

LEE'S TIGERS

The Louisiana Infantry
in the Army of
Northern Virginia



TERRY L. JONES

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As the sun slowly set, Generals Robert E. Lee and Jubal A. Early anxiously watched as Early's division advanced across a rugged, open plain toward the Union positions. The ragged gray line suffered occasional casualties as federal gunners found the range and pounded it with solid shot and canister. Steep hills and deep gullies further broke up the Confederate charge as the rebels closed in on the Union breastworks. Watching from his vantage point, Early became dismayed when it appeared that his division would be repulsed before even closing with the enemy. Suddenly, his spirits lifted as he watched General Harry T. Hays's Louisiana Brigade rush in and penetrate the enemy line. The blue defenders could be seen scampering back to a secondary position, only to be swept away again by the surging gray tide closing in behind them. As the victorious rebel yell rose over the field, Early momentarily forgot Lee beside him and jubilantly threw his hat on the ground, crying, "Those damned Louisiana fellows may steal as much as they please now!"¹

General Early was only one of many Confederate officers who struggled with the paradox known as the Louisiana Tigers. He tended to agree with those who called the Tigers "wharf rats from New Orleans" and the "lowest scrapings of the Mississippi," who plundered and foraged on farms wherever they camped.² But the Tigers were reliable in combat, and the general readily forgave them their past transgressions as he watched the Louisianians

1. New Orleans *Times-Democrat*, in Reminiscences Division, n.d., Confederate Veteran Papers, DU.

2. Sidney J. Romero, "Louisiana Clergy and the Confederate Army," *Louisiana History*, II (1961), 280; Charles L. Dufour, *Gentle Tiger: The Gallant Life of Roberdeau Wheat* (Baton Rouge, 1957), 4.

swarm over two Union lines near Fredericksburg. Even though this charge of May 4, 1863, was finally contained and then repulsed by the federals, the Louisiana Tigers had once again proven themselves to be the premier shock troops of the Army of Northern Virginia.

The fierce reputation of the Tigers was well earned, for Louisiana probably had a higher percentage of criminals, drunkards, and deserters in its commands than any other Confederate state, probably because of the great number of poor foreigners who filled the state's ranks. The Irish and Germans made excellent fighters, but many were newcomers to America and had little enthusiasm for the war. Thus many deserted when a chance arose to escape the rigors and danger of campaigning. Other foreigners who enlisted off the rough New Orleans waterfront, where drinking, fighting, and thievery were a way of life, naturally brought their vices with them to the army. This is not to imply that all of Louisiana's foreign soliders fell into this category. The majority did not. Most of the Irish and Germans were dedicated soldiers who behaved as well as native-born Americans. Nevertheless, these foreign-dominated units were most often mentioned in connection with such deviant behavior.

No one Louisiana unit can be singled out as being responsible for creating the Tigers' infamous reputation. Major Roberdeau Wheat's 1st Special Battalion is most often cited by historians as being the unit first nicknamed the "Louisiana Tigers" and of spawning the image associated with that name.³ One company in Wheat's Battalion, the Tiger Rifles, did lend its name to the entire Louisiana infantry, and no one can doubt that the battalion played a significant role in creating the reputation that surrounded the Tigers. But it was not Wheat's men who first spread the fear and apprehension that came to be associated with the Louisiana troops. Two other Louisiana commands, the 1st Battalion, Louisiana Zouaves (Coppens' Battalion), and the 14th Louisiana Volunteers, initiated this image by their wholesale rioting, looting, and robbery. These two

3. Douglas Southall Freeman, *Lee's Lieutenants: A Study in Command* (3 vols.; New York, 1942, 1944), I, 87; Henry E. Handerson, *Yankee in Gray: The Civil War Memoirs of Henry E. Handerson, with a Selection of His Wartime Letters* (Cleveland, 1962), 33; Leon Jastremski to Robert H. Hemphill, June 8, 1901, in Hemphill Family Papers, DU.

units did more to tarnish the image of Louisiana's soldiers during the first few months of the war than Wheat's Battalion did during its entire existence. In creating mayhem, even Wheat's desperadoes could not match the Irish, Germans, and Creoles of Coppens' Battalion and the 14th Louisiana Volunteers.

