The Sixth Mississippi Infantry Regiment: Courageous Citizen Soldiers

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THE SIXTH MISSISSIPPI INFANTRY REGIMENT: COURAGEOUS CITIZEN SOLDIERS

By John L. Frizzell

During the United States’ Civil War, the country was rent divisively into two separate nations: the United States of America and the Confederate States of America. The states that did not secede from the United States battled to preserve the Union, while the seceded states fought hard to preserve their new found independence. The plight of the seceded Confederacy, commonly known as “the lost cause,” came with potentially disastrous end results. If the Confederacy were defeated, all of its citizens could be labeled as traitors and put to death, causing Confederate soldiers to fight hard to ensure their freedom. One regiment in particular, the Sixth Mississippi Infantry Regiment, performed great acts of valor, once charging the enemy repeatedly until the Sixth itself was in such a shambles that it was forced to retire from the field. From its first engagement at Shiloh to its dissolution at Citronelle, the Sixth Mississippi’s service was marked by a tradition of great courage and devotion.

Two and a half years prior to Mississippi’s secession from the Union, citizens of Brandon, Mississippi gathered inside the Rankin County Court House on the morning of October 16, 1858, to discuss for the very first time as a community the need for a “Volunteer Military Company” – a militia.¹ By the 25th day of the same month, sixty men were able to proudly call themselves members of the Rankin Guards, one of the first of many militia units formed in the South just prior to the Civil War.² In February of 1861, just one month after Mississippi’s secession from the Union, the Rankin Guards were rechristened the Rankin Greys under the direction of their commanding officer, Captain J. J. Thornton.³ The next year, on August 24, at Grenada, Mississippi, the Rankin Greys were mustered into the Sixth Mississippi Infantry along with nine other companies formed from nearby counties, whose paths to formation would likely have been similar to that of

² Ibid., 4.
³ Howell Jr., Going to Meet the Yankees, 7.
the Rankin Greys, for a twelve-month period of service. Shortly thereafter, Captain Thornton of the Rankin Greys was elected to the position of Colonel of the regiment by the men of the Sixth.

The election of J. J. Thornton, doctor of medicine, as the colonel of the Sixth reveals a small piece of the character of the men in his regiment. In 1861, Rankin County had elected Thornton as a representative and sent him to the Constitutional Convention to argue against secession. As history has revealed, Thornton and his contemporaries were defeated by the secessionists; however, every representative at the convention still signed his name to the Ordinance of Secession – every member save one. Dr. Thornton refused to sign the document, later explaining that, “his constituents elected him to vote and work against secession, and the fame of the Caesars or Alexander could not induce him to forfeit the trust imposed on him.” This story was likely circulated throughout the camp of the Sixth prior to the election for Colonel. What could have resulted in ignominy for Thornton had instead resulted in an act of trust: the troopers of the Sixth placed their lives in Thornton’s hands and gave him the colonelship.

It was Thornton who, under the orders of Major General Leonidas Polk, led the Sixth Mississippi from Union City to Bowling Green, where it became a part of the Army of Central Kentucky. On October 28, 1861, under Special Order No. 51, the Sixth Mississippi was placed in the first division commanded by Major General Hardee, and General Albert Sydney Johnston took command of this entire army corps. Of this division, the Sixth was placed in the Second Brigade which was led by Colonel Patrick R. Cleburne. While serving in Kentucky, the Sixth was stricken with typhoid fever and measles reducing the regiment from its original 601 soldiers to around 150 effective men. A regiment of this size was practically useless, necessitating the Sixth’s reassignment to a well-populated area sympathetic to

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5 Ibid., 172.
6 Howell Jr., *Going to Meet the Yankees*, 6.
7 Ibid., 7.
9 Ibid., 484.
10 Ibid., 484.
The Sixth Mississippi Infantry Regiment

the Confederacy’s cause to replenish the regiment’s ranks; no place suited this purpose better than Corinth, Mississippi. Corinth sat on the junction of the Memphis and Charleston railroad and the Mobile and Ohio railroad, making Corinth a bustling community from which to organize and dispatch troops. H. Grady Howell Jr. vividly painted the scene when he described how the Sixth’s “surviving, shivering elements trudged slowly through ankle-deep mud into Corinth.”

The Sixth sorely needed new recruits, and while the regiment made itself busy revitalizing its companies, armies from all over the Confederacy rode the railroads into Corinth.

