work of a first lieutenant, stated that he would either get a promotion or "leave it [the Washington Artillery] sure."¹² He did not have to wait long for the first intimation of a coming promotion. Early in February, Walton ordered him to assume command of the third company.¹³ Within less than two months, Dearing would be a captain.

Although he had obtained a leave of absence, and although he had become concerned about promotion and Confederate military ability, the winter of 1861-1862 was inevitably a dull one for Dearing. Consequently, he sought a variety of diversions. Girls were always a popular object of recreation; with another officer [probably J. E. B. Stuart], Dearing went to visit some ladies. He and his comrade remained overnight, "having a very pleasant time-- dancing, etc." Another pastime was euchare, a game at which Dearing was quite proficient. He frequently had Joseph Johnston as a partner, and the two habitually

¹² James Dearing to Charles Henry Lynch, Feb. 21, 1862, letter owned by J. D. Christian, Lynchburg, Va.

¹³ War Record of James Dearing, National Archives and Records Service, Washington. Cited hereafter as NARS.

defeated all opponents. At other times, Dearing wandered about the campground, serenading everyone with his banjo and bass voice. The reception was such that Dearing soon had his own band of minstrels who spent evenings in entertaining their fellow-soldiers, including General Johnston.¹⁴ An amusing event occurred when the Louisiana soldiers decided to celebrate Mardi Gras. They held a masquerade ball complete with costumes and soldiers dressed as women. One plump soldier looked so attractive that the other men kept trying to hug him--until the officers specifically forbade such displays. Grateful for the entertainment and the excellent food, both Dearing and Rosser enjoyed the festivities.¹⁵

The young officer was not without difficulties. Osborne, his slave, was perpetually ill with a "cold and pains in his head." The result was that Dearing found himself the servant of his slave. More serious was the lack of a horse, although his need for one was questionable. On one occasion, Dearing asked his uncle to lend him \$200 in order to purchase a new mount.¹⁶

¹⁴James Dearing to Charles Henry Lynch, Feb. 21, 1862, letter owned by J. D. Christian, Lynchburg.

¹⁵Owen, Washington Artillery, 71-73.

¹⁶James Dearing to Charles Henry Lynch, Feb. 21, 1862, letter owned by J. D. Christian, Lynchburg.

With the approach of spring, Dearing had less time for boredom, play and complaint. General Johnston was becoming increasingly concerned about the growing Federal army of General George McClellan. As early as February 20, Johnston was ordering military supplies moved southward from Manassas to Gordonsville. When Brigadier General W. H. C. Whiting noted Federal activity opposite Dunfries, Johnston, fearing that McClellan might gain a two-days' marching lead toward Richmond, prepared to move to the south bank of the Rappahanock.¹⁷

On March 2, 1862, the Confederate army received orders to be ready to move at a moment's notice. Most of the soldiers believed that the army would abandon the Manassas battlefield. Dearing thought otherwise; at least he hoped for a chance "to whip the army of McClellan" once more before leaving.¹⁸

By March 18, it was obvious that McClellan was not going to use the overland Fredricksburg route to Richmond. During March 25-29, scouts reported Federal transports moving down the Potomac. President Davis began to fear an attack against the capital by way of the peninsula. Johnston accordingly ordered the command of Major General

¹⁷Johnston, Military Operations, 101-03.

¹⁸James Dearing to Mrs. M. A. Dearing, Mar. 2, 1862, Gooch Papers.

James Longstreet to the defense of the capital.¹⁹

During the move to Richmond, the Washington Artillery spent a few days at Orange Courthouse. The town had a number of beautiful women, and the officers wasted no time in establishing at a local tavern a "dancing club"--of which Dearing and Rosser were founders.²⁰ It was the last entertainment Dearing was to have for some time.

On April 8, Dearing received his promotion to captain.²¹ Two days later, he left Richmond with his command and hurried into position near Lebanon Church. The Confederates were expecting an immediate attack. As soon as Dearing had reported for duty, Major General John B. Magruder divided his battery, leaving Dearing one part and sending the other for duty elsewhere. Dearing complained to Brigadier General George E. Pickett who, with Longstreet's approval, ordered the battery reunited.²²

On April 23, 1862, members of the Lynchburg Battery elected Dearing as their captain.²³ Three days later, a Federal force attacked at a dam about one and a half miles

¹⁹Johnston, Military Operations, 101-03.

²⁰Owen, Washington Artillery, 76.

²¹NARS

²²James Dearing to Charles Henry Lynch, Apr. 28, 1862, Virginia Historical Society.

²³NARS

from Lebanon Church. Although two Confederate cannon were posted nearby, the gunners failed to deliver a volley. On the following morning, Pickett asked Dearing to accompany him to the area. Shortly thereafter, Longstreet arrived. Both generals wanted to know why the gunners had failed to fire. The lieutenants in charge of the guns replied that a colonel had ordered them not to fire unless the Yankees got on the dam. At that point, both Longstreet and Pickett exploded in anger. Pickett yelled that he outranked a colonel; if the gunners did not know how and when to fire, he roared, they ought to leave. Longstreet added that if the men did not know how to use their pieces, he would send Captain Dearing to relieve them. Longstreet apparently thought that his self-advice was good; that afternoon he ordered Dearing to take two guns into position at the upper dam. Dearing, who had no wish to receive similar criticism, wrote shortly thereafter: "I have been firing upon the enemy quite often ever since, in fact, off and on, day and night."

Confederates who earlier had been in the position had allowed the Federals to build a small fortification no more than 700-800 yards distant. Dearing kept up a constant fire to prevent the Federals from completing the works. He feared that they would "mount some heavy guns and blow my little fortification all to flinders." His fears were well-

founded. Shortly thereafter, a battery opened on his position, and for an hour and a half he engaged in a raging artillery duel. Dashing from one gun to another with his usual indifference to personal risk, Dearing barely escaped injury when a shell fragment cut down a tree only three feet away.

Dearing was, surprisingly enough, concerned about other things. He had allowed Osborne to go home because of sickness. He had then hired a Negro servant whom he had left with the Washington Artillery during the move from Manassas. The servant, perhaps with more fear of personal risk than Dearing, had never rejoined him. During the move, he had also lost his trunk. Yet his most serious lament was that he still had no horse. His uncle had failed to have his check honored in Lynchburg.²⁴

The outnumbered Confederate army at Yorktown was in a precarious situation. Johnston was afraid that the Federals' longer-ranged guns would demolish the place and inflict a serious defeat on the Confederates. On April 27, he informed the War Department of his planned withdrawal; and on May 3, the long retreat up the peninsula began. Johnston hoped to avoid major engagements during the retreat, but the Federal attacks became so heavy that he

²⁴ James Dearing to Charles Henry Lynch, Apr. 28, 1862, Virginia Historical Society.

decided to turn and fight at Williamsburg.²⁵

Early on the morning of May 5, Pickett moved with his brigade from the rear of Old College in Williamsburg. At 8 a. m., Longstreet ordered him to countermarch behind the brigade of Brigadier General Cadmus M. Wilcox. With Dearing's battery in the lead, Pickett moved into the re-doubts before Williamsburg.²⁶

Pickett notified Brigadier General Richard H. Anderson, then at Fort Magruder, of his approach. Anderson replied that he needed no help and instructed Pickett to remain in position. Shortly thereafter, Brigadier General J. E. B. Stuart informed Pickett that the batteries at Fort Magruder had suffered severely. At 11:30 a. m., Pickett ordered Dearing to take two guns to the Fort. About noon, Dearing reported to Colonel Micah Jenkins, who ordered him to drive off a column of Federal infantry approaching from the left. Ignoring the fire from a Federal battery, Dearing unlimbered his guns and began opening large gaps in the attacking infantry line. After suffering heavy casualties, the Federal infantry retreated; but the Yankee cannon continued to bark. The situation became desperate when another Federal battery moved into

²⁵Johnston, Military Operations, 108-10.

²⁶Lasalle Corbell Pickett, Pickett and His Men (Atlanta, 1899), 158.

position on the Confederate right. The duel continued without noticeable result on either side until Lieutenant William I. Clopton reported with two more guns. Dearing hurriedly placed the guns to confront the new Federal battery on his right. Giving scant heed to the whine of sharpshooters' bullets, Dearing and his men poured a steady stream of shell into the Yankee positions. He had just succeeded in silencing the Federal guns when Jenkins ordered the command into the fort.

In mid-afternoon, the Federal guns wheeled into position again and began laying a heavy barrage on the fort. Dearing, reinforced with the guns in Captain R. M. Stribling's battery, moved out of the fort and replied furiously. The Federal guns withdrew a second time, but the Confederates were to have no respite.²⁷ Between 4 and 5 p. m., the Federals launched a new attack with both artillery and infantry. Dearing's weary men manned their pieces once more and opened a determined fire against the approaching columns. The Union forces wavered once again. Before dusk, the Yankees had retreated. Dearing and his men returned exhausted to Williamsburg.²⁸ Jenkins, Longstreet, and Lieutenant Colonel J. T. Brown were among

²⁷OR, XI, pt. 1, 582-85.

²⁸Ibid., LI, pt. 1, 6, 88.

those who commended Dearing's gallantry.²⁹

After the Williamsburg battle, the Confederate forces continued their retreat up the peninsula toward Richmond. When the Federal army reached the Chickahominy River, McClellan divided his forces. Johnston hoped that the distance between the two sections of the Union army would increase. He therefore delayed his attack. On May 24, reports that General Irvin McDowell was moving south with another army caused Johnston to prepare at once for battle. The threat proved to be false. McDowell returned to Fredricksburg, and Johnston again delayed his attack.

On the morning of May 30, Brigadier General Samuel Garland reported Federal outposts two miles west of Seven Pines. Because the Chickahominy River dividing the two Federal forces was swollen by heavy, recent rains, Johnston assumed that he could defeat one part of the Federal army before having to fight the other.

