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**FLORIDA'S CONFEDERATE GUERRILLAS:
JOHN W. PEARSON AND
THE OKLAWAHA RANGERS**

by ZACK C. WATERS

SECESION and the approach of hostilities in 1861 found Florida unprepared for civil war. The state's militia had disintegrated at the end of the Third Seminole War in 1858, and the attempts of Governor Madison Starke Perry to remedy its disorganized condition proved ineffectual. Perry warned Floridians that the political situation called for military preparedness, but his pleas led to little improvement. An 1859 report indicated that the state possessed only one battery of light artillery and fewer than 1,000 muskets and rifles, including more than 250 antiquated flint and steel muskets.¹

Despite the condition of the militia, martial spirit was evidenced in Florida by the proliferation of independent volunteer companies. Cities such as Jacksonville, St. Augustine, Pensacola, and Tallahassee boasted two or more companies, while smaller towns and rural areas generally had a single unit. Most of these companies were poorly armed, and their drills often served more of a social than a training function. After attending the drill of Tallahassee's Dixie Yeomen, which included boat rides and a picnic, one observer noted, "This does not seem like war."²

Exceptions to the general rule of militia disorganization existed, however. One of the earliest and most reliable of the

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1. George Cassel Bittle, "In Defense of Florida: The Organized Florida Militia From 1821 to 1920" (Ph.D. dissertation, Florida State University, 1965), 221-35; *Florida House Journal* (1858), 27; *Florida Senate Journal* (1859), appendix, 7-8. For a fuller description of Florida's pre-war militia, see George C. Bittle, "Florida Prepares for War, 1860-1861," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 51 (October 1972), 143-52.
2. Susan Bradford Eppes, *Through Some Eventful Years* (Macon, GA, 1926; facsimile ed., Gainesville, 1968), 151. The "Dixie Yeomen" later became Company K, Fifth Florida Infantry Regiment. As to the social nature of pre-Civil War militia units, see Everett W. Caudle, "To Defend Or Pretend? The Social Role of Militia and Volunteer Units in the Antebellum South" (master's thesis, University of Florida, 1990).

companies was raised by a pragmatic, no-nonsense businessman from Orange Springs named John W. Pearson. During a trip to the North in 1860, Pearson became convinced that war was inevitable. When returning from the North, he stopped by Charleston, South Carolina, and purchased 125 smoothbore muskets and 100 Colt revolvers. Once home, he organized a unit composed of area residents that he called the Oklawaha Rangers. Following common practice, Pearson also outfitted its members from his own funds. Predictably, the company elected Pearson its captain, and, unlike many unit commanders, he instituted a regimen of drills and target practice for his troops. He limited the company to the number of men—125—that he could arm. In doing so, he chose only “sound and well developed men” who, he believed, could stand the rigors of extended service and were prepared to fight.³

Pearson was born January 19, 1809, in the Union District of South Carolina. By 1813, his father apparently had died, for his mother and grandfather moved with the child to Flat Creek, Bedford County, Tennessee. There, he grew to young manhood. In the mid-1830s he served briefly in Florida during the Second Seminole War and soon was a resident of the territory. In 1843, Pearson and his friend David Levy (later United States Senator David Levy Yulee) obtained title to the mineral-rich Orange Spring, which became one of the area’s first health resorts. Within a decade it was known widely as a “watering place” that was “popular with northern visitors seeking a warm climate.” A community grew up around the spring, and Pearson was active in its development. He prospered, and by the mid-1850s he owned a large hotel, sawmill, grist mill, furniture shop, and machine shop, as well as herds of cattle and numerous tracts of land. In 1860, he had twenty slaves and also was engaged in the cultivation of cotton. Pearson had valuable political contacts through his friendships with Yulee, former Florida Supreme Court Justice B. S. Pearson, and former Governor James Broome. Apparently, though, he lacked personal political ambitions. The only office

3. “The Oklawaha Rangers,” unpublished mss., Eleanor S. Brockenborough Library, The Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, VA. One source attributes authorship of this manuscript to Eliza Pearson Moody, the daughter of John W. Pearson. Eloise Robinson Ott and Louis Hickman Chazal, *Ocala Country. Kingdom of the Sun; A History of Marion County, Florida* (Ocala, FL, 1966), 230.



