

Tracking the “Pee Dee Wildcats”

Researching and Tracing the Movements of Company K, 26th North Carolina Infantry during the War Between the States

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I have always been interested in history. The first battlefield I visited was Kings Mountain during a school field trip. I still remember that particular trip and that trip “hooked” me.

Years later my uncle shared his genealogy notes about the Edwards. There was a notation on my great-great grandfather John T. Edwards’ service in the 26th North Carolina. Mentioning that to one of my co-workers, he became very excited that I had an ancestor whom had served with the 26th. What is all the excitement about? I became very interested in learning more. This is what I learned and the research brought my ancestors’ involvement alive. My family was also interested in finding out more. We traveled to battlefields in North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Georgia. Some were National Parks. Some were overgrown thickets. Some had guides. At many others, we had to act as our own guides.

Where do you start? There are two paths to start with. One is a unit history. The other would be to go to the local papers and look for articles. For me, things just happened to click. At the library, there is a set of the “Histories of the Several Regiments and Battalions From North Carolina in the Great War 1861-65” edited by Walter Clark. I made a copy of the 26th’s history. There is also a unit history in the “North Carolina Troops – A Roster.” I made a copy of the history for the 26th. In 2000, Rod Gragg had written “Covered with Glory - The 26th North Carolina Infantry at the Battle of Gettysburg.” In 2002, Earl Hess wrote, “Lee’s Tar Heels – The Pettigrew-Kirkland-MacRae Brigade.” I went through the bibliographies of the aforementioned books and noticed one often quoted. The Assistant Surgeon of the 26th – George Underwood had written “The 26th Regiment NC Troops, Pettigrew’s Brigade, Heth’s Division, Hill’s Corps, ANV, 1861-1865.” Using Barnes & Nobles’ Used Books, I found a copy and purchased it. I read these and also went to the library to read and copy articles from the North Carolina Argus newspaper. I looked for any article or letter pertaining to Company K. These books and articles formed my foundation.

Another source I used was a Compendium of North Carolina Regiments from the Union County Library. This book listed the regiments with regimental commanders, unit assignments, and the major battles the regiment participated in.

From the National Archives, copies of my great-great grandfather and uncles’ service records were secured. These provided a multitude of clues and facts. I was able to bounce the information contained here from what I read in the unit histories and the newspaper articles.

I went to the North Carolina State Archives and looked at all the original records they had on Company K. They had monthly reports with rolls, health reports, morale reports, and a brief summary of the Company's movements for the month. This proved a boon.

Get a notebook and start listing pertinent facts. If you read something of interest, jot it down and (most important – something I frequently fail to do) write the source with page number.

Other sources of information are magazines – the old Confederate Veteran, America's Civil War, Gettysburg, and others. Don't forget museums, The Museum of the Confederacy in Richmond has a large research library with many documents.

Wildcats are Formed

The secession movement was fanned early in Anson County. On November 15, 1860, a large group of citizens met at Ansonville at Lemuel Carpenter's large storehouse and ceremoniously erected a secessionist flag. Speeches were made. Citizens pledged to wear the Blue Cockade, in honor of their Revolutionary sires of 1776, and resist the Black Republican rule.

On April 12, 1861, Fort Sumter fell. On May 15 the Wild Cats of the Pee Dee met in Wadesboro to organize. J. C. Caraway was their Captain. They met on May 19 in Burnsville for parade and drill, and for those "disposed to do so, to volunteer. The next day, the state of North Carolina seceded from the Union.

On June 10, North Carolinians joined Virginia forces to whip the Yankees at Big Bethel, Virginia. Five days later, the Wild Cats of the Pee Dee met in Wadesboro to organize.

On June 19, 1861, the militia unit called the Pee Dee Wildcats met again in Burnsville. They pitched their tents and camped.

At 10 o'clock on Wednesday morning, a large number of the citizens, especially ladies, had assembled. At the tap of the drum, the Wild Cats "fell in," and after drilling awhile, were marched to a beautiful shade where necessary arrangements had been made for speaking.

