The unit history is enjoying renewed attention from Civil War historians. It offers a methodological middle ground wherein the author can address both the experience of individual combatants and their impact on various campaigns. Terry L. Jones, professor emeritus of history at the University of Louisiana at Monroe, has contributed to this trend with an updated edition of his 1987 monograph, *Lee’s Tigers Revisited: The Louisiana Infantry in the Army of Northern Virginia*. He draws on digitized sources, newly discovered materials, and fresh secondary works to produce this newly expanded treatment of the so-called Louisiana Tigers, especially regarding their service in 1864-65. Only the second book-length treatment of these famous Confederates, it should be well received by academics and the public alike.

The Tigers comprised five infantry battalions and ten regiments serving in the eastern theater. Paradoxically, these “premier shock troops of the Army of Northern Virginia” (p. xi) were notoriously ill-disciplined and prone to desertion. Jones posits that the negative characteristics of these men were due to the high proportion of impoverished immigrants in the ranks. Some new arrivals from abroad lacked fervor for the cause, while others displayed the rowdiness of their prewar lives in New Orleans. They boasted sizable representation from England, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Spain, and Switzerland. This reflected on the Tigers’ reputation. Whether they were economically motivated, patriotic, or had been coerced into serving, outfits with the most immigrants were also most subject to criticism as marauders. During the first months in uniform, they developed their poor reputation, and their wanton consumption of alcohol no doubt harmed their reputation as well. Jones is careful to note, however, that a majority of said foreigners did not steal or abandon their comrades, but rather equaled the commitment of their native-born counterparts.

*Lee’s Tigers* is a narrative history, as Jones chronicles everything from the creation of the units to the postwar lives of some members. The highly readable prose is dotted with anecdotes that illuminate, for example, how the Louisianians regarded their officers and interacted with civilians. He not only describes the contributions of these soldiers, but also advances several key findings about their combat effectiveness. At the First Battle of Bull Run, they helped buy time for Confederate major generals P. G. T. Beauregard and Joseph Johnston to prepare a defense against the Union forces and “break the federal flank at the most critical moment of the battle” (p. 83). According to the author, the Tigers figured prominently throughout the 1862 Shenandoah Valley Campaign, contributing decisively at the battles of Front Royal, Middletown, First Winchester, Strasburg, and Port Republic. And yet, their success came at the cost of plummeting morale and health as well as surging desertion rates. Turning to the Second Battle of Bull Run, Jones concedes that the Tigers’ famed resort to rock-throwing “was seen as the epitome of southern bravado” (p. 195), but a combination of enfilading rebel cannon fire and timely reinforcements actually precipitated the Union retreat.

The Louisianians enjoyed a fearsome reputation for their desire to close with the enemy. To that end, they conducted one of the greatest charges in the Civil War at the Second Battle of Winchester. Although the name
“Tiger” inspired terror among Northern and Southern civilians alike, the men showed far more self-control during the Gettysburg Campaign. On the second day of fighting at the Battle of Gettysburg, their penetration of the Union position on Cemetery Hill fizzled. Jones blames this on Confederate major general Jubal A. Early for not promptly supporting them and ensuring the concerted movement of the rebel divisions. Despite this and other setbacks, the record of these soldiers under fire was generally impressive. They displayed fortitude on May 12, 1864, stopping the Union onslaught at the Mule Shoe during the Battle of Spotsylvania. The author maintains that “the Yankees would have continued flanking the rebel brigades all the way down the western side” (p. 334) if the Tigers had not assumed a defensive line perpendicular to the Confederate entrenchments.

Jones finds that the last year of the war bore down heavily on the Louisianians. By the end of the Overland Campaign, the combination of picketing, combat, and marching had exhausted the men, who realized that Confederate fortunes were waning. These factors defined the Tigers’ service in the 1864 Shenandoah Valley Campaign. The author claims that “Early’s raid also nearly ruined the Louisiana Brigade with its forced marches, severe losses at the Monocacy, and constant skirmishing” (p. 351). The Tigers fought in seventeen engagements and marched over eight hundred miles between their departure from Richmond and the end of August. With hundreds of men absent without leave or prisoners of war, the troops were shadows of their former selves. They proved steadfast at the battles of Third Winchester and Fisher’s Hill, making it possible for a majority of the defeated rebels to escape. They were no longer capable of campaigning, however, when Union forces emerged triumphant at the Battle of Cedar Creek. During the Confederate flight from Petersburg, these men showed remarkable discipline. Enduring wet and muddy conditions, they “frequently served as the army’s rearguard” (p. 372) despite a lack of food and ammunition, and ended the Civil War in dismal shape.

The Tigers incurred a staggering human toll—about 25 percent of the men died in uniform—and they represented a contradiction in terms. Such troops could go on drinking binges, steal from civilians, execute maimed prisoners, defile Union graves, and abandon their comrades to serve in the Federal armies; they could also fight valiantly for the Confederacy, embrace religion, and donate funds to the needy. Jones presents convincing evidence that Civil War soldiers could be unruly off the battlefield but prove formidable under fire.

Lee’s Tigers Revisited should garner a wide audience, although it might have benefited from attention to a few areas. First, Jones could have engaged more explicitly with the historiography. His argument differs from the scholarly assumption that elevated desertion and ethnic diversity contributed to reduced unit cohesion and combat effectiveness. Second, he argues for the Tigers’ role in certain battles, but other parts of the text lack such clear statements of significance. Thirdly, the author employs statistics—compiling them in an appendix—but he might have sought to interpret them more extensively. Lastly, the author had an opportunity to extend his postwar discussion of the Louisianians into a longer evaluation of their role in debates over historical memory. These issues do not seriously detract from what is, nevertheless, a strong piece of research. Lee’s Tigers Revisited tells an important story about the Confederate army and merits a close reading by anyone interested in learning more about some of the finest soldiers who wore the grey.

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