

Charlestonians in War: The Charleston Battalion

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Review

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Phelps, W. Chris *Charlestonians In War: The Charleston Battalion*. Pelican Publishing Company, \$22.00 ISBN 1589801660

Hometown heroes

A Carolina war chronicle

When he conceived **Charlestonians In War: The Charleston Battalion**, author W. Chris Phelps debunked the old adage prevalent among the laity that there couldn't possibly be anything new to be written about the American Civil War. Up to this time, there had been no definitive volume devoted exclusively on this distinctively unique Charlestonian organization.

As he walked the historic streets of his boyhood hometown, Phelps learned of the terrible fighting that once raged on practically every street and block. It reeked of history, he realized. The more he researched, the more the history unfolded before him. I thought it an incredible irony that this unit, claimed by Charlestonians as *their* Regiment,' had tramped over the same ground that I had come to know so well growing up, he relates. Feeling thus qualified, he felt compelled to tell the untold story and he hunkered down to begin his quest in earnest. Soon his notes mushroomed into the full-blown story of one of the almost forgotten units of the Civil War--the Charleston Battalion.

The First South Carolina Infantry Battalion, as it was known during the Civil War, began as a volunteer city militia generations before, predating even the American Revolutionary War. Ultimately, the Charleston Battalion was mustered in defense of the city and state in 1862, organized specifically to defend Charleston.

Phelps had three things in mind when he developed his story. First, naturally, was to chronicle the roles played by these Charlestonians. Secondly, he meant to expound on the relationships that existed between Charleston society

and the Charleston Battalion by pointing out the wide range of the population regarding the recruits--native whites, slaves, free blacks, and immigrants who consisted of a peculiar mixture of Germans and Scotsmen--that on occasion presented a linguistic nightmare. Lastly, the author hoped to meld this cross section of Charleston into a meaningful genealogical resource for the present generation of Charlestonians, South Carolinians, and Americans who would be able to trace their lineage back to this forgotten group of patriots and citizen soldiers. Phelps succeeded admirably in the endeavor.

The author points out that Charlestonians proudly boasted, with justification, that the best young men of the city were in their battalion, and that the average intelligence and social position of the rank and file were greater than most. The men who formed the ranks of this hometown unit came from everyday life in Charleston and bonded and trained together to form a most effective and successful military unit. Led by the gallant Peter Charles Gaillard, they fought for almost two years in places like Secessionville, Battery Wagner, Morris Island, and Fort Sumter, as well as in regions throughout Virginia and North Carolina.

Because the city carried the dubious distinction of being where the Ordinance of Secession was signed, and because it had one of the most significant ports of the Atlantic seaboard, Charleston soon became the focal point of Northern aggression. To Northerners, it was the place where the war began, the root cause that led the United States down the tragic path to fratricidal war, and they would fight tenaciously to conquer it. On the other hand, the Charleston Battalion vowed to defend the city to the bitter end, and they suffered dire consequences in the process.

Phelps begins his chronicle by delving deeply into the fabrication of the uniforms worn by the men of the Charleston Battalion, including a descriptive analysis of the actual fabric of the cloth, with vivid descriptions of the colorful uniforms, including finely detailed descriptions of the superfluous ornamentations and accoutrements, from shiny brass button to shoes and weapons, augmented with detailed sketches of the uniforms.

In addition to describing the troop movements in battles with all its attendant horrors and suffering, Phelps offers a comprehensive muster roll of the participants, which will long serve as a valuable genealogical resource for descendants in generations to come. Not only does he supply the complete roster

of the troops, he portrays numerous period photographs and brief bios of many of the more significant characters of the Battalion. There is also a collection of intriguing photographs of the grave sites depicting markers and tombs of many of the leaders of the battalion. Moreover, the book contains numerous detailed maps of battles and troop movements to aid the reader.

Between June 1862 and August 1863, over 1,100 young men passed through the ranks of the Charleston Battalion. In the end, the battalion lost some 230 dead between 1862 and 1865, and a far greater number were wounded or captured, never to return to active duty. The author points out that by contrast with the Virginia theater, the war around Charleston was more or less static, and because of their age and frailty, many of the battalion simply fell out from sheer exhaustion after only a few weeks of marching and fighting in the Old Dominion.

In the final analysis, the author concludes his exciting book with this succinct statement: One by one they passed into the next life. As the years went by and they became frail and fewer in number, perhaps they simply nodded to one another as they passed on the streets of Charleston. Whether they had been young men or old men in Charleston during the 1860s, the war had been the even of their lifetime, and they had risen to the challenge in the defense of their city, their state, and their county.

William A. Spedale is the author of five books: The Battle of Baton Rouge, 1862; Where Bugles Called and Rifles Gleamed: Port Hudson, Yesterday and Today; Historic Treasures of the American Civil War; Fort Butler, Donaldsonville 1863; and The Heroes of Harding Field Baton Rouge, LA., World War II.