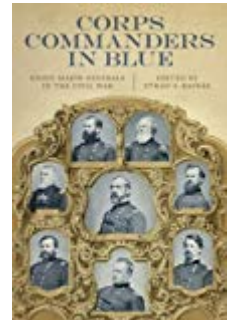


Ethan S. Rafuse, ed.. *Corps Commanders in Blue: Union Major Generals in the Civil War*. Conflicting Worlds: New Dimensions of the American Civil War Series. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014. 312 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8071-5702-2.



Reviewed by Nicholas Sambaluk

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Ethan S. Rafuse and his seven contributing authors offer a valuable, scholarly, and eminently readable collection of perspectives about a selection of Union commanders. The driving force in *Corps Commanders in Blue* is eight case studies by a group of renowned Civil War historians. The officers chosen demonstrate both the variety in experience and performance of corps-level officers and the interconnections between officers and events in the war.

Corps command played a significant role in Civil War operations, as Rafuse explains in the introduction. Empowered with more opportunity for initiative than the division and brigade officers below them, corps command nonetheless “required considerable discretion” so that lower-echelon officers could effectively exert direct control over smaller units while the corps commander coordinated a force constituting a significant part of a Civil War army (p. 5). The vast scale of the Civil War forced the corps system on American armies, although the United States had no experience or tradition organizing such large armies or such ex-

tensive structure prior to 1862. Although European warfare demonstrated seemingly ample Napoleonic precedent regarding corps command, the combat environment in European history was also distinct.

The opening chapter focuses on Major General Fitz John Porter to study civil-military relationships and perspectives early in the war. Porter, commanding V Corps, was a favorite of Army of the Potomac leader Major General George McClellan. Neither Porter nor his superior understood “that the war around them was changing dramatically” and that conciliation toward rebels was already starting to lose its political cache in the Northern states (p. 35). This was a challenge that “Acting Major General” Charles Gilbert, the topic of chapter 3, struggled with as well; temporarily vaulted into corps command because of a fatal duel between two Union generals in the western theater and a toxic feud between army commander Don Carlos Buell and his next senior most brigadier, Gilbert immediately established an even more disastrous rapport with the men tem-

porarily under his command. Joseph Mansfield is typically remembered for being fatally wounded early in the Battle of Antietam, but “this cursory treatment of Mansfield unnecessarily slights his nearly forty-five years of military service” (p. 62), and the second chapter not only sheds light on those four decades but also explains the contexts around Mansfield’s actions and concern at Antietam.

Major General George Meade (chapter 4) and Major General James McPherson (chapter 5) are studied as corps commanders prior to their elevation to army commands, and Major General Joseph Hooker (chapter 7) is studied in reverse, as a former army commander in the eastern theater who was pushed west and demoted to corps command after being severely defeated at Chancellorsville in May 1863. Major General William B. Franklin was similarly sent even farther west after his benefactor McClellan fell from grace; chapter 6 shows Franklin’s misadventures under Major General Nathaniel Banks pushing inland from the Gulf Coast.

The book’s final chapter examines Major General Winfield Scott Hancock during the 1864 Overland campaign. Following his wounding at the end of the Battle of Gettysburg, Hancock’s slow convalescence coincided with a major reorganization of his old II Corps. He returned to command it in early 1864, but neither he nor the unit were up to the standard that they had together set along Cemetery Ridge the previous summer. As a corps commander in an offensive campaign, Hancock was found wanting, and his “finest moment” at Gettysburg “did not offer a true test of his abilities as a corps commander” (p. 263).

The book deserves particular credit for the ways in which the editor and contributors ensure that while each chapter stands as a discrete and usable study, the overall work also presents a picture that is remarkably seamless for a work with eight participating authors. This effect is expertly supported by the earnest but not overemphasized

references to other relevant figures, some of whom like McClellan or Major General William T. Sherman influenced more than one of the studied corps commanders, and others such as McPherson or Meade who stood both among the corps commanders selected for study and also at other times as army commanders influencing their former peers. By arranging the eight case studies in a basically chronological format and by including both eastern and western theaters (and a case study on Hooker in the west), the book invites the reader to follow the war’s progress, to recognize the scale of the conflict, and to see interconnections between different parts of the war as well as between its prominent participants.

The contributing authors represent a rich range of experience as well. Rafuse and Mark Snell both count service in the history faculty at the United States Military Academy in their background, and Christopher Stowe teaches at the Marine Corps Command and Staff College, while John Hennessy is chief historian for Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park. Thomas Clemens, Kenneth Noe, Brooks Simpson, and Steven Woodworth are prominent scholars from an array of excellent civilian institutions across the United States.

Corps Commanders in Blue is a must-read for audiences interested in the Civil War, in issues of command relationships, and in such topics as relationships among leaders and between the military and civilian decision makers. Readers will also find that it is an invitingly well-written and excellently researched work, and a strong addition to a historian’s bookshelf and an undergraduate’s reading list alike.

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