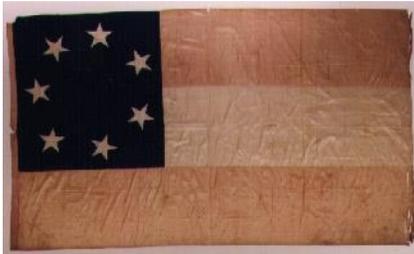


Sterling Alexander Martin Wood

By Arley H. McCormick



Sterling Alexander Martin Wood – S.A.M. Wood – as military reports referred to him, began his



Flag of Company K 7th Alabama

Confederate career with no previous military experience. He had never been a soldier, a sergeant, or lieutenant, yet upon forming the Florence Guard that became Company K, 7th Alabama Infantry on April 1st, 1861, he was elected their captain. The fetes, speeches, tears and kisses of family, friends and loved ones ended when Captain Wood watched his company sergeant direct the other 107 members of the Florence Guard onto the train. Ensign Thomas Allen Jones may have tucked their newly presented flag neatly in his pack as the troops crowded into each window to catch a final glimpse and listen to the cheers as their civilian past disappeared from view. They were soldiers now, and on their way to Pensacola, Florida. In Pensacola, they would organize and train to defend their home and many would never see home again.

S. A. M. Wood was born in Florence, Alabama to Mary and Alexander Wood, a well-known local lawyer, on March 17, 1823. He

completed a Jesuit Catholic education at St. Joseph's College in Bardstown, Kentucky, and at age 18 began studying law. He moved to Murfreesboro, Tennessee to practice law and in 1851 joined his brother's law practice in Florence. He ventured into politics when he was appointed solicitor for the 4th circuit court of Alabama, then elected to the state legislature in 1857 and became editor of the *Florence Gazette* in 1860.

The 1860 presidential election was a tumultuous event, and Wood supported John C. Breckenridge. The national controversy divided the Democratic Party and when the Southern Democrats walked out of the national convention to hold their own convention to nominate Breckenridge for President, it sealed the fate of the Democratic ambitions for the White House. The division resulted in a Republican, Abraham Lincoln, winning the presidential election. That event ushered in the military phase of S.A.M. Wood's life.

Once in Pensacola, Captain Wood's military education began, most likely with the study of "Hardee's Infantry Tactics." General Braxton Bragg used him as an aide and as such, he became a bystander in the negotiations regarding the Federal forces occupying Fort Pickens near Pensacola.

On May 9, 1861, he was elected, with a 310 vote majority, as the Colonel of the 7th Alabama Infantry Regiment. Perhaps his acquaintance

with General Bragg had something to do with that! On May 18, 1861, he took command. Less than two months earlier, Col. S.A.M. Wood had been the editor of a local newspaper. His Regiment included volunteer units from North Alabama, Tennessee, and Kentucky

By August 8, 1861, he found himself temporarily in command of



S.A.M. Wood sits on front right

the Second Brigade, his parent unit. The commander had departed for Richmond for another assignment and the acting commander was ill. Consequently, Wood was acting as commander and writing the Confederate Secretary of War, Leroy Pope Walker (a native of Huntsville, Alabama). Colonel Wood was confident and thought very highly of his ability to train and command. He wrote of his desire to fight, train his own brigade, and no doubt encouraged by the meteoric rise in rank and the few months of experience drilling the 7th Alabama Infantry Regiment, he boasted of his ability to have a brigade in fighting trim in two months.

Early that winter, the 7th Alabama Regiment of Volunteers was detached and ordered to Chattanooga. They arrived on

and they were divided into eight infantry and two mounted units: Lafayette Guards, Cherokee Guards, Calhoun Greys, Jackson Guards, Madison Rifles, Louisville Blues, Dale Guards, Mounted Rifles, and Prattville Rifles.

