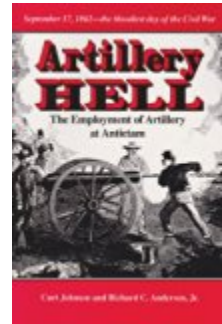


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Curt Johnson, Richard C. Anderson, Joseph Mills Hanson. *Artillery Hell: The Employment of Artillery at Antietam* (Texas A & M University Military History Series). College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1995. xx + 147 pp. \$29.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-89096-622-8; \$18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-89096-623-5.

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The terrible conflict between blue and gray infantrymen at Antietam is well documented. A lesser known aspect of that bloody day is the role played by field artillery. This is surprising for a battle that became known as “Artillery Hell.” Curt Johnson and Richard C. Anderson, Jr., attempt to fill this gap in Civil War literature with their book *Artillery Hell*.

This study centers around a manuscript compiled in 1940 by Maj. Joseph Mills Hansen. At that time the Antietam battlefield had no artillery pieces on site and the National Park Service needed information on the role artillery played in the battle in order to begin displaying field pieces. Hansen prepared the report that guided the Park Service in setting up the forty-one cannons that are now in the park.

Hansen’s tactical account of the use of artillery at Antietam is very limited in scope – the reader getting only a few sentences about each battery’s activities. However, the report does contain some very useful information. Hansen credited the Army of Northern Virginia with having 246 guns in 57 batteries, while the Army of the Potomac had 323 guns in 64 batteries. He concluded that each side actually employed 57 batteries at Antietam, but that the Federals had more guns and threw more pounds of shot. Hansen also noted that Antietam was the first time that Lee massed his artillery for maximum efficiency. Four or more batteries were placed together, under a unified command, at certain strategic places. This deployment, and having the advantage of being on the defensive, enabled the Confederates to achieve better results with their artillery. It was largely rebel artillery that allowed Jackson’s 19,000 men to hold off 33,000 Yankees

around the Miller cornfield on the morning of September 17.

On the other hand, McClellan was less successful in deploying his cannons, although Union artillery did play a key role in preventing Jackson’s counterattacks from crushing the right flank and A.P. Hill’s division from inflicting serious damage to Burnside’s corps. At the height of the fighting around the cornfield, only 15 of 40 Union batteries engaged were in close support of the infantry. The other 25 batteries were firing from across Antietam Creek. Hansen makes a strong case that at Antietam, the rebels for once had the upper hand in terms of artillery support.

In addition to the Hansen report, *Artillery Hell* includes several interesting chapters by Johnson and Anderson. Johnson’s essay on artillery operations and tactics gives a good overview of the opposing armies’ attempts to reorganize their artillery after the bloody fighting on the Peninsula and at Second Manassas. By the time of Antietam, the Army of Northern Virginia had begun to centralize its artillery by placing one artillery battalion with each division for direct fire support (rather than individual brigades having their own batteries), while each corps had an additional battalion for general support. The army’s reserve artillery could also be used as needed. Major weaknesses for the Confederate artillery were casualties and equipment losses that forced Lee to leave many of his batteries behind in Virginia when he invaded Maryland. On the Federal side, Col. Henry Jackson Hunt had taken command of the army’s artillery and was in the process of centralizing command, replacing captured cannons with the most modern guns,

and changing tactics from a dependence on rapid salvos to a slower, more accurate fire.

Anderson contributes an essay on Civil War artillery in general. Different types of guns, their effective ranges, specifications, ammunition, etc., are discussed in detail. In addition, Anderson gives a very useful description of a typical artillery battery, including crew complement and duties, equipment and tactical maneuvers. Anyone who confuses howitzers and Napoleons or canister and spherical case will find this chapter rewarding.

Artillery Hell closes with two chapters detailing specific information on each artillery battery engaged at Antietam, six Union after-action reports (five of which are previously unpublished), and several appendices detailing the strengths and casualties of each artillery unit.

Artillery Hell is an interesting book; there is a great deal of data crammed into this thin volume. It is well researched, with the authors using numerous primary and

secondary sources. Perhaps most important is their use of the Henry Jackson Hunt Papers, which Major Hansen failed to use in his report. Surprisingly, there are no maps showing the positions of the various batteries, and only one general map depicting large scale troop movements. There are, however, a number of photographs taken from artillery positions showing their fields of fire.

Readers will find the book's title misleading. *Artillery Hell* is not an indepth narrative about artillerymen at Antietam. The descriptions of battery movements, combat, casualties, and effectiveness are brief at best. The book is written in an encyclopedic style, not lively narrative. Those readers who are seeking the human side of the conflict will be disappointed. The strength of the book is its value as a research tool. The detailed information on each battery, descriptions of Civil War artillery and tactics, and statistical data are quite impressive. It would be a wonderful companion on a walking tour of Antietam.

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