In an effort to glorify the Louisiana troops, some historians only lightly treat these negative aspects of the Tigers, or else make their deeds seem more like childish mischief than criminal behavior. Such apologies are unnecessary. Despite the Tigers' reputation, the Confederate commanders time and again called on them in the most desperate situations. From First Manassas to Appomattox they consistently played key roles in the most important campaigns. It was the Louisianians who held back the initial federal onslaught at First Manassas, made possible General T. J. "Stonewall" Jackson's famed Valley Campaign, contained the Union breakthrough at Spotsylvania's Bloody Angle, and led Lee's last offensive actions at Fort Stedman and Appomattox. For all their vices, weaknesses, and failings, Lee's Louisiana Tigers emerged from the Civil War with one of the most respected military records of any southern fighting unit.

Many works have dealt with the Louisiana Tigers, but no comprehensive study of them has ever before been undertaken. To portray accurately the role the Louisiana soldiers played in the Army of Northern Virginia it is necessary to go beyond the readily available sources and thoroughly research the numerous manuscript collections that have been neglected for so long. The letters, diaries, and muster rolls found in these collections contain a wealth of information that cannot be obtained elsewhere. To ferret out such material requires luck, patience, and the help of persons familiar with the documents. I was most fortunate, for the various library and archival personnel consulted during this project invariably proved to be most helpful and willing to make the extra effort often needed to turn up useful material. A special thanks is extended to the staff of the Inter-Library Loan Departments of Texas A & M University, College Station, Texas, and Northwestern State University, Natchitoches, Louisiana, for making available elusive printed sources. Thanks are also in order to the archival staffs of the following institutions for their indispensable aid in locating important manuscript collections: Louisiana State Archives and Loui-

siana State University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana; Virginia Historical Society and the Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, Virginia; Duke University, Durham, North Carolina; the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina; the National Archives and Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; Centenary College and Louisiana State University at Shreveport, Shreveport, Louisiana; New York City Public Library, New York, New York; University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan; Northwestern State University, Natchitoches, Louisiana; East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina; University of Texas, Austin, Texas; Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Fredericksburg, Virginia; the Huntington Library, San Marino, California; and the Mansfield State Commemorative Area, Mansfield, Louisiana. I would also like to recognize the Texas A & M University Graduate College's mini-grant program, which helped fund a significant portion of my research at these institutions, and Donald Hunter, who prepared the maps included in this study.

Researching a historical topic is only half the task. One must then sift through thousands of pages of notes and present the narrative in a comprehensible form. This process requires advice, criticism, and editing. Robert Calvert, Don Hamilton, Larry Hill, and Betty Unterberger of Texas A & M University receive my sincere appreciation for their valuable input. I would especially like to thank Allan Ashcraft, without whom this study might never have been completed. Professor Ashcraft's kindly patience and constructive criticism helped immensely in guiding me through this project with a minimum of trauma.

ABBREVIATIONS

CC	Centenary College
DU	Duke University
ECU	East Carolina University
FSNMP	Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park
HNLC	Historic New Orleans Collection
HL	Huntington Library
LC	Library of Congress
LHAC	Tulane University, Louisiana Historical Association Collection
LSA	Louisiana State Archives
LSU	Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge
LSUS	Louisiana State University, Shreveport
MSCA	Mansfield State Commemorative Area
NA	National Archives
NYPL	New York Public Library
NSU	Northwestern State University
SHC	University of North Carolina, Southern Historical Collection
TU	Tulane University
UM	University of Michigan
UT	University of Texas
VHS	Virginia Historical Society Library
VSL	Virginia State Library