Lieutenant Colonel John W. Pearson, CSA. *Collection of the author.*

he held was the mayorship of Orange Springs, though he was appointed by Broome as disbursing agent for the payment of Florida volunteer troops during the Third Seminole War.⁴

4. Pearson was active politically as an advocate of disunion and sponsored several "Secession rallies" at his home in 1860. Donald J. Ivey, "John W.

After the firing on Fort Sumter in April 1861, Pearson offered the services of the Oklawaha Rangers to Governor Perry. Soon thereafter (probably in late June or early July), the governor dispatched the company to Fernandina to guard against action by the Federal blockading squadron, its service on the coast was of short duration, however, and by the end of August, the Confederate States government had assigned defense of the region to regular troops. Pearson and his company then were ordered in rapid succession to posts at Cedar Key, Fowler's Bluff, Clay Landing, and Cedar Landing on the Oklawaha River. Several months of such service convinced Pearson that his smoothbore weapons were obsolete, and, while at Clay Landing, he sent them to his machine shop in Orange Springs for rifling.⁵

The first months of 1862 were disastrous for Confederate interests in Florida. CSA troops abandoned Amelia Island on February 25, and the following week Fernandina was occupied by Federal forces. Within days the United States Navy sent an expedition up the St. Johns River to "examine the condition of things in Jacksonville" and to confiscate or destroy any "public property that may be of military importance to the rebels." Lieutenant Thomas Holdup Stevens, commander of Federal naval forces on the St. Johns, soon learned from frightened Jacksonville Unionists that the sudden appearance of his little armada on the river had entrapped two Confederate vessels, the blockade-running yacht *America* (celebrated winner of the 1851 challenge race against Great Britain and namesake of the *America's Cup*), and the steamer *St. Mary's*. These ships had been towed up the St. Johns by Colonel J. C. Hemming and his son Charles to avoid their seizure and scuttled south of Palatka. Stevens proceeded upriver and learned from a Union sympathizer in Palatka that the *America* had been scuttled in Dunn's

Pearson, Founder & Developer of Orange Springs," *Official Program, 5th Annual Confederate Festival of the South, Orange Springs, Florida - November 24th & 25th* (n.p., n.d.); John W. Pearson file, Marion County genealogical files, General Records, No. P-17, Central Florida Library, Ocala; manuscript returns of the Eighth U.S. Census, 1860, Marion County, Florida, schedule II (slaves). Various dates are given for Pearson's date of birth (including 1808, 1810, and 1812), but the author accepts the date Pearson used most commonly. Ott and Chazal, *Ocali Country*, 51.

5. "Oklawaha Rangers," n.p.; United States War Department, *War of Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington, DC, 1880-1901), series 1, I, 470 (hereafter *ORA*).

Creek, a tributary of the St. Johns. Stevens determined to raise the yacht and, if possible, the *St. Mary's*.⁶

The Confederates quickly realized Stevens's intentions and dispatched a company of the Second Florida Cavalry (CSA), commanded by Lieutenant Winston Stephens, to confront the Federals at Dunn's Creek. The plan called for Stephens's men to harass the Union troops until infantry support arrived. The Oklawaha Rangers also were dispatched to the scene with orders to fell logs across the mouth of Dunn's Creek so as to bottle up both the *America* and the Federals. Pearson and Stephens then were to combine forces and capture or disperse the Union party. However, as often was the case with early Confederate operations in Florida, the plan soon went awry.⁷

Pearson and his company advanced by forced march from the Oklawaha to the western bank of the St. Johns only to find that they were too late to spring the trap. Stephens's men had arrived while the Unionists were laboring to raise the *America*. They were positioned to commence sniping at the unsuspecting Federals, but Captain Stephens at the time apparently lacked a "killer instinct." He reportedly told his troopers: "I can't shoot them. I just can't do it - it would be murder." He then withdrew his forces. Stephens's failure allowed the Federals to raise the *America*, and, by March 28, the vessel was safely in Union hands in Jacksonville. Within months the reconditioned yacht was back at sea as part of the United States South Atlantic Blockading Squadron.⁸

6. *ORA*, series 1, VI, 93-95; United States War Department, *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*, 30 vols. (Washington, DC, 1894-1927), series 1, XII, 586-87, 638, 640 (hereafter, *ORN*). For additional information regarding Yacht *America*, see Charles Boswell, *The America; The Story of the World's Most Famous Yacht* (New York, 1967). Charles C. Hemming enlisted in Company A, Third Florida Infantry (Jacksonville Light Infantry) in 1861. Captured at Missionary Ridge, he escaped from Rock Island Prisoner of War Camp and became a Confederate secret agent in Canada before rejoining his unit in April 1865. After the war, Hemming became a successful banker in Texas and was instrumental in the installation of the Confederate memorial in Jacksonville. For more on Hemming, see Charles C. Hemming, "A Confederate Odyssey," *American Heritage* 36 (December 1984), 69-84.

