

# BOOK REVIEWS



INFANTRY highly recommends the following reference volumes: *The Armies of George S. Patton*. By George Forty. Arms & Armour Press (Distributed by Sterling Publishing, 387 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10016-8810), 1996. 336 Pages. \$29.95, Hardcover.

*The Armies of U.S. Grant*. By James R. Arnold. Published in hardcover in 1995. Arms & Armour Press (Distributed by Sterling Publishing, 387 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10016-8810), 1996. 320 Pages. \$19.95, Softbound.

*The Army of Robert E. Lee*. By Philip Katcher. Published in hardcover in 1994. Arms & Armour Press (Distributed by Sterling Publishing, 387 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10016-8810), 1996. 352 Pages. \$19.95, Softbound.

*Guide to Louisiana Confederate Military Units, 1861-1865*. By Arthur W. Bergeron, Jr. Originally published in 1989. Louisiana State University Press, 1996. 229 Pages. \$12.95, Soft-bound.

---

*Sappers in the Wire: The Life and Death of Firebase Mary Ann*. By Keith William Nolan. Texas A&M Press, 1995. 225 Pages. \$24.95. Reviewed by Dr. Joe P. Dunn, Converse College.

In his seven books about soldiers in combat in Vietnam, Keith William Nolan, a master of the personal interview, has established himself as a neo-S.L.A. Marshall chronicler of combat actions. This time he focuses on a small event in 1971 that several authors cite as a microcosm of the waning years of the war, even though the action had not been studied in depth previously.

During the night of 27-28 March 1971, a Viet Cong sapper company in-

filtrated Firebase Mary Ann, the forward-most position of the 23d Division (Americal), and killed 30 American soldiers and wounded 82 while suffering only 15 casualties.

At a time when American combat action had declined mightily and combat troops were confined to firebases or rear areas; when drugs, racial tension, and breakdown of discipline were rampant; and when a miasma of laxity and cynicism afflicted a growing percentage of the Army in Vietnam, this incident seemed to characterize the last years of the war.

Historians have excoriated the defenders of Firebase Mary Ann, and it is one of the two instances of dereliction of duty (along with My Lai) that William Westmoreland cites in his memoirs. In an earlier work, Nolan sharply criticized the unit that occupied Mary Ann. Now, however, he says that he and others were far too harsh. The book is an intensive minute-by-minute recreation of what happened at the firebase before, during, and after the 45-minute attack, placed in the context of the operations over the prior months. The story contains elements of both heroism and disaster. Nolan used declassified unit records and interviews with more than 50 survivors to recreate the events.

The final chapter tells of the discipline that was imposed after that fateful night, upon everyone from the division commander to officers at the firebase. Finally, Nolan brings the reader up to date on the current lives of the survivors.

Nolan does indeed depict a microcosm of the war at a particular stage, but one that is somewhat different from that presented in earlier accounts. One may agree or disagree with his interpretation; but as in all his previous books, Nolan has an uncanny ability to

tell the story of men in combat. This is a book well worth reading.

---

*Drawn With the Sword: Reflections on the American Civil War*. By James M. McPherson. Oxford University Press, 1996. 253 Pages. \$25.00.

*Ken Burns's The Civil War: Historians Respond*. Edited by Robert Brent Toplin. Oxford University Press, 1996. 204 Pages. \$24.00.

*Lee the Soldier*. Edited by Gary W. Gallagher. University of Nebraska Press, 1996. 620 Pages. \$45.00. Reviewed by Dr. Charles E. White, Infantry School Historian.

These books illustrate three reasons why popular interest in the American Civil War endures. Each is a collection of essays, lectures, speeches, and special studies in short form that have not become books. Most works like this never reach more than a limited audience. Fortunately, James McPherson, Brent Toplin, and Gary Gallagher have provided Civil War enthusiasts with three examples of fine historical research and writing.

After reading the collection of 15 essays in *Drawn With the Sword*, one can easily see why McPherson is widely recognized as one of America's most distinguished students of the Civil War era. These essays attest to the originality, sweeping range, and compelling views of their author. All but the final essay have been published before. Nevertheless, McPherson has revised and updated these, adding the 15th to give his book "thematic coherence."

McPherson begins by dismantling several old arguments: that the South was truly a distinctive region; that Harriet Beecher Stowe's controversial novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had a real impact; and that the North was the aggressor by forcing the South to fire the

first shot. The author then addresses the effects of the Civil War on American society and discusses why interest in this truly first "total" war continues even today.

Perhaps the most interesting portion of this book is in the section titled "Why the North Won," in which McPherson examines the reasons for Northern victory. Among the most thought-provoking essays is "Lee Dissected," in which the author presents the most objective evaluation of Robert E. Lee to date. While not denying Lee's splendid battlefield success, McPherson maintains that "Lee's victories prolonged the war until it destroyed slavery, the plantation economy, the wealth and infrastructure of the region, and virtually everything else the Confederacy stood for. That was the profound irony of Lee's military genius." In short, Lee more than any other Confederate leader was responsible for the ruination of the South.

