



Gerald J. Prokopowicz. *All for the Regiment: The Army of the Ohio, 1861-1862*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001. xii + 265 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2626-3.

Reviewed by Brian Dirck (Department of History, Anderson University)

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A Bit Too Much For The Regiment

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There is a general assumption within the vast Civil War book-reading public that the Western theater of the war was rather a dull place. The East has it all, of course: Robert E. Lee, “Stonewall” Jackson, George McClellan in all his flawed glory, Pickett’s Charge, the Bloody Angle, and so forth. Even the Trans-Mississippi has a certain gory fascination, with its brutal guerrilla wars. But aside from Shiloh and Nathan Bedford Forrest, what does the West have? The operations in Kentucky and Tennessee seem to have a desultory quality, led as they often were by generals who were interesting and deeply flawed (Braxton Bragg), were forgettable and deeply flawed (Don Carlos Buell, William Rosecrans), were prematurely killed (Albert S. Johnston), or finished their war careers in another theater (Ulysses S. Grant, William T. Sherman, and Phillip Sheridan). Union General George Thomas became a national hero after his victories at Chickamauga and Nashville, and for all his daring exploits got himself compared to a rock.

This Western theater ennui explains why the Union’s principle military force in that area during the early years of the war, the Army of the Ohio, has been so badly neglected. Its commander, General Don Carlos Buell, did not have a decent biography until the 1999 publication of Stephen Engle’s excellent *Don Carlos Buell: Most Promising of All*.^[1] Buell’s army has received scarcely more attention. As a rough indicator, I ran a search for “Army of the Ohio” on Amazon.com, and found a grand total of five books, three of which were out of print. By way of contrast, an “Army of Northern Virginia” search produced thirty-three titles; “Army of the Potomac” netted sixty-two. Even the Army of the Ohio’s Confederate counterpart, the Army of the Tennessee, produced eleven titles.

For those interested in Indiana history, such neglect has been particularly damaging, since a sizable number of Indiana troops served in the Army of the Ohio’s ranks.

There are numerous studies of the Hoosiers who fought in the East, like the Iron Brigade. But who now remembers the 42nd Indiana Volunteer Infantry, for example? They fought as hard and as bravely as any troops in the Union. Nor can it be said that they lacked a flair for the dramatic. These are the men who helped rescue Grant’s panic-stricken army as it clung to the banks of the Tennessee River after being driven back through their own camps at the Battle of Shiloh. “As we pushed our way in the dim light of dawn through the crowd of demoralized fugitives cowering under the bank,” wrote one officer the Army of the Ohio, “we were treated to about all the dismal prognostications the human mind is capable of” (p. 100). A pretty good case could be made that the Army of the Ohio, with its leavening of Indiana soldiers, saved Grant’s army—not to mention his reputation and his future—that bloody day in April, 1862.

Gerald Prokopowicz’s *All for the Regiment* hopefully signals a newfound interest in the Army of the Ohio. Part of his task was to tell the rarely told story of the army’s various battles and campaigns. *All for the Regiment* provides a brisk, well-written narrative history of the army’s creation in May of 1861 as part of the Union’s military buildup to defend the Ohio River valley and invade Kentucky and Tennessee. The Army of the Ohio saw perhaps its finest hour at the Battle of Shiloh, followed by a frustrating campaign to take Corinth, Mississippi and guard the vital Memphis and Charleston Railroad that ran through Chattanooga, Tennessee. In the fall of 1862 the army fought its last major battle at Perryville, Kentucky; the ineffectiveness of its command structure during that engagement caused the reorganization efforts that ultimately spelled the army’s demise.

