

Surrender And Redemption: A Midwestern Brigade Overcomes Critics And Military Adversaries

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Review

SURRENDER AND REDEMPTION

A Midwestern brigade overcomes critics and military adversaries

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Welcher, Frank J. and Liggett, Larry G.. *Coburn's Brigade: 85th Indiana, 33rd Indiana, 19th Michigan, and 22nd Wisconsin in the Western Civil War.* Guild Press of Indiana, ISBN 1578600707

Traditionally, regiments have most often been identified with the shared experiences of the common soldier in the Civil War. However, as is recognized by anyone who examines the War in detail, it was at the brigade level that the overwhelming majority of citizen-soldiers participated in the conflict. **Coburn's Brigade** reinforces the reality that the three million volunteers and regulars assembled in Union and Confederate field armies camped, marched, and fought in brigades - the optimal tactical organization of the Civil War.

Aware of the importance of the brigade experience, Frank Welcher and Larry Liggett have co-authored a painstakingly detailed unit history of the northern brigade commanded by Colonel John Coburn. It is the story of a brigade that has gained a reputation both notorious and laudatory in Civil War history.

During the Civil War, the assignments of regiments to any particular brigade were usually not permanent. For three years, from 1862 to 1865, the Federal brigade commanded by John Coburn proved to be one of the exceptions. In October 1862, at the height of hurried recruiting activities when it appeared Confederate forces campaigning in Kentucky would cross the Ohio and invade the Upper Midwest, the 85th Indiana, the 33rd Indiana, the 19th Michigan, and the 22nd Wisconsin regiments were assembled into a brigade under Coburn's command. Within six months of their organization, the men of Coburn's brigade experienced the disgrace of surrender and public/political accusations of misconduct (unfairly so, the authors argue) when captured by Earl Van Dorn's Confederate cavalry at Thompson's Station, Tennessee, on March 5, 1863.

In the aftermath of this controversial incident, the men of Coburn's brigade struggled to endure a brief incarceration as prisoners of war at Libby Prison in Richmond. After parole and exchange, they reunited in Middle Tennessee, determined to redeem the brigade's honor. Instead, their services were exhausted in numerous menial labor details, constructing fortifications and building bridges, supplying labor details for the quartermaster's department, guarding railroad facilities, and other mundane duties so frequently associated with army routine in the Western Theater.

Then in the spring of 1864, having regained the confidence of their superiors, Coburn's men fought with distinction in the Atlanta campaign and became the first Federal force to enter Atlanta upon its fall. Later, under the command of Colonel Daniel Dustin, the brigade experienced hard and significant campaigning in the Georgia Lowcountry and in the Carolinas, as it participated in the principal events associated with Sherman's March. The four regiments assigned to the brigade managed to stay together until their military service was discontinued in June 1865.

In preparing this study, Welcher and Liggett have tackled the difficult problem of writing about an unusual subject - relating the war service of a military organization that was not always newsworthy and glorious. The authors detail the story of how these citizen soldiers faced the stigmatized experience of collective failure and non-combat assignments, and analyze the process by which four Midwestern regiments were ultimately welded together into a cohesive fighting group.

Throughout the narrative, the day-to-day activities of the brigade are brought to life in exhausting detail, and some readers may find it a daunting read. For example, well over 200 pages are used to relate the movements, activities, and combat of the brigade during the momentous campaigns in Georgia and the Carolinas. It is most fortunate, then, that the authors researched a host of primary sources - reports, letters, diaries, newspapers, and postwar publications by brigade members. The labor of this research has been generously used to illustrate and enrich the overall narrative. The humanity of common men bonded by the shared challenge and ordeal of military service clearly emerges from the historical writings referenced throughout the book. These forceful first-person impressions relate the often mundane, sometimes harrowing collective experience of men confronted by bitter civil war.

Coburn's Brigade provides the reader with a different understanding of Civil War unit solidarity. It is a story of unit cohesion built on the shared desire to win redemption.

Stacy D. Allen is a 15-year veteran of the National Park Service and currently Historian at Shiloh National Military Park in Tennessee. He has published contributions in five books and authored two issues of Blue & Gray magazine, numerous essays, and book reviews.