

# Edward A. O'Neal

## of "The Fighting O'Neals"

By Arley McCormick



**Edward A. O'Neal**

 Edward A. O'Neal was born in Madison County on September 20, 1818. He graduated from the Green Academy in Huntsville, and then in 1836 from La Grange College near Florence, Alabama. He tutored in law under James W. McClung of Huntsville, and he became a member of the bar in 1840. Through hard work and diligence, he became a Commanding General in the Confederate Army. After the war, he went on to become the 26th Governor of Alabama. But the path was not always accompanied with cheers and

bravado - there was pain, humiliation, and grieving along the way.

Edward O'Neal was a first generation American whose father emigrated from Ireland. His mother, who was from South Carolina, was a descendant of French Huguenots. He grew up in Huntsville, and after graduating at the top of his class from La Grange College, he married, in 1838, Mary Olivia Moore, the daughter of Dr. Alfred Moore of Huntsville. Together, they had nine children. Their two sons went on to fight in the Civil War as well. Alfred Moore O'Neal became a major in 11<sup>th</sup> Alabama Infantry and Edward Asbury O'Neal Jr. was aid-de-camp for Major General Robert Emmett Rodes in the Army of Northern Virginia. Thus they were known, in the Florence community, as the "Fighting O'Neals."

In 1841, O'Neal was elected to Alabama's fourth judicial circuit court to fill an unexpired term. In this capacity, he served four years. He eventually moved to the growing community of Florence to establish a law firm. He was quickly accepted and became an influential leading citizen. Often neighbors and acquaintances would stop by his modest home, take a sip of water and pass the time discussing politics, family, and events occurring in the community. Edward O'Neal was a popular

resident with many friends and associates.

The 1850s was a turbulent time in the country. The rhetoric was vicious and constant between abolitionists and states' rights advocates, who attempted to influence politicians in support of their position. Edward O'Neal grew into an avid Secessionist. When Alabama passed its Ordinance of Secession on January 11, 1861, and Abraham Lincoln was inaugurated as the 16th President of the United States on March 4, he knew what he had to do. In June, at the age of 43, Captain O'Neal and his two sons marched off to war, three of many residents of North Alabama to cast their lot with the Confederate Army.

Upon arriving in Virginia, Edward O'Neal was immediately promoted to Major, 9th Alabama Infantry Regiment. In March 1862, he was commissioned as a Lieutenant Colonel and in time promoted to Colonel and placed in command of the 26th Alabama Infantry Regiment. In less than a month, he led his regiment at Yorktown. General Joe Johnston's Confederate forces blocked the advance of the Union forces under General George McClellan as they drove up the peninsula to threaten Richmond. Although not engaged, O'Neal and his regiment were ready. General McClellan's timidity resulted in a month-long standoff.

General Johnston worried that the Union Navy might attack his flanks. He withdrew up the peninsula toward Richmond. At Williamsburg on May 5, along with General D. H. Hill's division, a portion of the rear guard engaged Union troops. In the

ensuring standoff, the Confederate Army withdrew. O'Neal's brigade participated in the skirmish without significant impact.

On May 31, Colonel O'Neal's first major contribution in battle won him a vote of confidence from General Rains. Assigned to Major General D. H. Hill's division, a regiment in Brigadier General Gabriel J. Rains's Brigade, the 26<sup>th</sup> Alabama Infantry executed a key maneuver toward the Union Army's left flank that helped delay the Union forces and eventually withdraw from the peninsula. Unfortunately his horse was killed beneath him. O'Neal was severely wounded by shell fragments and spent several weeks recuperating before he rejoined his regiment.

Bloody battles erupted in a series of gaps on September 14, 1862: Crampton, Turner, and Fox, in the South Mountain area of Maryland. The Army of Northern Virginia was returning from Maryland. A small Confederate force under Major General D. H. Hill protected Turner and Fox Gaps; two vital passes through the South Mountain range. Early on September 14, 1862, General McClellan's Union Army pressed their advantage in numbers. Colonel O'Neal, under the command of Brigadier General Robert Rodes's Brigade, fought to hold the field as casualties mounted. They were outnumbered nearly 12 to 1. After seven hours of fighting, the Union divisions made a relentless charge on the northern end of Turner's Gap. General Longstreet prevented a rout by reinforcing the line along a cornfield fence.