7. *ORA*, series 1, LIII, 224-26.

8. *Ibid.*, 233-36; *ORN*, series 1, XII, 638; Mellon Clarke Greeley, *Musings of Mellon C. Greeley Written in His Anecdote* (transcript, 196-14), P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida, Gainesville.

The Oklawaha Rangers arrived on the east bank of the St. Johns after the Federals had passed down the river with their prize, but a disappointed Pearson was unwilling to let any Union force still in the area depart without a fight. He discovered that the sailors were threatening to burn the Orange Mills property of Dr. R. G. Mays (characterized by Union officers as “a most malignant rebel”) in retaliation for the disappearance of an alleged Federal collaborator. The ever-aggressive Pearson rushed his troops up the river’s east bank until they reached the Union gunboat anchored near Cole’s Mill. The captain hid his force along the river’s edge in an attempt at ambush, but the Union men were alerted to the Confederate presence by “traitors” and refused to fall into Pearson’s trap. After his force lay in wait all day and night, Pearson sent a small squad to the river’s bank to lure the Unionists into a foolish action. The commander of the gunboat spoiled the strategy, though, by departing for Jacksonville, a fuming Pearson left in his wake. The Rangers’ captain could only arrest four suspected white collaborators. He also hanged one slave, the property of Dr. Mays, whom Pearson believed had revealed information to the enemy.⁹

Pearson was outraged by the cooperation with Federal forces he had witnessed during his campaign along the St. Johns River. The captain’s report to Brigadier General Richard F. Floyd, commanding Florida state troops, stated: “I regret very much to report to you that at least three-fourths of the people on the Saint Johns River and east of it are aiding and abetting the enemy; we could see them at all times through the day communicating with the vessel in their small boats. It is not safe for a small force to be on the east side of the river; there is great danger of being betrayed to the enemy.” The danger of betrayal necessitated a change in tactics by Pearson. He acknowledged to Floyd: “I am now a guerilla in every sense of the word; we neither tell where we stay nor where we are going, nor when we shall return; assemble the company at the sound of a cow’s horn.” Pearson’s assessment was confirmed by General Floyd’s personal representative, Colonel F. L. Dancy, who had accompanied the Rangers. Dancy reported the company’s failure was due to “information furnished them [the Federals] by traitors lying in our midst and communicating with the enemy with impunity.” The

9. *ORA*, series 1, LIII, 233-34; *ORN*, series 1, XIII, 369.

reports caused Floyd to recommend that Governor John Milton proclaim martial law in Nassau, Duval, Clay, Putnam, St. Johns, and Volusia counties. In doing so he declared the area “a nest of traitors and lawless negroes.” Despite the recommendation, the Confederate government abandoned most of the Jacksonville area in early 1862 and left Milton powerless to enforce martial law east of the St. Johns River.¹⁰

The Florida legislature required that all state troops be transferred to Confederate service on or before March 10, 1862, and somewhat later—on May 10 at Orange Springs—the Rangers were sworn into the CSA army as an independent company. Nine days later the unit held another election of officers, and Pearson again was named captain.¹¹ Soon, they were dispatched to Tampa, where Pearson was ordered to assume command of Fort Brooke. The chief strategic value of Tampa in the spring of 1862 was as a haven for blockade runners, and, according to one source, Pearson was sent there because it was “easy duty—a prime location for a relatively inexperienced, seemingly over-the-hill officer” with powerful political allies. When his other potential duty assignments are considered, though, Tampa emerges as an excellent station and a probable reward for good service in east Florida.¹²

Shortly after their arrival at Fort Brooke, the Rangers received their baptism of fire. Of the event Pearson reported: “On Monday morning, June 30 [1862], the gunboat [U.S.S. *Sagamore*] hove into sight in the bay, and after sounding and maneuvering to get a favorable position came to anchor, turned her broadside to us and opened her ports, and then started a launch, with a lieutenant and 20 men, bearing a flag of truce, toward the shore.”

