

Last to Join the Fight: The 66th Georgia Infantry
Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill



The Battle for Atlanta Wikiart/Public Domain

Last to Join the Fight: The 66th Georgia Infantry By David Cone.
Macon, Georgia; Mercer Press, 2014. 209 pages. Illustrated.

Regimental histories are usually boring, hagiographic, misleading and evade realities. They bore because they assemble dull, selective facts and read like a team list combined with a sports team score card. That is essentially their attitude to war. They are hagiographic about units, their leaders and war. They mislead by not showing the intrigues for leadership and glory and by evading the realities of war and what causes them. Well for once none of these things apply.

As the title suggests, David Cone tells the story of the last Confederate regiment raised in Georgia. This time the officer who raises and commands a regiment, Colonel James C. Nisbet, is no cardboard hero. He does have the virtues of courage, efficiency, stoic loyalty and sedulous dedication, but his own words reveal that he is also a racist by any standard and a self-promoter with an ambition and a ruthless determination that gets him through the intrigues and squabbles that surround command. This book describes those behind the scenes battles several times. Usually little information about the lives, background and personalities of junior officers and enlisted men is written about in regimental histories. Here we get a whole chapter 'The Rank and File: Demographics of a Late War Regiment.' This goes for nearly thirty pages on those aspects and contains two tables with percentage breakdowns of their wealth, comparing that of the regiment's officers with that of its poorer men. Other statistics deal with age, civilian occupation, casualties, desertion rates and enlistment methods.

Throughout the book the personal stories of the men who made up the regiment emerge. Coming from all over Georgia they came from vastly different worlds. Even among the farmers, the largest group by profession (being 40% of the enlistees) massive differences emerge. Some from central Georgia were rich middle aged plantation owners such as William James Bush, who was worth forty thousand dollars and owned several slaves. More common in the ranks were the hardscrabble small farmers who rarely saw money and when they did they went into debt for it. A scattering of assorted professionals joined, but several enlistments were too young to have a profession, while others had been left unemployed by the war.

What made this regiment different was that it was formed in the summer of 1863 to counter the correctly expected invasion of northern Georgia which would sweep towards Atlanta. The fact that the 66th was formed so late meant that it also differed from other regiments in several ways. Unlike the first formed regiments, its recruitment was not based in a particular county or a few counties as was usual. Instead Nesbit took males from all over Georgia and from all categories. Nisbet encouraged exempts, volunteers and conscripts. The reference to the latter reads oddly: if they are already conscripts are they already enlisted? Is he poaching manpower from other units or appealing to discharged conscripts from other units? Or does he possibly mean deserters? Nisbet's advertisement shrewdly left much

implied. The regiment's late formation also meant that his rankers were older than was usual, more socially diverse and unlike the volunteers of 1861, they were not naive about war and uncertain about achieving victory. Few were patriotic volunteers. Nisbet initially offered a \$5000 bounty for volunteering, but Confederate money purchased little, even when goods were available. He also took conscripts and substitutes. The latter were usually poor men paid to serve in the place of the rich. That system was so corrupt and caused such resentment that the Confederacy began to end it in late 1863. At that same time conscription was soon extended down to sixteen and up to fifty. In Georgia the new conscription was enforced with possès and legally treating the reluctant and the evasive as enemies. With Sherman's brutal and destructive plundering invasion ripping through the South and obviously approaching, many volunteered, aged old men, boys under ten, even jailbirds. Many believed that the south could not be vanquished: others correctly saw that if they did not fight their society would be gone with the wind indeed. Nisbet got what few initially fought possible, over a thousand men on the regiment's formation and eventually a total of well over twelve hundred men for his regiment. Whatever his personal failings, he was a man of great organisational ability and dedication.

Their first battle demoralised; this was at Chattanooga in November 1863 when the Confederates broke and ran. Their commander, Braxton Bragg asked to be relieved of his command, he was. Subsequent battles on the retreat to Atlanta gave them few victories and no great and glorious reputation. The disastrous Atlanta campaign savaged their strength. The battles after this were fought by not only a numerically weakened regiment, but by one demoralised by defeat and enduring hunger and exhaustion. Those factors lead to widespread disease, desertion and depletion. By the war's end the 66th had suffered a 57% casualty rate. Disease killed three times as many enlistees as battle: 37 men of the 66th died on battlefields, 119 of disease. More deserted than died on the field and astoundingly 37 was also the same number of men who died in prison camps and 37 was also the number listed as changing sides. This probably means that they took the Oath of Allegiance so that they could go home or live as civilians behind Union lines rather than enlist in the Union forces. These three categories total 129 evenly divided between them. At their surrender in April 1865 only 133 men, just over a tenth of what the regiment had been at its peak number eighteen months before, were still serving.

David Cone does not gloss over their war's miseries when these men battled either the Union or disease. They had a third struggle after the war, to recover: some were victorious there, some failed. Nisbet, like most commanding officers in military disasters emerged as an eventual winner in business and lived into his eighty-eighth year, writing his memoirs. These focus more on his war in Virginia than his service with the 66th. Cone goes into this post-war world in sufficient and interesting detail.

If the world wants more regimental histories they should be written like this.

*