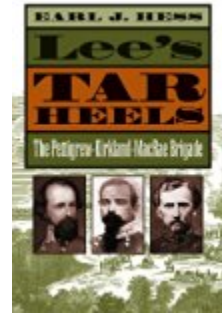


Earl J. Hess. *Lee's Tar Heels: The Pettigrew-Kirkland-MacRae Brigade*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. xvii + 437 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2687-4.

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Tar Heel Warriors

The Army of Northern Virginia has dominated Civil War military historiography. From biographies of Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, and other famous officers to studies of renowned combat units, historians have been drawn to the record of one of America's greatest armies. Its string of battlefield victories and valiant stands comprise a compelling story.

The heart, if not soul, of the army was Lee's "incomparable infantry." John B. Hood's Texans, Jackson's Stonewall Brigade, William Barksdale's Mississippians, Joseph Kershaw's South Carolinians, and the Louisiana Tigers all won acclaim on terrible battlefields. They were not alone, however, as other superb combat units spearheaded attacks and defended bloody ground. One of these less notable commands was a brigade of North Carolinians, led at different times by J. Johnston Pettigrew, William W. Kirkland, and William MacRae.

Earl Hess gives a complete history of Lee's Tar Heels. The brigade consisted of five North Carolina regiments—11th, 26th, 44th, 47th, and 52nd—which served together from December 1862 to Appomattox in April 1865. When finally organized as a brigade at the end of 1862, only the members of the 11th and 26th North Carolina had been in combat. Many men of the 11th North Carolina had served in the six-month 1st North Carolina and had fought at Big Bethel, Virginia, in June 1861. Because of their role in that engagement, the 11th earned the nickname of the Bethel Regiment. The 26th North Carolina, commanded by Colonel Zebulon Vance, had seen action at New Bern, North Carolina, in March 1862, and during

the Seven Days Campaign.

A native North Carolinian, Pettigrew had a distinguished antebellum career as scientist, attorney, and author. When the war began, he was elected colonel of the 22nd North Carolina. Promoted to brigadier general in March 1862, he suffered a serious wound at Seven Pines. When he recovered, the War Department assigned him to a new brigade that would become closely associated with its commander.

Pettigrew's brigade spent the winter and spring of 1863 in North Carolina. Disease and desertions plagued the command during these months. Its primary duty was to guard railroads from Federal incursions. The brigade participated in operations at New Bern and Washington. In early May, the five regiments received orders to report to Virginia, where it guarded the Army of Northern Virginia's supply line at Hanover Junction. Six weeks later, the North Carolinians joined the army as part of Henry Heth's division of A. P. Hill's Third Corps. The 44th North Carolina remained at Hanover Junction while their comrades marched toward Pennsylvania.

The Battle of Gettysburg exacted a fearful toll from the brigade. On July 1, Pettigrew's men attacked the Union Iron Brigade on McPherson's Ridge in one of the war's most notable clashes. Twenty-one-year-old Colonel Henry K. Burgwyn, Jr. was killed and his 26th North Carolina was ravaged in a head-to-head fight with the 24th Michigan. Two days later, with Pettigrew in command of the division and Colonel James K. Marshall of the 52nd North Carolina brigade, the North Carolini-

ans participated in the afternoon assault on Cemetery Ridge. The Tar Heels went as far as or farther than any troops in the forlorn attack and suffered more grievous losses, including Marshall, who was killed with two bullets in the forehead.

The brigade lost 1,753 of 2,584 men at Gettysburg, a casualty rate of more than 67 percent. The large 26th North Carolina—843 in the ranks on July 1—suffered more losses than any other regiment in Lee’s army. It sustained more deaths and more wounds than any unit, a rate estimated at a staggering 81 percent. Finally, on July 14, at Falling Waters, Pettigrew fell mortally wounded. Wherever the survivors looked, hundreds of their comrades were gone when they returned to Virginia.

In September 1863, Brigadier General William W. Kirkland, former colonel of the 21st North Carolina, was assigned to command of the brigade. Kirkland had been in the service from the war’s earliest days, suffering a wound at First Winchester, which kept him out of action until Gettysburg. He led the brigade for the first time at Bristoe Station, where he fell wounded and hundreds of his men were lost in an ill-advised attack on the Federals on October 14.

Kirkland rejoined the brigade in February 1864, and led it through the Overland Campaign in May and June. The combat during these weeks had no parallel in the war. The fighting was nearly unrelenting and horrific at times. Kirkland and the North Carolinians fought ably and bravely, losing perhaps one-third of their numbers. Kirkland suffered another wound at Cold Harbor, and on June 29, Brigadier General William MacRae assumed temporary command of the depleted regiments. A civil engineer before the war, MacRae had commanded the 15th North Carolina for eighteen months, serving capably as its commander. Before long, he had earned the brigade members’ respect and affection. He became one of the army’s finest and least well-known combat officers.

MacRae’s North Carolinians fashioned a distinguished record as one of the army’s most stalwart defenders of Petersburg, during the ten-month siege. At the Battle of Ream’s Station on August 25, Heth’s division achieved a stunning victory over the renowned Union Second Corps, inflicting more than 600 casualties and capturing more than 2,000 prisoners. MacRae’s veterans were in the forefront of the assault that broke the Federal line.

Throughout the autumn of 1864 and winter of 1865, Lee’s army endured the deadliness of siege warfare and launched a series of counterattacks to thwart Federal attempts to sever the railroads into Petersburg. MacRae’s Tar Heels participated in a number of these engagements. Finally, on April 2, 1865, a massive Union assault overran Lee’s lines at Petersburg, forcing the Confederates to abandon the city. A week later the remnant of this great Confederate army was surrendered by Lee at Appomattox Court House. MacRae and 442 North Carolinians stood in the ranks at the end.

Hess is a skillful writer, who weaves insightful incidents into the narrative. The book is based on commendable archival research, which interjects immediacy into the story as drawn from members’ letters and diaries. The author also places the brigade’s movements and actions into the army’s operations. He does, however, never let the North Carolinians’ role stray from the narrative. There is much to learn from and to savor in this very fine unit study.

The study of this fine brigade is excellent. Earl J. Hess, a distinguished author of previous Civil War books, has written a model work. It is based on a wide array of sources, is very well written, includes many human-interest stories, and offers a critical analysis of the brigade’s record. *Lee’s Tar Heels* is an outstanding study, one of the finest unit histories to appear in recent years.

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