

Homeward Bound: The Demobilization of the Union and Confederate Armies, 1865-1866

Terrence J. Winschel

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Winschel, Terrence J. (2002) "Homeward Bound: The Demobilization of the Union and Confederate Armies, 1865-1866," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 .
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol4/iss1/6>

Review

Winschel, Terrence J.

Winter 2002

Holberton, William B. *Homeward Bound: The Demobilization of the Union and Confederate Armies, 1865-1866*. Stackpole Books, \$24.95 ISBN 811707881

Long road home

The transformation from soldier to civilian

Quite simply, writes the author in his introduction, **Homeward Bound** begins where most other Civil War books end. Indeed, fascination with the complex military operations of the Civil War seems to end when the firing stopped. Although thousands of volumes have been written on the causes, course, and consequences of the war, surprisingly, a full-length treatment of demobilization of both armies has never been produced. Fr. William Holberton attempts to fill this void with **Homeward Bound**.

A veteran of World War II and a lifelong student of history, Holberton's passion for the Civil War, coupled with his personal experience of demobilization after WWII, inspired this work. Although a self-termed struggling neophyte, the author demonstrates a solid understanding of the war, strong researching skills, and excellent writing ability. Holberton taps freely on the extensive collections of soldiers' diaries, letters, and memoirs (as yet unpublished) at the United States Army Military History Institute and the Virginia Historical Society to sketch a picture of demobilization. He also uses an array of soldiers' diaries and letters recently edited and annotated by leading scholars to add color to the narrative and enhance the human element of a process that was often frustrating and fraught with tense waiting and anxiety. The narrative he weaves succeeds in shedding significant light on the final stage of military service for thousands of soldiers Union and Confederate, volunteers and regulars alike, whose service came to an end at the close of hostilities.

The author first sets the stage by detailing the surrenders of Confederate forces and describing the Grand Review of the Union armies in Washington,

D.C. His approach is comprehensive, as he devotes succeeding chapters to the systematic demobilization of the Union armies, along with that of hospital patients and black troops. He also allocates a chapter each to the repatriation of prisoners of war, including those who had been galvanized, and the U.S. military buildup in Texas along the Mexican border. Holberton attempts to sharply contrast the Federal effort with the disorganized manner of Confederate demobilization, but the simple fact that the Confederacy had no plans for disbanding its armies, added to the paucity of accounts by Southern soldiers, prevents a detailed comparison.

Regrettably, Father Holberton died before this work was finished. A familiar figure on battlefield tours and at Civil War symposia, Father Bill was immensely popular in Civil War circles, and his colleagues and friends finished this work as a loving tribute to his memory. Despite their obviously valiant effort to complete Holberton's work, it is apparent that this volume was not ready for publication at the time of the author's passing. Just how far along the author was in his writing will be never be known, but some chapters are less than complete in their discussion or end abruptly, and the chapter entitled Detour via the Texas Border is only five pages long—hardly enough to even begin treatment of the topic, let alone discuss it at length. Nor we well know if Father Holberton envisioned chapters on other aspects of demobilization such as those affecting the quartermaster and commissary departments, military contracts, or conscription. Thus, **Homeward Bound** reads more like a collection of essays rather than a smoothly flowing narrative.

Nonetheless, Holberton has done what no author has even attempted to do before, and provides us with a solid foundation for continued research and writing on the subject of demobilization. **Homeward Bound** makes an important first step and it is hoped that Father Holberton's work, as did his life of service, will inspire others to follow his lead and paint a more complete picture of the journey home.

Terrence J. Winschel is a historian at Vicksburg National Military Park and author of Triumph & Defeat: The Vicksburg Campaign; Vicksburg: Fall of the Confederate Gibraltar (1998); and The Civil War Diary of a Common Soldier: William Wiley of the 77th Illinois Infantry (2001).