

### Rough Riders: From Saddle To Battle, 'Texans Always Move'Em

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#### Recommended Citation

Miller, William J. (2000) "Rough Riders: From Saddle To Battle, 'Texans Always Move'Em," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol2/iss1/20>

## Review

### ROUGH RIDERS

#### From saddle to battle, 'Texans always move'em'

Miller, William J.

Winter 2000

**Crabb, Martha L.** *All Afire to Fight: The Untold Tale of the Civil War's Ninth Texas Cavalry*. Post Road Press-Avon Books, ISBN 038097794X

The regimental history, as a subgenre in American literature, has endured for well over 100 years. Eloquent writers and disciplined historians, rarely one and the same, have told the story of the men who have fought America's wars. There are a few superb unit histories and many more good ones, but the mass of regimentals remain unpoetic and merely informative. The ranks of the latter continue to grow.

The 9th Texas Cavalry did yeoman's service in the Civil War. From August 1861 to March 1865, the Texans skirmished, screened, patrolled, and raided with Confederate armies in the West and deep South. Fame has eluded the 9th Texas, just as it has the hundreds of other dependable yet unremarkable regiments that composed both armies, but Martha L. Crabb has tried to right that wrong. Her regimental history **All Afire to Fight** is as detailed and as loving as any one of those Texan troopers could have hoped for.

The author took her charge seriously and researched the 9th Texas to death. She compiled an impressive bibliography of primary sources and published histories. Then she interviewed combat veterans to get some idea about what battle was like. Next, she talked to cowboys and cattlemen to get a feel for horses. Crabb learned more than most of us want to know about the 9th Texas Cavalry and, unfortunately, decided to tell us everything. Page after page we read of the wet blankets, smoky campfires, numbing cold, dark nights, and muddy (or dusty) roads that made up the Civil War soldier's world.

Perhaps Crabb's goal was only to convey the hardship of a soldier's life (her best anecdote is that of two tentmates who were so impoverished in early 1863

that they had but one pair of pants between them. Whoever was on picket got to wear the pants, the other slept half-naked), but the minuti' build to stultifying levels. When, the tedium of camp and picket is given equal weight with the engagements and campaigns, the reader begins to question what is worth knowing and what is not. Like most books these days, this volume could have benefited from the attentions of a stern editor.

Crabb's prose has verve but is also overwrought. Her soldiers are not merely happy but "pleased as a hungry trooper with a pig." Of a foul day she writes: "Rain, like the odor of a skunk, hung on and on," and a rainy night is "dark as a wolf's mouth." Neither her editor nor her publisher gave her enough aid in condensing the story or polishing the prose.

More disturbing, however, is Crabb's indifference toward historical method. She embraces the Texans, two of whom are her ancestors, and tells their story as they would have it told, placing no distance between herself and her subject, and viewing them sympathetically rather than objectively. Testimony of two Texans is cited to relate that in January 1864 black cavalymen near the Yazoo River "captured and later murdered" two pickets of the 6th Texas Cavalry. This seems an important incident, and many readers, including this one, would like to know more about it. Racial tensions were high in that region at that time as Federals organized local "contrabands" into Union regiments, and such murders could have happened. But did they? Crabb apparently did not investigate the allegation. She willingly takes the Texans at their word, and when later they, according to their own account, routed a black unit and rode among the kneeling, pleading soldiers to deliberately "blow their brains out and leave them to wilter in their own blood," Crabb has nothing to say except that only four of the 75 blacks survived and the Southerners had thus "settled the score" for the two dead pickets of a few weeks before. She adds, almost triumphantly, "Not a Texan was scratched." This is not good history.

**All Afire to Fight** will be extraordinarily interesting to devotees of the 9th Texas Cavalry, but other readers might find the author's dedication to minuti' and her lack of objectivity discouraging. There is the potential here for an admirable regimental history; unfortunately there remains the need for the serious attentions of an editor.

*William J. Miller is the author of Mapping for Stonewall: The Civil War Service of Jed Hotchkiss and is former editor of Civil War Magazine.*

