The Boys of the 3rd Tennessee Cavalry

by Gene Eric Salecker

In late July of 1862 the Governor of Tennessee, Andrew Johnson, gave William C. Pickens permission to start recruiting a cavalry regiment in the area around Cumberland Gap. By the 10th of August, the first recruits, the nucleus of the 3rd Tennessee Cavalry, had signed up. William C. Pickens was to be their first commanding officer, being commissioned a Major by the state.

Throughout August and into early September, Major Pickens and his fellow officers continued their recruiting, branching as far south as Blount and Sevier counties. Recruiting went slowly and by 17 September, when Union General George Morgan evacuated the Cumberland Gap area in the face of an invasion of Kentucky by Confederate General E. Kirby Smith, only one company of men was ready.

Company A, with only 56 men, followed Morgan’s retreating army for 250 miles to Sciotoville, Ohio (near present-day Portsmouth) moved west across southern Ohio, crossed back into Kentucky at Covington and finally halted at Louisville.

For the next three months, while other Union regiments worried about E. Kirby Smith and the other Rebels, the 3rd Tenn. Cav. remained in Louisville. Recruiters, working back in eastern Tennessee continued to gather up men, sending them on to Louisville. In November and December companies B, C, D, and E reported for duty.

With the coming of the new year, 1863, the regiment found itself in rather odd straits. Not having been mustered (accepted) into the service of the United States Army yet, they were still considered state troops, and on 1 January were temporarily assigned by Governor Johnson to a brigade of Tennessee Infantry.

The regiment stayed in Murfreesboro through the month gathering more recruits and bulking up with companies F, G, H and I. On 27 January the 3rd Tenn. Cav. was finally mustered into Federal service with Major Pickens being promoted to Colonel.

However, because there were still too few men in the regiment, the newly arriving companies were eliminated and

"I propose to inform them...that very near the entire regiment has been captured."

- Lieutenant William A. McTeer, Adjutant, 3rd Tennessee Cavalry
included scouting patrols and working to rid the area of guerrillas. While at Nashville the 3rd Tenn. Cav., once again commanded by Colonel Pickens, was placed into the 2nd Brigade of the 1st Cavalry Division, Department of the Cumberland. Officially they were linked with the 2nd Indiana Cav., 4th Indiana Cav., 1st Wisconsin Cav., 2nd Tennessee Cav., and the 1st Ohio Light Artillery.

August saw companies F and G finally mustered into Federal service and join the regiment at the state capitol. Shortly after this, for reasons unknown, Colonel William C. Pickens was mustered out of the service which put the regiment in permanent command of Lieutenant Colonel Thornburgh. In September, as the Confederates won a victory at Chickamauga (Ga.) and moved up to lay siege to Rosecrans’ army in Chattanooga, Rebel cavalry Generals Joseph Wheeler and Philip Roddy struck northwest to cut the numerous roads out of the capitol and still cattle and horses, act as vedettes on the patrol the roads, escort wagons, drive needed at least 1,000 cavalry troopers to leave enough men to chase Hawkins. For the time being he had to rely solely on the 2nd Brigade of the 1st Cavalry Division, Departm ent of the Cumberland. Officially they were linked with the 3rd Illinois Cav., 5th Kentucky Cav., 2nd Tennessee Cav., 4th Tennessee Cav., and the 72nd Indiana Mounted Infantry.

The reason that Sherman reorganized his cavalry was because he was planning an invasion of central Mississippi. Already at Vicksburg and after helping Grant lay siege to that city, Sherman meant to cut straight across the state, capture Meridian and tear up the railroads around this important agricultural area. In conjunction with this move, Sherman wanted William Sooy Smith to take 7,000 cavalrymen on a raid from Memphis to Meridian, tearing up the tracks of the Mobile and Ohio Railroad from Okolona south, and attacking enemy cavalry en route.

On 3 February Sherman left Vicksburg and by the 8th had captured Meridian. Smith’s orders were to leave Memphis on 1 February and be in Meridian by the 10th, but he did not even leave the Memphis area until February 11th. Although already ten days behind schedule, none of this was known to the 7,000 cavalrymen, including the troopers of the 3rd Tenn. Cav.

After the war the men of the 3rd Tenn. Cav. would remember the raid on Okolona as the hardest service they ever did. As the column slowly advanced the men were sent into the surrounding countryside to destroy what was known as the “Tenth Law” which had been enacted by the Confederate government: In order to feed her starving soldiers, the government had passed a law requiring all farmers to give a tenth of their crops to the Confederacy. At different points along the roads, and railroads, the cavalrymen found collecting bins. Within a few minutes these were quickly put to the torch.

