THE TERRIFYING TIGERS (PART1)…paragraphs are numbered

1) Lt. Col. Charles de Choiseul was not a happy man. It was September 1861, and de Choiseul, a well-educated French Creole, had been ordered to take temporary command of Maj. Chatham Roberdeau Wheat’s First Special Battalion of Louisiana Infantry while Wheat recovered from a serious wound suffered at the First Battle of Bull Run. It was no routine assignment: a Virginia officer had been given the position previously, but he was unable to control the rowdy men and quit after only a few days. Now it was de Choiseul’s turn to try to rein in what was known as the Tiger Battalion. He wrote a friend, “I am a victim of circumstances, not of my own will. … Whether the Tigers will devour me, or whether I will succeed in taming them, remains to be seen.”

2) Few people wanted to associate with the battalion raised by Rob Wheat, a six-foot-four, 275-lb. giant. Wheat had served as an officer in the Mexican War and fought on American filibustering expeditions to Cuba, Mexico and Nicaragua. A man with a taste for adventure, he was serving with Giuseppe Garibaldi’s Red Shirts in Italy when the Civil War began. He immediately came home to New Orleans and organized a battalion of five companies.

3) Wheat’s men were a potpourri of high-society lawyers, merchants and planters’ sons, combined with low-life pickpockets, gamblers and thieves. One company, the Tiger Rifles, adopted the Zouave uniform and was said to have been partly recruited from New Orleans’ jails. Like other units raised in New Orleans, many of Wheat’s men were of foreign birth. While the soldiers from north Louisiana were English-speaking, Scots-Irish Protestants like other Confederates, those from New Orleans and south Louisiana were unique in the army. Louisiana was the only Southern state that was predominantly Catholic, and it had the highest number of newly arrived immigrants. In fact, when the Civil War began nearly one half of New Orleans residents had been born outside the United States.

4) Out of this multicultural population, men from at least 24 different nationalities volunteered for military service; many of them ended up serving under Wheat. It was a rough bunch. Many of the city’s foreign-born worked at the most menial of jobs on docks, wharves, levees and steamboats, where drinking, fighting and thievery were seen as necessary for survival. They naturally brought those same values to the army.

5) Before de Choiseul took command of Wheat’s Battalion, several Louisiana units had already become well known for such misconduct. Coppens’s Zouaves had hijacked their troop train on the way to Virginia and looted Montgomery, Ala., while drunken members of the 14th Louisiana rioted and attacked their officers on the way to the Old Dominion. In the latter incident, the regiment’s officers had to kill several of the men to regain control. Nonetheless, Wheat’s Battalion became the most notorious of all, creating so much mayhem in Virginia that Gen. Richard Taylor claimed “every commander desired to be rid of it.” Still, the unit performed bravely at Bull Run, and it was soon nicknamed the Tiger Battalion.

6) Civilians and soldiers alike came to fear the Tiger Battalion. One Alabaman described the men as “adventurers, wharf-rats, cutthroats, and bad characters generally.” Another soldier admitted, “I was actually afraid of them, afraid I would meet them somewhere and that they would do me like they did Tom Lane of my company; knock me down and stamp me half to death.”

7) Within six months after arriving in Virginia, members of Wheat’s Battalion engaged in a drunken street brawl in Lynchburg, fought the First Kentucky with rocks in camp, and lit into the 21st Georgia when the Georgians ran off with the Louisianians’ whiskey bottle. In the latter incident, 10 members of the Tiger Rifles took on an entire company of Georgians and were badly beaten. The Georgians’ captain apologized for his men’s theft but warned the bloodied Tigers they could have been killed if had not intervened. While walking away, one defiant Tiger called over his shoulder, “We are much obliged, sor, but Wheat’s Battalion kin clean up the whole damn Twenty-first Georgia any time.”

