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Review

'SOLID AND STEADY'

Cadmus Wilcox, though reliable and brave, still eludes fame

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Patterson, Gerard A. *From Blue to Gray: The Life of Confederate General Cadmus M. Wilcox.* Stackpole Books, 2001-01-01. ISBN 811706826

Given Major General Cadmus Marcellus Wilcox's long and combat-rich command tenure with the Army of Northern Virginia, it is curious it took so long for someone to pen his biography. Except for First Manassas, Wilcox was in the thick of the fighting in virtually every major engagement in the Eastern Theater. Although he had the good fortune to avoid enemy bullets, a string of circumstances conspired to deny him opportunities to shine on the battlefield. His career is best described as solid and steady, but unspectacular. This latter description can also be applied to Gerard A. Patterson's new biography.

Although he was a native of North Carolina and grew up in Tennessee, Wilcox was tapped early in the war to lead the 9th Alabama Infantry, and later a brigade of Alabamians. The "very wicked and unpopular but skillful officer," as one artillerist described him, crafted his five regiments into one of the Army of Northern Virginia's most reliable brigades. His temporary command of a small division during the Second Manassas campaign was bracketed by brave and determined brigade leadership during the fighting on the Peninsula and in the battles of Sharpsburg, Fredericksburg, and Chancellorsville. At Chancellorsville, Wilcox performed what many historians, including Patterson, believe was his most important wartime contribution: his keen observations determined that enemy troops were being withdrawn from Banks' Ford, prompting Wilcox to disregard his orders and rush his men to Fredericksburg and Lee's rear, where his timely arrival may have saved the army from disaster.

His good service notwithstanding, Wilcox remained a brigadier in the army's post-Chancellorsville reorganization and turned in a solid performance at Gettysburg with A.P. Hill's Third Corps. The scope of that campaign's losses

forced yet another reorganization, and Wilcox was promoted to major general and permanent divisional command. He discharged his duties well during the war's final year at the Wilderness, Spotsylvania, and throughout the lengthy Petersburg campaign. After the war, Wilcox lived a quiet existence in Washington, D.C., where he died in 1890.

The value of **From Blue to Gray** lies in the fact that it is the first biography of this significant Army of Northern Virginia officer. It is also something of a paradox, offering as it does interesting anecdotes and private visions from Wilcox's letters wrapped around a core of astonishingly thin detail. For example, Wilcox's important contributions during the Peninsula campaign and Seven Days' battles are covered in a handful of pages that offer little of the perspective necessary to understand what he did and why he did it. His role at the head of a division at Second Manassas is summed up in a single breezy paragraph, while the Chancellorsville campaign opens in a single sentence-without a word of background or explanation-and Stonewall Jackson launches his flank attack in the next. Wilcox's detailed battle reports are only scantily mined, even though readily available. The absence of maps exacerbates this paucity of detail. Patterson's skeletal approach at biography is all the more curious given his long and successful experience with the pen.

Patterson's research, which will never be described as exhaustive, has managed to uncover and utilize a number of his subject's letters, which add another dimension to the man many of us know something about, but about whom most of us do not know enough. Unfortunately, we still don't.

Theodore P. Savas is the publisher and acquisitions editor of Savas Publishing Company and an attorney living in Northern California. He is the author or editor of numerous articles and books.