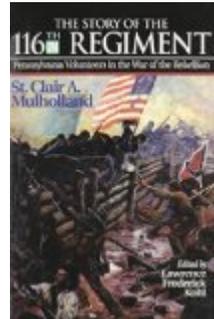


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

St. Clair A. Mulholland. *The Story of the 116th Regiment, Pennsylvania Volunteers in the War of the Rebellion*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1996. xxviii + 462 pp. \$27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8232-1606-2.

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By any standard, the 116th Pennsylvania was a remarkable regiment, and no one was more qualified to tell its story than St. Clair Mulholland. Born in Ireland in 1839, he was only seven years old when he emigrated with his family to the United States. Although his primary occupation in the years before the war was as a window-shade painter, he was also very active in the Pennsylvania militia. It was his reputation as an expert instructor in that organization that led to his appointment as a lieutenant colonel and second-in-command of the regiment when it was mustered into federal service in September 1862 as part of the Irish Brigade. When the regiment's colonel was wounded at Fredericksburg, Mulholland assumed command of the unit.

With the exception of periods when he was convalescing from wounds, Mulholland retained this position until 1864, when he was given his own brigade. His service was exemplary, and under his command the regiment became a mainstay of Winfield Scott Hancock's Second Corps. Mulholland rose to the rank of brevet major general, was wounded four times, and, for his bravery during the battle of Chancellorsville, was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. Following the war, he became active in Pennsylvania politics and was a favorite speaker at veterans' meetings and battlefield reunions. Although he lectured on a wide range of subjects, he sought above all to memorialize the service of his old regiment, and it was for this purpose that he published *The Story of the 116th Regiment* in 1899.

In compiling his history, Mulholland faced no shortage of material. The regiment saw combat in every campaign of the Army of the Potomac from the tragedy of Fredericksburg to the eventual triumph at Appomattox,

and he was an active participant in most of these actions. Long ago, however, Bruce Catton kindly cautioned that the accounts of veterans were likely to be "somewhat out of focus," and that warning should certainly be remembered as one reads Mulholland. The author plainly states that his primary purpose in writing the history of his regiment was to "fulfill a duty to comrades ... so that their noble deeds shall not be forgotten" (p. vi). In accomplishing this objective, he often employs prose that is flowery and melodramatic, and his efforts to sustain his assertion that the 116th was a regiment "on whose record there is no stain or blemish" sometimes strain credibility (p. vi). There is only one account, for example, of dishonorable conduct by any member of the regiment, and while his closing summary of the wartime service of over 1,500 members of the 116th lists hundreds of men as "missing," only two are actually classified as "deserters."

The book contains editorial flaws as well. Following the war, Mulholland served as chairman of the Grand Army of the Republic's Committee on Schools, and he was very much concerned that, although American students were "thoroughly familiar with the battles fought in Europe and the heroism of foreign troops," they knew "comparatively little about the magnificent bravery shown by the soldiers ... in the Civil War" (p. xxii). To correct this perceived imbalance, he offers repetitive accounts of Union regiments that suffered higher losses than those sustained in famous European battles and lengthy testaments to the sterling character of individual soldiers killed in these encounters. While the sense of duty and the sacrifices of these men and their units are beyond question, the manner in which they are presented by the author is laborious and often breaks his narrative of the engagements being described.

The book also suffers from an absence of maps to accompany Mulholland's descriptions of specific battles. As these accounts are generally very detailed and laced with arcane tactical jargon, the reader who is not thoroughly familiar with the terrain and movements being discussed will soon become hopelessly lost in a maze of fronts, flanks, thrusts, and turning operations.

These shortcomings pale, however, when compared to the considerable strengths of Mulholland's work. First, the book is rich in vignettes that supply a view from the ranks not found in more general histories. Available here, for example, is a unique description of the protocols employed by ordinary soldiers when negotiating unauthorized picket truces. The reader is also treated to a rather macabre discussion of the manner in which professional embalmers advertised and plied their grisly trade, a detailed account of the experiences of a Union prisoner of war, and numerous examples of how the men of the regiment managed to find humor in even the most appalling circumstances. Glimpses of the darker realities of the war are offered as well. The author casually recounts the killing of a Confederate prisoner who was judged too slow in his surrender, and he lauds the "bright, childish enthusiasm" (p. 186) of untrained recruits who fell by the hundreds in the hell of the Wilderness less than two months after they enlisted.

