

Brigadier General Edmund Winston Pettus

By Mike Morrow



Edmund Winston Pettus



Edmund Winston Pettus was born in Limestone County, Alabama on July 6, 1821. He was the youngest son in a family of nine children. His father, John Pettus, was a planter and former soldier in the Creek Indian Wars. He died when Edmund was still a child. His mother was a daughter of Captain Anthony Winston of Virginia, a veteran of the American Revolution.

Edmund Pettus was educated in the public schools and at Clinton College in New Middleton, Tennessee. He was admitted to the bar in 1842, and began his practice of law at Gainesville, Alabama. In 1844, he was elected solicitor of the 7th

circuit. In June 1844, he married Mary, daughter of Judge Samuel Chapman. She was his faithful and devoted wife for more than 60 years. Three of their six children, two daughters and a son, survived to adulthood. Their son, Francis L. Pettus, served as Speaker of the House and later as President of the Senate in the Alabama Legislature.

Edmund Pettus served as a lieutenant in the Mexican War with Alabama volunteers from 1847 to 1849. In 1849, he traveled to California, one of the many famous "Forty-niners." In 1853, Pettus returned to Alabama and was elected as a judge of the 7th circuit in 1855. He resigned the office in 1858 to return to private practice in Dallas County, Alabama. Excepting his Civil War service, he continued his practice until elected to the U.S. Senate at age 76.

After Alabama's secession in 1861, Pettus was sent as a commissioner to the secession convention of Mississippi, where his older brother John J. Pettus was governor. He joined the Confederacy as a founding member of the 20th Alabama Infantry Regiment. He was elected major in September 1861, and became the regiment's lieutenant colonel in October. In May 1862, he was promoted to colonel and given command of the

regiment. He was with his regiment under Kirby Smith in east Tennessee in the summer, fall, and winter of 1862.

On December 29, 1862, during the Battle of Murfreesboro, Pettus was captured, but was exchanged a short time later. The regiment reported to Mississippi with Edward Dorr Tracy's Brigade, and was in the fight made against Union Gen. Ulysses S. Grant at Port Gibson. He was captured again on May 1, 1863, as part of the surrendered garrison that had defended Port Gibson. He escaped and had returned to his own lines by May 6.

During the Siege of Vicksburg in 1863, Pettus and his regiment were part of the force that defended Confederate control of the Mississippi. An incident during this campaign illustrates well the gallantry of Colonel Pettus in the line of fire. His division commander, Maj. Gen. Carter L. Stevenson, reported an action that occurred at Vicksburg on May 22, 1863:

An angle of one of our redoubts had been breached by their artillery before the assault and rendered untenable; and toward this point, at the time of the repulse of the main body, a party of about sixty of the enemy, under the command of a lieutenant colonel, made a rush and succeeded in effecting a

lodgment in the ditch at the foot of the redoubt, and planting two flags on the edge of the parapet; the work was so constructed that this ditch was commanded by no part of our line, and the only means by which they could be dislodged was to take the angle by a desperate charge and either kill or compel the surrender of the whole party by the use of hand grenades. A call for this purpose was made and promptly responded to by Lieutenant-Colonel Pettus and about forty men of Waul's Texas Legion. A more gallant feat than this charge has not illustrated our arms during the war. The preparations were quickly made, but the enemy seemed at once to divine our intentions and opened upon the angle a terrible fire of shot, shell, and musketry. Undaunted, this little band, its chivalrous commander at its head rushed upon the works, and in less time than it requires to describe it the flags were in our possession.

Brig. Gen. Stephen D. Lee, whose brigade included the 20th Alabama, commented:

When a call for volunteers was made to, again make the assault two companies of Waul's Texas Legion responded to a man; about 20 men were cut off from the right, and either Major Steele or Captain Bradley asked Colonel Pettus if he was going to tell them how to take the fort. Pettus replied: "I will not tell you how to take the fort, but will show you," and he took a musket and took his place at the head of the assaulting party. Pettus arranged with General Lee how he should approach the fort, and to concentrate the Confederate fire upon it until he should signal to cease firing. This was done, and immediately after the signal was given Pettus and his men rushed into the fort and for the flag on the parapet. It was seized at the same instant by Pettus and Bradley, and neither would for a moment relinquish it; then Pettus said; "The flag honorably belongs to

the Texans, and they shall have it." The surrender of the union soldiers in the ditch outside of the fort was compelled by Pettus cutting the fuses of 12-pound shells so they would explode in a few seconds and throwing them over into the Federal ranks, which resulted in the surrender of a lieutenant-colonel and about 50 men.