The circumstances resulted in the Battle of Seven Pines. The May 31 battle went badly from the start. Some Confederate generals attacked at the wrong times and without adequate support; others failed to attack at all. Orders were confused and sometimes contradictory. Dearing's part in the battle, although brief, was valiant; his

²⁹OR, XI, pt. 1, 568, 583; LI, pt. 1, 88.

battery's role proved disastrous.

Longstreet was in charge of the Confederate right wing. He was to move against the Federal left flank with the support of Generals D. H. Hill and Benjamin F. Huger. After waiting several hours for Huger to move, Longstreet attacked without him. At 3 p. m., his brigades encountered Federal works of abatis, redoubts, and rifle pits. Generals Garland and George B. Anderson assaulted the position supported by the batteries of Captains J. W. Bondurant and Thomas Carter. The attacking force encountered a hail of bullets and shells that left hundreds of dying and dead Confederates on the field.³⁰ Exposed to the murderous fire, the batteries of Bondurant and Carter suffered severe losses. Dearing's battery rushed to reinforce Carter's.

Interrered by shells, bullets and the general slaughter, Dearing and his men answered the Federal fire in kind.³¹

Since the Confederates had succeeded in storming the rifle pits, Dearing had lost eighteen men.³²

The seriousness of his losses can best be judged by the comments of Longstreet. In June, when Brigadier General William N. Pendleton ordered three batteries from

³⁰Johnston, Military Operations, 130-35.

³¹OR, XI, pt. 1, 973.

³²S. Bassett French, "Biographical Sketches," Virginia State Library.

Longstreet's command, Longstreet complained that two of the batteries were useless. Dearing's battery did not even have horses.³³ Another indication of Dearing's serious loss was his failure to take any prominent part in the Seven Days battles of late June.

Despite high casualties, Dearing remained both determined and proud. He wrote his uncle that not one of the men he had lost had been shot in the back.³⁴ Concerning Dearing's conduct in the battle, Longstreet wrote: "His pieces were well served under the severest fire, as his serious loss will attest."³⁵

For the greater part of the summer, Dearing's battery remained in Richmond and sought to heal the wounds received at Seven Pines. Dearing himself was quite ill;³⁶ yet by August, both the Captain and his battery had recovered sufficiently to engage in the battle of the Second Manassas.

After McClellan's failure on the peninsula, President Lincoln had entrusted the Army of Virginia to Major General John Pope who, by August 27, was clearly on his way to Manassas.

³³OR, XI, pt. 3, 687.

³⁴Altavista (Va.) Journal, Nov. 21, 1913.

³⁵OR, XI, pt. 1, 941.

³⁶S. Bassett French, "Biographical Sketches," Virginia State Library.

On both August 28-29, Lieutenant General Thomas J. Jackson's Confederates clashed with segments of Pope's army. On the 29th, Longstreet's corps reached the area; but throughout that day and the greater part of August 30, Longstreet waited. Only after the Federals had unsuccessfully charged Jackson's lines three times did Longstreet assail the Union flank.³⁷

Captain Dearing used the opportunity to practice the artillery charges that were to become a mark of his tactical maneuvers. The battery would stop, unlimber, fire, limber up, and charge again. When the battle ended, the area was littered with the soldiers of Pope's army.³⁸

Lincoln found it expedient to change generals once more.

Dearing missed the battle of Antietam. His brigade, along with two others, was detached from Longstreet's corps for patrol duty with Major General Richard H. Anderson on the peninsula.³⁹

During October, General Pendleton began reorganizing the artillery of Robert E. Lee's command. Pendleton

³⁷James I. Robertson, Jr., The Stonewall Brigade (Baton Rouge, 1963), 144.

³⁸William N. Wood, Reminiscences of Big I (Jackson, Tenn., 1956), 32. Cited hereafter as Wood, Reminiscences.

³⁹Walter H. Taylor, Four Years with General Lee (New York, 1877), 71. Cited hereafter as Taylor, Four Years.

divided the Bedford battery of Captain John R. Johnson between Dearing and Stribling. By December and the battle of Fredricksburg, Dearing was commanding three batteries of artillery: his own, Stribling's, and that of Captain Miles C. Macon. Yet Dearing retained the rank of captain.⁴⁰

Had Dearing been able to participate in the Seven Days, Antietam and Fredricksburg, his promotion might have been more rapid. In any case, by the end of 1862, he had earned a promotion to captain and an excellent reputation among his superiors. He was well-prepared for further advancement and service.

Dearing did not have long to wait. Early in 1863, he was promoted to major and assigned command of the artillery in Major General George E. Pickett's division. Pendleton, always eager to improve Lee's "Long Arm," then recommended that Dearing command Battalion P in Longstreet's First Corps. On February 15, Dearing received the new assignment.⁴¹

⁴⁰Jennings Cropper Wise, The Long Arm of Lee: The History of the Artillery of the Army of Northern Virginia (New York, 1959), 358. Although present at the battle of Fredricksburg, Dearing's batteries were not seriously engaged. He and Stribling occupied the center of Pickett's line. Confederate Veteran, IX (1901), 215. Cited hereafter as CV.

⁴¹OR, XXV, pt. 2, 614-19, 626. Because of that particular situation, Dearing was to miss another important battle: Chancellorsville.

On February 25, Robert E. Lee placed the Department of North Carolina under Longstreet's command.⁴² Lee had two reasons for his decision: the danger of a new Federal attack on Richmond and the need for the food supplies from the eastern North Carolina counties. No major battles occurred; but in terms of its primary mission, the expedition proved quite successful.⁴³

The campaign gave Dearing an opportunity to demonstrate his predilection for cavalry service. The 2nd North Carolina Cavalry was transferred to southeastern Southampton County. Dearing, never happier than when on horseback, volunteered to lead an expedition to reconnoiter the Federal positions near Suffolk. Dearing called for twenty-five of the best mounted men in the 2nd North Carolina to join him. Then, reminiscent of J. E. B. Stuart's reconnaissance before the Seven Days campaign, the twenty-two-year old artillery officer proceeded to lead his little band on an excursion that took them near enough to Suffolk to capture a number of Federal pickets posted north of the town. The group crossed the Blackwater, rode through Isle of Wight, skirted to the north of Suffolk, and traveled crosscountry to Smithfield.

⁴²OR, XVIII, 895.

⁴³Pickett, Pickett and His Men, 236-37.

The information Dearing obtained enabled Longstreet to establish a picket line from Franklin to Smithfield. By mid-April, Confederates had almost surrounded Suffolk. This guard against Federal surprises added immensely to the success of the foraging expedition in eastern North Carolina.⁴⁴

Dearing experienced only one serious loss during the entire campaign. On April 16, Major General S. G. French, having been given command of Longstreet's artillery, split Dearing's battalion and sent two batteries down the Nansemond River. Because French provided inadequate protection against gunboats and infantry, the Federals captured the greater part of Captain R. M. Stribling's Fauquier Battery.⁴⁵

In May, Dearing left the Suffolk area to rejoin Lee's command at Fredricksburg. Early in June, Longstreet's corps moved to Culpeper Courthouse in preparation for the invasion of the North.⁴⁶

On June 15, Pendleton appointed Dearing, Colonel E. Porter Alexander, Major M. W. Henry, and Captains James Reilly, Joseph G. Blount and J. C. Fraser to a board that was to investigate the artillery and artillery projectiles

⁴⁴CV, XXXVII (1929), 93.

⁴⁵OR, XVIII, 334-36.

⁴⁶Ibid., 1045; XVII, pt. 2, 348.

then in use in the Confederate army. The Board was to meet on the first day of each month.⁴⁷ On that same day, the army left Culpeper and began its march toward Pennsylvania.

In the decisive campaign then beginning, Major M. W. Henry, Colonel H. C. Cabell, Colonel E. Porter Alexander, and Major James Dearing commanded artillery battalions in the First Corps. Dearing commanded the following batteries in Pickett's division:

Fauquier--Captain R. M. Stribling
 Hampden--Captain W. H. Caskie
 Richmond Fayette--Captain M. C. Macon
 Virginia--Captain Joseph G. Blount⁴⁸

On the afternoon of June 16, the battalion arrived at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Dearing's command then marched east along the slope of the mountains. On June 24, having spent several days in camp, the battalion left Berryville. The next day it crossed the Potomac between Williamsport and Hagerstown. The following night, Lee's artillery camped en masse near Greencastle, then proceeded the following day through Chambersburg.⁴⁹

During a five-day encampment near Chambersburg, Dearing found an excellent reason to increase his cavalry experience. His battalion needed horses. Dearing obtained

⁴⁷OR, XXVII, pt. 3, 873-74.

⁴⁸Ibid., pt. 2, 283-84.

⁴⁹Ibid., 388.

permission to go west into the Pennsylvania mountains in search of horses. After mounting as many of his men as possible on battery horses, he led an expedition into the mountains. The men easily found a sufficient number of new mounts, but they did not easily return to Chambersburg. Militia in the area, determined to trap the invading Rebels, guarded the mountain gaps and several times repulsed the band's attempts to break through. After suffering many ambushes and near-captures, Dearing used an old ruse to escape successfully. Late one night he ordered his men to build huge campfires. Leaving the fires burning, the group crept through a gap fifteen miles from the camp.⁵⁰

Early on the morning of July 2, the battalion left the vicinity of Chambersburg and moved toward Gettysburg. Near dusk, the battalion received orders to proceed directly to the battleground. That night the artillerists moved up immediately behind the lines of First Corps.

Dearing was not with his command. With typical impatience, he had gone directly to the front. At or before 9 a. m. on July 2, he offered his services to Colonel Alexander, who placed the batteries of Captains T. C. Jordan and P. Woolfolk, Jr., under Dearing's command.⁵¹

⁵⁰CV, IX (1901), 215.

⁵¹OR, XXVII, pt. 2, 352.

The Federal batteries had been obstinately harassing the Confederate lines. An irritated Alexander ordered Dearing to limber his guns to the front. Dearing then led a new artillery charge, following his usual process of firing, limbering up, charging, unlimbering, and firing again. Galloping back and forth, urging the gunners forward, he made excellent progress until the batteries encountered a rail fence. Temporarily halted, Dearing looked about for assistance. He spied a long column of Federal prisoners on the way to the rear. Six feet two inches of Confederate imposition, Dearing galloped up to them and, waving his saber in the air, bellowed, "God damn you, pull down those fences!"

