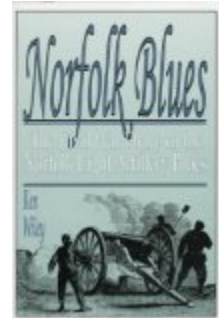


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kenneth Wiley, ed. *Norfolk Blues: The Civil War Diary of the Norfolk Light Artillery Blues*. Shippensburg, Penn.: Burd Street Press, 1997. x + 326 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57249-019-2.

Reviewed by Christopher S. Stowe (University of Toledo)  
Published on H-CivWar (November, 1997)



The ongoing publication of Civil War diaries, letters, and memoirs attests to the enduring popularity that this watershed era continues to have upon American society. Each year, a litany of primary-source titles serves to satisfy an insatiable hunger among casual readers and researchers alike. *Norfolk Blues*, edited by Kenneth Wiley, is among the latest contributions to this genre. It is the war diary of Private John H. Walters, a member of Norfolk, Virginia's "Light Artillery Blues"—a unit that saw extensive service within Robert E. Lee's famed Army of Northern Virginia from December 1862 until the eve of surrender at Appomattox Court House, Virginia, in April 1865.

The work begins with Wiley providing essential information about both the diarist and his battery. Walters, born in Holland in 1835, emigrated to the United States as a young man. Initially living at Albany, New York, Walters soon settled in Norfolk, where, in 1859, he entered the bookbinding trade. With the coming of war in 1861, Walters enlisted in Norfolk's prestigious artillery company, the Blues, a unit whose existence dated to 1829. Named for its distinctive blue uniforms (exchanged for Confederate gray after First Manassas), the battery for over one year guarded, ironically without ordnance, its home city against Federal forces in the Hampton Roads vicinity.

In the wake of George B. McClellan's and Ambrose E. Burnside's investitures of the Virginia and North Carolina coasts in the spring of 1862, the Blues evacuated Norfolk for Petersburg, Virginia; it is on this occasion that the private's journal commences. Walters spent many of his early months at Petersburg ill and bedridden, so much so that he was not present for the fully-refitted

Blues' first engagement at Coggin's Point, Virginia, on 1 August. By December, Walters and his Blues (now styled "Grandy's Battery," in honor of its longtime commanding officer, Capt. Charles W. Grandy) were officially assigned to Lee's host. The battery saw action in nearly all the army's subsequent fights and incurred its first combat casualties at Chancellorsville, Virginia, on 1 May 1863.

Walters displays throughout his diary the high morale befitting a member of the Confederacy's most lustrous field army. Even into the dark days of 1864-65, the gunner maintained his force's superiority over its principal Yankee opponent, the Army of the Potomac. Moreover, Walters never wavered from his belief in the sanctity of his cause. Only during the final week of the war, after suffering a minor yet painful wound during which the majority of his battery was captured, did the private evince a hint of despondency, stating that he would be "greatly surprised" if Lee's shattered remnants were to unite with Joseph E. Johnston's Confederate force in North Carolina (p. 221).

Walters's journal entries detail far more than the day-to-day activities of a private soldier. The artillerist comments upon various matters, political and military, including his aversion to Confederate Negro conscription as well as his distaste for congratulatory addresses from army headquarters issued after battlefield victories. Walters even offers insight into the Federal presidential campaign of 1864. Indeed, Walters displays remarkable confidence in his convictions, which are offered in measured and articulate prose.

Alas, perhaps too articulate. Some of the private's assertions, to say the least, stretch credulity. For example, mere days after the battles of Third Winchester, Fisher's

Hill, and Cedar Creek, Virginia, Walters provides concise and remarkably accurate summaries of these contests. The death of Union general James B. McPherson near Atlanta on 22 July 1864 is recorded within the diary on the following day, even though the Army of Northern Virginia was under partial siege at Petersburg, some four hundred miles from Atlanta as the crow flies, and two large Federal armies hampered communication between the cities. Moreover, Walters's powers of prognostication are at times extreme. John C. Breckinridge's victory at New Market, Virginia, in 1864 is noted with the following passage:

It is more than probable that Breckenridge (sic) will now be ordered down to us, though I fear it will be found a bad policy to take our troops from the (Shenandoah) Valley, as it is more than likely that the remains of (Franz) Sigel's command will be given to some other general, who receiving new troops or forming a junction with the troops in the Khanawas (sic) Valley under (William W.) Averell, will overrun Staunton, destroy Lexington, capture Lynchburg, destroy the Central Railroad, and . . . possibly may come down to reinforce . . . (Ulysses S.) Grant (p. 118).

Similarly, Walters views Breckinridge's presence at Petersburg in January 1865 as an imminent indication that the general would be appointed Secretary of War to replace the departed James A. Seddon. Indeed, such displays of prescience literally abound within the diary's entries.

While it is perhaps conceivable that Private Walters received unflinchingly accurate reports soon after major

engagements and displayed an uncommon foreknowledge, a more likely explanation may lie in the surviving document itself. As editor Wiley himself states, the published diary is not printed from an original manuscript, but a "typewritten copy in the possession of the city of Norfolk's Kirn Library, Sargeant Memorial Room" (p. ix). Wiley contends that Walters's daughter typed the manuscript from the original. Sadly, there is no indication that an original in fact survives. If not, one must question the work's very authenticity.

Editorial deficiencies also weaken *Norfolk Blues*. The misspellings are notable and annoying – McClellan, Breckinridge, and Massachusetts governor John Andrew are misspelled not only within Wiley's commentary but in the book's index as well. Furthermore, the work lacks editorial notation. Finally, on page 25, a photograph purporting to be that of a 6-pounder artillery piece appears instead to be that of a 12-pounder "Napoleon."

Though Wiley does admirable work in providing extensive vignettes of many members of the of the Blues, as well as detailing the postbellum story of a military unit that survives to this very day (as the 111th Field Artillery Battalion), the book's real value should ultimately lie in its credibility as a primary source. Unfortunately, *Norfolk Blues, the Civil War Diary of the Norfolk Light Artillery Blues* may be equal parts diary and memoir.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar>

**Citation:** Christopher S. Stowe. Review of Wiley, Kenneth, ed., *Norfolk Blues: The Civil War Diary of the Norfolk Light Artillery Blues*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. November, 1997.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1468>

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).