10. Why Pearson turned to guerrilla tactics so early in the war is an unanswered question. As a South Carolinian, though, he would have been steeped in the tradition of Francis Marion, Thomas Sumter, and Andrew Pickens, and as a Floridian he had twice seen the Seminoles use partisan warfare effectively. *ORA*, series 1, LIII, 224-26, 233-36.

11. Ivey, “John W. Pearson,” n.p.; John W. Pearson Confederate military records, Military Records of the 9th Florida Regiment, record group 109, National Archives, Washington, DC (hereafter, Pearson CMRs); *Proceedings of the Convention of the People of the State of Florida Held at Called Session, January 14, 1862* (Tallahassee, 1862), 107.

12. Karl H. Grismer, *Tampa, A History of the City of Tampa and the Tampa Bay Region of Florida* (St. Petersburg, 1950), 131-49; Ivey, “John W. Pearson,” n.p.

Determined not to let the enemy set foot on the shore he was charged with defending, Pearson took a boat and eighteen men and met the Federals in the bay. There he rejected the Federal demand for unconditional surrender of the town with the characteristic remark that he did not “understand the meaning of the word surrender.”

The Unionists, in response to Pearson’s bravado, began shelling Tampa at 6:00 p.m. and continued firing for one hour. The Rangers replied with fire from the fort’s batteries. The next day, the *Sagamore* steamed out of range of the Confederate artillery and, at 10:00 a.m., resumed shelling the town. At noon the Federal guns again fell silent. Pearson soon raised the Confederate flag defiantly over the fort, and, after a few parting shots, the Federal gunboats departed. An observer described the final scene of the attack: “Some rebels hoisted the rebel flag near the shore after the *Sagamore* had stopped firing. Three shells were fired at them, but they fled into the woods. Some of the rebels would dodge behind the trees when the shells were fired, and after they had exploded would come out again, evidently much pleased at the exhibition of fireworks.” The Union navy had allowed sufficient time for the civilians to evacuate the town, and Pearson reported “[n]obody hurt on our side.” Another Confederate summed up his impression of the attack. “When the gunboats fired with their longrange guns no one was hurt,” he wrote. “Being out of range we were given the opportunity to practice a few rounds to see the fun. After two days the fleet withdrew—result a few damaged houses, great noise with large amount of ammunition lost.”¹³

From the incident, Pearson and his men began to acquire a reputation among the Federals that would not have displeased their captain. A *New York Herald* reporter credited Pearson’s force with attacks on blockading vessels across the state, noting: “There was a company of about one hundred rebels at Tampa during the bombardment. They are a guerilla band and style themselves the Beauregard [actually Oklawaha] Rangers. They wander over the state of Florida waiting for a chance to fire

13. *ORA*, series 1, XIV, 111; *New York Herald*, July 24, 1862. For additional information on naval battles at Tampa, see Frank Falero, “Naval Engagements in Tampa Bay, 1862,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 46 (October 1967), 134-40.

upon some of the boats that go ashore from the blockading vessels after water and provisions. It is to be hoped they will meet their just desserts." As a guerrilla, Pearson would have approved of any report of his activities that inspired terror or caused dismay among the enemy.¹⁴

The Federal attack convinced Pearson that the artillery at Fort Brooke was inadequate, and he immediately sought to remedy the situation. He first attempted to get additional artillery from his superiors but was informed that none was available. Undeterred, he hit upon an acceptable alternative. As recalled in an anonymous post-war account: "Capt. Pearson seeing the short range of the cannon at Tampa, he detailed two of his company, J. J. Lovington and _____ Mansel to go to his shop at Orange Spring and manufacture two rifle[d] cannon— six and twelve pounders that were effective at four miles— this being conceded by the engineer to have the greatest penetrating force. After getting these two guns, Tampa was not shelled again— where before it was usual for the fleet to practice on the town."¹⁵

The aggressive spirit which Pearson had displayed on the St. Johns River remained alive, and he actively sought a way to go on the offensive. The captain was angered by the June 30 attack and by the subsequent ramming of a blockade runner in Tampa Bay by two Federal gunboats. He finally got a measure of revenge. On March 27, 1863, the Federal gunboat *Pursuit* appeared in Tampa Bay, and Pearson dispatched several of his men, complete with disguises (some in dresses) and blackface, to Gadsden Point to lure sailors from the blockading vessels ashore. The Union naval personnel took the bait and dispatched a launch with sailors aboard to bring in the "blacks." When the launch was within easy range, Pearson's men emerged from the surrounding woods and dunes and opened fire on the boat, wounding four sailors, two severely. The attack on the launch particularly incensed the Unionists for they claimed the boat was bearing a flag of truce. In retaliation, the Federal blockading ships ascended Tampa Bay and again bombarded the town. As with previous attacks, however, little damage was done.¹⁶

14. *New York Herald*, July 24, 1862.