CONTENTS

Preface and Acknowledgments	xi
Abbreviations	xv
I On to Richmond	1
II The Louisiana Tigers	21
III Baptism by Fire	45
IV Something to Boast of	63
V I Have Got My Fill of Fighting	93
VI Dark and Dismal Fields	113
VII Fighting the Good Fight	139
VIII Going Back into the Union at Last	158
IX Into the Wilderness	180
X All Played Out	203
Conclusion	227
Appendix	233
Bibliography	255
Index	265

ILLUSTRATIONS

Map 1: The Shenandoah Valley	72
Map 2: Field of Operations for the Army of Northern Virginia	115

following page 133

The scourge of the Confederacy: Coppens' Louisiana Zouaves	
Wharf rats of Wheat's Tiger Battalion	
Colonel Charles D. Dreux	
General Richard Taylor	
Holding the line with rocks: Starke's Louisiana Brigade at Second Manassas	
Antietam's dark and dismal field: Louisiana dead of Starke's Brigade	
General Harry T. Hays	
General Leroy A. Stafford	

Chapter I

ON TO RICHMOND

Richmond! The threatened capital and symbol of the South was the goal of thousands of Louisiana recruits. By May, 1861, it was apparent that Virginia would be the focal point of the coming clash, and Louisiana's young men in gray were eager to be there. From Pensacola, Florida, a young soldier in the Shreveport Greys wrote that his comrades "had become tired of living like flounders and crabs in the deep sands of Pensacola, and the cry was 'on to Richmond.'" Andrew Newell of the Cheneyville Rifles exuberantly wrote his family on the eve of departure from Camp Moore, Louisiana, that the company was in good health and spirits and "eager to get into the fight."¹

After the bombardment of Fort Sumter, Louisiana hastily organized scores of regiments and battalions to meet the threat of war, ultimately dispatching ten regiments and five battalions of infantry to Virginia. These were the 1st, 2d, 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th, 10th, and 14th Louisiana Volunteers; the 1st Special Battalion, Louisiana Infantry (Wheat's Battalion); 1st Battalion, Louisiana Volunteers (Dreux's Battalion); 1st Battalion, Louisiana Zouaves (Coppens' Battalion); 3d Battalion, Louisiana Infantry (Bradford's Battalion); and the Washington Infantry Battalion (St. Paul's Foot Rifles). The 4th Louisiana Battalion (Waddell's Battalion) was sent to Virginia in 1861 but is outside the scope of this study because it served there only briefly before being assigned to other areas.

Parades, parties, and pompous ceremonies were often held in

1. In this study, all direct quotes retain the soldiers' original grammar and spelling. Some punctuation, however, has been added for clarity. William E. Moore Diary, May 26, 1861, typescript copy, in William E. Moore Papers, UT; Andrew Newell to Robert A. Newell, June 20, 1861, in Box 1, Folder 2, Robert A. Newell Papers, LSU.

honor of the volunteer companies making up these commands. One function that garnered a great deal of attention was the presentation of flags to local volunteers. Such ceremonies were solemn rituals, as illustrated by the DeSoto Rifles' flag presentation. Handing the flag to the color guard, the spokeswoman for the seamstresses declared: "Receive then, from your mothers and sisters, from those whose affections greet you, these colors woven by our feeble but reliant hands; and when this bright flag shall float before you on the battlefield, let it not only inspire you with the brave and patriotic ambitions of a soldier aspiring to his own and his country's honor and glory, but also may it be a sign that cherished ones appeal to you to save them from a fanatical and heartless foe." The company's color-sergeant and corporals then stepped forward to receive the flag. The color-sergeant replied:

Ladies, with high-beating hearts and pulses throbbing with emotions, we receive from your hands this beautiful flag, the proud emblem of our young republic. . . . To those who may return from the field of battle bearing this flag in triumph, though perhaps tattered and torn, this incident will always prove a cheering recollection and to him whose fate may be to die a soldier's death, this moment brought before his fading view will recall your kind and sympathetic words, he will . . . bless you as his spirit takes its aerial flight . . . May the God of battles look down upon us as we register a soldier's vow that no stain shall ever be found upon thy sacred folds, save the blood of those who attack thee or those who fall in thy defence. Comrades you have heard the pledge, may it ever guide and guard you on the tented field . . . or in the smoke, glare, and din of battle, amidst carnage and death, there let its bright folds inspire you with new strength, nerve your arms and steel your hearts to deeds of strength and valor.²