The prisoners fell over each other trying to obey. The fence removed, Dearing hurried the batteries forward to hurl canister at the retreating Federals.⁵²

Later the same day, Dearing was surveying the Federal lines from an exposed position. When a courier from Robert E. Lee approached, Dearing thought that the General wanted a report on the Federal movements and positions. The courier's message quickly disillusioned the young, proud officer. "I do not approve of young

⁵²CY, XXXIV (1926), 18; Edwin B. Coddington, The Gettysburg Campaign: A Study in Command (New York, 1968), 405-06.

officers exposing themselves needlessly," Lee wrote. "Your place is with your men."⁵³

Pendleton then ordered the artillery to prepare for a barrage as early as possible on the following morning. Dearing's battalion was posted between those of Eshleman and Cabell. For safety, the First Corps ordnance train was moved some distance behind the lines--a circumstance that was to cause difficulties later.

Just before the battle resumed on July 3, Dearing was conferring with a group of fellow officers. Pointing his finger toward the Federal position, Dearing remarked, "That hill must fall."⁵⁴

As soon as the signal guns fired on the morning of July 3, Dearing ordered his battalion to the front. According to his official report, he directed his gunners to fire by battery so as to insure greater accuracy and conserve ammunition.⁵⁵ That Dearing was as calm as his official report indicates is doubtful. Mounted on his huge white stallion, and grasping a battle flag in his hand, he galloped from battery to battery--frequently in front of the muzzles of his own cannons. Occasionally he stopped to

⁵³SHSP, XXXIV (1906), 329.

⁵⁴Wood, Reminiscences, 44.

⁵⁵OR, XVII, pt. 2, 352, 388.

take the place of a stricken gunner. His daring caused much consternation among men who had no desire to receive special attention from the Yankee batteries.⁵⁶ Lee found it necessary to reprimand the young major a second time, and Lee further suggested that Dearing exchange his white horse for one less conspicuous.⁵⁷

Dearing continued to direct his fire against the Federal batteries in his front. By the time of Pickett's charge, the opposing batteries had almost ceased firing. Unfortunately, Dearing's ammunition was almost exhausted. His remaining shells were expended against a column of infantry moving against Pickett's right flank. Because the ammunition train had been moved to the rear, no more shells were available. Dearing had no recourse but to withdraw his battalion.⁵⁸

Artillerists who remained to watch the charge could only stare helplessly as the Federal batteries raked Pickett's columns and littered the field with hundreds of wounded and dead Confederates.

As soon as possible, Alexander sent Dearing the fresh

⁵⁶SHSP, XXXIV (1906), 331.

⁵⁷Lynchburg News, Feb. 15, 1961.

⁵⁸Dearing wrote in his official report that his battalion had remained in position after all ammunition was exhausted. However, Eshleman's report contradicts Dearing's statement. See OR, XXVII, pt. 2, 388-89, 435.

batteries of Captains G. V. Moody, Joe Norcom, M. B. Miller and O. B. Taylor. Near 6 p. m., in the final action of the day, Dearing used the batteries to drive off a strong column of infantry advancing on his position.

On the morning of July 4, Dearing's guns moved somewhat behind the lines he had occupied the previous day. He remained in that position throughout the day. About dusk, he received orders to join the lines of march at Black Horse Tavern.

On the following day, the army marched from Black Horse Tavern to Monterey Springs. Early on the morning of July 6, Lee's army headed for Hagerstown. The next day, Dearing's battalion, with the remainder of the army, prepared a line of battle with the hope that the Federals would attack and provide an opportunity for Confederate revenge. Yet the Union forces demonstrated no desire to launch a new offensive. Three days later, at Downsville, Alexander again ordered the battalion into line of battle. There it remained for three days in anticipation of a Federal attack that never came.

On July 14, the battalion recrossed the Potomac via a pontoon bridge at Falling Waters. The march continued without incident until, on July 21, Dearing sent two of his batteries under Major J. P. W. Read to secure Chester Gap. The batteries and one brigade from Pickett's division

succeeded in reaching the Gap just before a Federal detachment arrived there. Blount's and Caskie's batteries repulsed the enemy and retained control of the Gap. The remainder of Dearing's battalion crossed the next day. By 2 p. m. on July 24, the battalion had encamped at Culpeper Courthouse.

Although Dearing's losses were relatively light--8 killed and 17 wounded--⁵⁹ his personal feelings reflected the frustration of an army officer who could not and would not acknowledge defeat. Dearing believed strongly that Pickett's charge should have been supported. He was scornful of Major General Henry Heth's division that, although one of the strongest in the army, could not reach the heights that "Pickett's little division of 4,000 Virginians took unsupported--unassisted." He wrote that had Pickett been supported, "the Yankees would have had only one outlet by a single gap through the mountains and we would have destroyed their army." Had Pickett been able to hold the heights, "We most probably would have secured ammunition enough to supply us and the 1st trip towards peace would have been made. As it is now we are back here and all that are not are coming and if the Yankees wish to try us again we are ready willing and waiting. We can and will whip them whenever we meet them."⁶⁰

⁵⁹OR, XXVII, pt. 2, 389-90, 364.

⁶⁰James Dearing to Mrs. M. A. Dearing, July 27, 1863, Dearing Papers.

Dearing's conduct during the Gettysburg campaign revealed much youthful enthusiasm and a perilous indifference to risk. At both Chambersburg and Gettysburg, Dearing demonstrated the nonchalant courageousness that is a characteristic of the immature. It was a characteristic that brought reprimands from Robert E. Lee. Yet Dearing's zestfulness contained elements of constructive maturity; he did not hesitate to innovate. If his eagerness sometimes caused him to take unnecessary risks, his enthusiasm kept him actively engaged. Although Lee reproached his careless conduct, Dearing's immediate superiors praised his efforts and ability.⁶¹

Dearing's letter to his mother at the end of the Gettysburg campaign revealed another interesting facet of his personality. During the expedition, everyone had been busy. Dearing had been busier than most. Yet once he had returned to Culpeper Courthouse, he wrote: "I was unable to procure any coffee while across the Potomac. Neither could I procure any ladies shoes or gloves. I bought 3 or 4 or 5 dresses, the best I saw, which I will send the first opportunity."⁶²

⁶¹OR, XXVII, pt. 2, 363, 431.

⁶²James Dearing to Mrs. M. A. Dearing, July 27, 1863, Dearing Papers.

CHAPTER III

GENERAL DEARING

On September 14, 1863, Longstreet ordered the battalions of Alexander, Dearing and Eshleman to Petersburg. From that point the battalions were to move to Chattanooga with Longstreet's corps. However, Pickett was detached to command the Department of North Carolina. Consequently, from September to November, Dearing remained in Petersburg.¹

In November, Pickett recommended that Dearing be promoted to lieutenant colonel and transferred to the cavalry. Before the War Department could act on the recommendation, Pickett ordered Dearing to Franklin, North Carolina with 200 mounted men. Upon receiving reports of Union outrages against the citizens of Elizabeth City, Pickett ordered all cavalry in the Blackwater, plus 130 of Dearing's troopers to Elizabeth City.² Before Dearing arrived, the Federals fled the city.³

Although Dearing was unable to participate in any battles, the directives must have made him quite happy; he could avoid the tediousness of inactivity. The situation was also to provide him with further promotions

¹OR, LI, pt. 2, 766-67, 769.

²Ibid., XXIX, pt. 2, 841-42, 881.

³Ibid., 883; LI, pt. 2, 799.

in the eventful spring of 1864.

On January 27, a climatic event occurred when Dearing somehow found time to marry Roxana Birchett, daughter of a wealthy planter from Petersburg.⁴ Dearing had conveniently forgotten some earlier remarks he had made about marriage. In March, 1863, he responded to a comment by one of his recently married officers by writing: "He informs me that I am to be married but to whom he does not know. I do think people are the greatest fools & especially the Lynchburgians. The idea of my being married!! and I've no doubt but that half the people of my acquaintance believe it from all I hear."⁵

Whatever his young ideas about marriage had been, he became a devoted husband to "Lala" and, in August, 1864, an adoring father to his daughter, "little Sing."

The honeymoon was brief. Early in January, 1864, Pickett had begun preparations for a new foraging expedition into the North Carolina counties of Gates, Pasquotank and Perquimas. He still wanted Dearing to command the cavalry of the expedition, but no action had been taken on the November recommendation. Pickett once again urged Dearing's promotion, adding that "he has served with me for

⁴Gregory Kent and Juliet Fauntleroy (comps.), "Lynches and Adamses" (typescript), Jones Memorial Library, Lynchburg.

⁵James Dearing to Mrs. M. A. Dearing, Mar., 10, 1863, Gooch Papers.

two years under my immediate command. I know of no one more entitled to promotion than Major Dearing." On January 13, Secretary of War James A. Seddon endorsed the temporary promotion to colonel.⁶ Approval came none too soon. Seven days later, Robert E. Lee recommended that Dearing command the expedition's artillery.⁷

Dearing's regiment, the 8th Confederate Cavalry, contained companies from Georgia, North Carolina and Virginia. Included was Captain Edward Graham's Virginia Light Artillery.⁸

Three days after his marriage, Dearing assumed command of his regiment near New Bern, N. C. Early in 1862, a Federal force under General Ambrose Burnside had captured the town. Pickett, among others, was determined to return it to Confederate control.

For the attack, Pickett divided his forces into three elements. Brigadier General Seth M. Barton, with a strong force of infantry, cavalry and artillery, was to invest New Bern from the area of the Trent River and Brices Creek. Dearing with his command was to attack Forts Barrington and Anderson. The third force, under Pickett and Brigadier General Robert F. Hoke, was to attack from the area of

⁶OR, XXIX, pt. 2, 906; XXXIII, 1083-84.

⁷Ibid., XXXIII, 1102.