Monday, November 11, 1861. The hard part of leading a regiment was about to begin. Partisans sympathetic to the Federals were organized and interdicting the rail lines of communication with General F.K. Zollincoffer, charged with blocking the Cumberland Gap. The mission of the 7th Alabama was to block the partisan effort and protect the lines of communication.

Col. Wood's first tactical experience was successful and not particularly dramatic, but a good start and he was proud of the regiment as it moved in closed ranks, quietly, sporting a desire to fight. He maneuvered mounted troops across the Tennessee River south of Chattanooga and landed the infantry within a few miles of a large partisan camp. Upon arriving at the camp, he found it abandoned with the exception of a few preparing to leave. Five shots were fired and a couple of partisans wounded.

He was proud of his accomplishment when he reported to the Confederate Secretary of War, now J.P. Benjamin, on November 17 as well as Gen. Bragg, his commander in Pensacola, Florida. The Secretary of War mildly chastised Col. Wood for not reporting through the chain of command, and directed him to do so in the future. In his report, having

been in the area for six full days, Col. Wood outlined the tactical elements of his success and recommended that 500 infantry and a company of mounted riflemen be sent to protect the bridge at Tyner's and the provisions there. Col. Wood described his fondness of the local home guard which was poorly trained and equipped, and led by a former postmaster known to be a drunkard. He expressed his desire to return to Gen. Bragg, or with appropriate rank and directions, remain where he was enjoying the confidence, not only of the local population, but the mounted commanders supporting his short expedition. His military ambition was clear.

A month later, the regiment was ordered to Bowling Green, Kentucky. On January 7, 1862 S.A.M. Wood was promoted to brigadier general and command of the 3rd Brigade in Major General W. J. Hardee's 3rd Corps, by President Jefferson Davis. Gen. Bragg was not happy. He commented to the War Department that at least two other colonels were senior in rank and better qualified soldiers than S.A.M. Wood, but in the same correspondence, he tempered his remarks by indicating that Wood was a capable officer.

Brig. Gen. S.A.M. Wood's leadership was never tested at Bowling Green because Forts Henry and Donelson fell in February 1862. His regiment, with the rest of the Army, withdrew to Corinth, Mississippi where he faced a couple of leadership challenges. The time of service of most of the companies expired the first week in April 1862,

and his regiment was almost disbanded. There were ruminants that remained, but the mass of the men were farmed to other organizations. New recruits and units would round out the regiment that would fight at Shiloh. He didn't get two months to train a brigade.

The engagement at Shiloh in early April was his first real test. Gen. Hardee's Corps was small, comprising three brigades. After a sloppy, weather delayed march from Corinth to the Shiloh area, and just hours before the battle, he met with his brigade commanders to lay out a provisional, two brigade division commanded by Col. Thomas C. Hindman. Hindman's own brigade and S.A.M. Wood's brigade would make up one division.

In the early dawn light and dense morning mist, Wood's brigade advanced. Attempting to maintain alignment over the broken ground, it faltered and shifting and realignment took precious time. Wood's brigade straddled the Seay Field Road and on a slight ridge north of Shiloh Creek, his brigade opened the battle with the first salvo.

Gen. Wood's official report documented his regiment's capture of artillery, a description of fratricide against his troops, and being thrown from his horse and dragged through a former Union camp that left him disabled for three hours.

Gen. Hindman was not pleased with Wood's conduct in the fight, and upon reaching Corinth, caused a formal inquiry. There was nothing revealed that discredited Wood's actions and the complaint was withdrawn. Brig. Gen. Wood's first

aggressive test in command had resulted in embarrassment and a tainted reputation that would follow him.

Gen. Bragg evacuated Corinth to reorganize the army at Tupelo, Mississippi and plan the Kentucky campaign. Brig. Gen. Wood was designated to command the 4th Brigade of Maj. Gen. Simon B. Buckner's 3rd Division on the left wing of Hardee's Corps. His fellow brigade commanders were Brig. Gen. John R. Liddell, Brig. Gen. Patrick R. Cleburne, and Brig. Gen. Bushrod R. Johnson.