8) The Tigers were just a small subset of the 12,000 Louisiana soldiers in Virginia in 1861. Most were decent, God-fearing men who served their state honorably. But there were enough criminals and drunkards mixed in to give the entire state’s contribution a bad reputation. The good were lumped together with the bad, and because Wheat’s Tiger Battalion was the most infamous, all became known as the Louisiana Tigers. (END OF PART 1)
THE TERRIFYING TIGERS (PART2)

9) Trouble began anew not long after Colonel de Choiseul assumed command of Wheat’s Battalion, when, as he said, “the whole set got royally drunk.” That day an inebriated soldier twice snapped his loaded musket at the colonel’s orderly outside his tent, but the gun failed to discharge and the man was subdued. Later in the day unknown Tigers succeeded in “knocking down & badly beating & robbing … a washerwoman of the battalion in a thicket not a hundred yards from the guard house.” That night a free-for-all at the guard tent woke the colonel. With pistol in hand, he found the guards battling seven or eight Tigers who were trying to free some of their comrades. De Choiseul slugged one man who charged at him and finally restored order “with seven or eight beauties bucked & gagged in the guard tent.”

10) The next day the tension between the colonel and his men exploded. When two Tigers casually walked out of camp, de Choiseul mounted his horse and rode over to investigate. The men told him that the orderly sergeant had given them permission, but the colonel was suspicious of their story. He rode over to question the sergeant but ended up arresting him when the sergeant gave “an impudent answer” to his questions. De Choiseul ordered the man to his quarters and he skulked off uttering oaths under his breath. No sooner had he left than another Tiger strolled over and began defending the sergeant. Out of patience, de Choiseul ordered him to the guard house, but the man refused to go. Furious, de Choiseul grabbed him by his collar and threw him to the ground. The soldier picked himself up but still refused to obey the order, so the colonel knocked him down a second time.

11) By then a threatening crowd of Tigers was forming around de Choiseul. The colonel fingered his pistol and warned he would shoot the first man who “raised a finger.” Immediately, as de Choiseul recalled, a “big double fisted ugly looking fellow came at me & said ‘God damn you, shoot me.’” De Choiseul drew his pistol and shot him point blank in the face. “He turned as I fired & [I] hit him in the cheek, knocking out one upper jaw tooth & two lower ones on the other side & cutting his tongue.” The others quickly retreated and, according to de Choiseul, “that quelled the riot.”

12) After de Choiseul demonstrated his willingness to shoot a disobedient man, the Tigers quickly accepted him as their commander. De Choiseul later recalled that after Wheat recovered and he returned to his own regiment, he met a Tiger on the road who cried and kissed his hand goodbye (the colonel admitted that the man was drunk at the time).

13) De Choiseul had proven his mettle to the notorious Tiger Battalion, but a few months later he was mortally wounded at the Battle of Port Republic, Va. Major Wheat was killed while leading his battalion at Gaines’ Mill in June 1862. But tales of the Tigers continued. Gen. John Bankhead Magruder once wrote his wife that during the 12 hours that the 10th Louisiana was camped on Jamestown Island, its members “eat up every living thing on the Island but two horses and their own species.”

14) Later, when the army captured a large quantity of whiskey, the officers dumped it in the ditch to keep it away from the men. One soldier reported the Louisiana Tigers got down on their hands and knees 100 yards down the road and lapped the whiskey up like dogs as it ran by. So terrible was the Tigers’ reputation that one poor Pennsylvanian woman fainted from fright when the Rebel who was politely asking her for something to eat made the mistake of telling her he was from Louisiana.

15) On the other hand, the 12,000 Louisiana Tigers would prove to be among the best fighters in the Army of Northern Virginia. When their ammunition expired at the Second Battle of Bull Run, they refused to retreat and began throwing rocks at the Yankees. They were the only Confederates to break the Union line at Gettysburg, and they quite possibly saved Robert E. Lee’s army from destruction at Spotsylvania by holding their position after the enemy overrun other Confederate units at the Bloody Angle. The Louisianians fought in every major battle in the Virginia theater and they suffered appalling casualties. When Lee surrendered at Appomattox after four years of war, only 373 Tigers remained on duty. The Tigers’ name lives on today. Contrary to popular belief, the Louisiana State University Tigers are not named for a ferocious feline but for Louisiana’s most famous Civil War soldiers. In the early 1900s, Dr. Charles E. Coates of Louisiana State University was trying to decide on a name for the football team. When he was told that the Louisiana Tigers were the toughest set of men who ever lived, he chose them as his mascot. (THE END)