⁸NARS

Batchelders Creek. In conjunction with these movements, Commander John Taylor Wood was to attack and sink the Federal gunboats on the Neuse River.⁹

Dearing was to take Fort Bennington and, if practicable, Fort Anderson so as to distract the Union forces just before the major attacks. Barton's attack was to be the signal for Pickett to launch his assault. Dearing succeeded in capturing Fort Bennington, but he deemed Fort Anderson too strong for his troops. Pickett waited eagerly to hear Barton's opening salvos. He waited two days before learning that Barton considered the Federal positions too formidable. Pickett, in disgust, withdrew from New Bern, turned command of the North Carolina army over to General Hoke, and returned to Virginia.¹⁰

At this time, Dearing obtained a short leave. Although he spent the greater part of the two weeks with his wife in Petersburg,¹¹ he went to Richmond long enough to buy a pair of revolvers--symbols of his new status as a

⁹John G. Barrett, The Civil War in North Carolina (Chapel Hill, 1963), 202-04. Cited hereafter as Barrett, North Carolina.

¹⁰Pickett, Pickett and His Men, 331-34.

¹¹James Dearing to Mrs. Roxana Dearing, Mar. 8, 1864, Gooch Papers.

lieutenant colonel in the cavalry.¹²

Upon his return to North Carolina, Dearing led his regiment in several foraging and scouting expeditions to the eastern counties. General Hoke wanted to scout the Federal defenses at Plymouth, Washington and New Bern.¹³

After another brief leave in March, Dearing returned to North Carolina. He promptly became involved in an acrimonious exchange with General Joseph Johnston, then commanding the western Army of Tennessee. Early in February, Johnston had complained of deficiencies in his artillery service. He requested that Robert E. Lee send him Colonel E. Porter Alexander. Lee, considering Alexander's services to the Army of Northern Virginia too valuable, refused.¹⁴ To complicate the situation further, several of Johnston's officers had been grumbling because they believed that the officers in the Virginia Army received unjustified promotions. One such complaint cited the advancement of Lieutenant Colonel Dearing as an excellent example.¹⁵

On March 26, Brigadier General W. N. Pendleton visited Dearing at Weldon N. C. Pendleton informed

¹²NARS

¹³James Dearing to Mrs. Roxana Dearing, Mar. 8, 1864, Gooch Papers.

¹⁴Johnston, Military Operations, 570.

¹⁵OR, XXXII, pt. 2, 671.

him that Johnston had applied to the Secretary of War for Dearing's transfer to Lieutenant General W. J. Hardee's corps as colonel and chief of artillery. Dearing had no inclination to leave Virginia or to return to the artillery service. He wrote his wife: "I dislike very much the idea of going so far from Virginia. I much prefer going with General Stuart in Lee's army--don't you?"¹⁶

If Dearing objected overtly to Pendleton's information, the protest had no effect. On March 29, Pendleton proceeded to recommend Dearing's transfer to the War Department.¹⁷

Dearing avoided the transfer. He also succeeded in irritating Johnston, who wrote that he had applied for Dearing only on the recommendation of an officer who had served with him. Johnston further commented that he had not been favorably impressed by the Virginia Army's artillery officers, who displayed a childish eagerness to discharge their pieces.¹⁸

Another event was to threaten Dearing's happy relationship with the cavalry service. On April 5, Robert E. Lee sent a curt order for Dearing to report without

¹⁶ James Dearing to Mrs. Roxana Dearing, Mar. 26, 1864, Gooch Papers. J. E. B. Stuart had earlier asked Dearing to serve with him.

¹⁷ OR, XXXII, pt. 2, 686.

¹⁸ Ibid., pt. 3, 714.

delay to the headquarters of the Army of Northern Virginia for assignment to the horse artillery.¹⁹ Fortunately, Hoke was already preparing his assaults against Plymouth, Washington and New Bern. By the end of the campaign, Dearing was to be a brigadier general and secure in a cavalry command.

Dearing had two reasons for his refusals. His recent marriage was the more important one.²⁰ Because his wife was already pregnant, Dearing wanted to remain as near Petersburg as possible. He hoped too that his wife could join him at Garysville or Weldon, where he could see her more often.²¹ His second reason was his penchant for the rapid movement and semi-independence of cavalry. Dearing was thoroughly devoted to the Confederate cause, but he was also devoted to capturing his share of glory.

By mid-April, General Hoke had prepared his army for the attack on Plymouth. On April 19, the Confederate forces, including Dearing's regiment, were arrayed before the town. Hoke ordered Dearing to prepare to charge and seize an outlying fort. Just before the assault, Dearing noticed that his old Lynchburg battery (under Captain J. W.

¹⁹OR, XXXIII, 1264.

²⁰Note by Mrs. Roxana Dearing, Gooch Papers.

²¹James Dearing to Mrs. Roxana Dearing, Mar. 31, 1864, ibid.

Dickerson) was nearby. He instructed the artillerists and infantrymen to charge with the cavalry.

Waving one of his new revolvers in the air, Dearing yelled with all the fervor of a warring Indian and hurled his combined forces against the Federals. The pounding of hooves, the heavy rattle of caissons--punctuated intermittently by salvos from canoneers who paused only long enough to turn and fire--increased the excitement. To the Yankees in the fort, the spectacle was overwhelming. The Federals shortly surrendered.²² General Hoke's attack met with equal success; and on the following day, the remainder of the Federal garrison surrendered. With youthful elation, Dearing wrote his wife: "The fight is over and we have taken Plymouth with between fifteen hundred & two thousand prisoners."²³

The battle earned Hoke promotion to major general.²⁴ Hoke then urged to General Braxton Bragg that Dearing be promoted to brigadier general and given command of a brigade consisting of the 3rd and 6th North Carolina, 62nd Georgia, and 8th Confederate Cavalry Regiments. Hoke's

²²Altavista (Va.) Journal, Mar. 16, 1933.

²³James Dearing to Mrs. Roxana Dearing, Apr. 20, 1864, Gooch Papers.

²⁴Barrett, North Carolina, 220

letter indicated the degree of faith others had in Dearing's ability and dedication.

I shall expect a great deal of my Cavalry in my move against New Berne, and would be glad to have someone in whom I can place all confidence, and from Col Dearing's past actions, I believe there is no one who would do the work better. He never tires; and has shown himself willing in this move to lead Cavalry--Artillery and Infantry. He has entered into this move with great spirit, and much to him I am indebted for my present success, I am well assured the arms of the Confederacy will never be dishonored while in his care.²⁵

The promotion on April 29 made Dearing one of the three youngest generals in the Confederacy. He was barely twenty-four years old.²⁶

Neither Dearing nor the other enthusiastic warriors wasted time in self-congratulation. On April 30, the Confederate forces arrived at Washington. The Federals preferred retreat to capture and abandoned the city as hastily as possible. Hoke excitedly wired Bragg: "The enemy have evacuated Washington. Dearing, with his cavalry, is after them."²⁷

Hoke shortly recalled Dearing, for the most formidable obstacle remained: New Bern. Hoke opened the attack on May 4 by driving in the pickets stationed on the Trent Road,

²⁵Major General Robert F. Hoke to General Braxton Bragg, Apr. 25, 1864, NARS.

²⁶Altavista (Va.) Journal, Nov. 21, 1913.

²⁷OR, XXXVI, pt. 2, 940.

eight miles from New Bern. The next day, he attacked from the southside of the Trent River. The battle lasted until dusk with no gains on either side. On the morning of May 7, a confident Hoke sent a courier to Brigadier General Innis N. Palmer to demand the surrender of the town. Palmer gave the messenger a half an hour to leave.

Meanwhile, on the morning of May 5, Dearing had led his brigade across Brices Creek and surrounded the Federal Fort at Croatan, twelve miles south of New Bern. With one six-pound howitzer and some thirty-five men, the Federals fought for an hour and a half. At the end of that time, realizing the futility of further resistance, they surrendered. The redoubt was part of the fortifications that Barton had refused to attack three months earlier.²⁸

The Federal threat to Petersburg and Richmond ended the Confederate threat to New Bern. Both Hoke and Dearing received orders to report to Petersburg. Just before leaving for his new assignment, Dearing wrote with customary modesty to his wife: "I was the only person who had any engagement here. I took a fort with 33 prisoners with my brigade of cavalry."²⁹

²⁸OR, XXVII, pt. 2, 3-6; Barrett, North Carolina, 223-24.

²⁹James Dearing to Mrs. Roxana Dearing, May 6, 1864, Gooch Papers.

During the battles in the Petersburg-Weldon area, Dearing commanded the following cavalry regiments in Major General W. H. C. Whiting's division:

7th Confederate--Colonel V. H. Taliaferro
 8th Georgia--Colonel Joel R. Griffin
 4th North Carolina--Colonel Denins D. Ferebee
 65th North Carolina--Colonel George N. Folk³⁰

Movements and orders again became confused and contradictory. Dearing had to wait briefly at Weldon for one of his regiments to join the command.³¹ At the same time, Bragg suggested to General P. G. T. Beauregard that Dearing's brigade be used to hold the Petersburg-Weldon Railroad. The War Department then extended the limits of the First Military District to include Drewry's Bluff and placed Dearing temporarily under the command of Brigadier General Henry A. Wise. According to the War Department, Dearing was to guard the Confederate lines between Swift's Creek and Drewry's Bluff.³² However, as soon as Dearing reported in Petersburg, Wise reassigned him to the Weldon Railroad. Dearing left Petersburg immediately, only to be recalled the next day by General Beauregard who was preparing to attack

³⁰OR, XXXVI, pt. 2, 208.

³¹ James Dearing to P. G. T. Beauregard, May 11, 1864, Acheson Laughlin Hench (comp.), "Papers of American and English Authors and Historical Figures, Fourteenth Century to 1956," University of Virginia. Cited hereafter as Hench, "Papers."

³²OR, XXXVI, pt. 2, 997-98.

a Federal force under Major General B. F. Butler.³³

Beauregard had assembled a large Confederate force at Drewry's Bluff to counter Butler's movement from Bermuda Hundred toward Richmond. Beauregard quickly realized that Butler, if defeated, could simply retreat behind strong defensive lines across the neck of the Bermuda Hundred peninsula. The Creole general therefore ordered Whiting to assemble his available forces at Swift's Creek and to attack Butler's rear to block a Federal retreat.

