

### The Bloody Crucible of Courage: Fighting Methods and Combat Experience of the Civil War

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## Review

**Bowery, Jr. Major Charles R.**

**Winter 2004**

**Nosworthy, Brent** *The Bloody Crucible of Courage: Fighting Methods and Combat Experience of the Civil War*. Carroll and Graf, \$35.00 ISBN 786711477

Tactical Treatise

Author challenges views of combat

Was the American Civil War a Napoleonic war fought poorly by untrained citizen armies, as Paddy Griffith claims in *Battle Tactics of the Civil War* (1989)? Or was it a modern war that fit within the context of late- nineteenth century European military developments, as Edward Hagerman asserts in *The American Civil War and the Origins of Modern Warfare* (1988)? **The Bloody Crucible of Courage**, a new book by independent military historian Brent Nosworthy, purports to be a comprehensive study that answers this question by combining the study of three distinct areas: the tactical fighting methods, experiences of combat, and emerging technologies of the Civil War. Nosworthy is a European military historian by trade, and like his predecessor Griffith seeks to place his study of the Civil War within a worldwide context. By any standards, this is a massive undertaking, to which the author claims to have devoted eleven years of his life.

Nosworthy introduces the book with a brief overview of the historiography of two of his areas of focus, Civil War tactics and the experience of combat, and concludes with a believable claim that because battlefield conditions influence the employment of textbook tactics, the two topics should be discussed in an interrelated fashion. Several historians have addressed these topics independently of one another, leading in Nosworthy's opinion to errors of context, particularly in discussions of tactics and technology. The difficulty of this project is readily apparent to anyone seeking to undertake it: the sheer size of the body of primary source material is in itself an obstacle to a focused analysis. Moreover, combat experiences differed widely from theater to theater, campaign to campaign, and even unit to unit. Merely wading through this

material is a lifetime pursuit in and of itself, and the risk of a superficial study is reductionism. To his credit, the author avoids this pitfall.

Part One of **The Bloody Crucible of Courage** sets the stage for the author's analysis of Civil War combat. He surveys European developments in small arms, tactical doctrine, artillery, and ironclad ship production roughly from 1800 to 1860, and goes on to place the reaction of the American military into this context. The American army and navy were indeed small, parochial institutions in the early nineteenth century, but they made conscious attempts to observe European developments and integrate them into their own doctrines and technologies. The antebellum American military affinity for all things French is well-documented, and shines through here. All in all, this section of the book will force the Civil War scholar to see American developments in a worldwide context, in much the same way as Hagerman's earlier work. European methods and technologies are clearly the author's strongpoint; the reader without a strong grounding in these areas will find this approach illuminating.

Part Two, The Beginning of the War, examines Union and Confederate attempts to mobilize large numbers of citizen-soldiers for war. Nosworthy's European expertise is both a help and a hindrance here. His examination of early mobilization and camp life is based on a relatively small number of published primary sources, and in any case a number of other historians have covered this ground. Many archival sources exist on these subjects, rendering the author's treatment of this topic somewhat superficial. One might even speculate that detailed coverage of this topic is not really necessary in this book. In a project of this size, however, something has to give, and this may be it. On the positive side, the author's approach to this topic from outside the box of traditional Civil War historiography yields some true gems of research. For example, Nosworthy did significant research in the scientific and technical magazines of nineteenth-century America, most notably in *Scientific American*. In these pages he found a wealth of commentary and speculation on military matters. These portions of the narrative are truly fascinating and valuable.

Nosworthy's analysis of infantry and cavalry doctrine in Part III, Infantry and Cavalry, affirms the value of his comparative treatment of European and American military developments. The author's command of mid- nineteenth century European doctrine allows him to approach Civil War tactics with an authoritative eye. His discussion of the psychological basis of infantry combat seeks to explain why men reacted the way they did to the horror and carnage of

combat. In some places his conclusions are less than authoritative, such as his agreement with Grady McWhiney and Perry Jamieson (*Attack and Die*, 1982 ) that Confederate troops were more apt to favor offensive tactics because of Celtic ancestry, but in general this is a very refreshing treatment of a subject many have referred to as the old military history. In the book's conclusion on page 658, Nosworthy throws down a gauntlet for other Civil War military historians, demanding that they reinstitute a working knowledge of a period's military science as a core competency of all military historical efforts, regardless of the period or specific area of focus.

Where many historians have portrayed the Civil War as a contest between two mass citizen armies that were incapable of adapting to the technological changes of their day, Nosworthy sees a war in which both sides adapted quite well to a changing battlefield, especially in the Western Theater and in the latter stages of the war in the East. Part IV, *The West and Specialized Forms of Warfare*, and Part VI, *The Distinctiveness of Later Campaigns*, show that both the Union and Confederacy approached the war with a fairly sound understanding of European military technologies and doctrines, and sought to adapt them to the unique conditions of combat in North America, especially in the Western Theater with its extensive distances, rough terrain, river networks, and lack of infrastructure. In the East, this adaptation took the form of widespread use of field fortifications; the Confederate position at Spotsylvania Courthouse, Virginia, in May 1864 is a prime example.

For the reader with the stamina to make it to the end of this huge book, Part VII, *Epilogue and Conclusion*, is a fitting reward. Nosworthy comes out on the side of Paddy Griffith in that most strident of debates over Civil War tactics, the question of the role of the rifle musket in shaping the conduct and bloodiness of the war. The author marshals considerable data to conclude that not only was small arms fire in the American Civil War statistically more effective than that of the Napoleonic period in Europe, but that the rifle musket did not change the nature of Civil War combat as has been portrayed by Grady McWhiney and Perry Jamieson. In other words, Civil War infantrymen were not more efficient killers of each other because of the rifle muskets many of them carried. Because Civil War soldiers frequently had little marksmanship training, the author contends, they were unable to maximize the capabilities of the rifle musket by engaging in long- range firing. Further, the lower muzzle velocity of the rifle musket made this weapon less effective than a smoothbore musket at close range. This line of reasoning follows that of Paddy Griffith, who claims that the

majority of Civil War infantry actions occurred in the 140- yard range, only fifty yards further than those of the eighteenth century. Many contemporary observers agreed with this argument, and published their findings in civilian and military forums. Nosworthy buttresses his position in this ongoing debate by referring to casualty statistics from the Mexican- American War, during which American troops, with a few exceptions, used the smoothbore musket as a primary infantry weapon. This position also supposes that Americans employed firearms more effectively than Europeans because of a greater familiarity with them in everyday life, another provocative claim that awaits further substantiation. As with any historical argument that relies heavily on statistical data, the reader must view these conclusions with a healthy dose of skepticism. Civil War historiography is still awaiting a comprehensive study of Civil War engagements, and until this study is complete the debate will continue. For the time being, though, this book has contributed to the debate in a meaningful way.

In the final analysis, with the exception of his stance on infantry weapons, Brent Nosworthy sides with Edward Hagerman in the last of the old wars or first of the new debate. He succeeds in his main intention of placing the American Civil War into a worldwide context. **The Bloody Crucible of Courage** is an admirable attempt to illuminate an aspect of Civil War military history that has not been so much neglected as incompletely studied. In some places the author's reach has exceeded his grasp, but that shortcoming is understandable given the monumental size of the project. It is difficult to write a truly original book on the Civil War, but Brent Nosworthy has done it. His command of European military science informs this topic in numerous ways. This book is a worthy addition to Civil War historiography, and provides the historian with numerous points of departure for further study of a variety of topics. While it is certainly not suitable for the novice or general reader, anyone seeking a greater understanding of Civil War combat should read it.

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