Lieut. J.C. McLauchlin made the opening speech. He asserted, "that the character of the brutal war that is now being waged, and controlled by a maddened fanaticism at the North, against the South, could find a parallel only in the barbarous ages of antiquity." After touching many other important points, he alluded to the victories gained by our men, and said we should not be elated and boast of it, but rather humbled, for in it we recognize the hand of the God of our fathers. After speaking for three fourths of an hour, he concluded, when Lieut. L.R. Liles came forward and delivered a stirring, war speech. He appealed to the men, to nerve their arms for the conflict, and to the ladies to send them forward to meet the enemy, and drive them from our soil, if we would remain a free and happy people.

The Wild Cats were ordered into line, and as they marched out, the company adopted a resolution that Lincoln's fanatical hordes could never reach North Carolina soil, but over their dead bodies.

On July 3, 1861, over five hundred people attended one recruiting party at the Gould's Fork Academy (between Goulds Fork creek and the school bus garage on US 74). At this meeting, twelve more young men volunteered to serve, and the company was complete.

After completing their company they were to report to their Camp of Instruction in Raleigh. I am assuming that the Wild Cats rode the railroad to Raleigh, based on accounts written in the Company C 14th NC and Company A 23rd NC at that some time frame. These units climbed on carriages and wagons and drove down the plank road (roughly what is now US52) towards Cheraw. About a mile from Cheraw, there was a tollhouse. They alighted from their carriages and wagons and formed up. Then they marched to the train depot. From there they traveled by rail to Florence, then northeast Wilmington. From Wilmington, they traveled to Goldsboro, then arrived in Raleigh at their Camp of Instruction at Crab Tree (about three miles from Raleigh near what is now Crab Tree Valley Mall). It was here that they were assigned to the 26th North Carolina Infantry Regiment.

Wild Cats at their First Duty

The Yankees had attacked North Carolina at Fort Hatteras on August 28. This was the first successful invasion of Southern territory. In response, the Wild Cats boarded the trains and left Crab Tree on September 2. Their destination was New Bern. Once they arrived there later that day, they were sent to Morehead City. They arrived on September 4. Their duty assignment was to guard Fort Macon on Bogue Island. This masonry fort which protected one of North Carolina's deep water harbors. The regiment was ordered to board schooners that ran aground well offshore of the beach. They had to complete the trip in small boats.

Once on the island, they erected their first field encampment two miles west of Fort Macon. The camp was named Camp Burgwyn (named in honor of their lieutenant colonel's father who was on Bogue Island acting in the capacity of volunteer aide for Governor Clark.) The Wild Cats remained here from September through November. On November 4 a 1, 124 ton sidewheel steam transport named the "Star of the Union" ran aground. Its' eighty crewmen came ashore and surrendered to the 26th NC. There was great excitement in the camp, because of the large number of enemy prisoners. The prisoners were taken to Morehead City and later Raleigh. Company K was detailed out with three other companies to salvage the cargo from the shipwreck. This took until the November 19. On November 26, the regiment was moved off Bogue Island and to Carolina City. A new camp was erected, this one named Camp Vance in honor of Colonel Zeb Vance. Soon afterwards, illnesses attacked the regiment with viciousness. Several died in camp or in the hospital at Carolina City.

The Wild Cats remained at Camp Vance until January 26, 1862. In February, the Yankees captured Roanoke Island and started moving inland and by sea & rivers to seal off the ports of North Carolina. The 26th was moved about four miles south of New Bern and established Camp Branch. Here they stayed as part of a defensive line with Fort Thompson as its anchor on the Neuse River.

New Bern to Malvern Hill

On March 14, they were attacked. This was the Battle of New Bern which ended in Union victory. A hasty retreat across a swollen Brice's Creek saved future governor Zeb Vance and the 26th. Towards Kinston they retreated and established a camp five miles below the city on the south side of the Neuse River. This camp was named Camp MacGruder in honor of General John B. (Prince John) MacGruder.

In the April and May recruits were conscripted into the ranks to build up the company which had suffered both combat losses and deaths through pneumonia and other illnesses. They remained at Camp MacGruder until June 5, 1862 when they moved to a more open area, in an open field near Kinston. The new camp was called Camp Johnson.