15. "The Oklawaha Rangers," n.p.

16. *ORN*, series 1, XVII, 397-99; *New York Tribune*, April 29, 1863. For an account more sympathetic to Pearson, see Gary Loderhose, "A History of the 9th Florida Regiment" (master's thesis, University of Richmond, 1988),

Not all went well with Pearson at Fort Brooke. He demanded much from his troops, and several Rangers deserted. The incident presaged the future, and his company continued to have one of the highest percentages of absenteeism among the desertion-plagued Sixth Florida Battalion. This problem may explain Pearson's reluctance to forward company reports to his superiors. The captain's military records contain numerous complaints regarding his failure to forward troop strengths and timely reports of deserters from his company. His superior, Brigadier General Joseph Finegan, eventually solved this problem with a reminder to Pearson that failure to forward his reports could result in dismissal from the service.¹⁷

The impact Pearson and his men had on morale in Tampa and surrounding areas proved more important than the problem with desertions. Finegan received complaints, for example, from citizens of Tampa charging "bad discipline and interference with private property." A Union agent reported, "[T]he Confederate soldiers plunder the gardens in the neighborhood of Tampa as fast as any edibles are produced." Such complaints were commonplace for Confederate soldiers, though, as they habitually foraged from friend and foe to supplement their meager rations. Charges of "bad discipline," coupled with the high incidence of desertion, indicated a laxness of military discipline that reflected badly upon the unit's commander. Eventually, however, the shifting course of the war and more pressing concerns in north Florida diverted attention from the complaints. No record of action against Pearson or his men is recorded.¹⁸

More serious were the Rangers' activities in enforcing the Confederate Conscription Act during the spring and summer of 1862. According to one account, the soldiers began "scouring the woods, looking after deserters and conscripts." Since many southwest Floridians preferred not to take sides in the conflict, the Rangers were faced with a question of what to do with men who, once caught, refused to serve. A Union officer described the result: "Union men they threaten to hang, and do shoot, as

29. Pearson may well have violated the flag of truce at Gadsden Point, reasoning that the Union sailors were utilizing the protection of the flag of truce to engage in the illegal act of stealing slaves.

17. Loderhose, "9th Florida," 30; Pearson CMRs; Ivey, "John W. Pearson."

18. Loderhose, "9th Florida," 29-30; Pearson CMRs; *Boston Daily Journal*, March 21, 1862.

we have lamentable proof." Another report dating from the fall stated: "[E]very man between the ages of 18 and 45 in that section of reeldom is being remorselessly pressed into the rebel army, and if any objections are made they are handcuffed and tried, and then marched off, no matter what the condition of their families." In October, the Confederate Congress created an exemption for most cattlemen and cowhunters from the draft, but the divisions and resentments created during 1862 contributed within two years to bloody civil war in the southwest peninsula.¹⁹

After eighteen turbulent months in Tampa, the Rangers were ordered in October 1863 to report to Camp Finegan near Jacksonville. There they became Company "B" of the Sixth Florida Infantry Battalion, which had been created the previous month by the consolidation of several independent companies. Its mission was to counter threats to Tallahassee by Union forces and the dangers posed by a growing number of deserters and conscript evaders in Taylor County. Governor Milton and General Finegan considered the situation in north Florida so ominous that the Rangers spent the rest of the year on outpost duty in north Florida.²⁰

The routine duty near Camp Finegan was shattered on February 7, 1864, with the reoccupation of Jacksonville by Federal forces. The next day Union raiders attacked Camp Finegan and captured approximately 350 Confederate soldiers and four artillery pieces. Two of the guns were those that had been manufactured by Pearson for the defense of Tampa. The *New York Tribune* reported: "Two wrought iron guns, named respectively 'Hornet' and 'Tiger' are recognized by refugees as the handiwork of Capt. J. W. Pearson, who had a blacksmith forge and machine shop at Orange Springs, Putnam [actually Marion] Co., Fla. They are well made rifled with a 2 1/2 inch bore, and adapted to throw a four pound ball. The carriages in the rear are made just like a plow tail."²¹

The Oklawaha Rangers were not at Camp Finegan at the time of the raid; rather, they were several miles away on McGirt's

19. Quotations and background information are from Canter Brown, Jr., *Florida's Peace River Frontier* (Orlando, 1991), 152-60.

