

“THAT WHAT THEY HAD FORGOTTEN”



DONE WOULD NOT BE

THE BATTLE FLAG OF THE THIRTY-SEVENTH NORTH CAROLINA

Michael Hardy

They were not the “boys” of the spring of 1861. They were motivated to enlist neither by some romantic notion of chivalry nor by some governmental decree. For the men of the Thirty-seventh, the desire to enlist sprang from a sense of responsibility to their families, friends, and communities. These men came from a variety of backgrounds. They were farmers, with a smattering of preachers, lawyers, doctors, and tradesmen. They came from the southern Piedmont, from Union, Mecklenburg, and Gaston Counties; from the foothills, Wilkes and Alexander Counties; and from beyond the Blue Ridge, Ashe, Alleghany, and Watauga Counties. Their regiment was created on November 20, 1861.

A year passed before the regiment received a regulation battle flag. In late November or early December 1862, the regiment was awarded a third-bunting issue Confederate flag. The 48-inch square banner was inscribed with thirteen battle honors, painted in white letters. The style of lettering used for the five flags of the Branch-Lane brigade was virtually unique to the five North Carolina regiments that constituted the brigade.

Two of the battle honors, New Bern and Hanover, were earned prior to the Thirty-seventh’s formally joining the Army of Northern Virginia. The other eleven-- Mechanicsville, Cold Harbor, Frazier’s Farm, Malvern Hill, Cedar Run, Manassas Junction, Manassas, Harpers Ferry, and Shepherdstown-- were some of the Army of Northern Virginia’s most poignant battles.

After receiving their starry banner, the Thirty-seventh’s war did not end, and the painter’s brush would have quickly run out of canvas for additional battle honors. Fredericksburg, where the regiment fought off repeated attacks until running out of ammunition, could have been added. Then there was Chancellorsville, where the regiment sustained more losses than any other Tar Heel regiment. At Gettysburg, the Thirty-seventh was engaged late in the day on July 1. On July 3, the regiment lined up behind another Tar Heel regiment, the Twenty-sixth, and together they charged across the open fields and up the slopes. Then there were Falling Waters, Kelly’s Ford, Mine Run, and the Wilderness. Twice, on May 12, 1864, at Spotsylvania Court House, the actions of the Thirty-seventh helped saved the Army of Northern Virginia from defeat. We could also add Jerrico Mills, another Cold Harbor, Jerusalem Plank Road, Fussell’s Mill, Reams Station, Jones’s Farm, and Hatcher Run.

April 2, 1865, found the Thirty-seventh stretched thinly in the defenses just south of Petersburg. The Tar Heels had been under an artillery bombardment since ten p.m. At four a.m., massed Federals of the VI Corps stormed the Thirty-seventh’s lines, overpowering the regiments of Lane’s brigade. Close-quarter fighting took place when several members of the Thirty-seventh Massachusetts of Edward’s brigade, First Division, spied the colors of the Thirty-seventh North Carolina. Lt. William Waterman, Corporals Luther Tanner and Richard Welch, and Pvt. Michael Kelly, all of Company E, rushed toward the color-bearer of the Thirty-seventh North Carolina. In the following scuffle, Lieutenant Waterman was wounded in the wrist. Corporal Tanner was killed, as was Private Kelly who first bayoneted a Tar Heel who was trying to kill the Thirty-seventh Massachusetts’s regimental commander. Corporal Welch knocked down the color-bearer of the Thirty-seventh North Carolina and captured the banner. Welch was later awarded the Medal of Honor for capturing the flag.

The flag of the Thirty-seventh was taken to the War Department and assigned number 384. In 1905, the flag was returned to Virginia and, in 1929, was put on display in the Lee Chapel in Lexington, Virginia, by the Virginia Division of the United Daughters of the Confederacy. For almost 70 years, the flag “stood guard” over the

37th NCT Battle Flag



final resting place of Robert E. Lee at Washington and Lee University. A reproduction replaced the original in the late 1990s. For several years, the flag hung in the Breakthrough Museum at Pamplin Park, most likely displayed just yards from where it was captured on April 2, 1865. On April 7, just a few short weeks ago, the flag of the Thirty-seventh North Carolina arrived here from Virginia. Who knows what adventures still await this old flag.

Only a few blocks from here are the graves of almost countless

Confederate soldiers. Many of them perished during that awful war. One of those is Iowa Michigan Royster. Iowa did not survive the battle of Gettysburg. He was fearfully wounded on July 3 and passed on a few days later. He was originally buried at Gettysburg, but after the war was re-interred in Oakwood Cemetery, first in the Confederate section, and later in his family's section. We can only wonder how Iowa would feel if he knew that the battle-torn flag of his regiment was now so close.

There are no old soldiers

left. The last member of the Thirty-seventh died in 1947, the last Tar Heel Confederate soldier in 1951. The old soldiers' greatest fear was that what they had done would be forgotten. All of you here today have seen fit to honor those old soldiers, to remember that what they did is truly not forgotten.

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**Robert Bivens,
37th NCT**