Moving steadily south, Smith’s troopers passed through Okolona and began tearing up the railroad and chopping down the standing rows of corn. By 20 February they were as far south as West Point but here they ran into the men of Confederate General Forrest. Although Forrest had only a small force with him, William Sooy Smith suddenly lost all his nerve and decided to pull up stakes and head back towards the safety of Memphis. Forrest, seeing an opportunity, decided to strike.

At 10:30 A.M. on 22 February, as the Federal cavalry was returning to Okolona, Forrest’s men attacked. Hoping to buy some time for his retreating column, Smith turned the 3rd Brigade to face the Rebels. The 3rd Tenn. Cav. was immediately ordered to form in an open field on the left flank. While fighting occurred in the center, the left remained relatively quiet. With the enemy in check, the regiment was ordered to pull out of line and follow after the column which had continued its retreat towards Memphis.

As the 3rd Tenn. Cav. filed into the front, they found themselves in the Third Brigade, Cavalry Division, XVI Army Corps. This time the other regiments in the brigade were the 3rd Illinois Cav., 5th Kentucky Cav., 2nd Tennessee Cav., 4th Tennessee Cav., and the 72nd Indiana Mounted Infantry.
AREA OF OPERATIONS OF THE
3rd TENNESSEE CAVALRY
1862 - 1865

BY GENE ERIC SAUERKER
NOT TO SCALE
The rear of the regiment was fired upon by the Rebels. At the same time the two regiments holding the Union center came up and pressed against the rear of the 3rd. In the excitement and confusion many of the cavalymen from the rear units passed up and through the Tennesseans, actually carrying away some of the men from the 3rd Tenn. Cav. Struggling to keep command of this unit, Major Minnis and the 3rd Tenn. Cav. followed after Smith’s retreating column until once again ordered to make a stand. This time the Tennesseans filed into a field on the right side of the road, dismounted and waited. Once again the center of the fighting line was hit hard and once again the center began to fall back. About to be cut off from the retreating column, the regiment was ordered to mount up and pull back.

In retiring from the field the 3rd Tenn. Ca. was fired on in the rear and flank and in trying to get out of the way of the firing became tangled with the two Union regiments pulling back from the center. Suddenly all was confusion. The three regiments became hopelessly tangled. Panic gripped the men as they feared capture or death. In headlong flight the three tangled regiments suddenly rushed forward, seeking the safety of the main column.

Major John B. Minnis, commanding the 3rd Tenn. Cav. in its first major fight managed to rally a good number of his regiment around him and continued the retreat, alternately fighting and falling back.

Smith’s entire column was retreating at an alarming rate. Near 5:00 P.M., after running for almost nine miles, Smith finally turned and formed a new fighting line at Ivey’s Farm, consisting of units that had not seen action earlier in the day. The Confederates continued to pursue and attacked the new line. Smith, looking for reinforcements once again called on the 3rd Tenn. Cav., or what was left of them (Many had fled with the rest of the army.).

Mounted in their saddles, their sabres in hand, the Tennesseans charged in on the Confederate flank as two other Union regiments struck the front. Hit hard, Forrest’s Rebel cavalymen fell back, leaving dead on the field Colonel Jeffrey Forrest, Nathan Bedford Forrest’s brother. The fighting was over. By 26 February the 3rd Tenn. Cav. was back in camp, this time at Germantown just east of Memphis.

William Sooy Smith’s Meridian expedition was considered a total disaster. One Union colonel commented, “The expedition filled every man connected with it with burning shame. It gave Forrest the most glorious achievement of his career.”

Major Minnis, in his after-battle report wrote, “I trust you will consider the inexperience of the major commanding and the men under him in the field, and give justice to all.” The 3rd Tenn. Ca. had nothing to be ashamed of. They had performed fairly well, considering the circumstances. The loss to the regiment had been two men wounded and three men captured.

The Tennesseans spent the next week at Germantown, resting and refitting. As a consequence of their hard work destroying crops in Mississippi the men had to forage around for all the gristmills in the area in order to once again put a keen edge on their cavalry sabres. The many cavalry blades had been dulled by the hard work of chopping down and destroying stalks of corn and other crops.