Fourteen days later, on June 19, they were ordered to Petersburg. The Union Army under General McClellan was threatening Richmond. Onto the railcars they climbed and rode until reaching Petersburg, Virginia on June 21. They stayed in Petersburg until June 23. The Wild Cats left for Richmond on the 24th, and arrived there at two o'clock a.m. at the downtown rail station that President Davis often used. They bivouacked in Capitol Square near the Washington monument and at 7 AM took up line of march for our position on the line, near Seven Pines. This picket line was six miles below Richmond. That night they fought a skirmish referred to as Kings SchoolHouse. One man was killed and four were wounded, but they repulsed the enemy twice. They remained near Richmond until June 30 when they were ordered to march to Malvern Hill.

The company was assigned to the right of Malvern Hill on July 1, 1862. Malvern Hill was to be the final battle of the Seven Days Campaign. Some stragglers of Company K became separated from the main group and went into battle with the first regiment that they came in contact with. Some fought with Louisiana's, some with Georgians, and some with other North Carolina Regiments. Captain McLauchlin had been reported that he had been killed, but only his hat had been shot off his head. Out of they incredible brutal artillery against infantry fight, only four Wild Cats were wounded. Company K joined in the pursuit of the Yankees and wound up marching to Shirley Plantation on the James River. Robert E. Lee's grandfather owned the Shirley Plantation. It was at Shirley that Lee's father Light Horse Harry Lee married his mother. They were sent to Shirley to help Confederate Cavalry try to cut off the Yankee's rear wagon train, but they did not establish contact with the enemy.

From Shirley they marched back towards Richmond and then back down the James River to Drewry's Bluff where they rested. They left Drewry's Bluff and stayed three miles from Petersburg for month of August. The encampment at Petersburg was called Camp French. Two or three times during the month of August they would be moved to the James River, then back to Richmond, then back to Petersburg.

Suffolk Campaign and Back to the Old North State

In the first part of September they were still at Camp French. Orders were received to board the trains to Wakefield Station which was southeast of Petersburg on the rail line to Suffolk, Virginia. They traveled there on September 14, then had to march towards the town of Franklin, Virginia which is near the North Carolina border. The WildCats reached Franklin on September 19. They crossed the Blackwater River towards their goal of Suffolk, but in the end had to return to Camp French by September 23. They had marched seventy miles in what was a failed attempt by General Longstreet to secure the southside of the James River near Suffolk.. At Camp French they rested until late October when they were ordered towards Rawls Mill in Martin County, NC.

At Rawls Mill, there was a hot fight in which one Wild Cat was killed – John P. Winfield who had recently written a homesick letter to his wife asking that his father try to find him a substitute. After the fighting at Rawls Mill, the company was ordered to Tarboro where they stayed until November 10. At that time they were sent back to Camp French by way of Goldsboro to White Hall, then back to Goldsboro then to Camp French in Petersburg where they remained to celebrate Christmas.

The Wild Cats left Petersburg on January 4, 1863 and travelled by rail to Garysburg, NC. They remained there for two weeks, then on the 19th, left for Magnolia, NC in Duplin County. It was here that on January 25 the Brigade was called out to witness an execution of a member of the 26th NC Company B who had deserted. The condemned man was called out to be shot. Then, a pardon was given by the commanding general. There they stayed at Magnolia until February 13 when they were ordered to Goldsboro. At Goldsboro, they traveled about ten miles east and remained there until they were sent to Kinston near a bivouac near Hookerton, NC in April. Hookerton is in Greene County about 14 miles from Kinston and 28 miles from Goldsboro..

Support Unit for Chancellorsville Battle

The Wild Cats left for Kinston in late April and on May 1st they boarded rail cars to travel to Goldsboro. In Virginia, Union General Fighting Joe Hooker was on the move in what developed into the Battle of Chancellorsville. Hooker was trying to flank Robert E. Lee. On May 1, Lee and Jackson held their last meeting at Chancellorsville to decide how to turn the table on Hooker and attack his flank.

When the Wild Cats arrived in Richmond on May 3, they immediately disembarked and loaded onto another train for Hanover Junction and remained near there guarding a bridge across the North Anna River. They remained here until June 7.

