

Lieutenant Colonel John Pelham (1838 – 1863)



John Pelham was born near Alexandria, Alabama in what was then Benton County and now Calhoun County, on September 7, 1838. His parents were Dr. Atkinson and Martha Mumford (McGehee) Pelham. Well known for his innovative and above great ability to affect a positive outcome in battle with Jeb Stuart's horse artillery, the Pelham legacy is one of courage and wonder as he impressed those superiors in General Jeb Stuart and General Robert E. Lee.

Pelham was given an appointment to the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, in 1856. While there he was noted for his athletic abilities and cavalry tactics. He was doing well at West Point but letters back home to family and Alabama officials made it clear he was very concerned about the political disputes between the Yankees and Southerners. Pelham's loyalty was evident in his letters, while in a December 18, 1861 letter to his mother Pelham states, "...Alabama seems to be determined to leave the Union before the middle of Jan [January] and I think it would be dishonorable in me to withhold my services when they will be needed..." As sectional differences between the North and South were increasingly making things uncertain, on February 27, 1861 John Pelham wrote the newly elected Confederate President Jefferson Davis asking whether he should come home:

"Being still a member of the Mily Acad'y, [Military Academy] I don't think it would be exactly proper for me to offer my services to the new Government, but I am anxious to serve it to the best of my ability. If you think it would be better for me to resign now than to wait and graduate which will be in June, a single word from you will cause me to resign and as soon as my resignation is accepted, I will consider myself under your orders, and repair to Montgomery without delay. I am a member of the 1st Class which graduates in June next, you know the importance of that portion of the Course still to be completed and also whether my services are needed at present. May I expect a recall if needed?"

Most Respect'y Your Oblt Serv't Jno. Pelham of Alabama"

While there is no evidence that President Davis ever wrote Pelham back, fearing something negative could take place upon the threshold of war John Pelham left West Point for Alabama just a few weeks before his graduation. He came home looking to join an Alabama militia and he drilled new recruits in the Jacksonville, Alabama area. He was not backing home in Alabama long as he was in Virginia for the First Battle of Manassas in July of 1861 as a 1st Lieutenant under Joseph E. Johnston's command. It was here in Virginia he excelled in Jeb Stuart's horse artillery with his aggressive and effective handling of artillery guns that greatly helped the Stuart's cavalry in battle, in which he was in 60+ engagements in his tragically short lifetime. Before his death he earned the rank of Major, and Major Pelham died during a cavalry attack on Kelly's Ford when a union artillery shell exploded, and a fragment lodged into his head finally

killing him the next morning of March 17, 1863. He was posthumously awarded the rank of Lieutenant Colonel by the Confederate Congress.

Shortly after the war the legacy of John Pelham had already left an impression upon all Southerners as in 1867 as the small town of Shelbyville became Pelham Alabama that year in honor of one of Alabama's heroes. The cities of Pelham, Georgia, and Pelham, North Carolina are also named in his honor. Upon his death Pelham's body lay in state in Richmond before being brought back home to Alabama. He was buried in Jacksonville City Cemetery in what is now Calhoun County, Alabama. As Robert E. Lee called him "the Gallant Pelham" would not be forgotten by his fellow Confederates nor Southerners for generations to come.