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Gerald L. Earley. *I Belonged to the 116th: A Narrative of the 116th Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the Civil War.* Bowie: Heritage Books, 2004. vii + 269 pp. $25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7884-2529-5.

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Butternut Yeomen Answer Lincoln's Call to Defend the Union

The role of the common soldier during the American Civil War has held the fascination of scholars and general public alike for decades. Bell Wiley's *The Life of Johnny Reb: The Common Soldier of the Confederacy* and *The Life of Billy Yank: The Common Soldier of the Union*, published in 1943 and 1952 respectively, introduced many twentieth-century readers to the average Civil War soldier. More recently, scholars such as Reid Mitchell have focused on the reasons why common soldiers fought.[1] Men frequently entered military service with family and friends from their own town or county. The act of enlisting together often served to encourage those men who wavered. It also helped to further unite the men after they were under arms. In a manner of speaking, regiments often served as surrogate families for men surrounded by the camaraderie, drudgery, and horrors of mid-nineteenth-century army life.

William Burton once wrote that regiments were "the basic building blocks of the Civil War Armies" and that they "appeared in a fascinating variety of shapes and colors."[2] Indeed, volunteer regiments often reflected the socio-economic and demographic patterns of the regions from which they came. After the war, veterans wrote some of the first regimental histories and in so doing memorialized not only their roles, but also the deeds and sacrifices of their comrades-in-arms. John Pullen's *The Twentieth Maine* (1980), Paul Taylor's *Glory Was Not Their Companion: The 26th New York Volunteer Infantry in the Civil War* (2005), and Robert Huhn Jones's *Guarding the Overland Trails: The 11th Ohio Cavalry in the Civil War* (2005) comprise only a few of the many books written about individual Civil War regiments. Gerald L. Earley's *I Belonged To The 116th: A Narrative of the 116th Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the Civil War* is one of the latest additions to a long list of regimental studies.

In introducing his work, Earley explains that other regimental histories do not "address the native born soldiers of the lower Midwest who fought for the Union–men with values associated with the North as well as the South." The 116th Ohio Volunteer Infantry (OVI) was important, he asserts, because its soldiers "chose to fight for an administration [Lincoln's] not necessarily popular in their own neighborhood" (pp. v-vi). Indeed, during the Ohio gubernatorial election in 1863, most of the soldiers in the 116th who voted did so for John Brough and not for the Democrat Clement L. Vallandigham. According to Earley, "many in the regiment felt that a vote for Vallandigham was an indication of disloyalty to the Union cause" (p. 61). Tensions between soldiers reached such levels that officers ordered a pre-election halt to political arguments because of the unrest they caused in camp.

In chronological fashion, Earley traces the 116th's wartime experiences from its formal organization in August 1862, at Camp Putnam in Marietta, Ohio, to June 1865 when most of its companies were mustered out of service. While he points out many of the unit's deficiencies, such as problems with discipline and desertion, training challenges in 1862 and 1863, and fraudulent parole and furlough passes, Earley's book is generally a celebration of the unit's accomplishments. He relies heavily on the work of Lt. Col. Thomas F. Wildes, a loyal Republican who published a history of the regiment in 1884 and who, by Earley's admission, often found it difficult to record the unit's more compelling weaknesses and failures.[3]

After its organization, the 116th OVI worked its way through western Virginia, in what became West Virginia in 1863, to the Shenandoah Valley, where it saw action at places such as Winchester, Piedmont, Lynchburg, and Fisher's Hill. According to Earley, until Maj. Gen. Phillip Sheridan assumed overall command of the Army of the Shenandoah, the Ohio regiment often found itself led by incompetent corps generals such as Robert Milroy and Franz Sigel who "severely handicapped" Federal troops (p. 71). In 1864, the 116th was attached to Sheridan's Army of the Shenandoah, where it participated in the

Valley Campaigns of that year. Charged with helping to defeat Jubal Early's Confederate Army in the region, the regiment fought at the battle of Cedar Creek in October 1864. In that battle, the 116th stood tall because it was, according to Earley, one of only a few federal regiments to maintain an orderly retreat and then to offer "effective resistance" when Sheridan later rallied his troops (p. 181). Finally, in April 1865, the regiment participated in Ulysses S. Grant's final offensive against Robert E. Lee's dwindling army, arriving at Appomattox Court House in time for the latter's surrender.