Mulholland also provides fascinating assessments of the senior officers of the Army of the Potomac. Some of his evaluations are not surprising. Burnside, for instance, is rated as "unsteady" and possessed of an "evil genius," while Hooker is dismissed as "incompetent" (pp. 28, 33). Other judgments, however, are more intriguing. The author maintains that Meade (a fellow Pennsylvanian) was an outstanding commander, and argues that his Mine Run campaign failed not from a lack of initiative, as is often charged, but from an absence of accurate intelligence on Confederate dispositions. Mulholland's assessment of Grant is most remarkable for its brevity, for though he concedes that the general was a "worthy" commander (p. 192), he avoids the same discussion of personal traits and leadership qualities that he provides for other senior officers. The most effusive praise is reserved for McClellan, the only commander whom the author contends ever "possessed the absolute confidence and love of every man" (p. 25). Mulholland characterizes Lincoln's relief of McClellan as both "ungracious" and ill-timed, and he is firm in his conviction that had the general not been relieved, he would soon have launched an attack that would have destroyed the Army of Northern Virginia and ended the war.

The greatest contribution of Mulholland's work, however, comes in the final chapters, as he describes how the once-proud and powerful Army of the Potomac was transformed by the devastating attrition of the Wilderness and Petersburg campaigns. The evidence of this transformation that Mulholland offers is subtle and, quite possibly, unintentional. He never states, for example, that the horrific losses sustained in those campaigns rendered his beloved army less potent, and he certainly would never admit that it had become less dependable. Yet, to the discerning eye, the symptoms of the decline in capability and morale that afflicted the army in the last year of the war are unmistakable.

The first indications of a decline appear in the Pennsylvania recruiting drives Mulholland conducted to fill the ranks of the 116th before the Wilderness Campaign. To his dismay, he found that most of the eligible men were already at the front. The quotas had to be met, however, so the recruiters turned to the young. Mulholland sums up the result of this shift in focus simply and without emotion. "It was the men who went to war in '61," he writes. "It was the school boys who filled the ranks in '64" (p. 179).

After a month of fighting, the signs of decline were much more obvious. By June 1864 the 116th had lost over two hundred men in battle. Casualties among officers were so heavy that command of the regiment, normally the responsibility of a colonel, had fallen to the senior surviving captain. The constant strain of battle produced psychological casualties as well, and Mulholland's narrative offers a rare account of the mental collapse of three officers following the battle of Cold Harbor. By the middle of July, all ten field officers of the Irish Brigade had been killed or wounded, and losses in the Army of the Potomac were so high that many regiments in the brigades had to be consolidated in order to remain combat effective. Veterans lost from the ranks, as Mulholland notes, "had been largely replaced by recruits and substitutes," men whom he finds "had but little heart in the work" (p. 297).

As a result of all these factors, unit cohesion, a key element in the combat power of a military organization, began to deteriorate rapidly, and this change is evident in Mulholland's narrative. Before the campaigns of 1864, there are few instances in which he fails to provide the circumstances under which each man was lost; after the Wilderness his records are replete with notations such as "missing," "never heard of again," and "likely killed" (p. 289). Such terminology anticipates the classification of

“wastage” which would be employed to account for the thousands of men who simply disappeared in the trench warfare of World War I.

In summary, *The Story of the 116th Regiment* is a superb unit history that offers a rich and extremely useful account of Union Army life written from the perspective of a field-grade officer. It is filled with marvelous detail and provides the reader with a rare examination of the experiences of ordinary men in an extraordinary time. In writing this history, Mulholland hoped to keep alive the

memory of the service of the soldiers of the 116th Regiment, Pennsylvania Volunteers. This he has done—and more.

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