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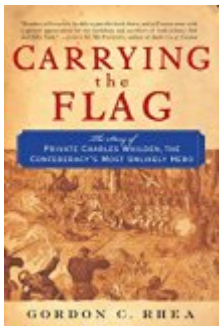

Gordon Rhea. *Carrying the Flag: The Story of Private Charles Whilden, the Confederacy's Most Unlikely Hero.* New York: Basic Books, 2004. 278 pp. $16.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-465-06957-6.

Reviewed by Aaron Sheehan-Dean

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Gordon Rhea's most recent book tells the story of the brief (one week) military service of Charles Whilden, a middle-aged Confederate private from South Carolina, during the first battles of the Overland Campaign. Rhea's previous work on the Virginia campaigns of 1864 have established him as the most knowledgeable scholar about the period.[1] He possesses a remarkable skill at explaining the complex maneuvers and events of those confusing weeks and he is equally adept at crafting engaging narratives. All of those skills are on display in this engaging text.

Rhea draws on his knowledge of the spring 1864 campaigns to set the scene for Whilden's actions with precision. The early chapters summarize the course of the war until early 1864 and Rhea gracefully narrows the story from the wide frame of the pre-war years to the individual moments of the crucial battles. As with his earlier work, Rhea offers concise and effective evaluations of the actions undertaken by the opposing commanders and their subordinates. He shows what officers knew and judges their actions based on that. He also gives readers a good sense of the missed opportunities based on what we now know about each army's position and condition. Rhea is scrupulous about framing the larger story of the war with reference to the centrality of slavery. He describes the Stono Rebellion and Denmark Vesey's conspiracy as well as the brutal white responses to both events in detail, and reminds the reader that southerners labored to construct a slave republic. Rhea is to be commended for insisting on the centrality of slavery to the Confederacy cause in a book clearly intended for a wide audience.

Rhea succinctly narrates Charles Whilden's early life. Whilden appears as a typical white South Carolinian of the period, firmly committed to slavery and state's rights and convinced of the pre-eminence of his native Charleston. Never married, Whilden ventured far from South Carolina in an attempt to earn his fortune, spending time in Michigan and the New Mexico Territory before the war. In none of his various travels or occupations was Whilden particularly successful and this inauspiciousness figures prominently in the book-jacket, which advertises Whilden as the

"Confederacy's Most Unlikely Hero." Whilden also suffered from epilepsy, which kept him out of active service until early 1864, when the Confederate military, desperate for manpower, finally accepted him. Whilden earned the distinction of receiving what must have been one of the least fortunate draws in the whole war, being assigned to the 1st. South Carolina on the eve of Ulysses S. Grant's major offensives in Virginia. Whilden would have disagreed with that assessment; he sought military action and a chance to defend his state, and he received a cardinal opportunity to do both. The 1st. South Carolina, a part of Samuel McGowan's Brigade and Cadmus Wilcox's Division, was one of the most respected Confederate regiments and they played a leading role in the battles of the Wilderness and Spotsylvania.

Rhea identifies the battles of spring 1864 as the most crucial in the Civil War and in this account one moment in particular stands out: the Confederate effort to retake what became known as the Bloody Angle at Spotsylvania. Following Union General Winfield Scott Hancock's successful breach of this weak spot in Robert E. Lee's lines early in the morning of May 12, Confederates recognized that they had to reclaim this ground while a new defensive line could be built farther to the south. In the effort to hold their ground, the 1st. South Carolina and other Confederates were rallied by the sight of Charles Whilden waving the regimental flag atop the earthworks that separated the two armies. Union fire destroyed the flag staff and shot Whilden in the shoulder, but wrapping the flag about himself, Whilden maintained his stand and helped guide Confederates to success.

There is little question that Whilden's actions required terrific courage and significantly more physical prowess than most soldiers were expecting from a forty-year old given to epileptic fits. There is also little question that the ability of Lee's Army to resist Union attacks in early May prolonged the war considerably, and that Confederate resistance at the Bloody Angle was a crucial moment in the campaign, but Rhea frames his conclusion less in terms of the strategic consequences of the battle, something he has done quite well in his other writings, but in terms of Whilden himself. He concludes, "there can be no question, however, that he [Whilden] was an unsung hero of the Bloody Angle, and that his valor helped deliver the day to the Confederacy" (p. 236). In this respect, Rhea accomplishes the goal he set for himself in the book's introduction: "to tell Charles's tale" and to suggest that we all "might possess reserves" of bravery (p. 3). For this reviewer, however, history should also suggest a deeper explanation of phenomena and change in the past. Rhea's previous work, which marries analytical rigor to narrative sophistication, frequently achieves this, but by framing the conclusion of this text in terms of "heroism" and "courage," Rhea does not fully satisfy the historical possibilities of his story.

Note

[1]. *The Battle of the Wilderness: May 5-6, 1864* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994); *The Battles for Spotsylvania Court House and the Road to Yellow Tavern: May 7-12, 1864* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997); *To the North Anna River: Grant and Lee, May 13-25, 1864* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000); and, *Cold Harbor: Grant and Lee, May 26-June 3, 1864* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002).

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