By the end of March 1862, the 40,000 Confederate troops massed at Corinth were placed under the command of General A. S. Johnston and christened the Army of Mississippi. The Sixth Mississippi was still serving in General Hardee’s division in Colonel Cleburne’s brigade, and would soon march to do battle against General Ulysses S. Grant’s forces encamped near Pittsburg Landing. In a matter of days, the Sixth Mississippi would finally experience their first engagement and “see the elephant” at the battle of Shiloh, April 6-7, 1862.

Three days prior to the battle, on April 3, General Order No. 8 ordered the Army of the Mississippi to march towards Pittsburg Landing to defeat General Grant’s Army of the Tennessee before reinforcements, General Buell’s Army of the Ohio, could arrive to assist him. General Johnston intended for his army to be in place and ready to attack by the following day, April 4. The twenty-five mile march to Pittsburg Landing from Corinth was a reasonable enough expectation, had the army been better organized and had it not been for the bad weather. By the evening of the 4th, the traveling army, already behind schedule, met heavy rains which rendered the country roads difficult to negotiate. By April 6, the stage was finally set and the battle ready to begin. Despite the delays to the Confederate march, the Union troops would shortly awake to the unexpected sound of Confederate gunfire. Union Brigadier General William H. L. Wallace visited

12 Howell Jr., Going to Meet the Yankees, 73.
13 Ibid., 74.
14 “Seeing the elephant” is an expression used by soldiers during the Civil War to refer to participation in battle.
17 Howell Jr., Going to Meet the Yankees, 76.
General Sherman on the night of April 5, the eve of the Battle of Shiloh, and reported “everything quiet and the general [Sherman] in fine Spirits.”\(^\text{18}\)  Sherman himself had written Grant earlier that same day saying, “I have no doubt that nothing will occur today more than some picket firing. . . . I do not apprehend anything like an attack on our position.”\(^\text{19}\)

The Third Corps, under General Hardee, was assigned the left flank of the Confederate battle line with the newly appointed Brigadier General Cleburne’s division taking up position on the far left of the line, opposite Sherman’s corps encampments.\(^\text{20}\) Cleburne records the order of his division’s battle line in his report to General Hardee as such: “Twenty-third Tennessee on the right, Sixth Mississippi next, Fifth Tennessee next, Twenty-fourth Tennessee on the left, Fifteenth Arkansas deployed as the skirmishers in front of the line, with their reserve near the left, and the second Tennessee \textit{en echelon} 500 yards in the rear of my left flank.”\(^\text{21}\)

The morning of April 6, the battle line advanced in this formation near 6:30 a.m. and engaged the enemy by 8:00 a.m.\(^\text{22}\)  During the advance, the line encountered an “impassable morass” that split the line in two, effectively separating the Sixth Mississippi and the Twenty-third Tennessee from the rest of the brigade.\(^\text{23}\)  The Sixth and the Twenty-third then charged the height, occupied by Union forces and fortified with a breastwork made of logs and bales of hay, alone.\(^\text{24}\)  Trigg’s battery, which had up until this point been travelling with Cleburne’s division, was now rendered useless by the thick leaves obstructing its line of sight, and turned back, leaving the Sixth and the Twenty-third to take the height without the aid of artillery.\(^\text{25}\)

The two regiments charged bravely into the camp of the enemy (the Fifty-third Ohio), but were sent reeling back in retreat by the withering fire

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\(^{20}\) \textit{OR}, x, part 1, 580.

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 580.


\(^{23}\) \textit{OR}, x, part 1, 581.

\(^{24}\) Ibid., 581.

\(^{25}\) \textit{OR}, x, part 1, 580.
they encountered.\textsuperscript{26} Though the attack surprised Sherman’s men, they nonetheless gave a good account for themselves. Cleburne records that the Twenty-third, having been driven back “was with great difficulty rallied about 100 yards in the rear.”\textsuperscript{27} The Sixth however, charged again and again unaided.\textsuperscript{28} Despite the Sixth’s unflagging courage, it eventually had to retreat “in disorder over its own dead and dying”, of which there were many.\textsuperscript{29}

Of the 425 men who took the field with the Sixth, 300 were listed as casualties including the field commanders Colonel Thornton and Major Thornton.\textsuperscript{30} Sixty of the men still standing from the Sixth regiment reformed and advanced with General Cleburne, along with half of the reformed Twenty-third Tennessee and the Eighth Arkansas, through the enemy’s encampment.\textsuperscript{31} The Sixth Mississippi was soon after ordered to the rear and saw no more action in the battle that day or the next.\textsuperscript{32}