In their haste to enter the military, some prominent Louisianians bypassed state officials and appealed directly to Confederate authorities for permission to raise units for the Confederate army. Governor Thomas O. Moore bitterly complained of this practice to Secretary of War Leroy P. Walker because he wanted the regiments to be mustered into Louisiana service first so that the state could pick the field grade officers and have the prestige of naming the commands. Governor Moore was particularly incensed at George

2. Bell Irvin Wiley, *The Life of Johnny Reb: The Common Soldier of the Confederacy* (New York, 1962), 21–22.

Auguste Gaston Coppens, a graduate of the French Marine School. Coppens was highly regarded in New Orleans social circles and was described by one woman as "a fine example of grace and beauty." But Coppens earned the wrath of the governor because he received personal authorization from Jefferson Davis in early March to raise and equip a battalion of Zouaves for the Confederate army.³

Coppens, like many Louisianians, was impressed with the French Zouaves. In early 1861, a group of actors claiming to be veterans of the Crimean War toured the country as a drill team patterned after the Algerian Zouaves. The Zouaves' uniforms varied but usually consisted of a red fez, a dark blue, loose-fitting jacket trimmed and embroidered with gold cord, a dark blue vest with yellow trim, blue cummerbund, baggy red pantaloons, black leather leggings, and white gaiters. This Zouave drill team toured several cities in Louisiana and thrilled everyone with its close-order drill, colorful uniforms, and French drill commands. By March, 1861, the Zouaves were so popular in Louisiana that Coppens hoped to pattern his command after them.

Coppens quickly organized several companies, most of whose members were foreigners or Louisianians of French extraction. It was claimed that Coppens received permission from the mayor of New Orleans to set up recruiting stations within city jails to give criminals a choice between prison or military service. This is probably an exaggeration, but the battalion's subsequent record of lawlessness lends credence to the claim. In late March the battalion left New Orleans for Pensacola, Florida, where it was mustered into service as the 1st Battalion, Louisiana Zouaves.⁴

Competition for Louisiana's recruits became fierce as the war crisis deepened. By the end of April the state was offering ten dollars to anyone who joined a state regiment and an additional two dollars for each friend induced to sign up. Since some parishes also offered bounties, many potential recruits traveled from parish to parish looking for the best offer. Local planters and businessmen

3. Mrs. Roger A. Pryor, *Reminiscences of Peace and War* (New York, 1905), 172; *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (130 vols.; Washington, D.C., 1880–1901), Ser. IV, Vol. I, 194–95 (hereinafter cited as *OR*). Unless otherwise indicated, all citations are to Series I.

4. Lee A. Wallace, Jr., "Coppens' Louisiana Zouaves," *Civil War History*, VIII (1962), 269–73.

even competed against one another by offering to supply weapons and uniforms to volunteers, with the understanding that they would be elected captain of the company or the company would be named in their honor. This practice led to individualized uniforms and weapons and caused regimental commanders much grief when trying to standardize their units' equipment.⁵

A. Keene Richards, a wealthy New Orleans citizen, outfitted the famed Tiger Rifles. But unlike some businessmen, Richards apparently made no demands in return for his support. This company adopted the popular Zouave dress and wore scarlet skullcaps with long tassels, red shirts, blue jackets, baggy blue trousers with white stripes, and white leggings. On each man's hatband were painted such slogans as "Lincoln's Life or a Tiger's Death," "Tiger in Search of a Black Republican," and "Tiger in Search of Abe." Recruited from the back alleys, levees, and jails of New Orleans, the Tiger Rifles became notorious for their thievery and brawling. The company was organized and led by Captain Alex White, a former mate on a Mississippi River packet. Rumored to be the son of a prominent governor, the mysterious White supposedly had changed his name and fled his native state after being convicted of killing a man during a poker game.⁶