By dawn on April 16, Whiting had reached Swift's Creek. At the beginning of the march, he ordered Dearing to guard the right flank with Griffin's regiment and the left flank with Taliaferro's. The advance guard of the force encountered Federal pickets from a Negro cavalry unit shortly after crossing Swift's Creek. Major General D. H. Hill--who was accompanying the expedition in an unofficial capacity--urged that Dearing's remaining regiments be hurried forward. Dearing, eager for battle, rushed to the front and arrived just in time to see the Federals disappear.

By 11 a. m., Whiting reached the point from which he was to communicate with Beauregard. Dearing then left by way of the Petersburg-Richmond Railroad route. At Chester Station he encountered a large Federal force. Never one to

³³OR, XXXVI, pt. 2, 1006-08.

allow opportunity to go unused, Dearing surrounded the station and, after a short but fierce fight, led away 220 prisoners.

Meanwhile, Whiting had lost his nerve. He had been pushing ahead--very slowly--until Taliaferro reported that a large Federal force was occupying the turnpike in their front. Whiting ordered a halt. General Hill, who had little faith in cavalry reports, went up to the turnpike himself and discovered but a handful of Yankees. By the time he returned, Whiting had already begun to withdraw. Despite Hill's eyewitness report, he refused to press an attack.³⁴

After jauntily herding his prisoners into the midst of Beauregard's army, Dearing reported Whiting's movement and position. Beauregard had been waiting impatiently for sounds of battle from Whiting's quarter. He was anxious to learn when Dearing's commanding general intended to attack. Dearing, who had already taken Whiting's measure, told Beauregard not to rely upon any advance by Whiting during the battle.³⁵ Beauregard finally despaired of aid

³⁴OR, XXXVI, pt. 2, 200, 203-04, 210-11, 256-57.

³⁵Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence Clough Buel (eds.), Battles and Leaders of the Civil War (New York, 1956), IV, 203. Cited hereafter as Johnson and Buel, Battles and Leaders.

from Whiting, and drove Butler back into the Bermuda Hundred.³⁶

In the official report of his fiasco, Whiting wrote: "General Dearing particularly distinguished himself by a brilliant attack on the enemy at Chester."³⁷ He should have stated that only Dearing distinguished himself.

For the remainder of May, Dearing was engaged in scouting activities. Whiting ordered the cavalry general to watch closely all approaches to Petersburg.³⁸ On the night of May 20, Dearing reconnoitered in the Fort Powhatan area. On May 27, he submitted a report concerning the movement of Federal transports down the Appomattox.³⁹ On the last day of May, Dearing's brigade attacked a small Federal group at Gatlins and attempted to sink two gunboats.⁴⁰

Such activities disturbed the Federals very little. To them, Dearing's brigade was inconsequential. Butler wrote that "there are but 1,000 rebel cavalry south of the James, and they are Dearing's brigade, jaded by a

³⁶ OR, XXXVI, pt. 2, 1022.

³⁷ Ibid., 258.

³⁸ Ibid., 1026.

³⁹ Ibid., pt. 3, 822, 841.

⁴⁰ James Dearing to P. G. T. Beauregard, May 31, 1864, Hench, "Papers."

200-miles march from N. C."⁴¹ When the Yankees attempted again to seize Petersburg, they would learn to regard the brigade and its leader with more respect.

⁴¹OR, XXXVI, pt. 3, 43.

CHAPTER IV

PETERSBURG'S GUARDIAN ANGEL

Since May, the armies of Lieutenant General U. S. Grant and General Robert E. Lee had been almost constantly engaged. By early June, the major forces of North and South faced each other from their respective entrenchments before Richmond. Grant hoped to break the Confederate line, destroy Lee's army, capture Richmond, and thus end the war. Early on June 3, 1864, Grant hurled his forces against Lee's entrenchments at Cold Harbor. The results were disastrous. Heavy losses convinced Grant to find new means by which to continue the offensive.

Petersburg was an obvious target. Over the Petersburg-Weldon Railroad came most of Lee's supplies from eastern North Carolina. The Southside Railroad provided Lee's connection with western Virginia and piedmont North Carolina. For the Army of the Potomac, the fall of Petersburg could have important consequences: Lee would no longer be able to receive the supplies on which his army depended, and Grant could outflank the Confederate army and thus avoid a long siege. Grant therefore planned to slip away from the Richmond lines, move his troops across the James, and seize Petersburg before Lee could react.

While Grant planned his grand offensive, other

Northern commands were not inactive. The first hint of trouble for Petersburg came with Dearing's report that Union transports were moving up the Appomattox River. On June 9, Brigadier General August V. Kautz's Federal cavalry launched the first attack against Petersburg. Only the meager forces of Brigadier General Henry A. Wise were in the city; Dearing rushed his brigade, including Captain Edward Graham's battery, to the besieged lines.

For a time the situation was desperate. By 2:30 p. m., Kautz had seized the outer entrenchments. A half hour later, Federal troops were in possession of the defensive works around the city.¹ Dearing posted Graham's artillery on one of the outer streets of the town, found what shelter he could for his men, and dashed about, as usual, encouraging his men to stand fast. The arrival of Dearing's brigade caused the attackers to hesitate; and for a time, much of the battle was an artillery duel. Ignoring bullets and shells, Dearing galloped up to Sergeant John Trusheim, who was in charge of one of Graham's guns. Dearing had noticed that a number of Federal officers were using a nearby house as headquarters. Dearing ordered Trusheim to send a shell over the house. The sergeant obeyed, but the Federals showed no reaction. Their tranquil attitude irritated

¹OR, XXXVI, pt. 3, 885.

Dearing, who then ordered Trusheim to send a shell through the house. The gunner eagerly delivered a volley, and the Yankees came "tumbling out" in short order.

The Confederate artillery evoked Federal response. Dearing, still mounted on his huge white horse, noticed a group of Federal soldiers wheeling a gun into position. He told Trusheim: "Go to work on them before they go to work on you."

The artilleryman had to mount his own gun to see the enemy position. He climbed back down and sent a barrage that disabled two opposing guns.

Seeing no more artillery pieces, Dearing prepared his cavalry for a charge. He instructed Trusheim to be ready to fire on any attacking Federals if the Confederate cavalry had to retreat. With that parting word, Dearing led a determined charge against the Federal cavalry on Reservoir Hill.² His opponents immediately retreated. For the moment, Petersburg was safe.³

Dearing assumed that the attack had been only a reconnaissance. When, on June 13, seven Federal transports passed his position at Swift's Creek, he correctly surmised

²George S. Bernard (ed.), War Talks of Confederate Veterans (Petersburg, 1892), 132-33. Cited hereafter as Bernard, War Talks.

³OR, XXXVI, pt. 3, 885.

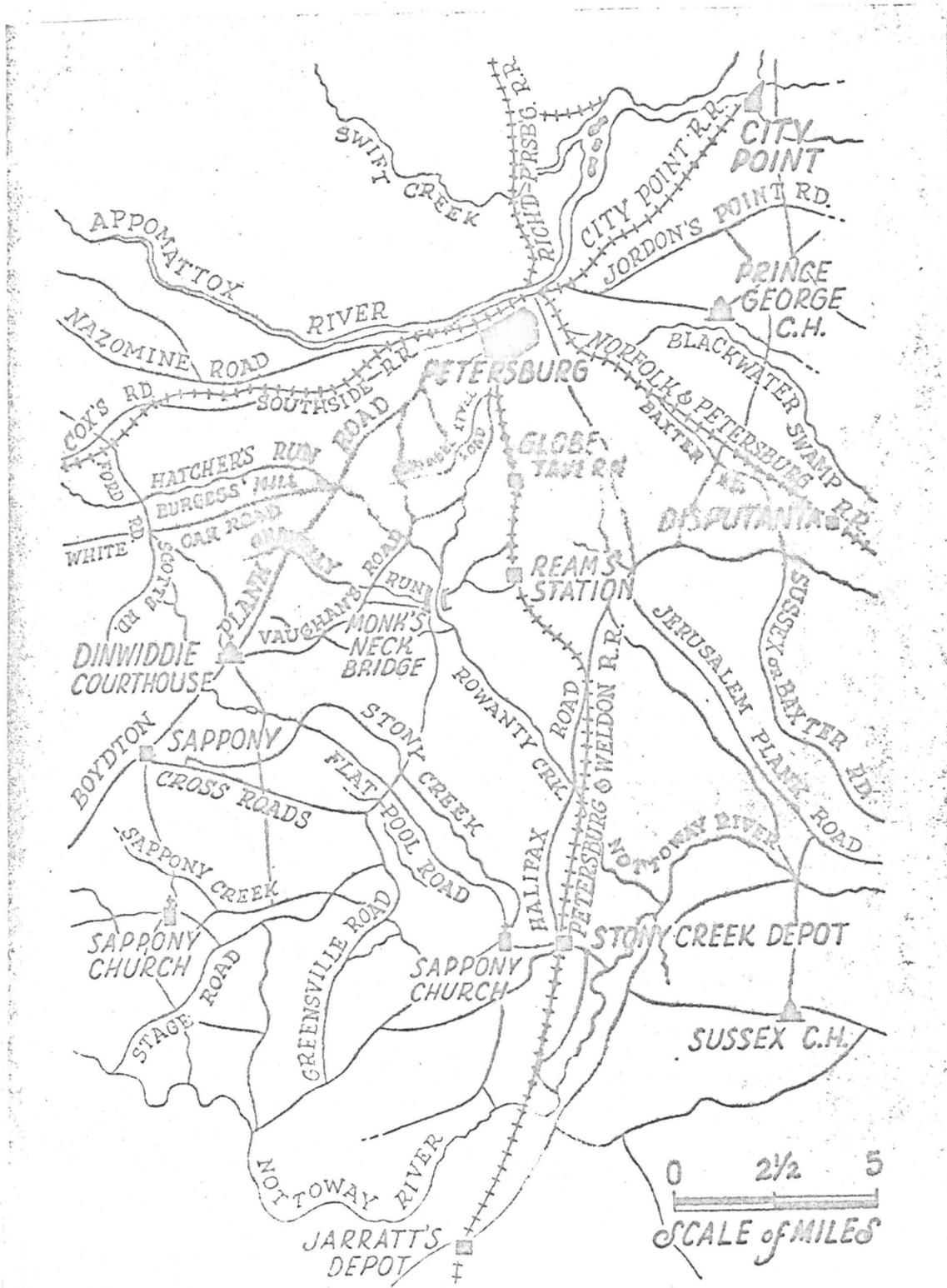
that Petersburg would receive another attack. During the next few days, Dearing concentrated his forces along the City Point and Broadway roads. At 7:35 a. m. on June 15, a large Federal force assaulted the positions.⁴ The Union soldiers had already marched several miles without serious opposition, but Dearing's men stood ready to stem the advance. Graham's battery kept up a constant barrage, dismounted cavalymen discharged a hail of bullets from their rifle pits, and the Federal advance ground to a quick halt.