20. Pearson CMRs; Loderhose, "9th Florida," 43-45; *ORA*, series 1, XXVIII, 413.

21. Loderhose, "9th Florida," 47; *New York Tribune*, February 20, 1864.

Creek guarding a valuable supply of cotton. The day following the raid Pearson was alerted to the situation by Captain Samuel E. Hope, commander of a Sixth Battalion company composed of men from Citrus and Hernando counties. The Rangers then joined forces with Hope's men and elements of the Fifth Florida Cavalry in a successful effort to elude the Federal raiders.²²

The Union raid stalled a few miles east of Lake City, but the ease of the Federal cavalry's advance likely convinced United States Brigadier General Truman Seymour that the interior of Florida was ripe for the taking. Finegan recognized the vulnerability of his district, began concentrating his scattered units, and frantically requested assistance. General P. G. T. Beauregard, commander of the Military District of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida, reacted promptly and quickly dispatched troops to Florida.²³

After the raid on Camp Finegan, the Sixth Florida Battalion, including the Rangers, fell back to the Confederate defensive position thirteen miles east of Lake City. On February 20, 5,550 Federal infantry met Finegan's combined force of 5,000 Confederates in the Battle of Olustee. Although most members of the Sixth Battalion were untested under fire, they soon found themselves in a tactically important position on the extreme right of the Confederate line. Shortly after the battle began, Finegan moved the Sixth Battalion from the entrenchments in order to counter mounting pressure by Union troops to his right flank. Entering the battle below the Florida, Atlantic, and Gulf Central Railroad line, which formed the extreme right (south) of the battlefield, the Sixth Battalion opened an enfilading fire on the approaching Federals. The Union troops that caught the full force of the fire were the untried Eighth United States Colored Troops, who mistakenly attempted to fight the Floridians rather than falling back to a less-exposed position. Colonel Joseph R. Hawley, a Federal officer, later wrote: "Colonel [C. W.] Fribley's black men met the enemy at short range. The black men stood to be killed or wounded—losing more than 300 out of 550[,] and they fell back and reorganized." One historian later concluded that the Sixth Florida's "enfilading fire was one of the chief

22. Reminiscence of Captain Samuel E. Hope, typescript in possession of the author.

23. *ORA*, series 1, XXXV, part 1, 323, 334.

factors in causing the initial retreat of the Union battle line." Pearson's company claimed to be instrumental in the capture of a Union cannon, which it turned on the stunned Federals. Company B suffered six wounded in the battle, one of whom later died, and fought well in their first major stand-up engagement.²⁴

The Confederates were victorious at Olustee, but Finegan's Floridians had but a few weeks to savor the exhilaration of their win. The Sixth Florida Battalion and three independent companies were consolidated to form the Ninth Florida Regiment on April 28, and on May 16 the new regiment (and virtually all other infantry in Florida) was ordered to Virginia to reinforce General Robert E. Lee's beleaguered Army of Northern Virginia. As a part of the reorganization, John M. Martin was named colonel of the new regiment; Pearson was appointed lieutenant colonel, and Pickens Bird remained as the unit's major. The Oklawaha Rangers kept its designation as Company B in the new regiment, and Robert D. Harrison was promoted to captain of the unit to replace Pearson.²⁵

Finegan's troops, consisting of the Ninth Florida Regiment, First Florida (Special) Battalion, Second Florida Battalion, Fourth Florida Battalion, and a smattering of independent companies, joined Lee's army on May 28 at Hanover Junction, Virginia. The newly arrived soldiers joined forces with the remnants of Brigadier General Edward A. Perry's Florida Brigade in the division of Brigadier General William Mahone. In Perry's absence, Finegan assumed command of the Florida Brigade.²⁶