As darkness fell, the Union forces broke through the Rebel line but ended the assault as darkness fell. As the sun set over South Mountain, the exhausted Confederates still maintained control of Turner's Gap.

The Confederate generals abandoned South Mountain before daylight on September 15. In the end, that bloody day bought the Confederate army valuable time to consolidate its position for the battle along Antietam Creek. Colonel O'Neal was out of action again because of wounds he received in the fight.

O'Neal returned to his regiment. He received praise for his action at Chancellorsville between April 30 and May 3, 1863. On May 2, while serving under Major General A.P. Hill's division on the left of the Army of Northern Virginia, Colonel O'Neal's regiment held a position to the right and adjacent to Iverson's regiment, straddled the Orange Turnpike, and pressed the Union forces hard. By 7 p.m., Colonels O'Neal and Iverson had secured terrain all the way to the Wilderness Church. They continued to press the Federal forces till 9 p.m. Again, Colonel O'Neal was slightly wounded and was taken from the field on May 3.

Two months later, Colonel O'Neal was commanding Major General Rodes's old brigade, a Brigadier General's position, which encompassed the 3<sup>rd</sup> Alabama, 5<sup>th</sup> Alabama, the 12<sup>th</sup> Alabama and his former regiment, the 26<sup>th</sup> Alabama. Major General Rodes was commanding the Division in A.P. Hill's Corps and the horrendous

Battle of Gettysburg, fought on July 1, 2, and 3, was about to begin.

There is always confusion in battle and battle is always accompanied by the unexpected. General Lee directed his commanders not to jump into the fray before he could consolidate the Army of Northern Virginia. General Hill, from his vantage point on Oak Ridge, could observe the arrival of two Union regiments, judge their number, and may have intended a limited engagement. The engagement indeed began as a duel between artillery batteries. Colonel O'Neal was given orders to advance his brigade south along the eastern slope of the ridge in tandem with Colonel Iverson's Brigade and clear the Union skirmishers fronting Culp's Hill.

Unfortunately, the two-regiment assault was not executed well. He could have been too anxious to execute, perhaps it was inexperience, or simply an oversight, but Colonel O'Neal launched his brigade without consultation or coordination with Colonel Iverson, and rather than lead the assault, he remained behind with the 26<sup>th</sup> Alabama. The assaulting regiments almost immediately came under fire from long and short range musketry, and as they approached to within about 80 to 100 yards of a stone fence, the Union forces stood up and placed direct fire on their entire line, causing massive casualties and a huge number of men to be captured. The initial engagement lasted no longer than 30 seconds and nearly destroyed two regiments. Colonel O'Neal consolidated the regiments and

continued to press the attack, but were repulsed again and again.

Colonel O'Neal may not have been in a position to observe the entire field or the consequences of his order. He failed to call for reinforcement, and he did not recall the attack. The result was that his two regiments were mauled. Nothing he could do after that fatal assault could retrieve the loss in manpower or his superior's faith in his ability to command. In the aftermath of Gettysburg, his reputation was irreparably damaged. The recommendation for his promotion to brigadier general that had preceded the Gettysburg Campaign was suspended for a time and eventually submitted by General Lee to President Davis, with a recommendation to withdraw his name from consideration. President Davis obliged.

Colonel O'Neal continued to serve, knowing his career was in jeopardy, and knowing that General Lee held his future on the letter he would eventually submit to the President. In the aftermath of Gettysburg, of the 171 infantry regiments engaged, 46% of their command and staff had become casualties. The old warriors in the Army of Northern Virginia expected their commanders to lead from the front, yet after so many had been killed, that expectation did not change.

At the battle of New Hope Church, which occurred from November 27 to December 2, 1863, O'Neal's regiment again saw action, but the final engagement of the year was inconsequential. The Confederate and Union armies went into winter quarters. Upon the reconsolidation

of the Army of Northern Virginia in early 1864, O'Neal and his regiment returned to Alabama to replenish its ranks. Within a few months, a rejuvenated command was ordered to Dalton, Georgia.

Colonel O'Neal, with his 26<sup>th</sup> Alabama Regiment, was in Mobile, Alabama, where Colonel James Cantey, who served with Stonewall Jackson in the Army of Northern Virginia, had been detached to organize a brigade. By April 1864, he had organized a brigade of three regiments, the 17<sup>th</sup> and the 26<sup>th</sup> and the 29<sup>th</sup> Alabama Regiments and one, the 37<sup>th</sup> Mississippi Regiment. Colonel Cantey had a solid reputation as a regiment commander. He had been promoted to brigadier general on January 8, 1864 but he was frequently absent from his command due to illness. Consequently, Colonel O'Neal would get another opportunity to command a brigade during the Atlanta Campaign.

