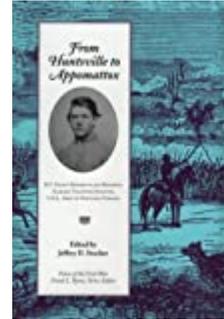


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jeffrey D. Stocker, ed. *From Huntsville to Appomattox: R. T. Cole's History of 4th Regiment, Alabama Volunteer Infantry, C.S.A., Army of Northern Virginia.* Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996. xvi + 318 pp. \$32.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87049-924-1.



Reviewed by Arthur W. Bergeron (Pamplin Civil War Site)

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From Huntsville to Appomattox is taken, as indicated in the full title, from a manuscript by Robert T. Coles. The 4th Alabama Infantry Regiment was without question one of the conflict's most outstanding fighting units. Coles was only nineteen when he joined Captain Egbert J. Jones's Huntsville Guards in April 1861, but he was appointed sergeant major of the regiment when it was organized at Dalton, Georgia, the following month. In less than a year, Coles received appointment as adjutant of the 4th Alabama. He missed only two of the regiment's engagements during the entire war. Obviously proud of the record of his unit, Coles attempted after the war to persuade one of his comrades to write its history but failed to do so. He penned his own memoir in 1909-1910. At that time, Coles had access to and used a number of Confederate and Union sources to amplify his recollections of events.

Coles's memoir begins with short historical sketches of the companies that made up the regiment and jumps quickly to the unit's movement from Harper's Ferry toward Manassas Junction in mid-July 1861. Coles provides no information on how the Alabamians left the Deep South for northern Virginia. The 4th Alabama served in the Battle of First Manassas as part of the brigade commanded by Brigadier General Bernard E. Bee, who gave Thomas Jonathan Jackson the nickname

"Stonewall." During the fighting, the men of the 4th Alabama repulsed attacks by four Union regiments before being flanked on both sides and forced to retreat. Coles states that this battle unified the men of the regiment and molded them into the fine fighting force that they were from then onward.

The 4th Alabama then served in a brigade, commanded first by William H. C. Whiting and later by Evander M. Law, in Major General John Bell Hood's famous division. At the battle of Gaines Mill on June 27, 1862, the Alabamians helped overrun the Union position and turn the tide of the engagement. They later fought at Second Manassas, South Mountain, and Sharpsburg. During the Battle of Fredericksburg, the Alabamians were not engaged with the enemy and did not fire a shot. Stationed at the army's center, they nevertheless suffered several dozen casualties from Union fire. The men missed the battle of Chancellorsville because they had been sent with other units of Lieutenant General James Longstreet's corps on an abortive campaign against Federal forces at Suffolk, Virginia.

Coles writes proudly of the fighting done by his regiment on July 2, 1863, at Gettysburg. "No regiment in either army made a more determined effort nor exhibited a bolder front, unsupported and exposed on both flanks, than the 4th Alabama in its three different efforts to dis-

lodge the enemy” (p. 108). He attributes the failure to overrun the Round Tops to the exhausted condition of the troops. While he speaks well of the men involved in the Pickett-Pettigrew-Trimble charge, he laments the fact that Hood’s division did receive more praise for its role.

Sent to the Western Theater with four other brigades, Law’s men fought in the bloody battle at Chickamauga, Georgia, in September 1863. From there the Alabamians moved to Lookout Mountain and participated in the siege of the Union army in Chattanooga. Critics of James Longstreet’s actions in the West will find in this book plenty of support for their arguments. Coles says that the general conducted himself in a “half-hearted manner.” Longstreet’s interest in things “began to wane” after Chickamauga “as it did before the Battle of Gettysburg” (p. 141), a phrase that indicates Coles found suspect the general’s conduct in that battle. He speaks of “the errors committed and indifference displayed” (p. 147) by Longstreet in ordering the unsuccessful attack at Wauhatchie. Coles also accuses Longstreet of not acting aggressively enough in the early stages of the Knoxville campaign when a Confederate victory might have been achieved.

Returning to the Army of Northern Virginia in the spring of 1864, the 4th Alabama played an important role in the battles fought at the Wilderness, Spotsylvania, North Anna, Cold Harbor, and Petersburg, as well as in operations north of the James River. In describing the trench warfare that dominated these campaigns, Cole writes, “The Northern soldier was more inclined to construct artificial cover than his Southern brother. It was a variety of labor we disliked to perform, however urgent it was” (p. 172). The great disparity in numbers, however, forced the Alabamians and other Confederates to erect strong earthworks. The regiment served in the trenches around Richmond during the winter of 1863-1864 and marched with the army toward Appomattox Court House after the Confederate capital was evacuated on April 2, 1865.

Coles does not gloss over unpleasant or controversial aspects of the war. He admits that some men of his regiment became “laggards and cowards who used every subterfuge to avoid the hardships of camp life and its attendant dangers” (p. 37). In another place, Coles tells of a private who was the only man of the 4th Alabama “regarded as a downright coward.” This soldier had plenty of personal courage on the march and in camp “but became perfectly demoralized at the first sound of a bullet or shell” (p. 67). In his description of the surrender at Appomattox Court House, Coles allows his strong Southern patriotism to show through: “The mortification of having to march up and stack arms in front of a host of men, whom we had every right to consider, man for man, that we were their superiors, from past experience on many battlefields, was most galling to our proud spirits” (p. 193).

The book has a number of fine illustrations of members of the 4th Alabama, but it would have benefited from the inclusion of more maps. Stocker does a highly commendable job in providing notes for Coles’s narrative. He used a number of primary sources, some of them fairly obscure. In a few places, however, this reviewer would have liked to see more complete notes. For example, Coles claims that his regiment had the highest casualties of any regiment on either side at First Manassas. The editor does not address the claim but simply refers readers to the *Official Records* for Confederate casualties.

This minor criticism aside, Civil War enthusiasts of every kind will enjoy reading *From Huntsville to Appomattox*. All serious students of the conflict will want to add a copy to their bookshelves.

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