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24. Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence Clough Buel, *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War, Being for the Most Part Contributions by Union and Confederate Officers*, 4 vols. (New York, 1884-1887), IV, 76-80 (accounts of Olustee by Major General Samuel Jones, CSA, and Brevet Major General Joseph R. Hawley, USA); Bittle, "In Defense of Florida," 308; "Oklawaha Rangers," n.p. Several companies of the Sixth Florida Battalion claimed credit for the capture of the Federal artillery. For more detailed studies of the Battle of Olustee, see David James Coles, "A Fight, a Licking, and a Footrace: The 1864 Florida Campaign" (master's thesis, Florida State University, 1985); William H. Nulty, "The 1864 Florida Battalion Expedition: Blundering Into Modern Warfare" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Florida, 1985); William H. Nulty, *Confederate Florida: The Road to Olustee* (Tuscaloosa, AL, 1990).
25. J. J. Dickison, "Florida," *Confederate Military History*, XI (Atlanta, 1894; reprint ed., New York, 1962), 157-58.
26. *Ibid.*; Richard S. Nichols, "Florida's Fighting Rebels: A Military History of Florida's Civil War Troops" (master's thesis, Florida State University, 1967), 166-72.

Finegan's weary men enjoyed no rest. The day after they arrived, the Floridians were moved to the front to meet a Union thrust at the Confederate position along Totopotomoy Creek. In this little skirmish the Ninth Florida "did fine service, and won for themselves credit by charging the enemy line which had driven back the advance in front of [Major General John C.] Breckinridge's division, and reestablishing the line." The losses to the Floridians likely were minor, but among the casualties was Lieutenant Colonel Pearson.²⁷

Pearson was admitted on June 2 to the Howard Grove Hospital in Richmond and was discharged for duty on July 29. By then, his Oklawaha Rangers had participated in two major battles. On June 3, 60,000 Union troops had charged the Confederate position at Cold Harbor crossroads and been repulsed. The one breakthrough in the southern line was restored by the quick action of Finegan's Florida Brigade and a Maryland unit. In an ensuing suicidal charge ordered by Finegan, Captain Robert B. Harrison was wounded severely. Despite Finegan's blunder, the early morning heroics of the Floridians had helped save the day for the Confederates.²⁸

The Floridians scored a less dramatic success on June 23. Lee's army had been maneuvered into the trenches around Petersburg, Virginia, by Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant, who then moved to sever the key railroads supplying the Confederates and to stretch their lines to the breaking point. Grant's first target was the Weldon Railroad which connected Petersburg with possible supplies and reinforcements in North Carolina. Lee prepared a counterstrike, and, late in the afternoon of June 23, Finegan's troops struck an exposed Union position capturing 400 to 600 prisoners. Lieutenant I. M. Auld of the Fifth Florida Regiment reported to his mother: "Our Division was sent to the Weldon Railroad to attack the raiders who were destroying the tract [track], and while the balance [of Mahone's Division] were fighting them our little Brigade was slipped in behind a bunch who had been cut off and we advanced on them about dusk,

27. A. F. G[omellion] to "Dear Friend Roger," June 7, 1864, mss. box 79, P. K. Yonge Library; Pearson CMRs.

28. Pearson CMRs. For additional information on the Florida Brigade, see Zack C. Waters, "Tell Them I Died Like a Confederate Soldier: Finegan's Florida Brigade at Cold Harbor," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 69 (October 1990), 156-77.

and they, thinking we were a large force, surrendered, begging us not to shoot." For once, the victory was achieved with minimal loss to the Confederates, for Auld reported, "we did not lose a man except two who were taken prisoner."²⁹

During most of the next two' months the Floridians were spared from the worst of the bloodletting in the siege of Petersburg, but late in August Finegan's Irish luck ran out. Following an established pattern, the Union V Corps moved to the vicinity of Globe Tavern on August 18 and began tearing up the tracks of the Weldon Railroad. The following day Major General Henry Heth's Confederates struck the raiders and inflicted minor damage. Lee determined to follow up on his advantage using Mahone's Division as his "shock troops." This time the Union army was ready for a Confederate attack and prepared to meet the expected assault with artillery and breastworks. On August 21, Mahone's Division, including Finegan's Florida Brigade, made two unsuccessful charges against the Federals' fortified position. Private Young Hunter, of Company G of the Ninth Florida Regiment, reported: "It is the hardest fight I have been into yet. The Yankees ware well fortified and we had to charge through an open corn field. The shell grape canister and minie balls come as thick as hail." Leading the first charge, Pearson was struck in the chest by shrapnel. A post-war account states: "On the morning of the 21st of August the Florida brigade advanced within one hundred yards of the Federal breast-works on the Weldon Railroad, where the enemy was strongly entrenched. Repeated charges were made to dislodge them, but failed. The loss in killed and wounded was very severe. Lieut. Col. John W. Pearson, of the Ninth Regiment, was severely wounded."³⁰