At Perryville, on October 8, 1862, Brig. Gen. S.A.M. Wood was wounded. Sensing an opportunity to carry a ridgeline that Union forces held, Maj. Gen. Buckner decided to commit Wood's regiment. Wood's regiment was well placed to execute the movement because earlier he occupied the heights overlooking Doctor's Creek. He passed through Brig. Gen. Cleburne's line where Union infantry and artillery hailed direct fire on Wood's men and forced them to fall back. Wood reformed his brigade and renewed the assault. The Federal guns ran low on ammunition and withdrew, falling back towards the crossroads. The regiment had forced the Federals back and as the regiment paused, intermittent artillery continued. Wood sustained a head injury. He was out of action until November 1862 when the Army of Mississippi would be renamed the Army of Tennessee.

On November 20, 1862, the Confederate Army of Tennessee was constituted under Gen. Bragg and consisted of three corps. Brig. Gen.

Wood was a brigade commander reporting to a new division commander, Patrick R. Cleburne, in General Hardee's Corps.

Union Gen. Rosecrans became the commander of Union forces after the Battle of Perryville, and took months to prepare at Nashville before advancing on Murfreesboro. The Army of Tennessee's center was at Murfreesboro and the left wing at Eagleville under Gen. Hardee, along with Maj. Gen. Cleburne and his brigade commanders.

The Confederate Cavalry engaged Gen. Rosecrans en route, and at dawn on December 31, 1862, the battle opened by the Confederates. Maj. Gen. Cleburne was a supporting division in the attack, but after reaching a point near the Wilkinson Road, he found the Federal Army in a strong position and drove them two miles before reforming. Bushrod Johnson, John Liddell and S.A.M. Wood's brigades were skirmishing over broken ground and in the midst of limestone boulders and cedar brush. Three assaults were made, and on the third, Wood and Johnson succeeded, but with great losses. Brig. Gen. Johnson's brigade saw the supporting troops on the fight falling back without apparent cause, and they retired without orders and in confusion. Wood, however, did not falter.

After a few yards, the formation received artillery fire from the railroad near the Nashville turnpike, but the Federal line broke and the Confederate units pursued. After all the fighting, the exhausted Confederate troops, without reinforcements, could not exploit

their gains. Throughout the day, Wood had demonstrated his ability to command and control his formation. The Federals didn't fire a shot for nearly three days after the battle and General Bragg withdrew. Brig. Gen. Wood performed well.

The Army of Tennessee was withdrawing to Tullahoma when on June 24th, a Federal Brigade advanced and captured the crossroads at Liberty Gap. The gap was held by Brig. Gen. Liddell's Brigade. The Federals attempted to flank the Confederate units with infantry and mounted infantry units. There were repeated attack and counter attacks until Brig. Gen. Liddell recognized the futility of holding the gap and withdrew his forces.

Brig. Gen. Wood's next battle would be his last. At Chickamauga, the other brigade commanders included James Deshler and Lucius E. Polk. Wood's Brigade totaled 1,982 troops. A whopping 776 would be killed or wounded during the fight.

Maj. Gen. Cleburne's Division was the reserve during the initial deployment, but that changed at 7 p.m. on September 19, 1863. Maj. Gen. Lidell, formerly a brigade commander in Cleburne's Division, was promoted to division commander and he was having no success with the barricaded Union troops to his front. He pressed Gen. Cleburne to attack but Maj. Gen. Cleburne didn't want to attack at night. Lt. Gen. Daniel H. Hill, Gen. Lidell's Corps Commander, arrived on the scene and was convinced to direct Gen. Cleburne to attack in spite of the approaching darkness.