White's Tiger Rifles became part of Major Roberdeau Wheat's 1st Special Battalion, Louisiana Volunteers. Born in Virginia to an Episcopal minister, Wheat served as an officer in the Mexican War and fought in Cuba, Mexico, and Nicaragua with various private expeditions. The thirty-five-year-old lawyer and soldier of fortune was serving with Garibaldi in Italy when South Carolina seceded. He immediately returned to the United States and while in New York was approached by his old commander, General Winfield Scott, who urged him to join the Union forces. Wheat declined and headed for Montgomery to try to obtain a commission in the Con-

5. Edwin Albert Leland, "Organization and Administration of the Louisiana Army During the Civil War" (M.A. thesis, Louisiana State University, 1938), 19–23, 31.

6. Dufour, *Gentle Tiger*, 121, 212; New Orleans *Daily Item*, August 25, 1896, in David F. Boyd Scrapbook, David F. Boyd Papers, LSU; Thomas Cooper DeLeon, *Four Years in Rebel Capitals: An Inside View of Life in the Southern Confederacy, from Birth to Death* (Mobile, 1890), 66.

federate army. No commissions were available, however, so he continued on to his home in New Orleans to raise his own company—the Old Dominion Guards. Wheat was later elected major of the 1st Special Battalion and won a lasting place in history as commander of the famed Louisiana Tiger Battalion. A strapping six feet, four inches, in height and weighing 275 pounds, he proved to be the only man capable of handling the rowdy Tigers. “His men loved him—and they feared him,” one soldier wrote, “the power or spell he had over his men was truly wonderful.”⁷

Wheat's Battalion was a potpourri of men who ranged in status from lawyers and merchants to pickpockets and pimps. Richard Taylor wrote years later that “so villainous was the reputation of this battalion that every commander desired to be rid of it.” One company, the Walker Guards, consisted of soldiers of fortune who had served under William Walker in Nicaragua. The Perret Guards, by contrast, were gamblers, and membership in the company was reserved for those able to “cut, shuffle, and deal on the point of a bayonet.” Historians usually cite the Catahoula Guerrillas, a company of planters' sons, as being the tamest unit in Wheat's Tigers. Although they were not usually associated with the villainous acts committed by the rest of the battalion, they were referred to as “Free Booters and Robbers” by one officer when they left their hometown, which suggests that they may not have been as innocent as previously believed.⁸

Like many of Louisiana's commands, Wheat's Battalion contained a large number of foreigners, that is, men born in foreign countries, although some of them were naturalized citizens. In 1860, 11.44 percent of Louisiana's population was foreign-born—the most of any southern state. State officials recognized the importance of this segment of the population and made a special effort to incorporate it into the war effort. To promote foreign enlistments, newspaper advertisements frequently called for recruits for such

7. Dufour, *Gentle Tiger*, 7–120; *Southern Historical Society Papers*, XVII (1889), 47–54.

8. Richard Taylor, *Destruction and Reconstruction: Personal Experiences of the Late War* (1879; rpr. Waltham, Mass., 1968), 17; Dufour, *Gentle Tiger*, 120; J. W. Buhoup to St. John R. Liddell, April 26, 1861, in Box 14, Folder 91, Moses and St. John R. Liddell Family Papers, LSU.

companies as the Scotch Rifle Guards, British Guards, and Irish Brigade.⁹

The largest group of foreign-born in Louisiana was the Irish. State officials attempted to raise a brigade from among the thousands of Irishmen who were working as laborers on Louisiana's plantations, levees, and wharves. The attempt was a dismal failure, however, for only two companies were organized and later attached to Colonel Isaac G. Seymour's predominantly Irish 6th Louisiana Volunteers. Seymour was a fifty-seven-year-old Yale University graduate, a successful newspaper editor, and had been the first mayor of Macon, Georgia. Under Winfield Scott he led a company of volunteers against the Seminole Indians in 1836 and a regiment of volunteers in the Mexican War. In 1848, Seymour moved to New Orleans, where he became editor of the city's leading financial newspaper, the *Commercial Bulletin*. As commander of the 6th Louisiana, Seymour was described as being "a brave gentleman but [an] inefficient, slow officer." He often had difficulty controlling his Irishmen, for the 6th Louisiana was found to be "turbulent in camp and requiring a strong hand."¹⁰

