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George C. Bittle



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FIGHTING MEN VIEW THE WESTERN WAR, 1862-1864

by GEORGE C. BITTLE

THE FLORIDA UNITS fighting the Confederate cause in the West made no major contribution to the overall war effort, yet many Florida officers and men did yeomen service in the South's Army of Tennessee. The experiences of these soldiers certainly reflect those of many other Confederate fighting men in the same army. In this sense, the trials and tribulations of these Floridians may be used to illustrate the changing conditions among at least one segment of the southern troops on a very important front of the Civil War.

In the spring of 1862, the Florida soldiers in the West consisted basically of a single battalion under the command of Major Thadeus A. McDonnell. The First Florida Confederate Infantry Regiment had been mustered in with great fanfare at the Chattahoochee Arsenal on April 5, 1861, on the very eve of the outbreak of hostilities at Fort Sumter, South Carolina. Stationed first at Pensacola, the regiment in March 1842 was ordered to Corinth, Mississippi, to join General Braxton Bragg's hard-pressed army. It only reached Montgomery, Alabama, however, when the term of the men's enlistment expired, and they were mustered out. A few reenlisted, but only enough to form a battalion.¹ The time was critical and the Florida Battalion was rushed by train into its first great engagement, the Battle of Shiloh. The unit was exposed to a "galling fire," and five officers, including Major McDonnell, were killed or seriously wounded before the Florida force was withdrawn to artillery protection. Brigade Commander James Patton Anderson, in his official dispatches, liberally praised his men for their courage and fortitude, and their service at Shiloh became part of the First Florida's renowned legend.² After the siege of

1. Board of State Institutions, *Soldiers of Florida in the Seminole Indian, Civil and Spanish-American Wars* (Tallahassee 1903) 39.
2. There is a problem of timing connected with the Florida Battalion's engagement at Shiloh which occurred on April 6-7, 1862. In March the First Florida was ordered to Mississippi, but the unit had arrived only at Montgomery, when the men's enlistment expired. Some four companies were reorganized immediately. *Soldiers*

Corinth, Mississippi, in May 1862, the battalion was combined with another Florida unit as the First Florida Regiment with Colonel William Miller commanding.

Second Lieutenant Hugh Black was an officer of the First Florida Regiment, and from the letters that he wrote to his wife in Florida we learn how the ordinary soldier reacted to the hardships and exigencies of war and of his loneliness and uncertainties fighting hundreds of miles away from home and family. Writing from Tennessee during the summer of 1862, Black predicted, "our forces will drive the enemy out of the country or capture the whole force." A few weeks later, he reported the Federals in full retreat and described the route from Knoxville to Clinton, Tennessee, as the most "distress [ful] road I ever saw. It was just like marching through a solid bed of ashes and the heat was very great."³ The First Florida fought at Richmond, Kentucky, on August 29-30, 1862, and on the day following the battle, Lieutenant Black found the ground still "strewn with the dead and dying soldiers-some were being buried-others were dieing [*sic*]

of Florida states, p. 39, that the men were mustered out on April 6, 1862, yet on pp. 59-76 it would appear that the date must have been April 5. By rail the distance between Montgomery and Shiloh was 475 miles; to cover this distance in twenty-four hours, the minimum time the men would have had if they were involved in the fighting would have required an average speed of twenty miles an hour. Assuming that the men may not have arrived at Shiloh until after the battle started the average speed could have been even less. In any case the unit's participation at Shiloh has been noted by various sources, *Soldiers of Florida*, 39-40, 59-76; J. J. Dickison, *Military History of Florida in Confederate Military History*, edited by Clement A. Evans (Atlanta, 1899), XI, 164-65; "Report of the Part Taken by the Florida Battn in the Engagement of the 6th and 7th inst. 1862," by Captain W. G. Poole to his general, April 12, 1862, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida, Gainesville.

3. Hugh Black to Mary Ann Harvey Black, June 24, August 4, 1862. Captain Hugh Black Papers, Special Collections, Robert L. Strozier Library, Florida State University, Tallahassee. Hereinafter referred to as Black Papers. Hugh Black entered Confederate service when he was twenty-four years old, as a 3rd lieutenant in the Florida Infantry, Company A, on April 2, 1862, at Quincy. He was wounded in the Battle of Chickamauga, September 19, 1863, and promoted to 2nd lieutenant two months later. Black was carried on the Invalid Corps rolls at the time of his surrender in Tallahassee on May 10, 1865. "Compiled Service Records of Confederate Soldiers Who Served in Organizations from the State of Florida, Sixth Infantry, A-Co," National Archives, Microcopy M281, Roll 69. Microfilm copy in P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History. Hereinafter referred to as "Compiled Service Records."

