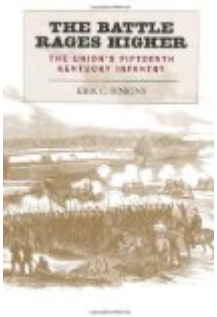
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kirk C. Jenkins. *The Battle Rages Higher: The Union's Fifteenth Kentucky Infantry.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003. xix + 452 pp. $35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8131-2281-6.



Reviewed by James Ramage

Published on H-CivWar (August, 2004)

As the first regimental history of the Union 15th Kentucky Infantry, this book provides new information on the experience of soldiers in the ranks and valuable perspective on the difficulties of men from a slave border state serving in the Union army. Kirk C. Jenkins, a Kentucky native and attorney in San Francisco, became interested in the regiment while researching one of his forbearers who was an officer in the unit. He focuses on morale, weather conditions, rations, shelter, food, and other aspects of material culture that were important to the private soldier. He discusses the background of the men and officers and provides a valuable biographical roster. The book fills a gap because there have been few studies of Kentucky's Union regiments. In recent times, this is only the third book on a Union regiment from Kentucky. The other two are Kenneth W. Noe's *A Southern Boy in Blue: The Memoir of Marcus Woodcock, 9th Kentucky Infantry (U.S.A.)* (1996) and Joseph R. Reinhart's *A History of the 6th Kentucky Volunteer Infantry U.S.: The Boys Who Feared No Noise* (2000).

Hopelessly divided, Kentucky remained neutral for the first five months, and when the General Assembly declared for the Union in September 1861, the 15th Infantry Regiment was organized in Louisville. One-fourth of the men were foreign born, including Irish-Americans from around Louisville and German-Americans from the Cincinnati area. Union regiments usually had the united support of their community, but Confederate sentiment was strong in Louisville, and the Pro-Southern *Louisville Courier* declared the unit an abomination desecrating Louisville by camping at the fairgrounds.

It is well known that the First Kentucky Infantry Brigade in the Confederate army was called The Orphan Brigade. They were "orphans" because Kentucky did not secede, and if the Confederacy won its independence, they would have no home state in the new Confederate nation. Jenkins points out that Union regiments from Kentucky became orphans as well in a different sense. Even though Kentucky voters decided to remain in the Union in 1861, that did not mean that they supported all of Abraham Lincoln's war

aims. Most Kentuckians opposed emancipation and the use of African Americans in the Union army, and they chaffed under Union occupation and suspension of the writ of habeas corpus. By the end of the war most Kentuckians despised Lincoln and the Republicans, and identified thoroughly with the Confederacy. Therefore, the men of the 15th Regiment and the other approximately 90,000 Union troops from Kentucky were even more alienated from the folks back home than was usual for Civil War soldiers. Jenkins concludes that at the end of the war they felt unappreciated, like Vietnam veterans; they felt unwelcome in their home state. General William S. Rosecrans may have referred to this when, in the Battle of Stones River, he called the men of the 15th his "Orphan Regiment" (p. 99).

The regiment fought to restore the Union, but many of its officers and men joined civilians back home in opposing emancipation. In January 1863, fifteen of the unit's officers submitted their resignations in protest of the Emancipation Proclamation. Rosecrans refused to approve, and most of the fifteen persuaded a medical officer to give them medical discharges. The election of 1864 gave the regiment an opportunity to vote against Lincoln and for George McClellan. Kentucky civilians voted 30.2 percent for Lincoln, the lowest of the twenty-five states in the election and Kentucky's Union soldiers voted 3,068 for McClellan and 1,205 for Lincoln. The men of the 15th voted for McClellan, but it was not easy. One man wrote: "I don't like the Idea of soldiering three years and then giving the rebels all they ask and more than they dare to ask now" (p. 247).