The battle raged for more than two hours while Major General William F. Smith called up increasingly large numbers of reinforcements.⁵ Pressured by superior numbers, and almost outflanked, Dearing began a slow retreat into the heavier defensive works before Petersburg. The Confederate stand cost the attacking army four precious hours--hours that General Wise used to rush reinforcements into the Petersburg lines. After encountering Dearing's stubborn resistance and newly fortified defenses, General Smith made a crucial decision. He decided to wait.⁶

⁴OR, XL, pt. 2, 649, 655.

⁵George Wise, Campaigns and Battles of the Army of Northern Virginia (New York, 1916), 363.

⁶OR, XL, pt. 2, 656.



From Douglas Southall Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants: A Study in Command, III, 539.

Dearing's most serious casualty was one howitzer. Losses in the Federal army were much greater. If Petersburg had fallen, the war might well have ended then rather than ten months later. Beauregard referred to Dearing's action as one of "incalculable advantage."⁸

On the day following the battle, Beauregard abandoned the Bermuda Hundred lines and rushed his troops to Petersburg. On June 17, Wise contracted the defensive lines around the city and stationed Dearing's brigade next to the Appomattox to guard the river approaches. Within two days, Lee's troops arrived and began solidifying the town's defenses.

On June 19, Dearing reported to Major General W. H. F. Lee, who assigned him once more to the Weldon Railroad. The summer was to be a busy one. Two days later, Dearing's brigade clashed with a detachment of Federal pickets on the Jerusalem Plank Road. The following day, his brigade arrived at Ream's Station just in time to beat off a strong force of Union cavalry.⁹ From Ream's Station, the Federals moved west to Blacks and Whites on the Southside Railroad. With Dearing's brigade in the lead, W. H. F. Lee's forces charged the enemy cavalry, drove in the center of their

⁸Johnson and Buel, Battles and Leaders, III, 540.

⁹OR, XL, pt. 2, 669, 310, 336.

line, and then found themselves outflanked on both sides. For once, Dearing needed someone to ride to his rescue. The precarious situation was relieved with the arrival of Brigadier General Rufus Barringer's brigade. The combined Confederate cavalry reformed lines and struck hard at the Federals, whose retreat became increasingly rapid.¹⁰

Almost as soon as the battle at Blacks and Whites had ended, Dearing joined with part of Stuart's cavalry for a preliminary skirmish with Brigadier General James H. Wilson's command. On June 29, Wilson and Kautz made a new attempt to destroy the Weldon Railroad. At first, the drive toward Ream's Station seemed thoroughly successful. Throughout the morning, Federals brushed aside minor opposition from small Confederate bands of pickets. By early afternoon, Wilson and Kautz reached the railroad, only to encounter the combined forces of Major General Fitzhugh Lee, W. H. F. Lee, and Major General Wade Hampton, who had rushed to Ream's Station to reinforce Dearing's brigade. By mid-afternoon, the Confederate cavalymen had all but surrounded the attackers. The Union generals began to panic. Abandoning supply wagons, ambulances, their entire artillery, and most of their wounded, Kautz and Wilson led out as many of their soldiers as possible.

¹⁰Clement A. Evans (ed.), Confederate Military History (Atlanta, 1899), IV, 261.

Confederate cavalymen had rarely been more jubilant.¹¹

In July, Dearing joined Wade Hampton at Chaffin's farm. He obtained an unwanted rest when he fell ill with chills and fever.¹² By August 18, Dearing had recovered sufficiently to engage in a twelve-hour battle at Yellow House. At 7 a. m. that day, Colonel Samuel P. Spear--commanding Kautz's cavalry--and Major General Gouverneur K. Warren drove in Dearing's pickets about a mile from the Weldon Railroad. Dearing hurried to the front to stabilize his line; but by noon large groups of blueclad soldiers were advancing upon both the railroad and the Vaughn Road. Beauregard dispatched two brigades of infantry to support Dearing. However, the Federal numbers remained overwhelmingly superior. Dearing began another slow retreat and bitterly contested every foot of lost ground. Late in the afternoon, he prepared a new defensive line at Davis House and finally succeeded in stemming the Federal tide.¹³

The assault on Dearing's position was a concerted effort by the Union army to break the Confederate hold on the Weldon Railroad. In that, the Federals were partially

¹¹OR, XL, pt. 2, 493, 512-20.

¹²James Dearing to Mrs. Roxana Dearing, July 30, 1864, Gooch Papers.

¹³OR, XLII, pt. 1, 428, 857.

successful. After the battle, the Federal lines extended across the railroad just north of Globe Tavern. Although the loss inconvenienced the Confederates, it was not critical. The railroad could still be used as far north as Ream's Station; from that point, supplies moved overland to Petersburg. Dearing doubted correctly that Lee would attempt to regain the lost portion.¹⁴

On August 31, Dearing received a pleasant distraction from military duty; news arrived of his daughter's birth. He wrote his wife on the following day and gently chided her for not providing another soldier for the cause; but he ended his letter by stating that perhaps she thought one soldier in the family to be sufficient. Dearing quickly demonstrated an almost violent pride in his child. He wrote indignantly to his wife: "I wish you would pull your Pa's nose for me--He wrote me word that My daughter wasn't bigger than his fist."¹⁵ Later, when his brigade was on review in Petersburg, Dearing took his infant daughter in one arm and paraded her proudly before all the men of his brigade.¹⁶

¹⁴ James Dearing to Mrs. Roxana Dearing, Aug. 22, 1864, Gooch Papers.

¹⁵ Ibid., Sept. 1, 1864.

¹⁶ J. W. Wilcox to Mrs. Roxana Dearing, Mar. 20, 1911, ibid.

Dearing and his wife had one point of disagreement about the baby. His wife wanted to name the child Mary Lucretia. Dearing replied: "I believe Lulie or Lucy or anything of that sort is prettier, I think, than Lucretia-- but name her, my love, what you like."¹⁷ Dearing's wife, with feminine perversity, named the daughter Mary Lucretia.

Dearing applied for a brief leave of absence to visit his loved ones. Robert E. Lee considered the military situation too precarious and refused the request. By September 5, Dearing and his brigade were moving toward Stony Creek for further guard duty.¹⁸

When Robert E. Lee considered the military situation of the Confederacy precarious, he might well have added that the food supply was equally critical. The Confederate soldiers were undersupplied and frequently went without food. Before the hungry Confederates, Grant soon placed a desirable prize: 3,000 cattle grazing at Coggins Point on the James River. The temptation was too great. Early in September, Wade Hampton proposed a plan by which the herd could be captured for Confederate use. Robert E. Lee consented, and Hampton began gathering a cavalry force consisting of W. H. F. Lee's division, Dearing's and

¹⁷James Dearing to Mrs. Roxana Dearing, Sept. 23, 1864, Gooch Papers.

¹⁸Ibid., Sept. 4 and 5, 1864.

Rosser's brigades, and 100 men under Lieutenant Colonel Lovick P. Miller.¹⁹

On the morning of September 14, Hampton led his cavalymen from Petersburg down the left side of Rowanty Creek to Wilkinsons Bridge. The command camped there for the night and early the next day rode to Cooks Bridge on the Blackwater. The Federals had earlier destroyed the bridge, but Hampton's engineers replaced it before nightfall. By midnight, all the raiders had crossed. Hampton then began assigning positions. W. H. F. Lee would proceed by Lawyers Road to the Stage Road on the left of Coggins Point. He was to occupy the roads leading from the enemy positions to Sycamore Church. Dearing would follow Hines Road to Cockes Mill on the right of the Point. After the attack began in the center, he would cross Mingers Ferry Road, attack the Federal post there, cut off any Federal attempt to retreat, and prevent possible reinforcement from Fort Powhatan. Hampton, Rosser and Miller were to attack in the center and secure the cattle.

At 5 a. m., most of the Federal soldiers were asleep. Those on guard duty had had a quiet and boring night. They were totally unprepared for three Confederate cavalry charges. Rosser, leading the center forces, shattered the stillness with yells and pistol shots. The startled Union

¹⁹SHSP, XXII (1894), 149.

infantrymen were able to provide only slight resistance. As soon as W. H. F. Lee and Dearing heard the battle sounds, they assaulted the flanks of the Federal position. Once again resistance was minimal. While part of the force kept the Yankees at bay, others hurried into the huge pasture and began rounding up cattle. Almost before the Federal soldiers know what was happening, the cavalymen had secured the cattle and were rapidly herding them across Cooks Bridge. Yet serious dangers remained.

Hampton had taken his command far behind the Union lines. If a large Federal force cut off their march, the great "cow raid" would end disastrously. Upon reaching Cooks Bridge, Hampton immediately dispatched Rosser to secure the Jerusalem Plank Road that led directly to--and from--the Union lines near Petersburg. The entire command soon crossed the Blackwater, only to hear Rosser's report that a large Federal detachment was moving down the Plank Road. Hampton ordered Rosser, Dearing and Miller to take positions at Ebenezer Church, near the end of the Plank Road. The advancing Federals met a stream of bullets from Confederates who realized they had to escape or accept the probability of becoming prisoners. Yet the Federal infantrymen demonstrated no desire to press an attack.

