

This Civil War battalion was just college kids

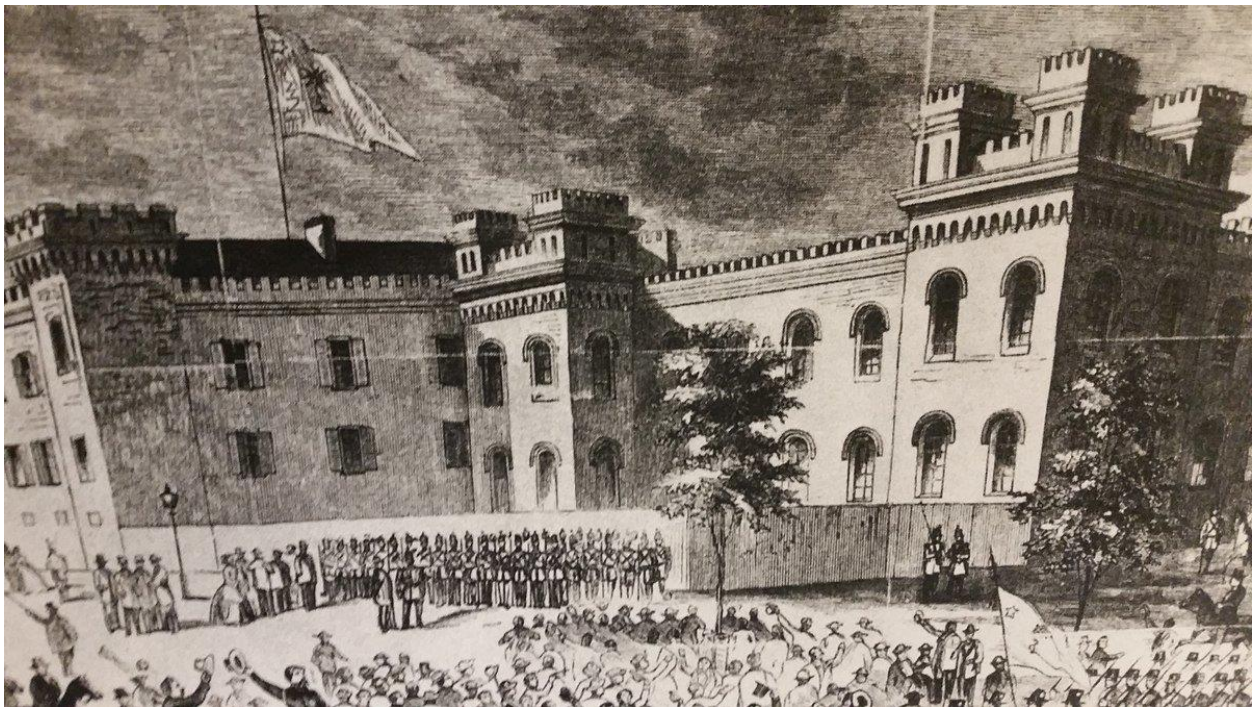
During the Civil War, an entire battalion was formed by pulling the students of two colleges out of school, putting them under the command of their professors, and shipping them off to war. And these college kids really did fight, possibly firing some of the first and last shots of the war and earning battle streamers for seven different engagements before the war ended.

The college students were cadets at The Citadel and The Arsenal Academy, both establishments for training future military officers. So, when South Carolina seceded on Dec. 20, 1860, there was obviously a question of roles for these men who had already signaled an interest in military service.

Just a few weeks later, on Jan. 9, cadets were manning artillery emplacements in Charleston Harbor when a merchant ship, *Star of the West*, loaded with supplies and reinforcements for Fort Sumter, entered the harbor. The Citadel's superintendent, Col. Peter Stevens, ordered gunners to fire on the ship in an attempt to turn it around.

A single warning shot across the bow failed to deter the ship, but a short volley a few minutes later caused multiple strikes against the ship's hull and forced it to withdraw.

A later attack by Confederate forces on Fort Sumter in April 1861 is generally regarded as the first attack of the war, but the cadets were awarded a streamer for their January attack.



An illustration of The Citadel during the Civil War.

(Alfred Rudolf Waud)

The next streamer for the academy came in November 1861, at Wappoo Cut, but they didn't actually meet with Union forces. On Nov. 7, Union naval forces had shelled and seized two Confederate forts near the South Carolina capital, and political leaders worried that the Union would press forward. They called on the cadets to man defenses at Wappoo Cut, but the Union soldiers didn't press the attack, and the cadets eventually returned to school.

Around the same time, Union forces landed on James and John's islands, and Confederate counterattacks failed to re-take the beachheads, and on James Island, they were even forced back along a bridge. These were islands key to Charleston's defense, and the cadets were sent again to hold the line. They brought eight light artillery pieces to James Island and manned them against Union attack.

At this point, though, The Citadel and The Arsenal were still functioning as military academies despite their students and faculty being called away from time to time to perform training, logistics, or even defensive duties. But by June 1862, there was a body of cadets that was ready to go to war without waiting for their commissions at graduation. At least 37 cadets resigned from the school and formed the "Cadet Rangers," a cavalry unit.

This sort of pattern would continue for the next few years, with the cadets being called out to defend Charleston for a few days or weeks and then being sent back to the school to train, frustrating some of them. In early 1863, cadets manned guns in a defensive battery on a bridge between Charleston and James Island.

Union forces shelled the city during this period, and some of the cadets were sent to guard stores of weapons and supplies. But they returned to school again until the first half of 1864, when they were once again sent to defend James Island.

At the end of 1864, the cadets were called to a defense that would actually result in combat. Union Marines, soldiers, and sailors were sent to break the Charleston and Savannah Railroad, and their attack surprised the infantrymen defending the position. The cadets, stationed a few miles away at the time, rushed to the fight at the double-time.



Union Marines and other troops attacked cadets at the Battle of Tulifinny near Charleston, South Carolina, and the cadets earned praise for their disciplined fire and poise under attack.

(David Humphreys Miller)

During that first night, on Dec. 6, the cadets did little because they arrived as the Union troops were digging into their defensive positions while the Confederate attacks gave way.

But the next morning, the cadets were one of the key components of an attack on the Union positions. They came under rifle fire and responded with a bayonet charge, but were driven back. They secured their wounded and dropped back to their own defenses. In this role, they earned praise from nearby infantry units for their disciplined fire. They even pursued the Marines attacking them during the final Union retreat. During the fight, they suffered eight casualties.

The following year, in May 1865, cadets would once again engage in direct combat with Union forces. They were sent to guard infrastructure in Williamston, South Carolina, when Union forces attempted to reach a bridge over the Saluda River and burn it. The cadets beat back the attack successfully, saving the bridge.

Even as the Confederacy's prospects in the war suffered under the Union Anaconda Plan, the cadets held their lines when ordered. They never surrendered and were one of the last forces to disband, not doing so until May 9, 1865, one month after Gen. Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox Courthouse in Virginia.