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others with their legs and arms being cut off. Their suffering were great but they received every attention that could be given them by the kind and generous citizens of the surrounding country.”⁴ Churches and private homes were pushed into service as hospitals, and “there were piles of arms and legs as high as the tables.” Black noted in his diary that “we had no need of drawing rations from military stores, but were fed by the people of the town and surrounding country.”⁵

The First Florida saw action at the Battle of Perryville, Kentucky, on October 8, 1862, and when Brigade Commander General John C. Brown was wounded, Colonel Miller took over the whole brigade. He later reported that the ordnance officer, a nephew of the commanding general, was drunk during the battle and that when ammunition did not arrive at the front, his men had to cut cartridge boxes off the dead and to strip bullets from the wounded. Miller also noted that his “excited boys” had captured several “successive positions,” but he described the losses as “great.”⁶ Some of the First Florida men were unable to fight, Miller revealed, since the battle area was covered with sharp black locust plants which lacerated the “virtually barefooted” feet of his troops.⁷ Lieutenant Black noted in his diary that the local people around Perryville had provided the Florida soldiers with “any quantity of good provisions and whiskey” and that there was “a considerable jolification” in camp.⁸ On the other hand, Private C. O. Bailey, writing to his mother in Florida shortly after the battle at Perryville, reported that he had not had “a drop to drink” since he left home. His mother it seems had heard something about his behavior since he admitted that he had “chewed some tobacco” to which something had been added to make him “lively.”⁹ Private

4. Hugh Black Diary, 415, Black Papers.

5. *Ibid.*

6. William Miller, “The Battle of Natural Bridge,” mss. in Special Collections, Robert L. Strozier Library. This paper was read by Colonel Miller to the Tallahassee Chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy in January 1901. The narrative covered his war experiences as a Confederate officer in the Army of Tennessee. For an edited version see William Miller, “The Battle of Natural Bridge,” edited by Mark F. Boyd, *Apalachee*, IV (1950-1956), 76-86.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Hugh Black Diary, 5, Black Papers.

9. Cosmo (Casermo) O. Bailey to his mother, October 31, 1862. Bailey Papers, Mss. Box 6, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History. Hereinafter referred to as Bailey Papers. Bailey was mustered into

Bailey failed to explain what the major ingredient was. The regiment returned to Chattanooga on December 13, 1862, and after its losses were totalled it was merged with the Third Florida Infantry. Afterwards the force was designated as the First and Third Regiments Consolidated.¹⁰

Not all Florida soldiers stationed in the West had fellow Floridians as their battle companions. Of the two companies with which Private Bailey was familiar, which totaled 123 men, no more than thirty were Floridians. In a letter written in the fall of 1862, Bailey mentioned the growing shortage of supplies, and said that there were only four tents in his company; most of the men, he wrote, had no protection at all from the elements.¹¹ Probably in an effort to keep his mother from being overly concerned, Bailey, in February 1863 wrote that he could secure butter, eggs, and chickens even though the prices were very high. Lieutenant Black, in a letter to his wife the following month noted: "We are having a fine time just now; Spring has come and everything looks gay and beautiful."¹² Apparently morale among the Confederate troops in Tennessee was still fairly good. The physical condition of the men, however, was not always the best. After marching two full days to get to Loudon, Tennessee, Lieutenant Black's weary men were issued only four ounces of beef and a single biscuit which hardly seemed adequate rations for hungry soldiers.¹³ Roderick G. Shaw of Company A, Fourth Florida Infantry, was also a part of the Army of Tennessee. Like Lieutenant Black's communications, Shaw's letters to his sister in Quincy show that he was equally unhappy about the quality and quantity of food issued the men. "Meal after meal," he wrote, "we sit to cornbread (once in a while a little flour) bacon and water." Butter, he found completely unavailable. When Shaw was promoted to sergeant major on April

the Alachua Rebels which became the Seventh Florida Infantry, Company D, April 2, 1862, in Gainesville. His service record lists his first name as Cosmo, "Compiled Service Records . . . Seventh Infantry A-Co," National Archives, Washington, Microcopy M251, Roll 76. Microfilm copy in P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History. In *Soldiers of Florida*, 176, Bailey's name is given as Casermo.

10. J. J. Dickison, *Military History*, 165.

11. Bailey to his mother, October 18, 1862, Bailey Papers.

12. *Ibid.*, February 1, 1863; Black to his wife, March 16, 1863, Black Papers.

