

Confederate Combat Commander: The Remarkable Life of Brigadier General Alfred Jefferson Vaughan Jr.

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Review

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Peterson, Lawrence K. *Confederate Combat Commander: The Remarkable Life of Brigadier General Alfred Jefferson Vaughan Jr.*. University of Tennessee Press, \$59.00 ISBN 9781572339514

The Story of a General and His Brigade

When I received this volume, I quickly perused the flaps and back cover for information about the book, in hopes for a quick insight about what I was about to read. I was met with the information that the author was a descendant of the General, a fact that gave me foreboding about what I was about to read. Thankfully, Lawrence Peterson deftly removes the normal issues that arise in these situations in his preface. This is no book based on glorifying a relative; rather, the author takes a methodical, scholarly approach to his work, eschewing family ties for a tale fairly told. The task at hand is simply to tell the story of a general and his brigade, and Peterson performs this task ably. The task of writing a comprehensive biography of his works protagonist, on the other hand, is a mark much harder to hit.

Peterson's task is a daunting one, made so by the lack of actual primary sources with which to write his work. As he notes, there is no extant body of materials left by General Vaughan; rather, the author is left to use a romanticized history of the General's life written by one of Vaughan's sons between the 1950s and the late 1970s, as well as the General's own history of the regiment he commanded during the war, written three decades after the war. Despite this major roadblock, Peterson has done yeoman's work in tracking down any possible leads for information on his subject. He has gathered information from such sources as courthouse records, Vaughan's official correspondence with the governing board of the Virginia Military Institute, and other governmental records in his attempt to reconstruct the life of his ancestor.

The lack resources forces Peterson to work diligently to place the life and actions of Vaughan within the broader context of American history. At several

points where details are especially thin, the author works to fill the gap with context. While some reaches beyond the necessary, such as relating the tribal groups that predated the area of Mississippi that Vaughan eventually settled by decades with little relevance to the task at hand, at other points it helps the non-specialist to fully understand the importance of the life of Alfred Vaughan and the times within which he lived.

One problematic aspect in the early portion of the book is the use of the term "farmer" as opposed to "planter." A farmer is one who personally labors in the soil, raising a crop for profit or subsistence on a smallholding. Peterson uses the rather bucolic term to describe his protagonist's agricultural activities. Rather, it is not until page 32 that the author mentions the word slave in connection with Vaughan, despite the fact that he was raised on a substantial Virginia plantation, and later married into a Mississippi family. Vaughan was not a cotton "farmer;" the financial success mentioned in connection with his Mississippi plantation was simply not possible without the forced labor of enslaved humans. Later, when a letter from Vaughan's father urges his son to "go with his people," the lack of the primacy of slavery comes to irritating light. It is a non-factor in the eyes of the author as to why Alfred Vaughan supported secession and joined the Confederate military; the author speaks more to an imagined internal struggle over the reasons why the South would lose the war than he does about the any monologue that might have occurred about the imagined dangers of emancipated slaves and collapse of the world that the protagonist married into. Yes, Peterson does give six sentences to the perceived impact of Lincoln's election on slavery and the position that the cotton South occupied in the world, but it falls away quickly and unsatisfactorily as the military career of Vaughan comes to the fore.

The true strength of this book lies in the fact that it is a history of the 13th/154th Tennessee Infantry with biographical information about its long time Colonel and brigade commander. Great attention is given to the military activities of the regiment and brigade through the course of the war, until Vaughan's wounding during the Atlanta campaign. Thankfully, Peterson includes an appendix that fills the void as to the actions the unit was involved in after the loss of its commander. This book is an excellent brigade-level history of a western theater Confederate infantry brigade, and one of its valuable assets is the author's constant striving to place the events and people included in his work within the larger context of the war and the events that led up to it. While the biographical information strengthens in the chapters dealing with the post-war life of General Vaughan, it tells the story of the career of General Alfred

Vaughan without eliciting a better understanding of the soldier himself.

Dr. Robert Welch is an independent scholar based in Macomb, Illinois. His current research is on the capture of the 16th Iowa Volunteer Infantry Regiment and the themes of reunification with its captors at post-war reunions, as well as the efforts to support the Federal war effort in agricultural periodicals of the era.