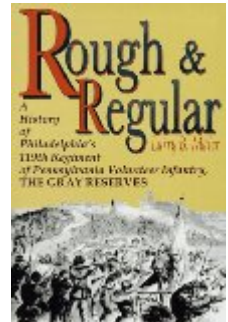


Larry B. Maier. *Rough and Regular: A History of Philadelphia's 119th Regiment of Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry, the Gray Reserves.* Shippensburg, Penn.: Burd Street Press, 1997. \$30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-57249-082-6.



Reviewed by George C. Rable

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The first regimental histories of the Civil War were written while the conflict was still raging. A number appeared immediately after the war, and then there was a veritable flood toward the end of the last century and the beginning of this one. Most of these works were written by members of the regiment (often chaplains). Some authors carefully gathered primary materials from old comrades; others relied on official reports or merely memory. The results ranged from thin, sketchy volumes to thick, imposing tomes with mind-numbing detail and extensive rosters. And the historical value of these volumes varied just as widely. For years, historians of the war neglected this vast body of literature, but then Bruce Catton put many of these "regimentals" to good use in his famous *Army of the Potomac* trilogy. The appearance in 1957 of John Pullen's now classic *The Twentieth Maine: A Volunteer Regiment in the Civil War* marked the emergence of a new generation of regimental histories written by historians. Well researched and movingly written, Pullen's soft-cited volume set a high standard. Excellent regimental histories continue to appear occasionally (such as Warren Wilkinson, *Mother,*

May You Never See the Sights I Have Seen: The Fifty-Seventh Massachusetts Veteran Volunteers in the Army of the Potomac, 1864-1865, and Richard Moe's *The Last Full Measure: The Life and Death of the First Minnesota Volunteers*), but such fine works are unfortunately rare.

One requirement for a good regimental history is an interesting story to tell, and this usually means that the outfit had better be among William F. Fox's "Fighting The Hundred." No one can doubt that the 119th Pennsylvania Infantry saw more than its share of hard service. Initially recruited from some gentleman militia in Philadelphia, the "Grays," as author Louis B. Maier oft refers to them, served briefly as home guards. Formal recruiting for the regiment began in July 1862. Some of the volunteers were like the stalwart patriots described in James M. McPherson's fine recent work, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (1997), but others were either trying to avoid an impending draft or were attracted by generous bounties. Still others, as Maier notes and too many historians

have forgotten, were simply young men who needed a job.

Joining the Army of the Potomac in October, the 119th became part of the Sixth Corps, commanded from early 1863 through mid-summer of 1864 by the capable and popular John Sedgwick. The regiment was under fire but not engaged at Fredericksburg and saw its first real combat at Salem Church in May 1863. These Philadelphians supplied infantry support at Brandy Station but were part of the reserve at Gettysburg. They gallantly attacked a strong Confederate position at Rappahannock Station in November 1863, but despite heavy casualties and what at the time seemed a significant victory, their valor was soon forgotten as George Gordon Meade's Mine Run campaign fizzled. During the winter of 1863-64, the regiment suffered from wind, rain, snow, dissension, drunkenness, and command changes. Sick of camp life, they may at first have welcomed the arrival of warmer weather and another campaign season. But the Philadelphia boys soon took part in the horrendous Wilderness campaign and then after a hard march to Spotsylvania Courthouse joined Emory Upton's attack on the Confederate salient, and later became part of the nearly indescribable slaughter at the Bloody Angle. One private who had perhaps fired as many as two hundred rounds in one day recounted how his right arm had become almost useless. Out of some 400 effectives the 119th had suffered some 231 casualties in a little over two weeks. Yet Cold Harbor lay ahead, as did an arduous march, the crossing of the James River, and finally the construction of earthworks at Petersburg in killing heat. In mid-July 1864, the regiment joined Phillip Sheridan in pinning down Jubal Early in the Shenandoah Valley. The Pennsylvanians bravely charged a rebel line at the battle of Opequon and helped drive the Confederates back through Winchester. By early December they had returned to Petersburg, where they participated in the breakthrough of April 2, 1865, and capped off their dis-

tinguished service with some hard fighting at Sayler's Creek.

The story of the 119th Pennsylvania is in some ways typical of hard fighting regiments, but its inherent drama and interest is difficult to discover. The problem lies with the dearth of primary sources. Maier makes good but not always consistent use of the often revealing compiled service records of selected men from the regiment. His main source, however, is the manuscript diary of James W. Latta, a young lawyer who served with this outfit for most of its history. Maier offers so many long quotations from this source (located in the Library of Congress) that he has in essence published nearly all passages of any significance (and a number of only passing interest). Maier consulted a few Pennsylvania newspapers, though by reading but one issue of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, he missed some valuable material on the regiment. Maier deserves credit for paying attention to enlisted men as well as officers, and even describing the fate of the wounded after several battles, but like too many historians, he has neglected the valuable information on the wounds and medical treatment of individual soldiers in the thoroughly indexed Broadfoot edition of the *Medical and Surgical History of the Civil War*, 12 vols. and index (1990-92) (original title, *Medical and Surgical History of the War of the Rebellion*).

Although the author perhaps could have culled a few more manuscript sources and might have discovered some interesting material in the regimental records in the National Archives, it is debatable whether enough high-quality primary sources are extant to support a history of over three hundred pages. The author includes a lengthy roster but says nothing about how he compiled it, and this reader suspects that it adds little to the substantial but also incomplete roster found in that indispensable reference work: Samuel P. Bates, *History of Pennsylvania Volunteers, 1861-5* (1869-71). This is all a shame because

Maier for the most part writes well. His descriptions of marches and battles are clear and often perceptive, although he includes too much general background and relies too heavily on accounts from soldiers who served in other units. In general, the quotations should have been pared down and much better integrated into the narrative. The author offers occasionally good descriptions of winter quarters, marches, weather, and even army politics. But parts of the manuscript simply lack proportion: it is hard to justify a 26-page chapter on Gettysburg for a regiment that hardly gets into the fight. Students of the war will consult this volume for quotations from the Latta diary and a few details here and there, but the work as a whole adds little to our knowledge of the war's fighting units.

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