This book is James McPherson at his best. For those seeking a book that combines a summary of recent scholarship on the Civil War with the brilliant insights of a master historian, this is clearly the one to read.

Another superb work is Toplin's edition of *Ken Burns's The Civil War: Historians Respond*. In 1992, Burns's documentary *The Civil War* captivated American audiences and made television history, breaking all viewing records for a Public Broadcasting Service series. Indeed, more than 40 million people saw the series, more than the populations of the Union and the Confederacy combined.

Because this documentary may have represented the best modern American example of film's potential to teach history on a mass scale, historians wanted to hold Burns's production to high scholarly standards. Thus, before the haunting "Ashokan Farewell" ceased to echo in the ears of those who watched, historians found problems. Some felt there was far too much emphasis on slavery and freedom, while others voiced their concern that the series was too anti-Southern. Still others complained that it reflected the

Northeastern liberal establishment viewpoint.

The criticisms seemed endless: Burns did not focus enough on the military aspects; the series slighted Reconstruction; women and other minorities were not properly represented. Even the American Historical Association established a "Film Review" section in its journal, ostensibly to monitor film makers and their propensity for distorting history. It seemed that every special interest group felt that the focus of its particular specialty or viewpoint should have commanded center stage. Clearly, the critical response to *The Civil War* demonstrated the kind of scholarly interest this subject evokes in U.S. academia today.

Thankfully, Robert Toplin has captured these "evaluations" in this thoughtful book. The Burns series brings together supporters, detractors, and even Ken Burns himself. Readers will find a refreshing interpretation of the way television portrays history, and the problems Burns and others encounter when putting together documentaries. Are documentaries art, history, entertainment, or a combination of all three?

Finally, perhaps no other general in American history has been so universally revered as Robert E. Lee. More has been written about this Southern icon than any other American warrior. In this massive edition, *Lee the Soldier*, noted historian Gary W. Gallagher has put together in one volume the most important writings by and about Lee. Gallagher's purpose was to provide "... convenient access to assessments of Lee's generalship that reflect the interpretive sweep of literature." Readers will not be disappointed. Virtually every aspect of Lee's remarkable Civil War career is covered in this book.

To achieve his objective, Gallagher has divided the book into four sections. Part One, "Testimony of R.E. Lee," comprises a series of 1868 conversations in which Lee spoke candidly with former associates about his campaigns. These especially valuable

transcripts provide the foundation upon which Gallagher builds the remainder of his book. One of the best lines is Lee's response to his critics: They "talked much of that they knew little about." Interestingly, Ulysses S. Grant made a similar remark in his famous *Memoirs*.

Part Two, "Assessments of Lee's Overall Generalship," contains 11 essays from Lee's contemporaries and from leading Civil War scholars such as Douglas Southall Freeman, Charles P. Roland, Albert Castel, Alan T. Nolan, and Thomas L. Connelly. These discussions cover the entire spectrum of opinions about Lee's generalship.

Part Three, "The Great Campaigns," narrows the focus to specific battles, with particular emphasis on Gettysburg. Here the reader will see how Early, Longstreet, and Porter Alexander viewed that fight. Also included in this section are discussions of Lee during his initial six weeks in command, at Antietam, Chancellorsville, and from the Wilderness to Appomattox Court House.

Finally, Part Four, "The Written Record," contains a list of the top 200 essential books on Lee's military career.

*Lee The Soldier* is the best collection of its kind anywhere.

---

*When the Odds Were Even: The Vosges Mountains Campaign, October 1944-January 1945.* By Keith E. Bonn. Presidio, 1994. 294 Pages. \$24.95. Reviewed by Lieutenant Colonel Albert N. Garland, U.S. Army, Retired.

If you want to be a politically correct U.S. military historian writing about World War II in Europe, you must state unequivocally that the U.S. fighting man was no match for his German adversary, and that the only reason the U.S. soldier was able to come out on top so many times was that he had an unlimited amount of supplies and number of tactical air sorties at his beck and call. Or you can fall back on the saying I first heard many years ago after returning from fighting the Germans: "It's a good thing you weren't fighting the German Army of 1941."

## BOOK REVIEWS

The author of this book is a serving U.S. Army officer who holds a doctorate in history from the University of Chicago. He is not politically correct and disagrees strongly with historians who have followed and still follow the PC line.