While Earley's effort to place the unit's military role in larger context is at times strained, his discussion of the relationship between Sheridan and the 116th OVI is interesting, if a bit too celebratory. For instance, he insists the regiment's Colonel Wildes was able to intercede with Sheridan on behalf of Dayton, Virginia's pacifist Dunkards to prevent the burning of the town in retaliation for the murder of the General's engineer, Lt. John R. Meigs. Meigs was the son of U.S. Army Quartermaster General Montgomery Meigs. Of Wildes, Earley writes, he "proved at Dayton [in October 1864] that he was as morally courageous as he was physically courageous; his civic action at Dayton was a triumph of moral courage" (p. 160). Given Wildes's apparent penchant for accentuating the positive, perhaps the author has given the soldier too much credit for influencing Sheridan.

Earley suggests that the 116th OVI was unique because it bucked the political leanings of its home counties in southeastern Ohio. Yet, there were many regiments from other border states such as Kentucky, Maryland, and even Pennsylvania, that came from Democratic counties who nonetheless contributed significantly to the Union war effort. Moreover, while Earley insists that the 116th was "markedly" different "from the regiments chronicled in the familiar regimental histories," and concludes "the men from the 116th were representative of a significant portion of the men who served in blue," he fails to explain convincingly how and why such might be the case (pp. v-vi). One wonders, too, whether the regiment's evolution from "a ragged and poorly drilled unit" to a unit that "was among the best of the veteran regiments in soldierly bearing" was a transition different from any other Federal volunteer unit (p. 192). Throughout the war, Americans on both sides showered similar accolades on other units.

Some of Earley's larger conclusions further substantiate what historians already know about the war and the Federal soldier. The men of the 116th OVI flocked to arms because of patriotism–their patriotism frequently overrode local political rivalries. As he appropriately points out, "patriotism was without question the primary motive for the 1862 enlistments"; after that, "coercion and enticement entered the picture" (p. 3). On the cause of the war, Earley breaks no new ground, suggesting that "the soldiers and the people [of Ohio] understood that the wealthy Southern planter class had brought on the war for the sake of slavery, and the threat of war would always exist until slavery was forever swept away" (p. 136). He fails to address how these specific Ohio soldiers viewed the issue of race, which is particularly surprising given how closely most of them lived to Virginia. In discussing Gettysburg, Earley insists that after the Pennsylvania battle, "the rebel cause was doomed" (p. 57). This contradicts the scholarship of James McPherson and others who reject the notion of inevitability. Such an interpretation suggests an overly triumphant tone that at various times throughout the book weakens Earley's work.

Gerald Earley has added to our understanding of how average Northerners responded to the Confederate threat to the Union. His book should be helpful to individuals engaged in genealogical research because the index includes an extensive list of names of those soldiers who served in or came in contact with the 116th OVI. That the author fails to include battle names or other subject headings in the index does, however, limit the utility of his work. More problematic is the publisher's overall presentation of the book. It has only one map–that of the Battle of Piedmont in 1864–which is partially obscured by the binding (p. 86). Other technical problems abound: citations in the text are not indicated by superscript numbers giving the text an unfinished look; several photographs are fuzzy making it difficult to appreciate fully their contribution to the text; and the book suffers from inconsistent editing. Sentences lack prepositions (pp. 36, 39, 101) and words are carelessly misspelled. For instance, "Rutherford B. Hayes" is spelled without an "e" in the surname (p. 13). There are a couple of factual errors that stand out, the most obvious of which is the author's reference to "West Virginia" in 1862, when it did not officially become a state until 1863 (p. 16). Unfortunately, these technical problems tend to reduce the overall effectiveness of Earley's writing and distract readers from fully appreciating the results of his research. These issues aside, people interested in the 116th OVI should find this book a relaxing one to read.

Notes

[1]. See Reid Mitchell, *Civil War Soldiers* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988).

[2]. William L. Burton, *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 124, no. 6 (December 1980), p. 455.

[3]. See Thomas F Wildes, *Record of the One Hundred and Sixteenth Ohio Infantry Volunteers in the War of the Rebellion* (Sandusky, Ohio: I. F. Mack and Bro., Printers, 1884).

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