

The Life of William Calvin Oates And history of the 15h Alabama Volunteer Infantry

William Calvin Oates according to his father's bible registry and a monument erected for him at Oakwood cemetery in Montgomery Alabama was born on November 30, 1833 in Oates Crossroads which is now Pike County Alabama to William Oates and Sarah Seller Oates. William Calvin was the oldest of at least eight children. His father was a very strict individual, even to the point of abusiveness. William left home at the age of sixteen after one particular beating only to return one year later. He would soon be in trouble with the law and have several warrants out for his arrest. On one particular occasion in 1850, he fled from the law to Florida after fracturing a man's skull in a fight in Alabama. He would remain in Florida for a number of years. While living in Florida he would become a housepainter's assistant and a crewman on a sailing vessel. He had another warrant out for his arrest in Louisiana due to choking and hitting his employer in the face several times. Oates then moved on to Marshall County, Texas and became a gambler and a house painter. In one particular fight that he was involved in while in Texas over insulting remarks, he nearly gouged out his opponents eyes and got himself yet another warrant out for his arrest. After this warrant he fled from the law to Waco and became a shingle cutter and witnessed a murder. Not wanting to be questioned by the law for obvious reasons, he was going to slip out of Waco but was involved in yet another altercation. Deciding that it would be of better interest for himself he decided not to meet his opponent in a gunfight and he slipped out of Waco.

He then moved onto Bastrop, Texas and won a lot of money from his fellow workers and decided to move once again. Living in Port Lavaca, Texas he fell in love but moved yet again to Henderson, Texas. While in Henderson, William met his younger brother John and they headed back to Alabama. While heading back home, William got involved in a card game resulting in, yes you guessed it, another fight in which he tried to gouge out the eyes of his opponent yet again. In Alabama, Oates still had the original warrant out for his arrest from 1850 so he couldn't return to his home county. He moved nearby and became a school teacher. Later in life he read law in Eufaula, Alabama and passed the bar exam soon afterward. Now a lawyer he also became a newspaper man.

Oates was Captain of the 15th Alabama Volunteer Infantry Regiment which was organized at Fort Mitchell, Alabama in August of 1861. Many believe that Oates was Colonel of the regiment, but it was later discovered that the rank was never confirmed. The 15th Alabama had 900 men from 11 companies from Southern Alabama. The first orders for the men of the newly formed regiment sent them through East Tennessee to Manassas Virginia to take part in the battle of First Manassas (also known as the battle of Bull Run). The 15th joined Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson's army in the Shenandoah Valley for the start of the 1862 campaigning season, then moved with Jackson to help defend Richmond, Virginia from Union General George B. McClellan's forces on the Peninsula.

On January 19, 1863, the 15th Alabama was placed in the Alabama Brigade under the command of General Evander McIver Law. The Alabama Brigade consisted of the 4th, 15th, 44th, 47th, and 48th Alabama Regiments.

In a letter written one year later on April 22, 1863 by John, William's younger brother, he mentioned the battles and actions which the 15th Alabama had been involved in to date. They included the battles of Front Royal, Winchester, Strasburg, Port Royal, Cold Harbor, Malvern Hill, Cedar Run, Hazel River, Second Manassas, Germantown, the Capture of Harper's Ferry, Sharpsburg, and Fredericksburg.

The turning point for the 15th Alabama and the entire Confederate army came on the days of July 1-3 1863, the battle of Gettysburg. Oates and his men were involved in the second days action on Little

Round Top defending it against the 20th Maine led by Joshua L. Chamberlain. On this day Oates would lose 192 of his men (33 of which would be shot, 76 wounded and 84 captured). Of the men to be wounded, his brother was mortally wounded only to die in an enemy field hospital 23 days later on July 25th of blood poisoning. John is buried in Hollywood Cemetery in Richmond Virginia along with other Confederate soldiers.

The 15th would also be involved in the battles of Battle Mountain, Chicamauga, Brown's Ferry and Lookout Mountain, Knoxville, and Bean's Station during the remainder of the 1863 campaigning season.

William Oates served as commander of the 15th Alabama from the battles of Sharpsburg until he was transferred in July 1864 to the 48th Alabama Infantry.

In 1864 the 15th would be back in Virginia to take part in the battles of The Wilderness, Spotsylvania, Hanover Court House, and the Second Battle of Cold Harbor. They were also engaged in the defense of Petersburg, (in which Oates would be wounded and lose his right arm), and subsequent battles until the end of the war. The 15th Alabama Volunteer Infantry took part in the surrender at Appomattox Court House on April 9, 1865. Of the more than 1633 men on the 15th Alabama's muster roll during the war, 260 fell in battle, 440 died while in the service and 231 were discharged or transferred.

Mr. Oates would become involved in politics after the war in 1868 by serving as a delegate to the Democratic National Convention in New York. Oates was elected in 1880 to the U.S. House of Representatives and would remain there for seven consecutive terms until he was elected Governor of Alabama in November of 1894.

William C. Oates' military career was not over with yet though. President William McKinley appointed Oates brigadier-general during the Spanish-American War, but the war ended before Mr. Oates arrived.

Oates continued his law practice in his later years. He married Sarah Toney of Eufaula, Alabama on March 28, 1882 and had one son together, William Calvin Jr. William Calvin Oates died in Montgomery, Alabama on September 9, 1910. He his buried at Oakwood Cemetery in Montgomery.

Compiled by:
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