In the spring of 1861, Major Gaspard Tochman, a native of Poland, arrived in New Orleans to promote foreign enlistments through the organization of a Polish brigade. Tochman first came to the United States after being exiled by Russia for his participation in the Polish Revolution of 1830. Once here, he became a popular lecturer on Poland and cultivated the friendship of prominent government officials. In May, 1861, Tochman received permission from his friend Jefferson Davis to raise two regiments of Poles. Since there were only 196 Polish men, women, and children residing in Louisiana in 1860, the real intent of the brigade was to induce other foreign groups to enlist. Tochman's plan was a success, for two "Polish regiments" were raised, although they mainly con-

9. Ella Lonn, *Foreigners in the Confederacy* (Chapel Hill, 1940), 30–31; New Orleans *Daily Delta*, May 2, 1861.

10. Campbell Brown, "Reminiscences of the Civil War," 2 vols., I, 33, in Campbell Brown Collection; Taylor, *Destruction and Reconstruction*, 39; Preface, Isaac G. Seymour Papers, in Schoff Civil War Collection, UM; New Orleans *Commercial Bulletin*, July 30, 1862, in New Orleans Civil War Scrapbook, 2 vols., TU; Leland, "Organization and Administration of the Louisiana Army," 45–46; Lonn, *Foreigners in the Confederacy*, 107–108.

sisted of other nationalities. These two regiments were separated instead of being consolidated into one brigade, with the 1st Polish Regiment designated as the 14th Louisiana Volunteers and the 2d Polish Regiment the 3d Battalion, Louisiana Infantry.¹¹

Colonel Valery Sulakowski was made commander of the 14th Louisiana. Like Wheat, Sulakowski was a strict disciplinarian and perhaps the only officer capable of controlling the wild soldiers of his command. Born in Poland to a noble family, he received his military training during the 1848 Hungarian uprising against Austria. When the revolution failed, Sulakowski fled to the United States and settled in New Orleans as a civil engineer. Sulakowski eagerly supported Tochman's efforts to raise a Polish brigade and was rewarded with the command of the 1st Polish Regiment. His men's diverse nationalities and languages made them difficult to manage and forced Sulakowski to rule with an iron fist. He was described by one soldier as "a most exacting military commander, disciplinarian, and organizer" and as the "incarnation of military law—despotic, cruel and absolutely merciless." Sulakowski's men never became fond of him, although they did admire his talents. He was, one Louisianian claimed, "without doubt the best colonel in the service."¹²

Although thousands of foreigners joined Louisiana units, patriotism was not always the prime motivator. Shortages in state levee funds threw many Irishmen out of work before the war and forced them to enlist to survive. Other foreigners were literally shanghaied into the army. One English correspondent in New Orleans wrote, "British subjects have been seized, knocked down, carried off from their labor at the wharf and forced . . . to serve." Other foreign nationals were forced into barracks and hogtied until they agreed to enlist. The British consulate in New Orleans was so swamped by pathetic pleas from its subjects that it finally pressured

11. Sigmund H. Uminski, "Two Polish Confederates," *Polish American Studies*, XXIII (1966), 65–73; Lonn, *Foreigners in the Confederacy*, 101; Leland, "Organization and Administration of the Louisiana Army," 52–53.

12. *Confederate Veteran*, V (1897), 467; Napier Bartlett, *Military Record of Louisiana* (Baton Rouge, 1964), 43; Forrest P. Conner (ed.), "Letters of Lieutenant Robert H. Miller to His Family, 1861–1862," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, LXX (1962), 71; Francis C. Kajencki, "The Louisiana Tiger," *Louisiana History*, XV (1974), 51–52.