James Lee McDonough, author of \textit{Shiloh – in Hell before Night}, describes the Sixth going into the battle of Shiloh as “a ragtag regiment whose men were dressed and equipped with little or no regard for uniformity.”\textsuperscript{33} The Sixth had indeed gone into the battle of Shiloh as raw recruits, but they had left it as soldiers; they had “seen the elephant.” General Cleburne remarked on the men of the Sixth’s performance at Shiloh saying, “It would be useless to enlarge upon the courage and devotion of the Sixth Mississippi. The Facts as recorded speak louder than any words of mine.”\textsuperscript{34} And so a tradition of courage and devotion in the Sixth began that would continue throughout the war.

On April 26 of the same year, the Sixth reported 165 effective men serving under Brigadier General Marmaduke in the Fourth Brigade of Hardee’s Third Corps in the Army of the Mississippi at Corinth.\textsuperscript{35} The Sixth was on a slow path to recovery with only 40 of its men cleared for active service since the engagement at Shiloh. Due to its depleted strength, Special

\textsuperscript{27} \textit{OR}, x, part 1, 581.
\textsuperscript{28} \textit{OR}, x, part 1, 581.
\textsuperscript{29} \textit{OR}, x, part 1, 581.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 581.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 582.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 582.
\textsuperscript{34} \textit{OR}, x, part 1, 581.
\textsuperscript{35} \textit{OR}, x, part 2, 452-453.
Orders No. 41, under General Beauregard’s authority, transferred the Sixth to General Breckinridge in the reserve corps of the Army of the Mississippi, now under the command of General Braxton Bragg, effective April 26. General Cleburne reported that by the end of the first day of battle at Shiloh, all of the Sixth’s field officers and most of its company officers were incapacitated. This dearth of leadership in the regiment led Beauregard to order the election of new officers on May 8, resulting in J. J. Thornton’s re-election. Thornton, however, resigned on May 25, resulting in Major Lowry’s election to the office of Colonel.

Following the election of its officers, the Sixth and the rest of Breckinridge’s command left Corinth and moved to support Vicksburg throughout the month of June and most of July. By October 3, the Sixth had returned to Corinth to take part in the battle that occurred there, serving under Brigadier General Bowen’s Third Brigade in Major General Lovell’s army of the District of the Mississippi. The Battle of Corinth raged October 3-5, during which the Confederate army attempted to roust the Union troops from the city. The Sixth Mississippi was held in reserve until October 4 when the whole brigade was ordered to advance on a Union redoubt. Bowen’s superiors informed him that there were only three guns in position at the redoubt, but once the redoubt began to fire its artillery upon the brigade, Bowen decided the numerical strength of the battery more closely resembled twenty pieces, causing Bowen’s brigade to withdraw to the rear. The Confederate army withdrew from Corinth on October 5, with Bowen’s division acting as the rear guard. The Union forces successfully held Corinth against the Confederate onslaught.

By January 9, 1863, the Sixth Mississippi was stationed at Grenada, Mississippi. On or around April 17, the Sixth was ordered from Jackson to Grand Gulf, Mississippi, where it once again served under Bowen. While serving in the second brigade of Bowen’s division under Brigadier General

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36 OR, x, part 2, 548, 550, 642.
37 OR, x, part 1, 582.
38 Rowland, Military History of Mississippi, 173.
39 Ibid., 173.
40 Ibid., 173.
41 OR, xvii, part 1, 365, 411.
42 Ibid., 412.
43 Ibid., 412.
44 OR, xvii, part 1, 413.
45 OR, xvii, part 2, 829.
46 Ibid. 829.
The Sixth Mississippi Infantry Regiment

Martin E. Green, the Sixth fought with distinction in the Battle of Port Gibson. General Green, referring to the Sixth Mississippi and two other regiments that were new to his command, wrote, “They fought most gallantly and did honor to the States they represent, and will do to rely upon in any emergency.”

Green also records that General Bowen himself led a “gallant” charge with the Sixth Mississippi and the Twenty-third Alabama in front of the enemy’s battery under a heavy fire.” Even Bowen himself records this charge in his report on the battle, commending the Sixth for its noble response to his command to charge the battery. Of the recently elected Colonel Lowry, Green reported that he “deserves the highest commendation for his coolness and promptness in executing every order.”

It is clear from this report that the Sixth was indeed continuing the tradition of courage and devotion in battle that it began at Shiloh.