Prokopowicz was after more than an operational history, however. Surveying the Army of the Ohio’s entire history, he wondered how it was that this army so rarely managed to function as a completely integrated, viable whole, with all of its constituent parts operating towards

fulfilling the same purpose at the same time. Usually only parts of the army were fully engaged with the enemy during a given engagement, while other parts remained inactive and often confused concerning the army disposition and tactical goals. The Army of the Ohio “was like a dinosaur, a killing machine with powerful muscles and a tiny brain,” Prokopowicz observed, “It was capable of inflicting and enduring great violence, but the lack of a highly developed central nervous system limited it to administering straight-ahead blows and prevented it from coordinating its sinews to strike at its opponents’ vulnerable flanks” (p. 5).

Why was this the case? Prokopowicz showed that Army of the Ohio was organized in such a way that its officers and enlisted men placed a heavy emphasis on the regiment as the primary locus of military life. “The soldiers’ loyalty centered on the smallest units to which they belonged, the company and especially the regiment,” Prokopowicz pointed out (p. 4). Nearly every aspect of the army’s structure reinforced “the regiment-based culture of the army,” and mitigated against efficient operations at the brigade level and above (p. 6). The men were recruited, organized and trained primarily as members of a regiment. The regiment was closely and emotionally identified with the home front communities and states to which the enlisted men gave their primary allegiance. Governors were reluctant to fill out the ranks of depleted regiments from their states, preferring instead to form new regiments that could be stocked with new political appointees. Most of all, the regiment possessed a uniqueness, a quality of singular pride, that was lacking elsewhere. “The Civil War was fought by thousands of units named ‘Company A,’ dozens of ‘First Brigades,’ a handful of ‘Second Divisions,’ and a few ‘III Corps,’ on each side, but there was only one ‘50th Ohio Volunteer Infantry Regiment,’” Prokopowicz wrote (pp. 32-33). Moreover, the Army of the Ohio’s leaders did little to foster a sense of loyalty to the army as a whole. Drills at the brigade level and above were rare, and officers made little effort to create a sense of pride and identification with the entire army. For the average enlisted man, according to Prokopowicz, “the field army to which they belonged was a meaningless abstraction” (p. 17).

There were advantages to this company and regiment-centered mentality. The Army of the Ohio’s regiments were resilient under fire. They rallied together and retained their battlefield effectiveness even after absorbing horrendous casualties. But in terms of the overall effectiveness of the army, Prokopowicz believed that the disadvantages were far more numerous and acute, and ultimately hamstrung the Army of the Ohio’s perfor-

mance. The army’s lack of a coherent command structure meant that its attacks were often uncoordinated. During the Battle of Perryville a large portion of the Army of the Ohio sat idle as parts of the First and Third Corps were battered bloody by repeated Confederate assaults. “The near-destruction of one-third of the army, while the other two-thirds stood idle, was the result of leadership failures throughout the organization,” Prokopowicz argued (p. 179). The Army of the Ohio “would display in battle a dogged persistence in the face of disaster as well as a frustrating inability to seize tactical opportunities that might lead to victory,” he wrote (p. 9).

Prokopowicz laid much of the blame for this state of affairs on the army’s substandard leadership. He criticized brigade and division officers who became so absorbed in trying to inspire their troops with frontline bravado that they lost touch with their commands. And as commanding general, Don Carlos Buell came under heavy criticism for his failure to weld the army into a unified whole. Buell was a talented administrator, able “to tackle the problem of securing arms, uniforms, and equipment for his men....he did not, however, understand the nature of the volunteer army that he led” (p. 46). Buell was uncommunicative, aloof, and indifferent to matters of loyalty and morale. He was also a hapless soul who lurched from blunder to blunder with an Ambrose Burnside-like alacrity. When the Army of the Ohio suffered from an acute shortage of water during a series of forced marches, for example, Buell refused to allow his surgeon to wash a wound he received falling from horse, a gesture that said, in effect, that he would not use water while his men went thirsty. But “Buell gained no popularity from his sacrifice because he characteristically did nothing to communicate it to the army,” Prokopowicz observed (p. 163). Buell’s absence during the crucial battle of Perryville (he had been prevented from hearing the sounds of the battle at his headquarters due to a rare “acoustic shadow”) eventually got him fired, a fitting end to a disappointing career.

