

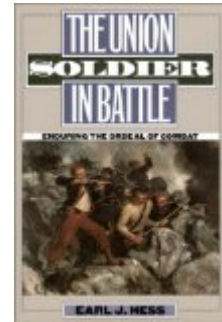
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Earl J. Hess. *The Union Soldier in Battle: Enduring the Ordeal of Combat*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997. xii + 244 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-0837-9.

Reviewed by Ricardo A. Herrera (Department of History and Geography, Texas Lutheran University)

Published on H-CivWar (July, 1997)



Books dealing with the military history of the Civil War are legion. Few, however, treat the soldiers' intellectual and emotional experience and mastery of combat or its aftermath. Authors addressing the issue of soldiers' morale and its sustaining ideological and emotive framework are decidedly in the minority. The books that do deal with this topic commonly tend toward a very limited chronological or experiential scope, a narrowly focused set of subjects, or use battle as only one component of the military experience. Therefore, a great gap is created in our knowledge of combat morale and its creation and sustainment. This field of inquiry is greatly in need of further scholarly endeavor. With this concern in mind, Earl J. Hess has filled a portion of the gap with *The Union Soldier in Battle: Enduring the Ordeal of Combat*. The work substantially contributes to our understanding of the nature of battle and combat morale and to our appreciation of how northern soldiers and veterans interpreted the war and their roles as combatants.

At the outset, Hess states that a proper examination and understanding about the Federal experience of Civil War combat must be "shorn of modern prejudices, ideological faddishness, and a desire for political correctness" (p. ix). As nearly as possible, therefore, readers are helped to comprehend battle in the terms and context understood by the soldiers. Lessons learned at school and church and images from home and work provided the guideposts for acceptable behavior and the intellectual tools for making order out of the physical and emotional chaos wrought by combat.

Confusion and horror reigned in battle. It was an event unlike anything that most soldiers had experienced. Troops needed to make sense of battle and to

impose order on the chaos so that they might come to an understanding about the nature of war and soldiering. Death and disorder became familiar to the soldier through the use of homey metaphors. The most common metaphorical images employed by soldiers to explain battle to themselves and to their audiences used scything grain, hammering metal, falling rain, pounding hail, and other similar mental pictures to convey the experience and impression of combat. By turning combat into a common workaday experience through his metaphorical imagery, the soldier exerted control over his immediate environment and his memory and reduced the trauma of battle to something approximating a distasteful but necessary job.

Northern soldiers, who were almost all volunteers, developed "a sense of professionalism" from their experiences on the battlefield and the lessons they learned from combat. Professionalism was really "a guarded familiarity with" war's "dark side." It enabled troops to approach combat with a detached outlook and to perform calmly their tasks while under fire. As soldiers acquired competence in the "techniques of war" (maintaining formations, maneuvering, loading and firing, and entrenching), their composure and confidence grew as their fears subsided. Emotional mastery was, therefore, complementary with the mastery of the technical aspects of soldiering (p. 157).

Battle was a test of the idealistic northern soldier's manhood and provided him with the opportunity to earn fame, honor, and glory. According to the nineteenth century's "romanticized view of history" and war, "Soldiering was an adventure; [and] death in battle was a glorious sacrifice for country and a good cause" (pp. 2, 74). Ultimately, battle tried the mettle of the individual, and

“How he acted determined whether he would become a victim of war or a victor over its horrors” (p. ix). And it was from the wellspring of the republic’s history that the northern soldier found a model for his conduct.

For the Civil War generation of American men, no other event demonstrated the attributes and accomplishments of a courageous and patriotic soldiery like the American Revolution. The War for Independence, as institutionalized through education and popular culture, provided lessons in how to think and act like a good soldier. Hess contends that most Union veterans were victors over the terror of war. They controlled their understanding of combat and the war by measuring and judging their experiences according to the republican ideology and standards of conduct ascribed to the Founding Fathers’ generation. Union troops confirmed to themselves and to others the high worth of their sacrifices because their conduct in battle had matched that of their “legendary forefathers” (p. 98). Northern men had saved the Union created only two or three generations earlier. American history had provided the “inspiration” and “guides” for action and reflection and had validated the importance of their service (p. 198).

Throughout much of this work, the author takes issue with the narrow focus and the conclusions of Gerald F. Linderman’s *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War* (1987). Briefly, Linderman examined the ideal and the demonstration of courage through the experiences of selected northern and southern soldiers and averred for the postwar disillusionment of these veterans. As Hess sees it, Linderman posited that combat was “an unmasterable experience that warped the view” of all soldiers. Reality and action had not conformed to ideology. Soldiers, as many twentieth-century observers believe, were victims of war. According to Hess, however, this was not the case.

Hess goes beyond Linderman’s single theme of courage and his limited selection of soldiers and materials. The author believes that his broader thesis, his larger sampling of soldiers, and his greater use of primary materials gives a truer picture of combat, morale, and reflection. Hess concludes that northern soldiers experienced the war and understood it as one of the defining episodes in their lives and in the development of their personal characters. Furthermore, Yankee veterans made sense of their sacrifices according to peacetime convictions and

lessons and to the professionalism they had acquired in the army. Action was indeed the result of belief and directly corresponded to it. It was the deep and sincere ideological conviction of these men that shielded them from disillusionment. According to Union soldiers, war and sacrifice had confirmed the validity of their ideology.

Hess’s *Union Soldier* takes his earlier *Liberty, Virtue, and Progress: Northerners and Their War for the Union* (1988) as its intellectual point-of-departure. Hess, hewing to his interest in northern ideology and conduct, sees a meaningful and vigorous set of intellectual constructs that enabled Union soldiers to face battle, make sense of it, and return to combat. Northern ideology was powerful and sustaining; its meanings transcended the long passage of time for most veterans. That most of these soldiers “continued to retain that faith even after the conflict had ended” testified to the durability and, for these men, truth of northern ideology (p. ix).

The Union Soldier in Battle is admirably researched, well-written, and convincingly argued. Due in part to this success, it raises a question in need of further elucidation. To what degree did Confederate troops share the same sentiments held by Union soldiers? Over eighty years of national history had passed between Lexington and Fort Sumter. In large part, the men of both armies drew from a common intellectual and cultural heritage. It behooves us, therefore, to consider how the armies resembled each other ideologically.

Earl J. Hess has broached an important topic that calls for greater work by Civil War scholars. A parallel examination (in the larger vein of Bell Irvin Wiley’s pioneering studies) of Confederate morale and the Southern experience of battle would balance the findings in *The Union Soldier* and deepen appreciation of the interplay between ideology, behavior, and military service. Indeed, researchers might very well consider using Hess’s book as a spur to further studies of the American encounter with combat throughout the nation’s history. *The Union Soldier* addresses a pressing need to understand the nature of combat. It should appeal to a broad audience, ranging from serious scholars to the educated public.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact <h-net@h-net.msu.edu>.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar>

Citation: Ricardo A. Herrera. Review of Hess, Earl J., *The Union Soldier in Battle: Enduring the Ordeal of Combat*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. July, 1997.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1130>

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.