



John B. Lundstrom. *One Drop in a Sea of Blue: The Liberators of the Ninth Minnesota.* St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2012. 499 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87351-821-5; ISBN 978-0-87351-872-7.

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Published on H-CivWar (July, 2013)

Commissioned by Hugh F. Dubrulle

Antislavery Soldiers from the Land of Ten Thousand Lakes

John B. Lundstrom's *One Drop in a Sea of Blue* is a narrative history of the Ninth Minnesota, a volunteer regiment in the Union army that fought in the American Civil War from summer 1862 to the war's conclusion in 1865. The regiment, though little discussed in military histories of the war, participated in a number of crucial engagements, from the disastrous Union defeat at the hands of Nathan Bedford Forrest at Brice's Crossroads in June 1864 to the decisive victory of General George Thomas at Nashville that December. A number of its members became prisoners at Andersonville, and some of them escaped the abysmal conditions of the notorious prison camp by serving in the Confederate army. After the end of the war, the unit performed garrison duty in the former Confederacy before finally mustering out of service in August 1865.

Through lengthy accounts of battlefield events and prison life, Lundstrom situates the Ninth Minnesota within the larger scale of the war. Its members, whom Lundstrom fleshes out as individuals using an impressive array of archival sources, become lenses onto the rank-and-file Union army as a whole. Yet the narrative is at its most interesting when focusing on one aspect of the Ninth Minnesota that was not typical: its stance on slavery. Many of the men in the regiment "differed from the vast majority of the Union army" in hewing to the "general concept of emancipation," rather than solely to the preservation of the Union, as their impetus for joining the war effort (p. 408). A "strong majority," though by no means all, of the Ninth Minnesota opposed the pecu-

liar institution as a moral evil, and thus "did not go South just to restore the Union" (p. 40).

The antislavery sentiments of the Ninth Minnesota emerged the summer of 1863, as the regiment was stationed in Missouri. A Unionist slaveholder named Charles Walker planned on escaping gradual emancipation in the state by moving to Kentucky. One of his slaves, however, fled to Union army lines and pled with the soldiers he encountered—the men of the Ninth Minnesota—to rescue his family. Thirty-eight men from the unit responded by removing Walker's slaves from a train departing for Kentucky and setting them free. These "liberators" were courtmartialled and temporarily imprisoned for their actions, which defied military orders regarding loyal slaveholders in loyal states (pp. 3-4).

While the book, as a narrative history, has no single animating thread, the "wonderful and unique" actions of the "liberators" constitute its fascinating and well-written centerpiece (p. 74). Lundstrom, however, needs to do more to situate the event within the larger scope of the war and the modern historiographical debate over the motivations of Civil War soldiers. He takes pains to stress the singularity of the Ninth Minnesota's active and "forcible slave rescue," as opposed to the more passive antislavery actions of other units (p. 69). Moreover, he carefully avoids extrapolating the behavior of the Ninth Minnesota into broad claims about the general motivations of Union soldiers. Citing Gary Gallagher, Lundstrom notes that most Federal troops in the first years of the Civil War fought only to preserve the Union, not to

abolish slavery. Yet the author also claims that the Ninth Minnesota demonstrates the “changing attitudes of Federal soldiers” as a whole towards slavery, and helps to animate the broad question of why Union soldiers volunteered to fight (pp. 4-5). Were the thirty-eight liberators and their actions unique, then, or indicative of larger trends? Moreover, can the actions of soldiers who joined the war effort in summer 1862—a time when many in the upper military and political echelons of the United States, including Abraham Lincoln, were moving to embrace emancipation as a war aim—illuminate the motivations of the Union ranks in general? Lundstrom needs to flesh out such issues to a greater extent.[1]

Overall, however, Lundstrom succeeds in offering a well-written and fascinating account of a little-known Union army regiment. While many regimental histories home in with single-minded purpose on battlefield maneuvers at the expense of both the larger picture of the

war and the nuanced stories of the individual soldiers themselves, *One Drop in a Sea of Blue* incorporates historiographical and biographical perspectives into its narrative. Lundstrom also contributes to the historical literature on the Union army by advancing scholarly understanding of the issue of Federal troops’ antislavery motivations. His book will hopefully stimulate further debate on how soldiers like the Ninth Minnesota liberators fit into the greater scheme of the Union war. It thus comes recommended for scholars and general audiences alike.

Note

[1]. For the two poles in the scholarly debate over Union soldiers’ motivations, see Chandra Manning, *What This Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War* (New York: Vintage, 2008); and Gary W. Gallagher, *The Union War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

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Citation: Frank Cirillo. Review of Lundstrom, John B., *One Drop in a Sea of Blue: The Liberators of the Ninth Minnesota*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. July, 2013.

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