Indeed, the Confederates held their line so easily

that Hampton--having sent the cattle by another route--toyed with the idea of attacking the Federal rear as a parting gesture. Night came before he had a chance to implement his plan; and by the morning of September 17, the Federals had retreated toward Petersburg. Happy Confederates returned to Petersburg and the applause of its citizens. Unnoticed was the quiet thanks of thousands of hungry Confederate soldiers.

Of Dearing's conduct, Hampton wrote: "I beg to express my entire satisfaction at the conduct of officers and men. Major General Lee and Brigadier General Dearing carried out my orders most skillfully."²⁰

Dearing wrote ecstatically to his wife that he had just returned from a raid in which he had whipped the enemy in two severe engagements and had captured "2486 cows." He assured his young wife that "Rosser's brigade and mine did all of the captures & did the fighting." One of Dearing's "captures" was a gray pony that he gave to Johnnie, his wife's younger brother.²¹

The great cattle raid completed, Dearing's brigade took position on the Vaughn Road near Poplar Springs Church. During September 29-30, Dearing was again ill with

²⁰OR, XLII, pt. 1, 944-46.

²¹James Dearing to Mrs. Roxana Dearing, Sept. 18 and 21, 1864, Gooch Papers.

chills and fever. The Federals chose that time to assault the lines of Brigadier General Matthew C. Butler. On the 29th, Union soldiers pushed Confederate pickets from the Vaughn Road to Hatcher's Run. Hampton ordered W. H. F. Lee to counterattack with one of his brigades. Lee's troopers drove the Federals back to Wyatt's farm. However, the Federals launched a new drive on the following day. Dearing's brigade, under the command of Colonel Joel Griffin, fled its position in panic.

Hampton finally succeeded in halting the enemy advance, but the loss for the Confederates was serious. Robert E. Lee found it necessary to extend again his thin defensive line. His great fear was that Grant's army would reach the Appomattox River, west of Petersburg, and thus prevent Confederate access to the supplies from North Carolina and western Virginia. Lee ordered Hampton to investigate Griffin's conduct and to order a court-martial if necessary.

Hampton hurriedly began to construct a new defensive line at Hatcher's Run to block the Federals from Boydton Plank Road. Because few troops were available to man the trenches, Hampton ordered Dearing to place his brigade in the trenches in the event of a new attack.²² On October 27, three days after the line had been completed, the

²²OR, XLII, pt. 1, 947; pt. 3, 1133, 1146, 1159, 1162.

Confederates had an opportunity to test their new facilities. Federals assaulted in force from Burgess Mill. Hampton moved out against the enemy and sent orders for Dearing to guard his rear. Lieutenant General A. P. Hill ordered Dearing to remain in the defensive line and dispatched a courier to inform Hampton of the change in orders. A group of Federals captured the courier; and Hampton proceeded with his attack only to find his rear unguarded. Yet he managed to retreat safely.

By the following morning, the generals had reconciled their differences, and Dearing led two charges against the Federal rear guard at Armstrong's Mill. The fighting was close and fierce.²³ In the midst of the fray, Dearing's horse was shot from under him. Dearing also lost about twelve officers in the battle.²⁴

The Federal commander, Major General Winfield Hancock, believed that Dearing was dead. Hancock's report convinced Grant, who relayed the message to Secretary of War E. M. Stanton.²⁵ Even the Petersburg newspaper assumed that Dearing was dead. Dearing hastened to inform his wife that

²³ OR, XLII, pt. 1, 949-50.

²⁴ James Dearing to Mrs. Roxana Dearing, Oct. 29, 1864, Gooch Papers.

²⁵ OR, XLII, pt. 1, 23.

he was very much alive.²⁶

When, early in November, Thomas L. Rosser's promotion to major general left the famous Laurel Brigade without a commander, Rosser offered the cavalry group to Dearing. Dearing replied enthusiastically: "I am very much obliged & gratified on being offered your old brigade. Make out a formal application at once & I'll come a runnin and do my best to keep your Brigade the fine reputation it now has."²⁷

A few days later, Hampton went to see Robert E. Lee about the possible appointment. Lee was inclined to disallow the transfer, since no one else was available to take command of Dearing's brigade. Another reason for Lee's hesitation was undoubtedly the disgraceful retreat of Dearing's troops in September. Dearing himself indicated some disenchantment with his men in his next letter to Rosser. "I really do not see why I should be kept here any longer--I'll get killed yet trying to make these men of mine fight." Dearing asked Rosser to write urgent letters of request to both Lee and Hampton in regards to his assignment to the Laurel Brigade. He concluded with one of his frequent

²⁶James Dearing to Mrs. Roxana Dearing, Oct. 29, 1864, Gooch Papers.

²⁷James Dearing to Thomas L. Rosser, Nov. 24, 1864, Rosser Papers.

expressions of determination. "I want to get with you at once Rosser and I know we can make the Yankee cavalry respectful at least."²⁸

Despite entreaties, Lee continued to refuse the transfer. He could ill afford another disaster. Thus, a frustrated Dearing remained near Burgess Mill.²⁹ His brigade of cavalry, like other units in Lee's army, was dwindling steadily. By the end of November, he had only 995 effectives in his brigade.

Meanwhile, Grant's army continued to hammer at the wings of the Confederate lines in an effort to force Lee's retreat from Petersburg. On December 6, Dearing's brigade shifted to Stony Creek Station on the Weldon Railroad. Six days later, Federal infantry, cavalry and artillery struck at the railroad and began moving toward Hicksford and Weldon. Throughout the night, couriers poured into Lee's headquarters.³⁰ Dearing and his men counterattacked desperately. Reinforced by additional troops, Dearing's men slowly forced the enemy back from the vital railroad. By the next day, the line had been cleared of Federal

²⁸James Dearing to Thomas L. Rosser, Nov. 26, 1864, Rosser Papers.

²⁹OR, XLII, pt. 3, 626.

³⁰Taylor, Four Years, 142.

troops and the threat to Hicksford and Weldon relieved. The damage to the railroad, nonetheless, was severe. Federals had demolished ten miles of track over which came most of the cavalry's supplies.³¹

Shortly thereafter, Dearing obtained what proved to be his last furlough. He wrote to his mother: "I am starting up home to see my precious Lala & sweet little baby."³²

During Dearing's absence, Beauregard prepared to return to service in the Carolinas. A major general was needed to command his cavalry. Feeling that none of General Joseph Wheeler's brigadiers deserved promotion, Beauregard suggested that Lee promote Dearing and transfer him to the Carolinas.³³ Although Lee once again refused to trust Dearing's brigade with anyone else, he did transfer Dearing's brigade to Matthew Butler's division. Lee then prepared to send Butler's division to the Carolinas.³⁴

Lee's decision had been based on the expectation that the remainder of the winter months would bring a cessation of military operations in Virginia. The pressure on his

³¹James Dearing to Mrs. Roxana Dearing, Dec. 13, 1864, Gooch Papers.

³²James Dearing to Mrs. M. A. Dearing, Dec. 17, 1864, ibid. His wife had moved to the safer locale of Lynchburg.

³³OR, XLIV, 979.

³⁴Ibid., XLIII, pt. 3, 1362.

army was such, however, that he reassigned Dearing's
brigade once more to the command of W. H. F. Lee.

Hicksford, N. C. marked the fartherest extent of Dearing's
transfer south.³⁵

CHAPTER V

HEROISM AT HIGH BRIDGE

Grant's failure to capture Petersburg in the summer of 1864 forced him into a war of siege and attrition. As much as he may have disliked that strategy, it was a formula that the North was well-equipped to use. From June, 1864, through March, 1865, Robert E. Lee's dwindling forces had time and again to extend their already too-thin defensive lines. At the same time, the well-supplied Federal army continually increased in number. By the spring of 1865, Confederate valor and determination were useless; yet men like Dearing continued to fight.

Early in 1865, Robert E. Lee granted Dearing the coveted command of the Laurel Brigade. From the time Dearing returned from furlough until near the end of March, he continued to patrol the Belfield-Hicksford-Weldon area.¹ Early on the morning of March 28, he wrote his wife: "I expect active operations every day & nearly every hour."

At 7 a. m. on the same day, Rosser and Dearing began the move to Stony Creek.² On the next day, the various

¹NARS

²James Dearing to Mrs. Roxana Dearing, Mar. 28, 1865, Gooch Papers.

cavalry units joined Major General Fitzhugh Lee's cavalry division.

On March 31, General Philip Sheridan, fresh from the Shenandoah Valley where he had annihilated the little army of Jubal A. Early, approached Five Forks with a large Federal force. Rosser and Dearing, with W. H. F. Lee's division, proceeded to make the Yankees "respectful." Waving sabers and revolvers, and screaming the Rebel war cry, the Southern cavalry swept down on the unsuspecting Federals. Sheridan began a strategic withdrawal that carried him all the way to Dinwiddie Courthouse. Although darkness prevented another assault, Fitzhugh Lee had hopes for the following day. Yet April 1 brought only frustration.

First, the Confederates had to return to Five Forks when Fitzhugh Lee learned that a strong infantry force was approaching his left flank. Moreover, about mid-afternoon news came that Pickett's left flank had been broken and that Federal troops were surging through the gap. Rosser tried desperately to reach Hatcher's Run to help stanch the flood of Yankee infantrymen. Before he could prepare his own attack, enemy troops overran Five Forks and drove the entire Confederate force back toward the Southside Railroad. Rosser retreated swiftly, prepared a new but thin defensive line, and barely succeeded in checking the Federal advance.

April 2 was no improvement. Robert E. Lee realized that his position in Petersburg had become untenable. He began the painful retreat toward Appomattox Courthouse. He ordered Fitzhugh Lee to withdraw to Amelia Courthouse to cover the retreat of Major General R. H. Anderson's command.