The Sixth was later included in a relief army under the command of General Joseph E. Johnston that marched from Jackson to the aid of Vicksburg while it was under siege. The army reached Brownsville by July 1, 1863, but when Vicksburg surrendered on July 4, the army returned to Jackson with General Sherman close on their heels. The Confederate army arrived at Jackson on July 7, and Sherman, arriving on the 9th, placed the city under siege. The Confederate forces at Jackson withstood the siege until it evacuated to Morton on the night of July 16.

At this point in the war, the noose slowly closing around the Confederacy began to feel uncomfortably tight. For this reason, on March 20, 1864, Lieutenant General Polk issued Special Orders No. 80, placing Colonel Lowry in charge of an expedition to force any deserters back into the army. The purpose of this expedition was not to mete out punishment onto deserters of the Confederate army, but to swell the ranks of the diminishing army by forcing men back into it. Polk received reports throughout the expedition and was well pleased by the results. Victoria E. Bynam, author of The Free State of Jones: Mississippi’s Longest Civil War, reveals the

47 OR, xxiv, part 1, 672, 674.
48 Ibid., 674.
49 OR, xxiv, part 1, 664.
50 Rowland, Military History of Mississippi, 175.
51 Rowland, Military History of Mississippi, 175.
52 Ibid., 175.
53 Ibid., 175.
54 OR, xxxii, part 3, 662.
55 Ibid., 820.
secret to Lowry’s success, stating that “Deserters who were captured by Colonel Lowry’s men escaped execution by enlisting in or returning to the Confederate Army.”

The Sixth, upon finishing its expedition against deserters, served in Brigadier General Adams’ brigade of Lieutenant General Loring’s division of the Army of Mississippi. Brigadier General Featherston commended the Sixth for handsomely repelling two charges while acting as Adams’ skirmish line near Marietta, Georgia on June 27, 1864, and for acting “with great coolness, courage, and determination during the same engagement.”

Shortly thereafter, the Sixth made its way to Franklin, Tennessee. Now a part of the Army of Tennessee but still serving in General Adams’ brigade, the Sixth participated in the Battle of Franklin with the Confederate forces under the command of General John Bell Hood. When Adams died in battle while charging the enemy’s line, Colonel Lowry took command of the brigade. After the Confederate defeat at Franklin, the rest of the actions of the Sixth were inconsequential. Any action after this point could at best only prolong the inevitable: the dissolution of the Confederate States of America.

Following the defeat at Franklin, the Sixth also participated in the Battle of Kinston on March 10, and the Battle of Bentonville on March 19-21. On April 9, 1865, General Robert E. Lee surrendered to General Grant at Appomattox Court House and the Army of Northern Virginia was effectively disbanded, tolling the death knell for the Confederacy. If Robert E. Lee, debatably the greatest general of the South, had been forced to surrender, what hope did the remaining Army of the Confederacy have?

On April 9, the army serving under General Joseph Johnston was reorganized and the remaining members of the Sixth Mississippi were combined with the remnants of the Fifteenth, Twentieth, and Twenty-third Mississippi to form the Fifteenth Mississippi Infantry Regiment under Lieutenant Colonel Graham, serving in the brigade of recently promoted

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57 OR, xxxviii, part 3, 659.
58 Ibid., 879-880.
59 Howell Jr., *Going to Meet the Yankees*, 242.
60 Rowland, *Military History of Mississippi*, 177.
The Sixth Mississippi Infantry Regiment

Brigadier General Robert Lowry.  

Grady Howell Jr. explains in his book, *Going to Meet the Yankees: A History of the Bloody Sixth*, that the remaining members of the Sixth left the confederate army in two factions: one group surrendered as members of the Fifteenth Mississippi with General Johnston at the close of April. The other group fled to the South to continue the fight with General Taylor, and surrendered at Citronelle, Alabama on May 4, 1865.

The Sixth Mississippi Infantry Regiment, active throughout the entirety of the war, acquitted itself with honor. General Johnston, in his farewell address to the Army of Tennessee, of which the members of the Sixth were a part, though serving in the Fifteenth Mississippi, wrote in General Orders No. 22, “You will return to your homes with the admiration of our people, won by the courage and noble devotion you have displayed in this long war.” And so, the Sixth, one of the last regiments of the Confederacy to surrender, brought its tradition of courage and devotion, present throughout the war, to a close.

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61 *OR*, ilvii, part 1, 1061, 1063.
62 *OR*, ilvii, part 1, 1061.