Gettysburg – the Crucible and Irrecoverable Losses

On June 3, 1863, Lee began his Gettysburg Campaign by pulling troops from the Fredericksburg area toward the Shenandoah Valley. As part of that, to screen or mask the fact that troops were being withdrawn, the Wild Cats were sent to Hamilton's Crossing on June 7. The next day they were marched eight miles down the Rappahannock River and performed picket duty until the 12th. That day, they marched to Fredericksburg and lingered for three days. Then they marched

for Culpeper Court House. From there they joined the column of gray troops in Front Royal and marched to Berryville. On June 25th the Wild Cats crossed the Potomac River and marched to Hagerstown, crossing the Pennsylvania State line on the 26th. Marching on they entered Haynesford and from thence to New Salem. From New Salem they marched until they arrived at Gettysburg on June 30, 1863.

Lt. L.L. Polk (of the 43rd NC Infantry), writing to a friend, which letter includes many of the killed and wounded given in the above says:

“It is enough to make the heart bleed, to think of the mournful, though noble fate of those dear boys. All the officers were wounded in company K, 26th Regiment, on the 1st, except Lt. Lilly. On the 1st, the company went in, 92 strong, and came out with 45. On the 3d, Lt. Lilly took in 45, and came out none unhurt. Lilly is unable to say who is killed, as only two reached the breastworks with him, when he was shot down. The Regiment went in with 40 officers, and only tow came out unhurt. Col. Burgwyn was killed. Lt. Col. Lane, badly wounded. The Regiment went in nearly 900 strong and came out with 73. The Colors were shot down in the hands of 14 different men. Pettigrew’s brigade went in with about 3,600 and came out with about 300. Maj. Jones commands the brigade. A 1st Lieutenant commands the 52nd Regiment.:

Recooperation and Licking the Wounds – Mine Run Campaign

The Wild Cats encamped near Brandy Station on the Rappahannock River during the month of November. On November 8, they received orders to march in the direction of Culpeper Court House and form in the line of battle. At night they crossed Robeson River and encamped. Remaining here until the 27th, the company marched in the direction of Fredericksburg where they remained in line of battle in front of Union forces until the 3rd of December when they returned to a place near Orange Court House.

In January, the Wild Cats performed picket duty on the Rapidan River for forty days. The men were in good spirits with new recruits and replacements joining the company. They were looking forward to “a very good killing next summer.” On February 14, re-enlistments were sought, and two thirds of the company re-enlisted. In March they remained in camp near Orange Court House with high anticipation of defeating the enemy in the coming spring.

Pursuing Grant through Wilderness to Cold Harbor

On May 4th, 1864, the Wild Cats left their camp near Orange Court House and on the 5th, were engaged with the enemy at the Battle of the Wilderness. One man was killed and ten were wounded. The next day, the engagement continued and an additional five men were wound and one man was missing. They were ordered to entrench their lines and there they remained along the line from the Wilderness to Spotsylvania Court House. On May 10, the Wild Cats fought Hancock’s Corps on the river. This was a Confederate victory at the cost of one Wild Cat’s life and wounding another.

From May 11th until June 3rd, the company was entrenched. The Confederates felt as though they had solidly whipped the enemy during the continuous fighting. One day the Yankee officers led

a charge on the entrenchments, but were alone as their men would not charge with them. At the first volley from the Wild Cats' line both officers and the obstinate Yankee soldiers fled. The fighting continued and small numbers of wounded Wild Cats continued to add up. By May 19th, there was an additional death and thirteen wounded.

The enemy was again engaged on June 3rd at Cold Harbor where three Wild Cats were wounded. After the fighting at Cold Harbor, they remained in the trenches until June 30 when they were sent to Iboring Creek to guard a wagon train.

Grant disappeared after Cold Harbor. Because Grant had made a habit of making continued short turn movements during the Overland Campaign, Lee began to shift his troops across the Chickahominy River to keep them between Richmond and Grant.