13. Hugh Black Diary, 4, Black Papers.

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16, 1863, he let his Florida family know that he was looking for "a boy to cook for me and to attend to other little necessities."¹⁴

Perhaps it was only a ruse to bring up his wife's hopes, but at the end of May 1863, Lieutenant Black wrote that he was "confident of our success and I confidently believe that I will survive the war for I feel just like it." The following month, however, he had lost his optimism, and he was wondering if the Federals would not capture all of Kentucky. Yet, he wrote, his "men were very cheerful [in battle] and seemed to be the happiest men I ever saw. They would yell as though they were playing town ball, instead of fighting a battle, when a ball would go to [sic] high they would hollow [sic] at the Yankees to shoot lower. . . ." ¹⁵ In August 1863, he reported that there seemed little prospect of fighting in his sector; perhaps, he hoped, "the last general battle of the war has been fought. I at least hope so." He told his wife that the Confederates were withdrawing from most of East Tennessee without a fight, and he could not completely understand this procedure, but apparently he was unaware that this was all part of a build-up for what would become the famed Chickamauga campaign in the late summer and fall of 1863. ¹⁶ The Florida forces - the First and Third Consolidated under Colonel William S. Dilworth and the Fourth Florida under Colonel W. L. L. Bowen - were involved in the bitter Battle of Chickamauga on September 19-20, 1863, which resulted in a hardwon but very costly southern victory. The Florida troops were subjected to a sharp cannonade, both directly from in front and from an enfilading position, and yet despite being placed in such an exposed position, they charged 300 yards across an open field to engage the enemy for half an hour before a retreat was ordered. A second Confederate charge saw the Florida troops again participating, and this time they carried the enemy works. ¹⁷ The loss of life was heavy, and a number of Florida men were killed. Of the 273 men that answered to the First and Third Consolidated muster, nine were killed, seventy were wounded, and thirteen were listed as missing. Colonel Bowen re-

14. Roderick Gaspero Shaw to his sister, Mrs. Jesse Shaw Smith, Quincy, Florida, May 17, 1863. Shaw Collection, Special Collections, Robert L. Strozier Library. Hereinafter referred to as Shaw Collection.

15. Black to Mary Ann Harvey Black, June 24, 1863, Black Papers.

16. *Ibid.*, August 1863.

17. Dickison, *Military History*, 173-74, 181-82.

ported that nine men from his Fourth Florida had died, sixty-seven were wounded, and thirteen were noted as missing.¹⁸

Private Bailey, who had also fought at Chickamauga with the Seventh Florida, described the bitter action in a letter to his father: "When we were ordered to fire I stood sometime without firing looking for something to shoot at but I could not see anything and the boys kept shooting so that I thought I would shoot too so I shot right ahead of me."¹⁹ According to Bailey some Southerners threw away their own muskets and picked up Yankee Springfield or Enfield rifles that were lying on the field.²⁰ Sergeant Major Shaw found that the Chickamauga victory had worked a "very great change in the Confederate army. Having before been accustomed to defeat and retreat, no one can conceive what a change a victory so brilliant would make . . . unless he could see the joyous countenances of those veterans."²¹ The Florida forces were again involved in the fighting at Missionary Ridge (Chattanooga), Tennessee, in November 1863. Two Florida regiments were placed as outlying pickets, but these units, together with the Seventh Florida, which had been sent in as a forward reserve unit, were forced to retreat. The Sixth Florida defended a pontoon bridge across the Chickamauga River until the Confederate force completed its crossing.²²

By the end of 1863, the Confederate Army of Tennessee was running out of even the most basic supplies and equipment - food, clothing, and ammunition. Sergeant Major Shaw wondered if his sister could provide him with a blanket, and he needed an overcoat, although he said that he preferred one that was neither yellow or brown in color.²³ Although his need for a coat was great, apparently Shaw was still concerned about a color preference. In December, Brigadier General J. J. Finley, commanding the Florida forces, informed Governor John Milton in Tallahassee, that his men were "almost without shoes and blankets."²⁴ Even finding

18. *Ibid.*, 172-74.

19. Bailey to his father, September 27, 1863, Bailey Papers.

20. *Ibid.*

21. Shaw to his sister, October 8, 1863, Shaw Collection.

22. Dickison, *Military History*, 174-75, 178-80, 183-84.

23. Shaw to his sister, October 1863, Shaw Collection.

24. J. J. Finley to John Milton, December 16, 1863, "Governor John Milton Letterbook, 1861-1863," Florida Historical Society Library, University of South Florida, Tampa. Microfilm copy in P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History.