On 5 March the regiment was sent back to Nashville with orders to help guard the Nashville & Chattanooga Railroad. While in the capital companies K and L were finally mustered into Federal service and joined up with the regiment. For the first time since the beginning of the war, the 3rd Tenn. Cav. was finally up to its full regimental strength.

On the last day of May another reorganization of the Department of the Cumberland occurred as Sherman pushed towards Atlanta. The 3rd Tenn. Cav. was one of the many units left behind to guard Tennessee and was placed in the 1st Brigade of the 4th Cavalry Division. This time the brigade was to be in an all Tennessee brigade along with the 2nd and 4th Tenn. Cavvs., and the 1st Tenn. Light Artillery.

Duty along the Nashville & Chattanooga Railroad lasted until the middle of June when the brigade was sent for operations around Decatur in northern Alabama. In July Lt. Col. Duff G. Thornburgh, who had not been with the regiment since February, resigned for personal reasons that had nothing to do with the regiment and Major John B. Minnis was promoted to Lt. Col. and was given permanent command of the regiment.

Gaining in experience the 3rd Tenn. Cav. found itself the only cavalry unit chosen to accompany a small expedition from Decatur to Courtland and Moulton, Ala., from July 25-28. Only a detachment was sent and the only action that occurred was a small skirmish near Courtland on the 28th.

On August 6 another detachment of the regiment got into a small action on the Summerville Rd. near Decatur and on the 9th the whole Tennessee Brigade forced the Rebels back in a sharp skirmish near Pond Springs, Ala. In the following week and a half, detachments of the regiment went on operations in Madison County and against Moulton, Ala. On the 19th and 20th another detachment skirmished with Rebel cavalymen at Antioch Church.

With the coming of September the regiment was sent north of Decatur to Athens, Ala. and finally to Elk Run Bridge near the Tennessee border. Rebel cavalry of General Joe Wheeler was once again causing trouble. On 10 September companies E and G (about 30 men) were sent out on detached duty and ran up against the Confederates at Florence, Ala. In the ensuing fight, the two companies were surrounded and had to charge through the Rebel lines to escape. The captain of Company G and four other soldiers were taken prisoners. One man, a sergeant in Company G, was severely wounded, being shot through the hips.

Endeavoring to protect the railroad and still gather information about Rebel movements, part of the 3rd Tenn. Cav. was ordered to remain at the earthen fort at Athens while the rest of the men followed Col. Minnis on a patrol west towards Rogersville and Lexington. On 23 September, with the regiment still separated, Gen. Forrest moved on Athens. Forcing the defenders back into the fort, Forrest opened up with a short cannonade at daybreak on the 24th. Near 11:00 A.M. the commander at Athens surrendered the fort, after accepting Forrest’s invitation to “review his troops”, at which time he was assured by Forrest that he was vastly outnumbered by the wily Confederate’s “10,000 men”, actually he only had 4,500, but used his favorite trick of rotating the same men and artillery pieces through a clearing over and over again). Almost 600 Union soldiers were taken prisoners. The 469 U.S. Colored Troops that had garrisoned the fort were sent to Mobile, while the 120 men and 9 officers of the 3rd Tenn. Cav. were sent to “Castle Morgan” a prison at Cohaiba, Ala. (Among them
was James J. Brock, promoted 2 days earlier to Bugler of Company I. -Ed

Colonel Minnis, with almost 400 men of the regiment was at Rogersville when they too ran into Confederate cavalry. In trying to get back to Athens they ran into more Rebels and were forced to turn north, cross the Elk River and head for Sulphur Branch Trestle, two miles north of Athens. Considered one of the strongest points along the rail line, the trestle was held by about 300 Colored Troops and reinforced on the 24th by another 300 men of the 9th and 10th Indiana Cavalry.

On the 25th Forrest surrounded the fort guarding the trestle and demanded its surrender. The request was promptly refused and Forrest just as promptly opened fire with his artillery and advanced his forces. As the first shells entered the fort, the commanding officer, Colonel William Lathrop, was killed and Lieutenant Colonel Minnis found himself in command. In the ensuing fight some 27 Federals were killed and another 112 wounded. The 3rd Tennessee had 4 killed and 8 wounded with one dying two days later.

After two hours, and only after Lieutenant Colonel Minnis himself had been wounded and knocked senseless for a few moments by a shell fragment, he was forced to ask for a cease fire. Within minutes the fort was surrendered and another 400 soldiers from the 3rd Tennessee Cavalry were headed towards Cahaba and prison.