Brigade Commander Lee concluded with the following note to Division Commander Stevenson:

General, I send you the flag taken by the Texans under the lead of our gallant Lieut. Col. E.W. Pettis, Twentieth Alabama Regiment. It was as gallant an act as I have ever seen during the war. I have pledged myself to give it to the captors. I beg that you and General Pemberton will bear me out.

It is also recorded that on the night of the assault, the Texans unanimously elected Pettus to be a Texan, and that Pettus always considered this one of the greatest compliments ever paid him. That he was fearless in the line of duty is shown by his leadership in the

desperate charge at Vicksburg at the head of the assaulting column, and then at the peril of handling shells liable to explode in his hands. His were actions that in a later era would merit the highest of military valor awards...actions performed not by some impetuous young officer, but by a father of six in his early forties!

When the Vicksburg garrison surrendered on July 4, Pettus was again captured and would be a prisoner until his exchange on September 12. Days later, he was promoted to brigadier general for gallant and meritorious service, then awarded command of his brigade in November. This brigade was the Pettus Brigade to the war's conclusion.

In October and November 1863, the brigade participated in the Chattanooga and Missionary Ridge campaigns of the Army of Tennessee, including the unsuccessful Lookout Mountain defense of November 24. In 1864, it was part of the Georgia campaign, with action at Rocky Face on May 8, Kennesaw Mountain on June 27, Atlanta on July 22, and Jonesborough from August 31 to September 1. The Pettus Brigade was part of Hood's Tennessee campaign, but was several miles south of Franklin on November 30, 1864, and did not participate in that battle. Beginning on December 17, Pettus temporarily led Stevenson's Division in the Army of Tennessee. The gallantry of the Pettus Brigade at Nashville, and later at the

Harpeth River while covering the Army of Tennessee's retreat from Nashville, was commended by Corps Commander S. D. Lee.

The Pettus Brigade participated in the Battle of Bentonville from March 19 to 21, 1865. Pettus received a severe wound to his right leg during the battle's first day, but he remained with his brigade until the action was complete. His aide-de-camp, a nephew also named E. W. Pettus, was killed at Bentonville.

On May 2, 1865, Pettus was paroled at Salisbury, North Carolina, and was pardoned by the U.S. Government on October 20, 1865. During his many western theater actions, he had been wounded four times and captured three times.

After the war, he resumed his practice of the law and never sought or held any political office until 1896, when he was elected to the United States Senate for the term beginning March 1897. He served there until his death on July 27, 1907, following a stroke. He was the last Confederate military leader to serve in the U.S. Congress.

Military historian Ezra J. Warner stated that Gen. Edmund Pettus was "...a fearless and dogged fighter and distinguished himself on many fields in the western theater of war...he followed with conspicuous bravery every forlorn hope which the Confederacy offered."

North Carolina's Senator Lee Overman delivered a memorial address for Senator Pettus to the

U.S. Senate. It contained the following commendation:

Senator Pettus was not a politician. He despised hypocrisy and subterfuge. He never espoused a popular cause to curry favor with the masses, nor was it ever necessary for him to do so. Simple, straightforward, unaffected, of rugged honesty and sincerity of purpose, he followed the dictates of his own conscience without regard to popular approval or favor. And though he loved the people, yet he could not be swayed from the path of duty by false clamor or unhealthy

public opinion. Born under the regime of the "Old South," imbued with the doctrine of State rights, loving the South, her people, and her traditions, with a fervor amounting to passion, he viewed with disfavor and suspicion every measure which seemed to him to point to a centralization of power in the hands of the Federal Government.

Today, sadly, the name of Edmund Pettus is most commonly recalled by the general public as the name of the 1940 memorial bridge across the Alabama River at Selma, associated in particular with the "Bloody Sunday" Civil Rights conflict of March 7, 1965.



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.