Like any good book, *All for the Regiment* creates questions as well as answers; not so much about the Army of the Ohio itself—Prokopowicz’s analysis and research are quite thorough and convincing—but rather about that army in comparison with others during the Civil War. Prokopowicz offered comparisons between the relationship of companies and regiments in the Army of the Ohio, likening the former to the soldiers’ “families” but pointing out that the latter held the soldiers’ strongest loyalties (p. 19). This is an interesting observation in light of recent research by William Garrett Piston and Richard W. Hatcher III concerning the soldiers who fought at

Wilson's Creek. Piston and Hatcher found that their soldiers' primary group loyalty lay with the company rather than the regiment.[2] What accounts for this difference? Could regional variations—the Wilson's Creek soldiers were largely from the Trans-Mississippi theater—have somehow affected the ways in which enlisted men structured their loyalties? Or perhaps the difference is more a matter of the passage of time. Piston and Hatcher focused on soldiers who were among the earliest enlistees of the war and who fought in one of the earliest battles, while Prokopowicz addressed the experiences of men who were in the army until the end of 1862. It might be that Civil War soldiers' attachments to companies, regiments, and above tended to evolve upward with the passage of time.

Prokopowicz's research also raised fascinating new questions about the precise relationship between regimental pride and national patriotism. The title of his book is apparently a play on words, taken from the title of Elisha Hunt Rhodes' famous Civil War memoir, *All for the Union*. [3] The difference in wording and emphasis makes one wonder: if soldiers' primary group loyalties really did not extend much beyond the regiment, then what was the structure of their nationalism? Could an excessive identity with local units of command have weakened soldiers' commitment to national priorities and a national military identity? Was the rank and file of the Army of the Ohio more or less likely to express opinions on various national political subjects—emancipation, for example—than soldiers in other theaters or commands, and could this in turn have been a function of their regiment-based, localistic military culture? Perhaps a comparative study of unit, political, and national identities among soldiers of the Army of the Ohio with, say, the Army of the Potomac might yield interesting results in this regard. Were Army of the Potomac enlisted men like Elisha Hunt Rhodes more likely to express overt national identities than their Army of the Ohio counterparts, or was there no substantive difference in this regard?

Prokopowicz's arguments also bear examination in light of the nature of military leadership during the Civil

War. He placed a heavy emphasis on the Army of the Ohio's leadership deficiencies as a major source of the army's poor track record, particularly at the very top. But what exactly should Buell have done to address these problems? Indeed, what could he have done differently, given the fact that the army's regiment-based culture was rooted in political practices and social attitudes that were largely beyond his control? It would be interesting to see a detailed, direct comparison between Buell's actions and those of a more successful Civil War general: Robert E. Lee, for example. Gary W. Gallagher has recently argued that Lee was very good at forging a sense of pride and loyalty within the Army of Northern Virginia.[4] What did Lee do right that Buell did so wrong? Or was the difference more a matter of different sociocultural structures between an army that was raised primarily in the Ohio River Valley region, and an army whose ranks were filled with men from the South?

These questions should not be taken as criticisms of *All for the Regiment*. Quite the contrary, Prokopowicz's book does what top-notch histories are supposed to do: it stimulates the imagination and creates new avenues of research. *All for the Regiment* is a fascinating, first-rate military history, and should lay the groundwork for a variety of new conversations concerning the nature of the Civil War military experience.

Notes

[1]. Stephen D. Engle, *Don Carlos Buell: Most Promising of All* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

[2]. William Garrett Piston and Richard W. Hatcher III, *Wilson's Creek: The Second Battle of the Civil War and the Men Who Fought It* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), xv, 32.

[3]. Robert Hunt Rhodes, ed., *All For The Union: The Civil War Diary and Letters of Elisha Hunt Rhodes* (New York: Orion Books, 1985).

[4]. Gary W. Gallagher, *Lee and His Army in Confederate History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

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