

The Humphreys Nobody Knows: One Common Soldier's Satire Of The Union Officer Corps

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Review

THE HUMPHREYS NOBODY KNOWS

One common soldier's satire of the Union officer corps

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Armstrong, William H. and Arner, Frederick B.. *Red-Tape and Pigeon-Hole Generals: Andrew A. Humphreys in the Army of the Potomac.* Rockbridge Publishing, ISBN 1883522153

With **Red-Tape and Pigeon-Hole Generals**, Fred Arner has established himself as a champion of the Army of the Potomac's downtrodden and an assailant of its legendary elite. In a previous work, *Mutiny at Brandy Station*, Arner dissected the causes and personalities associated with an uprising in the Union Third Corps during the winter of 1864 -- an analysis that reflected warmly on the common soldiers and poorly on the subordinate command of the Army of the Potomac. In **Red-Tape and Pigeon-Hole Generals**, Arner continues the trend, resurrecting a scathing assessment of Andrew Humphreys (one of the Union cause's most respected figures) written by one of Humphreys's contemporaries.

Most historians have long consigned **Red-Tape and Pigeon-Hole Generals** (written anonymously in 1864) to the bin of fiction. The book contains unidentified characters in a fictionalized regiment commanded by fictionalized officers. Why the anonymous author chose this approach becomes clear in the first few chapters: published in wartime, this is an unvarnished, harsh recounting of the relationship between a mercurial regular army officer (Humphreys, although not named in the text) and the nation's volunteer fighters, the very core of the Union war effort. Without its fictive pretense, this work would have been an enormous indictment of the army's management at a time when the North -- split deeply by political division -- could least afford it.

Fred Arner has done diligent and useful work to peel away the veil of fiction that has obscured this book. He identifies the regiment in question: the 129th Pennsylvania, a nine-month regiment that saw heavy service in the East from

Antietam to Chancellorsville. He reveals the author (Lieutenant Colonel William H. Armstrong of the 129th), the major protagonists (Colonel Jacob Frick of the 129th and his Pennsylvania Volunteers), and the primary antagonist, Major General Andrew Atkinson Humphreys, commander of the division of nine-month Pennsylvania Volunteers and later chief of staff of the army.

With the characters established, the book is transformed from a seemingly mindless diatribe against a vile general and his Regular Army cohorts into an important book that reflects -- perhaps more vividly than any other -- the tension between old army discipline and new, eager, and often slack volunteer soldiers.

The reader must, however, beware. The long recounting of conversations are a sure sign that they are fabricated or loosely reconstructed -- not to be relied upon. Also, Arner, in his ardor to embrace the indictment of Humphreys portrayed here, is considerably less keen on presenting favorable testimony about the general than he ought to be (there is much such material out there, to be sure). This is no balanced assessment. Still, it is a useful piece of work and interesting reading that ought to find a place on the shelf of anyone interested in the Army of the Potomac.

John Hennessy, author of Return to Bull Run, writes from Fredericksburg, Virginia.