

# Foreword: A Golden Age of Civil War Studies

A century and a half after the Civil War's conclusion, scholars and readers find themselves at an unexpected, but very welcome, point: The long tradition of studying and interpreting the conflict has been rejuvenated, resulting in a richer, more honest and far broader appreciation of those who fought in the ranks or led from the front, all but a few of whom had faded into the shadows cast by the titans. More than ever before, we have an appreciation of the complex humanity of the common men who did such uncommon things.

Ours is a golden age of Civil War studies.

Although some enlisted veterans produced admirable memoirs, for over a century the written word focused on the famed men of high rank, first with the score-settling reminiscences by generals gray and blue who bickered among themselves all the way to their graves, then with the shameless romanticizing of the great by partisan historians—who robbed their subjects of their true humanity—and on to the popular “overview” histories in which those below the rank of general rarely earned a mention.

Over the last several decades, though, another strain of historical writing began to have an impact, a democratic approach, in which the average soldier's importance and vitality gained recognition. Hand-written memoirs emerged from chests in attics; letters bound with faded ribbons escaped from old tin boxes; and ever more scholars asked themselves “What was it like for the men in the ranks or for the junior officers at war?”

Regimental histories, in particular, evolved from bare-bones recitations of events with rosters appended to richly detailed accounts of how flesh-and-blood men experienced four years of carnage, heartbreak, loneliness, fury,

boredom, hunger, sweat, frostbite, wounds, disease, glory and petty grudges, the thrill and ache of mail from home amid camp life's sour drudgery, the profound, rough-handed camaraderie and, not least, the experience of battle.

John Horn's splendid history of the 12th Virginia will stand among the classics of the discipline.

Long years of research and patient crafting allowed the author to deliver an account as detailed and precise, as honest and clear, as any regimental accounting we'll ever see. Following the men of Petersburg and its environs from the naïve enthusiasm of the war's initial months through near-disaster amid the gore at Crampton's Gap, and on through a series of tough stands in the Chancellorsville campaign to the blunt savagery of the war's last year, this chronicle of one hard-used, heroic regiment is a true soldier's book—and that is a great compliment. John Horn takes us as close as words on a page can bring us to the soldier's experience. From merry snowball fights between entire brigades, to the final, bitter defense of their home city, the men of the 12th Virginia leap to life.

Horn's reliance on first-hand accounts reminds us of how casual death became—as well as how hungry those men in gray became as early as the winter of 1863, when at least a few acquaintances of the regiment found rat meat a tasty supplement to their rations.

Simple pleasures and harsh punishments, battlefield confusion and clashes of character . . . informal truces on the picket line and the shock of finding your powder wet as the enemy approaches . . . so often, it's the telling detail, the tidbit ignored by the proponents of grand history, that really bring those Civil War soldiers to life again. And Horn is the master of such details.

Above all, though, this book is a labor of love. And that's key to grasping how this new golden age of Civil War studies occurred. Men and women of serious mien and mind have dedicated their lives to uncovering the conflict's mundane, illuminating details and its neglected actors, what the French historian, Fernand Braudel, called "the structures of everyday life." And those researchers and authors are not doing this expecting financial gain; quite the contrary, they know that book sales rarely bring more than a meager return on their enormous investments of time, energy and lifelong financial outlays. They do this work because of a sense of mission, a sense of duty to those who transformed our nation. And so we gain books such as the volume you hold in your hands. No well-intentioned ceremonies, however large and colorful, honor the dead as mightily as such works.

---

Another factor contributing to this new golden age is that untamed beast, the internet. Scholars scorn it publicly, but use it privately. Yes, the internet, with its lack of editorial controls and discrimination, can be the domain of extravagant lies and insidious self-deception, of cruel shaming and hard-hearted revenge, but for all that it also enables historians and savvy amateurs to trace and contact descendants of those who fought, to locate never-published documentation, to broaden their research immensely, and to track down obscure newspaper articles, genealogies and public records, even photographs that kin thought lost. For the historian, the internet replaced nothing, but enhanced a great deal. The archives still demand that he or she be present for duty in those glorious prisons for long stretches—there's no substitute for classic, relentless research. But exploited by those of knowledge, judgment and character, the internet is a massively powerful tool.

But the ultimate value of all means of research is that they coalesce to result in a book as fine as this one. Horn's extraordinary work does well by the dead and living alike. The infantrymen of the 12th Virginia will no doubt dip their flags to the author as their ghosts march by.

Ralph Peters (Col., ret)