For three days the retreat continued. On April 5, Robert E. Lee ordered Fitzhugh Lee to take part of his cavalry to the Paineville Road, where Federal cavalry had already burned a number of the Confederate supply wagons. Lee detached W. H. F. Lee's division and sent it in advance of Longstreet's corps, then retreating toward Jetersville.³

Rosser and Dearing, in the vanguard of W. H. F. Lee's division, encountered Federal cavalry on a ridge near Amelia Springs. Without hesitation, Rosser ordered Dearing to "Ride over 'em." Dearing spurred his horse, drew his revolver and, with the Laurel Brigade at his heels, routed the enemy cavalry.⁴ With Fitzhugh Lee, who had been chasing another detachment of enemy troopers, the Confederates attacked again and pushed the enemy almost to Jetersville. Upon learning that a large Federal force had already invested the town, Lee halted.

³OR, XLVI, pt. 1, 1298-1301.

⁴William N. McDonald, A History of the Laurel Brigade, (Baltimore, 1907), 371. Cited hereafter as McDonald, Laurel Brigade.

During the night, Lee received orders that the Confederate army would avoid Jetersville. His troopers were to follow Longstreet's corps and protect its rear. Early the next morning, he started the main body of his command under Rosser and remained himself only long enough to inform the first passing infantry officer of the change in orders. Rosser, meanwhile, discovered at Rice's Station that a body of Federal troops were preparing to attack Longstreet's left flank. Rosser's division, with Dearing's brigade in the forefront, encountered the enemy at High Bridge, a railroad trestle about five miles east of Farmville. The Federal troops, under the command of Colonel Francis Washburne and General Theodore Read, were preparing to burn the trestle.⁵

Dearing led a brief charge that ended when Federal infantry, previously hidden in bordering woods, opened a murderous fire on the attacking Confederate cavalry. Dearing ordered a withdrawal and then conferred with Colonel E. V. White. Noting that they were surrounded, Dearing commented: "We must cut through or surrender."

White replied: "You know best what to do."

Dearing ended the conversation with a determined statement: "We must whip that infantry, and if you and

⁵Christian, Lynchburg, 238.

I lead the charge, it can be done!"⁶

With White at his side, Dearing drew his saber and led a second charge against the enemy. Dearing first engaged Colonel Washburne in a saber duel and wounded that officer so severely that Washburne's condition remained critical for over three weeks.⁷ Dearing's men were so equally industrious that the Federal defenses began to crumble. In the melee, Dearing killed General Read with his revolver. Almost at the same moment, Dearing fell as a bullet pierced both his lungs.⁸ Although the Confederates enjoyed one of their last meager victories by capturing Read's command, Fitzhugh Lee could do no more than call the action a "dearly bought victory."⁹

Soldiers carried Dearing from the field to a nearby farmhouse. Both Rosser and White came to visit their stricken comrade. Unable to speak above a whisper, Dearing pointed to the stars on his collar and stated that they belonged to Colonel White.¹⁰

⁶Frank M. Myers, The Comanches: A History of White's Battalion, Virginia Cavalry, Laurel Brigade, Hampton Division, A. N. V. (Baltimore, 1956), 367.

⁷OR, XLVI, pt. 1, 1167.

⁸McDonald, Laurel Brigade, 376.

⁹OR, XLVI, pt. 1, 1298-1302.

¹⁰Myers, The Comanches, 376-77.

From the farmhouse, Dearing's friends transferred him to the Ladies' Aid Hospital in Lynchburg. Someone there discovered in Dearing's pocket a letter from Robert E. Lee. The letter informed Dearing that the papers necessary for his promotion to major general were in the hands of the Secretary of War. To Lee, Dearing's advancement was "a promotion too long delayed by reason of my inability to fill your present command of the Laurel Brigade."¹¹

Soon after Dearing's removal to Lynchburg, Federal troops under Brigadier General Ranald McKenzie invested the city. Upon hearing of Dearing's presence and desperate condition, McKenzie at once dispatched a courier with orders that Dearing was not, under any circumstances, to be disturbed or embarrassed. As soon as possible, McKenzie visited Dearing. The Confederate general greeted him with his usual friendliness and cordiality. McKenzie thereupon fell to his knees next to the bed and burst into tears. To spare Dearing's feelings, McKenzie pardoned him without requiring the prescribed oath.¹²

The twenty-four-year-old General had completed a remarkable military career. Undoubtedly, much of his success was the result of his personality; men

¹¹Notarized Document, Gooch Papers.

¹²Schaff, Old West Point, 237; Altavista (Va.) Journal, Mar. 16, 1933.

instinctively admired and trusted him. While engaged in the fighting around Petersburg, Dearing had met a young lieutenant from Kentucky. The lieutenant had a small Confederate flag that a group of ladies in his home state had made for him. After knowing Dearing only a short time, the young officer gave the prized possession to the General.¹³ When Robert E. Lee prepared to transfer the command of the Laurel Brigade to Dearing, Lee told Rosser, "I know of but one man suited to the command, Dearing, Jim Dearing, whom everyone loves."¹⁴

Dearing amassed commendations wherever he fought. Throughout the war, only two of his superiors questioned his conduct or ability. Robert E. Lee censured his careless behavior, and Joseph Johnston included Dearing in a comprehensive indictment of the artillery officers in the Virginia Army.

Many Confederate officers earned the respect of their superiors; Dearing secured the esteem and affection of his subordinates as well. Sergeant John Trusheim wrote: "We were attached to the cavalry command of General James Dearing, than whom no braver officer ever unsheathed sabre and who was as brave as a lion and as gentle as a lamb"¹⁵

¹³Altavista (Va.) Journal, Nov. 21, 1913.

¹⁴Gregory Kent and Juliet Fauntleroy, "Lynches and Adamses."

¹⁵Bernard, War Talks, 132.

In February, 1865, Captain J. W. Wilcox became a member of Dearing's staff.¹⁶ He thought so highly of Dearing that he named his son after the general. Years later, he wrote to Mrs. Dearing that the General had all the best qualities of a Southern gentleman.¹⁷ Although Dearing was a strict disciplinarian,¹⁸ the common soldiers loved him. One of Dearing's former cavalrymen wrote: "I thought so highly of him I would like to have a full account of his life, if you will take time to give it me, or if anyone has written a book let me know where I can get it, and you will greatly oblige one of his admirers."¹⁹

The light-hearted commander had faults. Like most Confederate soldiers he was naive. By January, 1865, the Confederate cause was obviously and irrevocably lost. The realists refused to risk their lives in a vain endeavor and deserted. Idealists, like Dearing, imbued with doctrines of honor and courage, continued to fight--and die.

Dearing was devoted to the South. He was also quite concerned about his own reputation. As though the praises

¹⁶CY, XXXIII (1925), 66.

¹⁷J. W. Wilcox to Mrs. Roxana Dearing, Mar. 20, 1911, Gooch Papers.

¹⁸OR, XXXIII, 1083.

¹⁹F. W. Barnes to Tipton Jennings, Esq., Oct. 27, 1908, Gooch Papers.

of his superiors were not sufficient, he frequently attempted to bolster his ego by exaggerating his exploits in letters to his family. His desire for personal esteem encouraged his careless behavior; it possibly caused his death.

Until 1864, Dearing's effect on the war was negligible. His major contributions to the South were his defenses of Petersburg and the Weldon Railroad. Had Dearing failed to make his determined stand against Major General William F. Smith, the Civil War might have ended ten months earlier. Had Dearing not been in command of his brigade at the time, his troopers might well have engaged in a second frantic retreat.

Despite his accomplishments, Dearing was never a great leader. He enjoyed the rank of general for less than a year. Moreover, he attained that rank after the Virginia army had lost most of its ability to maneuver. The adversities of the South destroyed Dearing's opportunity for pre-eminence. John Wise gave an excellent summary of Dearing and Dearing's historical situation by writing that "he may be likened to a promising colt of faultless breeding, with a brilliant record in his first year's performance."²⁰

On April 22, Dearing died quietly.²¹ Three days later,

²⁰ John S. Wise, The End of an Era (Boston, 1899), 338.

²¹ Lynchburg Virginian, Apr. 22, 1864.

on Dearing's twenty-fifth birthday, an army horse belonging to a close friend pulled Dearing's flag-draped casket to the family cemetery at "Avoca." The body was later disinterred and reburied at Spring Hill Cemetery, Lynchburg.²²

²²Altavista (Va.), Journal, Mar. 16, 1933.

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BRIGADIER GENERAL JAMES DEARING, C. S. A.
(William L. Parker)
Abstract

James Dearing was born on April 25, 1840, at "Otterburne" near Altavista, Virginia. When his father died in 1843, Dearing was adopted by his uncle. In 1858, after graduating from Hanover Academy, a classical school near Richmond, Dearing entered the United States Military Academy.

In 1861, Dearing left West Point to join the Confederate Army. He joined the Washington Artillery as second lieutenant and, in July, 1861, distinguished himself at the First Manassas. By April, 1862, he was a captain. With that rank, he fought in the Peninsula campaigns and at the Second Manassas.

Early in 1863, as major, Dearing received command of General George Pickett's artillery. Impressed by Dearing's ability at Gettysburg, Pickett transferred him to the cavalry and recommended his promotion to lieutenant colonel.

In April, 1864, Dearing's cavalry overwhelmed the Federals at Plymouth, North Carolina, earning Dearing a promotion to brigadier general. The Confederate attack against New Bern was interrupted when Dearing was ordered to Petersburg. For nine months Dearing defended Petersburg and its vital railroads.

Early in 1865, Robert E. Lee gave Dearing command of the Laurel Brigade and recommended his promotion to major

general. Before receiving the promotion, Dearing was mortally wounded near Farmville while covering Lee's retreat toward Appomattox.

On April 22, Dearing died at Lynchburg. He was buried at "Avoca" near Altavista. His body was later disinterred and reburied at Spring Hill Cemetery, Lynchburg.

In March, 1863, Dearing had married Roxana Birchett. The couple had one child, Mary Lucretia.