

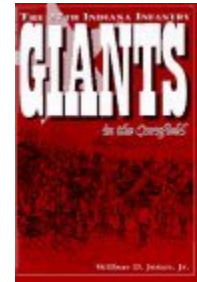
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Wilbur D. Jones, Jr. *Giants in the Cornfield: The 27th Indiana Infantry*. Shippensburg, Penn.: White Mane Publishing, 1997. xix + 319 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57249-015-4.

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In the years after the Civil War, Union and Confederate veterans wrote and published numerous accounts of their participation in the great national struggle. They wrote for a variety of reasons, including patriotic fervor, nostalgia for the days of youth, and historical accuracy (or, telling their side of the story). Histories of the regiments in which they served emerged for the same reasons, along with the desire to memorialize the fallen comrades of the units. These regimental accounts, written by participants in the struggle, continue to have great usefulness for historical research. Recent publications on the actions of Civil War regiments are seemingly no less numerous. Civil War “buffs” and re-enactors research regimental activities to get the taste and feel of combat. Scholars look to the regiment as a useful vehicle by which to analyze the experience and meaning of war for its participants and their society.

The 27th Indiana Volunteer Infantry regiment was by all accounts an extraordinary unit. Raised in the summer and fall of 1861 and serving for the following three years, the regiment could claim several distinctions. The 27th fought in a large number of major battles. It participated in the campaigns of both the Army of the Potomac in the East and Gen. William T. Sherman’s army that advanced on Atlanta. The unit suffered very high casualties, and it contained on average the tallest men in the Union army.

Given the first three features, the 27th Indiana would appear to be a choice regiment to study in depth. Wilbur D. Jones’ *Giants in the Cornfield* is an effort to describe in detail the common experiences of a fighting regiment. Jones uncovered many heretofore unknown manuscript collections and employed oft-ignored records in the National Archives and other repositories to piece together an account of battlefield heroics, suffering and

internecine conflict.

Jones’s book eschews the chronological narrative. Instead, the work is based on twelve thematic chapters, each touching on an aspect of the regiment’s experience. In the book’s preface, Jones makes clear his intention “to add a fresh dimension” to the Civil War corpus by focusing on the soldiers’ “characteristics, interactions, feelings, and emotions” (p. xiii). Jones’ first chapter is an evocative account of the 27th Indiana’s fight in the battle of Antietam in September 1862, the engagement in which the unit suffered its worst losses and for which it is most famous. This chapter serves as an introduction and explanation for the title of the book. (The regiment fought a Texas brigade in a cornfield; soldiers of the unit also found the famous “lost order” before the battle that helped George B. McClellan defeat Robert E. Lee.) Subsequent chapters treat themes such as sickness, medical care, prisoner-of-war experiences, breaches of discipline, religiosity among the soldiers, boredom in camp, and morale. Each chapter depicts the horrors of the soldiers’ experience, from the din of battle to languishing in camp or prison, sick and wasted.

As is inevitable in such a scheme, episodes recur more than once and Jones’ account sometimes verges on the redundant. As is his wont, Jones does not cover the unit’s participation in its other major (or minor) battles in anything like the detail he lavishes on the Antietam experience. Other battles merit relatively few words in comparison and are dispensed with seriatim in chapter four’s discussion of bravery (pp. 61-81). Readers wanting to learn about the unit’s service in the battles of Winchester, Cedar Mountain, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, Resaca, and elsewhere will be seriously disappointed.

Jones’s choice of thematic chapters allows him to

mine the wealth of personal manuscripts and official records to assemble quotations on given topics. However, he often fails to rise above the merely anecdotal and analyze fully the rich subject matter. He quotes from the letters and diaries of the 27th's soldiers and seemingly lays them end to end to fashion his text. In one instance, Jones prints excerpts of the diary of an imprisoned soldier in the text for several pages (pp. 145-150). Edmund Randolph Brown's 1899 regimental history is quoted extensively throughout the book. Subjects such as soldiers' responses to killing and death, the Emancipation Proclamation, desertion and other subjects are not afforded the attention due them. Rather, Jones admits to a fascination with the height of the soldiers (especially a six-foot, ten-and-one-half-inch captain) and dwells on it at length. In many cases he takes the words of potentially problematic sources at face value, as is most evident in his use of pension application files from the National Archives to depict the health of the troops (see Chapter 10, "Typhoid, Catarrh, and Soldier's Rheumatism: Health and Fitness"). He employs without circumspection the imprecise medical terms found in the pension files and other medical records to describe and diagnose the wounds and illnesses contracted by the soldiers.

At other times, the author reads too much into the records. For example, Jones accuses a captain and an enlisted man who messed together of having a homosexual relationship. However, the court martial records he cites fail to note any homosexual misconduct, but rather point to the unwise practice of officers fraternizing with enlisted men. The captain was dismissed for fraternization, itself a serious problem in the eyes of higher commanders. I doubt that Indiana Governor Oliver P. Morton would have re-appointed and promoted him to lieutenant colonel in another Indiana volunteer regiment had he known he was adjudged guilty of homosexual practices.

Elsewhere, Jones's facts concerning issues ancillary but important to the main story come into question. The Indiana Sanitary Commission was not the first such organization created. Regimental correspondence states that Major John Mehringer resigned his commission shortly after the organization of the regiment because of prob-

lems arising from his continuing tenure as county auditor back home, not because his wife was mentally ill. Governor Morton appointed allotments commissioners to convey soldiers' pay to their families under an act passed by the U.S. Congress and did not undertake such an endeavor unilaterally. At other times, Jones's conclusions seem unclear. He highlights Colonel Silas Colgrove's failings as a leader, yet concludes that the regiment's commander "earned the appointment (brevet brigadier general) with steadfast hard work and achievement" (p. 271). He acknowledges Colgrove's service as presiding officer on the important military commission at Indianapolis that tried civilian conspirators in the fall of 1864 but does not connect his brevet promotion to the successful conviction of the conspirators.

Jones's thematic description of life in the 27th Indiana would have benefited from incorporating the findings of much of the recent work done on a range of subjects related to the Civil War and nineteenth-century American society. These include important works on the mental health of soldiers, their ideology and motivation, desertion, women and the Civil War, sex lives of the soldiers, and the role of religion in the ranks. Jones's notes and bibliography do not indicate that he consulted this growing body of work during his research. As a result, the book's analysis lacks depth. Moreover, broad and stereotypical statements concerning "lifestyles" (p.124), Victorian standards of behavior, and gender roles appear. Again, familiarity with recent historical literature would have served the author well.

The book would have profited from better editing. Typographical errors, awkward sentences, grammatical infelicities, and improper word usage appear in the text.

While many "buffs" and re-enactors may find much of interest in its pages, the serious scholar of the Civil War will be disappointed in this ordinary treatment of an extraordinary regiment.

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