

H-Net Reviews

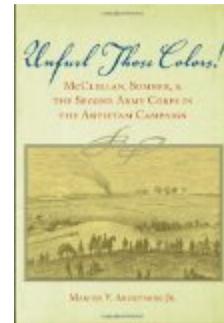
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Marion V. Armstrong. *Unfurl Those Colors: McClellan, Sumner, and the Second Army Corps in the Antietam Campaign*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2008. viii + 384 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8173-1600-6.

Reviewed by Timothy J. Orr (Old Dominion University)

Published on H-CivWar (June, 2011)

Commissioned by Martin P. Johnson



The Second Army Corps at Antietam

Marion V. Armstrong's *Unfurl Those Colors!: McClellan, Sumner, and the Second Corps in the Antietam Campaign* is a traditional military history that follows the Army of the Potomac's Second Corps during the Maryland campaign of 1862. Armstrong charts the Second Corps' movements from September 6, 1862, to two days after the conclusion of the Battle of Antietam, September 19, 1862. Armstrong's book is not terribly thesis-ridden; however, it does attempt to correct misconceptions regarding the performance of the Second Corps' commander, Major General Edwin V. Sumner. In Armstrong's words, Sumner was not the "incompetent old fool out of place as a corps commander" that many historians have made him out to be. In fact, Armstrong contends, "Rather than the general responsible for the failure of his corps at Antietam, Sumner was a commander effectively working toward accomplishment of the mission and objectives given him by his commander, and as commander was willing to take risks necessary to achieve those objectives" (p. 3).

In terms of interpreting the Battle of Antietam, *Unfurl Those Colors!* boasts an impressive assortment of maps that detail the Second Corps' movements. Arguably the best quality of the book, Armstrong's play-by-play presentation of Antietam's battle action is a model for military historians to follow. His maps are highly detailed. They depict terrain, vegetation, positions and formations of Union and Confederate units, and command structure in a clear, effective manner. Experts will find his carto-

graphic views refreshingly insightful and first-time readers will find them comprehensible and cogent.

Armstrong makes two key revisions of Sumner's leadership. First, he attempts to absolve Sumner of the blame for the careless advance of Brigadier General John Sedgwick's division into the West Woods, and second, he pardons Sumner for convincing Major General George McClellan not to renew the attack from the Union right flank against the Confederate left. For the latter issue, Armstrong makes a convincing case that Sumner's legacy suffered at the hands of merciless historians—started, apparently, by a Massachusetts veteran named Francis W. Palfrey and taken up by postwar writers—who maligned Sumner for lacking the initiative to renew the attack on the afternoon of September 17 and thus not delivering the coup de grace to Robert E. Lee's weakened Army of Northern Virginia.

Of Armstrong's two stabs at revisionism, his former contention is weaker. He proves that Sumner did not, in fact, send Sedgwick's division blindly into the West Woods. Armstrong points out that Sumner performed a reconnaissance previous to ordering Sedgwick's attack, verifying that Sumner carefully chose the ground over which the division was to cross. Still, despite this foresight, Sedgwick's division routed. The simple fact remains that Sumner advanced Sedgwick's division to a point such that it exposed its left flank to a Confederate counterattack. Sumner and Sedgwick, it seems, expected

a single green regiment to protect the division's left, but both generals failed to realize that no other troops protected that regiment's left flank. This interpretation comes across as an attempt to transfer the liability of an entire division's misfortune onto a single, inexperienced unit, a dubious contention if that is what Armstrong believes. Armstrong dubs Sumner's advance "the right decision at the right time" (p. 203). Certainly, no one can fault Sumner for making a decision that seemed reasonable to him, but plainly, his decision to advance Sedgwick's division into the West Woods caused the division's catastrophe. A command decision, not a quirk of fate, led to the division's 2,210 casualties.

Armstrong's second major revision, related to Sumner's decision not to renew the assault from the Federal right flank against the Confederate left on the afternoon of September 17, is more believable. Traditionally, historians have blamed Sumner's post-battle demoralization for convincing McClellan of the hopelessness of renewing the attack in this sector of the field. Armstrong contends that Sumner "did not lapse into a demoralized state of mind that made him an ineffective commander on the Federal right. To the contrary, Sumner was active, aware of the events going on around him, and in command" (p. 288). Armstrong makes it clear that Sumner accurately comprehended the disposition and condition of the Fed-

eral right flank and that he conducted his troops with an eye toward thwarting a possible Confederate counterattack. Further, Armstrong questions what good a renewed attack would have done, suggesting that Sumner likely understood that Lee had improved his defenses on the north end of the battlefield and that they were stronger than they had been in the morning. Finally, Armstrong claims that the real decision to renew or not to renew the attack ultimately rested with McClellan, who in reality was not hoodwinked by any supposed demoralization on Sumner's part, but in fact understood the battlefield situation clearly. McClellan sent Sumner a series of messages that suggested the possibility of renewing the attack, but they stopped far short of outright ordering him to proceed. Much of the anti-Sumner rhetoric, it seems, came from McClellan apologists who wrote on "Little Mac's" behalf long after Sumner had died.

Military historians will find plenty of useful material in *Unfurl Those Colors!* Armstrong's book serves as a model for a new style of Civil War campaign history, as it integrates traditional tactical minutiae with social histories of the different Union regiments and biographies of the different battlefield leaders in the Second Corps. The tactical material is not terribly new, but this book will serve as a useful tool for military staff rides, battlefield enthusiasts, and historians of Civil War combat.

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

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

Citation: Timothy J. Orr. Review of Armstrong, Marion V., *Unfurl Those Colors: McClellan, Sumner, and the Second Army Corps in the Antietam Campaign*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. June, 2011.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=32439>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.