Three days after he was wounded, Pearson resigned his commission. Oddly, even though he had been a lieutenant colonel for four months, he used his old rank of captain in the letter of resignation and failed to mention his recent wound. He noted

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29. Isaac McQueen Auld was a lieutenant in Company C, Fifth Florida Infantry. After the war he was a Presbyterian minister in St. Petersburg, Dade City, and Wildwood. Dickison, "Florida," 159; *ORA*, series 1, LI, part 2, -1028; I. M. Auld to "Dear Mother," June 29, 1864, Putnam County Archives and History Commission, Palatka.
30. Loderhose, "9th Florida," 133-34; Fred L. Robertson, comp., *Soldiers of Florida, in the Seminole Indian-Civil and Spanish-American Wars* (Live Oak, 1903; reprint ed., Macclenny, 1983), 207.

with a combination of pride and foreboding: "I have been in the service of the Country since the commencement of the war, endeavoring both with my means and personal service to contribute to attainment of my Country's Independence. My health has given way and I feel that I am physically unable to endure the exposure incident to an active campaign." Pearson's thoughts were prophetic; for the time being he was "physically unable" to stand the trip back to Florida. The strain of the eventual trip home and the severity of the wound worsened his condition, and on September 30, 1864, at Augusta, Georgia, he died. Due to disruptions caused in middle Georgia by the campaign of General William T. Sherman, Pearson's body was not returned to Marion County. A friend and business associate from Savannah traveled to Augusta to recover the body and buried him in Savannah's Laurel Grove cemetery.³¹

Pearson's death did not end the service of the Oklawaha Rangers. They continued as an integral part of Finegan's Florida Brigade, participating in a winter march and skirmish at Belfield, Virginia, and the three-day battle along the frozen banks of Hatcher's Run in February 1865. After recovering from his wound, Captain Robert D. Harrison returned to duty in time to lead the Rangers on the agonizing retreat to Appomattox Courthouse. On April 9, 1865, the Oklawaha Rangers stacked arms for the last time, surrendering two officers and seventeen men.³²

Postwar histories generally ignored or downplayed the role of Finegan's Florida Brigade, and Pearson and the Rangers virtually were forgotten. Yet, in many ways, Pearson had a significant impact on the war in Florida. Personally, he was proud, courageous, fiercely independent, bound to his own strict code of honor, and willing to sacrifice his possessions and blood for a cause to which he was dedicated totally. He was an excellent combat officer, but as an administrator he was less effective. These qualities proved both a blessing and a curse to the Confederacy. His energetic actions maintained a viable Confederate presence in areas that were under constant threat of Federal

31. A grave marker for John W. Pearson is at Orange Springs, but apparently his remains never were removed to Florida from Savannah. Ivey, "John W. Pearson"; Pearson CMRs; letter from George R. Pearson to author, September 9, 1989, collection of the author.

32. Dickison, "Florida," 159-60; "Paroles of the Army of Northern Virginia," *Southern Historical Society Papers*, XV, 302-12.

seizure. This was no small accomplishment for a tiny force in territories that often were hostile or indifferent to the southern cause. However, Pearson's aggressiveness and continued use of guerrilla tactics while a post commander at Tampa drove many south Florida citizens away from the Confederacy and contributed to the later creation of south Florida-based Union military units from Florida. His administrative shortcomings, tendency to overlook breaches of discipline by his troops, and failure to recognize that many area residents wanted no part of the war further alienated many Tampa residents.

In military matters, Pearson exhibited an adaptability that was rare among Confederate officers. His use of the machine shop at Orange Springs to manufacture artillery and refurbish his weapons exemplified Pearson's ability to overcome obstacles. More importantly, he was one of the first Florida Confederates to recognize the advantages of guerrilla warfare. During the last two years of the war, Captain John J. Dickison, his neighbor and friend, adopted these tactics (adding the increased mobility of cavalry) in his defense of Florida's interior. In the process, Dickison became Florida's Confederate folk-hero. In contrast, Pearson's role in the war has received little attention. He undoubtedly would have appreciated the recent assessment of a historian who stated: "[Pearson] never backed down from a fight, nor was he afraid to battle when the odds heavily favored the enemy." Courage alone could not win the war, but Pearson gave everything he had to the effort.³³

33. Loderhose, "9th Florida," 27.