The story of the regiment seems more like fiction than reality, and Jenkins's well-written narrative brings it to life. They were mustered into General Don Carlos Buell's Army of the Ohio on December 14, 1861, and participated in the occupation of Bowling Green and Nashville, and were in northern Alabama when Confederate General Braxton Bragg seized the initiative and invaded Kentucky. Under Buell, they marched home to oppose Bragg and saw the elephant in the Battle of Perryville. Their battle experience seems incredible--three times in major battles they defended crucial positions of the Union line and were attacked by more numerous enemy forces and forced to withdraw. Only thirty regiments in the Union army had higher casualty rates. They took 969 men into the war, and three years later had only 250.

At Perryville, the men found themselves outnumbered and on the defensive in the crucial and heavy fighting at Squire Bottom's house on the Union left flank. In Colonel William Lytle's brigade, they defended the angle of the Bottom House salient and were attacked by Confederate forces advancing on their front and right outnumbering them at one point seven to one. The men fought for an hour, and nearly one-third went down. When the Kentuckians ran out of ammunition, they fixed bayonets and withdrew. A member of Buell's staff saw them moving toward the rear and said they "seemed to stagger and reel like men who had been beating against a great storm" (p. 79).

Jenkins has a good eye for pathos and human interest. In the fighting at the Bottom House, the regiment's color sergeant was wounded, and they propped the regimental flag against a fence. Enemy fire snapped the standard, and as the flag fell toward the ground, nineteen-year-old Captain James Brown Forman from Louisville caught it and jumped on top of the fence and waved it in defiance at the enemy. The story appeared in the newspapers, and with the colonel wounded, Forman was appointed to command the regiment and became the youngest colonel in the western theater. The men called him their "boy colonel" (p. xv). On the first day of their next battle, the Battle of Stones River, they were positioned in a grove of cedar trees on the far right of the Union line. Forman predicted that morning that he would be killed and designated who was to re-

ceive his horse. Sure enough, they were attacked by more numerous enemy infantry and surrounded on three sides. Enemy rifle fire struck Forman and he fell dead from his horse. The men retreated to the Nashville Turnpike, and that night a squad slipped behind enemy lines and recovered his body which was taken to Louisville for burial.

On September 19, 1863, when the two armies faced each other on Chickamauga Creek, the regiment was on the Federal bank exchanging picket fire with fellow Kentuckians in the Confederate Orphan Brigade on the opposing side. The next day, the crucial day of the battle, the regiment was moved to the Union left, to Snodgrass Hill, where Bragg focused his main attack. The Confederate Orphan Brigade made the shift northward as well, and advanced through the woods against the men of the 15th. For three hours they fought, Kentuckians in gray attacking Kentuckians in blue, and some of the fighting was hand-to-hand. For the third time in the war, the regiment took heavy casualties and withdrew before superior enemy numbers. The 15th were in General William T. Sherman's army in the Atlanta campaign and fought the Orphan Brigade again at Rocky Face Ridge near Dalton, Georgia and a fourth time in the Battle of Resaca. During the night of May 15, 1864, after the second and final day of fighting at Resaca and before the Confederates withdrew, the men shouted back and forth across the lines and learned that several were friends and a few had brothers on the other side.

One of the strengths of the book is that it views the war from the limited field of vision of men in a regiment. On the other hand, there are times when the reader feels lost in the movement of brigades and divisions. There are several helpful maps, but in order to follow the movements described, especially in the Tullahoma campaign and the battle of Chickamauga, the reader needs an atlas. Jenkins researched available primary sources at the Filson Historical Society in Louisville and other libraries, and demonstrated familiarity with the latest secondary sources. The book is well organized, and the lively writing will appeal to general readers as well as scholars. On several levels, this is a valuable book that contributes meaningfully to the historiography of the Civil War.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar

Citation: James Ramage. Review of Jenkins, Kirk C. *The Battle Rages Higher: The Union's Fifteenth Kentucky Infantry.* H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. August, 2004.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9689