On the 25th, Brig. Gen. Liddell planned to stall the Federal advance. With a desperate tactical situation and intermittent drenching rain, Brig. Gen. S.A.M. Wood and his brigade conducted a passage of lines to cover the withdrawal of the 6th and 7th Brigades as they retired late in the afternoon. They did so amidst rapid and accurate artillery fire. In the darkness and sporadic rain, Brig. Gen. Wood's Brigade stabilized the line. Sporadic firing continued all the next day and near 10 o'clock in the evening, the units withdrew to continue their march for Tullahoma. It had been another acceptable demonstration of command and leadership.

Brig. Gen. Wood deployed his brigade in the center with Brig. Gen. Polk on the left. At 7:30 p.m., the mile long parade of infantry stepped off toward the Union front. Gen. Wood attacked over the cleared ground of Winfrey Field and lost control shortly after the first step. The Union line opened with an intense rate of fire, but it was not particularly accurate. The Mississippians to the right of General Wood's line advanced quickly and became confused in the darkness. They believed their left flank was being turned by Federal troops and in the confusion, fired on Confederates of their own brigade. Not only did Gen. Wood lose control of the advance, but also failed to lead. He could not be found in the darkness. The uncertainty of his troops was magnified with his apparent absence and many believed him to be a coward. The

rest of the division advanced in good order and by 9 p.m., Federal troops were routed from around Winfrey Field. By mid-morning on September 20, Wood's Brigade was in the center again, but lost contact with General Deshler's advancing infantry on his left. Portions of the brigade managed to maintain contact with Polk, which caused a larger split between the remainder of Woods' Brigade. Wood halted in a small valley several hundred yards from the Federal line as artillery and rifle fire rained on his troops. He waited for instructions. Maj. Gen. Cleburne arrived and wanted to know why he was not advancing. Wood responded that he had lost contact with the right and was blocked by Deshler's men on the left. Cleburne pressed him to move forward and he drifted further leaving even more distance between himself and Polk.

General Wood finally hit the Federal line in an awkward place and having lost contact with a portion of the brigade protecting the right flank, the rest of Wood's men were in open ground and Deshler lagged well behind. Wood stopped for a considerable amount of time while confusion on the front was sorted out. Again, he pushed forward. They advanced behind Federal Gen. Turchin's right and Wood found himself in front of Gen. King's Federal position where his men experienced a smothering fire. It was reported that Wood's men broke in confusion, leaving the right line unsupported while Wood was covered by sharpshooters and an artillery battery. Polk's and Wood's Brigades were both repulsed. Maj.

Gen. Cleburne's Division had a bloody fight. Improper alignment before the battle affected two brigades as they encountered the enemy. Wood's Brigade on the left had almost reached Poe's house, on the Chattanooga Road, when he was subjected to a heavy enfilading and direct fire, and driven back. Union Gen. Thomas carried the day and Gen. Wood was forced to weigh his aspirations for continued military service.

Brig. Gen. Wood's career was not typical, but not unusual either. Many generals began as volunteers or organized units that contributed mightily to the success of the army. Wood, without military experience or a resume for leading men in any sort of formation, become a brigade commander. His leadership was challenged at Shiloh, a slight that followed him. He was wounded at Perryville, performed adequately at Murfreesboro and during the Tullahoma campaign. At Chickamauga, however, he was tainted as a coward and lost control of his brigade in both a night and day attack. Most likely, believing his aspirations for more senior command were shattered (along with his personal esteem), Brig. Gen. Wood's resignation was accepted. On October 17, 1863, he became a civilian again.

S.A.M. Wood established a law practice in Tuscaloosa after the war. He became an attorney for the Alabama Great Southern Railway, was elected to the state legislature in 1882, and taught law at the University of Alabama. Wood died in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, on January 26, 1891.

S.A.M Wood had an accomplished life as a lawyer, politician, newspaper editor, soldier, and law professor. Perhaps he quit the army

too soon to disprove his critics regarding his ability to lead an infantry unit.



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.