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cloth for a uniform was difficult, as Shaw, who had since been promoted to lieutenant, discovered early in 1864. If he could find some material, he would send it to Quincy so that his sister could make him some clothes.²⁵

As Sherman's awesome march from Atlanta to the sea began, the Confederate cause became even more critical and seemingly hopeless. As early as January 1864, Lieutenant Shaw reported that "the re-enlisting fever is up in our Army . . . but as yet none of the Florida troops have made a start in that direction." He disapproved of the desire of many of his fellow Floridians, whose three-year enlistments would end in the spring of 1864, to return home on furlough. He thought that the time had come for the South to prove whether it would win in one great last and desperate effort. He was "very confident of our success," and according to a letter to his Florida family, he was looking forward to "a quiet home next year."²⁶ Apparently, Shaw was hoping to buoy up the spirits of the home folks; surely the conditions that he saw around him were not reassuring. Private Bailey was also apprehensive of the future. In a letter written early in 1864, he noted that "it looks like Old Sherman just goes where he pleases without any trouble at all," and the prospect of defeating the Federals seems "rather gloomy just at this time."²⁷ Shortly afterwards, Captain David Maxwell, writing to his father in Florida, from a hospital ward in Newnan, Georgia, claimed that he felt "confident of success. We have a large army and all are in fine spirit." Maxwell described the almost continuous fighting outside Dalton, Georgia. From May 7 to May 25, he said that he had had only two nights of unbroken sleep; all the rest of the time he was on duty.²⁸ Lieutenant Hugh Black painted an even darker picture: "I don't see the use in the Army trying to do anything more. I think that they have done their *best* and *lost*. General Johnson has been relieved from the Command of the Army of Tennessee and General Hood put in his place. . . . Johnson's men say that they will not

25. Shaw to his sister, January 28, 1864, Shaw Collection. See also Catherine Cooper Hopley, *Life in South; From the Commencement of the War* (London, 1863), II, 276-77.

26. Shaw to his sister, January 28, 1864, Shaw Collection.

27. Bailey to his mother, February 16, 1864, Bailey Papers.

28. David Maxwell to his father, May 29, 1864, Gilbert Wright, ed., "Some Letters to His Parents by a Floridian in the Confederate Army," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XXXVI (April 1958), 369. For a biographical sketch of Maxwell see *ibid.* 353-54.

fight under Hood much longer. . . . I shall not be surprised at any time to hear of the capture of Lee's Army." ²⁹ Black begged his wife not to worry if he was reported missing. He wondered if it would "stand Me in hand to go and make peace with the Yankees." Desertion among the Confederates all over the South had become a steadily rising problem. Black reported that a lieutenant and several of his men from the Fourth Florida had deserted two nights before. ³⁰ Certainly these letters from the Florida men in the Army of Tennessee would indicate that the Confederate cause in that sector was lost before the close of 1864.

There was no let-up of General Sherman's pressure in Georgia, and, on September 1, 1864, First Lieutenant Francis P. Fleming, writing from Jonesboro, Georgia, informed his mother in Florida that he was spending every night either marching or building breastworks, and that during the day he and his men were trying to protect themselves from enemy shells and infantry attack. Still, even in November 1864, Lieutenant Fleming was somewhat optimistic, at least more so than some of his fellow Florida officers. Fleming was not yet ready to admit that he believed the war was totally lost. ³¹

During the early weeks of 1865, the Confederate army continued a tragic fighting retreat which ended finally in a last unsuccessful battle at Bentonville, North Carolina. On April 9, 1865, just a few days before the final surrender on April 26, the Florida Brigade was organized into a single regiment, but all Confederate resistance on every front was virtually ended. ³² The Confederacy had collapsed, ending the brave hopes of its fighting men. As Mrs. Susan Bradford Eppes, a Florida contemporary,

29. Black to Mary Ann Harvey Black, July 20, 1864, Black Papers.

30. *Ibid.* John E. Johns in his *Florida During the Civil War* (Gainesville, 1963), 154-69, discusses the problem of desertion in Florida during this period. See also William Watson Davis, *The Civil War and Reconstruction in Florida* (New York, 1913), chapter 10, and the facsimile edition with introduction by Fletcher M. Green (Gainesville, 1964).

31. Francis P. Fleming to his mother, September 1, November 4, 1864, Edward C. Williamson, ed., "Francis P. Fleming in the War for Southern Independence, Soldiering with the 2nd Florida Regiment," Part II, *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XXVIII (October 1949), 153-55. See also Part III XXVIII (January 1950), 206-07. For a brief biographical sketch of Fleming see Part I, XXVIII (July 1949), 38, fn 1.

32. Dickison, *Military History*, 187-88.

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sadly wrote: "These heroes . . . had gone forth so full of hope and courage, so handsome and trim . . . and now, they come back in twos, and threes, not in regiments or battalions; . . . heartbroken, footsore, and weary."³³

33. Susan Bradford Eppes, *Through Some Eventful Years* (Macon, 1926), 267.