To refute the PC-types, notably Martin van Creveld and the late Trevor N. Dupuy, and to advance his thesis that the U.S. fighting man was the equal of and perhaps better than his German opponent, Keith Bonn set out to find and study the combat operations of the American and German armies in a situation in which tactical air power is absent or its effectiveness obviated, a situation in which American logistical advantages are nullified by higher headquarters' alternative priorities or by the realities of weather and terrain, and a milieu in which the manpower circumstances of both sides are adequate for the fulfillment of their respective doctrinal requirements and expectations. Bonn goes on to say, *In other words, it is necessary for accurate appraisal of the relative combat proficiency of the German and American armies in the ETO, to find a time and a place when the odds were even.* Bonn's choice for that place is the Vosges Mountains during the autumn and winter of 1944-1945, specifically the campaign in the High and Low Vosges from 15 October 1944 to 15 January 1945.

Because his book grew out of his doctoral dissertation, Bonn has probably done more research in primary source material—both German and U.S.—than most military historians writing today. He explains some of his research methods early (on pages 7-12) and lists many of his sources in a selected bibliography near the end of the book. Each of his five chapters includes numerous footnotes, all grouped together between pages 235-268, and many of these contain important information.

After an introductory chapter, Bonn discusses the battleground—"never before in the history of modern warfare had an army fought its way successfully through opposition in the Vosges"; the

opposing forces, including lengthy discussions of U.S. and German doctrine, organization, and training; the battle for the High Vosges, 15 October-4 December 1944; and the battle for the Low Vosges, 1 December 1944-15 January 1945. He then offers a wrap-up chapter in which he discusses the effects of training, organization, and doctrine on the campaign's outcome.

The two operational chapters contain detailed orders of battle and numerous maps. A grouping of photographs is inserted after page 138.

The battle was far from easy on the opposing ground forces. It was particularly difficult for the American soldier, who was usually called on to attack prepared defensive positions. The weather was atrocious, with freezing temperatures, almost daily rain, and considerable winds. Both sides paid dearly.

Bonn seldom goes below regimental level when discussing the infantry and armor battles. It was not his intent to show how individual soldiers fared on a day-by-day basis. But he does include enough of the sights and sounds of battle to keep the reader's interest in the campaign's overall progress.

I noted only two minor errors: A U.S. division artillery battalion had 12 tubes, not 18 (page 57), and the U.S. M1919A4 (later the A6) machinegun was classified as a light weapon, not medium. The M1917A1 machinegun was the heavy weapon; it was not the M1917A4, by the way, as Bonn indicates (page 24).

Bonn notes that "very little effort has been expended on the campaign by the historical community." He's right, of course. In fact, the official Army "green series" volume that includes the campaign did not appear until 1993.

Our current crop of infantrymen should become familiar with this campaign, for there is much they can learn from its study.

---

***Terrible Innocence: General Sherman at War.* By Mark Coburn. Hippocrene, 1993. 248 Pages. \$22.00.** Reviewed by Major Don Rightmyer, U.S. Air Force. Retired.

During the past five years, several worthwhile (although controversial) biographies have been published about the Civil War service of General William Tecumseh Sherman. These have included Michael Fellman's *Citizen Sherman*, Charles Royster's *Destructive War*, and John Marszalek's *A Passion for Order*. Mark Coburn's *Terrible Innocence* weighs in on the lightweight side of the recently published Sherman biographies.

Mr. Coburn presently teaches English at Fort Lewis College, and this is his first published volume of military history.

This book will serve the general reader best as an overview and general introduction to Sherman's Civil War career and the campaigns in which he participated. This book is undocumented with only a two-page "Suggested Reading" at the end of the text. It is obvious from the quality and depth of the narrative overall that this was a subject that intrigued the author and motivated him to bring together a rather superficial, general assessment of Sherman from his early problems in the military command of Kentucky through his triumphal victories in the Carolinas.

If you can find this book on a library shelf, pick it up for an easy read. It is not one of the "must read" Civil War histories and certainly not one of the better ones dealing with Sherman.

---

### RECENT AND RECOMMENDED

***Iron Fist: Classic Armoured Warfare Case Studies.* By Bryan Perrett. Arms & Armour, 1996. 240 Pages. \$14.95, Softbound.**

***Operation Iceberg: The Invasion and Conquest of Okinawa in World War II—An Oral History.* By Gerald Astor. Dell, 1996. 560 Pages. \$5.99, Softbound.**

***The War North of Rome, June 1944 May 1945.* By Thomas R. Brooks. Foreword by Senator Bob Dole. Sarpedon, 1996. 432 Pages. \$27.50.**

***The Last Year of the Kriegsmarine: May 1944 May 1945.* By V.E. Tarrant. Sterling, 1996. 288 Pages. \$14.95, Softbound.**

***Over the Battlefronts: Amazing Air Action of World War One.* By Peter Kilduff. Sterling, 1996. 256 Pages. \$29.95. *Disaster on Green Ramp: The Army's Response.* By Mary Ellen Condon-Rall. U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1996. (GPO S/N 008-029-00328-7.) 145 Pages. \$8.00, Softbound.**