By the end of September Forrest had evacuated the northern part of Alabama but the damage to the 3rd Tenn. Cav. had already been done. Only 15 officers and two hundred men were able to avoid the clutches of Forrest, either having escaped shortly after capture or having been on detached duty. What was left was pulled back into Decatur and placed under the command of Lieutenant George Webster of Company H.

Throughout most of October the badly demoralized Tennesseans remained at Decatur. As the Confederate army under General John Bell Hood advanced on Decatur and threatened an invasion of Tennessee, the 3rd Tenn. Cav. was pulled back to Nashville and placed under the command of Major Ben Cunningham who had been wounded in the shoulder at Sulphur Branch Trestle but had been released by Forrest.

The regiment stayed at Nashville for some time, trying to regain strength and morale. In November, while Hood advanced towards Franklin, Tennessee, they were placed in the 2nd Brigade of the newly formed 6th Division of the Military District of Mississippi but the reorganization was only as strong as the paper it was written on. Many of the men of the 3 Tenn. Cav. were without weapons and almost all were without horses, having worn out their mounts on their many expeditions. Hood had invaded Tennessee by 22 November and the Federal Cavalry Corps was trying to get ready to meet him. Orders went out to arm the 3rd Tenn. Cav. with sabres and Maynard carbines but a few days later they were still waiting. And still, they did not have horses!

Armed or not, mounted or not, the Tennesseans were moved to Edgefield just outside of Nashville on 13 December thus missing the Battle of Nashville on 15-16 December and the defeat of Hood’s advancing army. For the rest of December and for the first two months of 1865 the 3rd Tenn. Cav. remained at Edgefield with nothing to do.

An example of the futility of the situation can be seen in the case of Captain Armsted H. Wilson of Company C. Wilson, along with the rest of the officers of the regiment, had been paroled at Memphis by Forrest on 14 November. He first went to Camp Chase, Ohio, and was finally told to report to his old company. He reached the regiment on 23 December and found only 12 men to command. With nothing to do, Wilson left his lieutenant in charge and went home to see his wife and five children. On 16 January he was back with his company only to find himself facing a court martial for leaving his men. Found guilty, despite arguing that there was nothing for him or his men to do during his absence, he had to forfeit one months pay and allowances.

In March the 3rd Tenn. Ca. was moved to Pulaski and formed up with other dismounted units to do garrison duty against bushwhackers. April found the regiment still at Pulaski but now under the command of Major Samuel Pickens. By the end of April the 3rd Tenn. Cav. only had enough men to form three companies. Unknown to them at the time, not too far away near Memphis, the majority of their regiment had become casualties in the greatest maritime disaster in history, the loss of the steamboat Sultana.

For six more weeks this remnant of the once proud 3rd Tenn Cav. remained in the army, eventually moving up to Nashville. On 10 June 1865, the regiment was finally mustered out. Their service in America’s bloodiest war was at an end.

In all, the 3rd Tenn. Cav. marched more than 5,550 miles in their two and one half years of existence. Throughout that time, some 536 members of the unit died: Ten men were killed in combat and another 36 died in Rebel prison camps; two hundred to 250 more died from disease, as did the majority of all soldiers who died during the war. And of the more than 400 men of the regiment to board the Sultana, probably between 250 and 275 perished, having more men on board than any other Union regiment.

- Gene E. Salecker

Gene is a major researcher/"data man" for our current Sultana organization. He has taken it upon himself to try to complete the roster of the men who were on board the Sultana at the time of the disaster and is constantly adding to it as more information comes to light. He has travelled to Memphis, Knoxville, Andersonville and many other places to further his research. He also has files on many of the individual soldiers and on related reunions, trials, events, etc. connected with the disaster. He welcomes, no, solicits your interest and your help...and is always willing to share what he has. If you have information for Gene or have something you want to ask him about the Sultana, please contact him as follows:

Gene E. Salecker
2526 N. Davison
River Grove, IL 60171
(Basically, that's Chicago. "One or two blocks away", says Gene.)
While Confederate troops in western Tennessee were bracing to meet the Federal onslaught at Forts Henry and Donelson, Confederate authorities in East Tennessee were fighting for the hearts and minds of their own citizens. Though the state as a whole had voted overwhelmingly to join the Confederacy, its mountainous east remained a bastion of Unionism. The sole exception was Knoxville, the largest city in the eastern area; here the town fathers and two out of three of the local voters favored the Confederacy.