Petersburg and More Fighting

The Wild Cats crossed White Oak Swamp on June 13 and encamped near the Charles City Road. They were six miles from Malvern Hill. On June 14, they were ordered to entrench. They remained here for three days when they received word that the Yankees had crossed the James River. The Wild Cats set out for Drewry's Bluff on June 18 and crossed a pontoon bridge over the James River near Drewry's Bluff. Then they marched to a point six miles north of Petersburg and boarded a train. They rode five miles farther, then got off, and continued marching to the Appomattox River.

On June 22, the Wild Cats were ordered to a spot near the Weldon Railroad where the railroad crossed Boydton Plank Road on the southwest side of Petersburg. Across on the West Side of the tracks was the Confederate States Lead Works. Grant had sent some of his cavalry on a raid to cut the Weldon Railroad near this spot. The raid was a success and now the track had to be repaired. On June 29 they were ordered to go pick up a load of corn from Stony Creek station which was about twenty miles past the point where the rail line had be destroyed by the Yankee cavalry.

When they returned they were pulled off the line and placed in reserve for a short period of rest. On July 8 the company was ordered back into the trenches near the Weldon Railroad. Because of Yankee artillery fire they moved down the tracks about five miles for two days, then returned to their former position.

On July 26, Grant began fighting near Deep Bottom and the Wildcats were called out. They marked quickly from Petersburg to the pontoon bridge at Drewry's Bluff, then on to Deep Bottom. They crossed the bridge around midnight and got to Deep Bottom just after dawn. After engaging the enemy near the end of the Battle for Deep Bottom, the Wild Cats were put to work strengthening the entrenchments. On July 30, the famous mine was exploded and the battle of the Crater ensued. The Wild Cats were rushed to Chaffins's Bluff to strengthen the lines. On July 31, they found themselves occupying the trenches to the right of the Crater. Remaining there for three days, they were placed in reserve and wound up camping near their old 1862 Camp French.

Grant made another move to take the Weldon Railroad in August. The Wild Cats were sent to Globe Tavern and participated in the battle for it on August 21. After this battle, the company was sent back to their position near the lead mine. There they remained until August 24 when they were ordered to march along Squirrel Level Road, then Vaughan Road to avoid detection by the Yankees. Then, they camped near Armstrong's Mill on Hatcher's Run. They worked up on August 25 and marched to Reams Station where they participated in defeating the Yankees in the first standup fight in a long time.

In September, the Wild Cats helped construct earthworks to the east of the Weldon Railroad and remained there until September 16 when they were sent southward along Boydton Plank Road for five miles and entrenched again. After four days of digging entrenchments, they were ordered to go to Peebles Farm. There they constructed a redoubt and called it Fort MacRae in honor of their brigade commander.

On September 30, they fought the battle of Jones Farm which ended in victory saving the Boydton Plank Road and the South Side Railroad. The next day they fought the battle of Squirrel Level Road, the next the battle of Duncan Road. All in which repulsed the Yankees. The company stayed in this area strengthening fortifications and awaiting an attack.

The autumn continued to bring fight after fight – Burgess Mill on October 27. In December, they pursued the enemy to Hicksford. Moving back to near Dinwiddie Court House they stood picket duty.

Appomattox and The End

January 1865 found them back on Duncan Road. In early February the Wild Cats fought on Hatcher's Run in the sleet and snow. On March 31, the Wild Cats were near the battle line at White Oak Road. Early April, they fought their last engagement with their brigade near Sutherland Station. When Richmond and Petersburg were abandoned, the Confederate Army retreated toward Amelia Court House, Jetersville, Rice's Depot, Farmville, and finally reached Appomattox Court House. Near Appomattox they were called on to defend an artillery train that was threatened by Sheridan's cavalry, but they could not reach them in time. Sheridan captured thirty cannon and two hundred wagons.

On April 9, a cease-fire was declared and Lee surrendered the Army of Northern Virginia. On April 12 in mid afternoon, the Wild Cats were ordered in formation with the remainder of MacRae's Brigade. They marched down to a point near the Union lines, turned to face their opponents, and then stacked arms.

Then they split into smaller numbers, so as not to burden the citizens by feeding large groups of soldiers, and began their way home to Anson County.

Sources for this paper are:

Company K 26 NC Regiment Muster Sheets, North Carolina Archives in Raleigh, NC
North Carolina Argus Newspapers 1861-1865