The Army of the Tennessee was his new command. When Colonel O'Neal arrived, General John B. Hood, whom he was well acquainted with from their service in the Army of Northern Virginia, was the Second Corps Commander. The 26<sup>th</sup> Alabama was assigned to General Polk's Third Corps, formerly the Army of the Mississippi. Major General Edward C. Walthall was his division commander.

On the eve of battle at Peachtree Creek, General Joseph Johnston was relieved by Jefferson Davis and General Hood assumed command of the Army of the Tennessee. On July 20, 1864, Colonel O'Neal found himself commanding Cantey's

Brigade and on line facing a federal division positioned north of Collier Road. Colonel O'Neal's Alabama and Mississippi regiments attacked aggressively – as ordered – with initial success, enfilading the unit in their front and striking the flank of the XIV Corps along Howell Mill Road. In time, Union artillery caught them in a cross fire and decimated their ranks. They continued to fight until flanked, and then fell back in disorder.

The Army of Tennessee's bold strike failed, but Colonel O'Neal's Brigade, with significant losses, acquitted themselves very well. Considering the horrendous destruction caused by the Union artillery, they fell back and regrouped at their previous breast work to await further orders.

Eight days later, Major General Walthall's Division, while marching toward and ultimately into the Battle of Ezra Church fought on July 28, 1864, was consulted by Major General S. D. Lee and Major General Alexander Stewart regarding the stubborn resistance by the Union line. Not wanting to miss an opportunity to smash the Union Army, Walthall deployed Colonels O'Neal and Reynolds Brigades to attack the Union right. They did so with vigor, repeatedly, and with great losses. General Walthall's growing concern that the support on his right had not materialized, challenged General Stewart to bring another brigade to his left. Precious time passed, and there was still no support on General Walthall's right. Consequently, he directed the reserve to deploy to his rear and

ordered Colonels O'Neal and Reynolds to execute a passage of lines to the rear, withdrawing through the lines of the reserve division. Once again, Colonel O'Neal and his command met the task with severe losses.

Shortly after the Battle of Ezra Church, the Confederate Military Command conceded that Atlanta was lost and reorganized in an attempt to distract General Sherman from advancing further into Georgia. General Hood moved the Army of the Tennessee north and west toward Alabama in an attempt to recover Tennessee. He retained the 26<sup>th</sup> Alabama Infantry Regiment in his formation, but relieved Colonel Edward O'Neal from command of Cantey's Brigade and the 26<sup>th</sup> Alabama Infantry Regiment. Hood placed him on detached service, rounding up deserters in the region of North Alabama.

The fight for the Confederacy was lost forever in another hard year, and Edward O'Neal and his sons returned to Florence to rebuild their lives. Edward O'Neal resumed his law practice and after being elected to the Alabama Constitutional Convention, chairing the Committee on Education, and campaigning vigorously for Winfield Scott Hancock for president, he was elected to the governor's chair serving from 1882-1886. His son, Emmet O'Neal, continued the political legacy and served two terms as governor between 1911 and 1915.

While Edward O'Neal's military superiors may have found fault in his command capability and denied him the rank of brigadier general,

his family, friends, and political allies would always refer to their local hero as “general.” Military service during the Civil War was a dangerous proposition under any circumstances. The constant threat and exposure to disease and petulance that modern sanitary and medical understanding significantly mitigate; the constant stress of the responsibility for the lives of those that serve with you and around you, all take a toll that is aggravated further by the fog of war and the

collective errors induced by weather, terrain, tactical intelligence, action, judgment, and of course – the enemy. Edward O’Neal may not have lived up to the standard of some of his senior officers, but he was wounded several times, served honorably, and died in bed surrounded by his family and friends in Florence, Alabama on November 7, 1890. Edward A. O’Neal dedicated the majority of his life to the South and the people of the State of Alabama.



The Narrative can be found in the TVCWRT book published in 2012 titled, *North Alabama Civil War Generals; 13 Wore Gray, the Rest Blue*. Complements of the TVCWRT.