For a while, both sides held recruiting rallies in Knoxville, sometimes on the same street (below). But feelings became too strong for peaceful competition. A pro-Union gathering in May 1861 was disrupted by shooting. In time, thousands of Unionists joined guerilla bands or enlisted in Federal armies. Confederate officials tried to woo the recalcitrant mountaineers with friendly persuasion and a guaranteed secret ballot in the August elections for the Confederate Congress. The tactics failed embarrassingly: The mountaineers elected Union candidates.

Authorities now had no choice but to crack down. Pro-Union leaders were imprisoned and attempts were made to disarm the citizens. Other Confederates took the law into their own hands, beating, butchering and lynching resisters. The passions inflamed by these episodes led to guerrilla warfare, and would outlast the War itself.

NEW NEWSLETTER SUBSCRIBERS...

- Dwight C. Burnham, 42 Creek Ridge, Pittsford, NY 14534. Capt. Frederick Speed was his great-great uncle.

- Phylliss Harris, 5400 S. Webster St. Kokomo, IN 46902


- Eva Palmer, 386 Jerry Dr., Talbott, TN 37877

- Rayleen McCreeery, 404 N. Broadway, Greenfield, IN 46140

- James K. Anderson, 13760 Noel Rd., Suite 325, Dallas, TX 7524 - James is a real Texas oilman and is the great grandson of Madison Isaac Thompson, 3rd Tenn. Cav.

- Dave Harvey, 40, Devoil Close, Burpham, Guildford, Surrey GU4 7FG, England (We are now international! Welcome, Dave.)

FROM THE EDITOR.....

SPOTLIGHT ON THE SOLDIERS OF THE 3RD TENNESSEE CAVALRY

Helen Coulter of Maryville, TN writes of her grandfather, Jesse Wallace Millsaps and his brother Jim (Co. B): "Jesse and his brother James were survivors of the Sultana sinking. Both floated all night holding onto a log and didn't know they were together until daylight and they were rescued." (Truth IS stranger than fiction!) "My grandfather (Jesse) lived at Walland, TN after the war and had a small farm. He joined the Old Pleasant Grove Baptist Church at an early age and remained a member of the New Pleasant Grove Baptist Church until his death (1925). He was liscensed to preach many years ago by this church. He was always very religious."

I have recieved many letters from Helen and I value them greatly. In her last note she asked how old I am: Helen, I am 47...and yes, please call me Pam!

Robert K. Cannon of Louisville, KY sent me copies of all the military and family records of his great-great grandfather, Henry Tolbert Linginfelter (Co. I). He also sent me some wonderful copies of photos of H. T. Linginfelter as an old man. Thank you, Robert.

J. James Brown's (Co. D) granddaughter, Helen Norwood of Knoxville, TN. wrote me of her grandfather: "...when my grandpa came home his wife was garden hoeing and had her gun with her....he looked so bad that she did not recognize him and pointed the gun at him. He had to show her his hand where he was missing a finger from before the war to prove to her that it was really him." Thanks for sharing this, Helen.

Some other subscribers who have 3rd Tenn Cav. ancestors are: Debbie Jacobs of Clarkston, Ga., (Nathaniel Williams); Ron Farmer of Granada Hill, CA (Joseph Farmer); John Saylor Dempster of Memphis, TN (John Saylor V); Sherry Marin of Sutter Creek, CA - Sherry says there's STILL gold in them thar hills - (David Gibson); Glenna Jenkins Green, Bakewell, TN (DAUGHTER of Samuel Washington Jenkins); and many others in our number who I hope to mention in the future. My thinking here is to let you all know who and where our members are so people can correspond with each other. To facilitate this I plan to make my entire mailing list available to anyone who wants it, complete with their interest in the Sultana. (This winter, I hope.)

Let me hear from more of you! Again: Does anyone have any letters written to the Sultana Survivors Association? I'd still love to personally own a Sultana Reunion badge. If anyone knows where I can buy one, please let me know.

- Pam Newhouse, Editor

Upcoming newsletter feature stories:

• "The Original Sultana Survivor's Association" (Pam Newhouse), January, 1992
• "The Crippling of the Sultana: The Real Story" (Gene Eric Salecker), April 1992
• "Yankees from the Great Lakes State on the Sultana" (The Soldiers from Michigan), Pam Newhouse, July 1992