

The Battle Rages Higher: The Union's 15th Kentucky Infantry

William H. Mulligan

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Review

Mulligan, Jr. William H.

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Jenkins, Kirk C. *The Battle Rages Higher: The Union's 15th Kentucky Infantry.* University Press of Kentucky, \$35.00 ISBN 813122813

Border state infantry:

A regimental history revival

Kirk Jenkins has demonstrated the continuing value of a very traditional approach to studying the Civil War — the regimental history. His history of the 15th Kentucky Infantry (U.S.) is based upon an impressive amount of research and offers a number of valuable insights into the nature of the war because of the format. A regimental history provides an opportunity to follow an individual unit from its recruitment and organization throughout the course of the war and to follow its members' lives afterwards. The format allows the full range of issues and challenges that surrounded raising troops and organizing companies and regiments to be discussed in a very specific context. Units were raised in communities by men from those communities, this format allows that aspect of the war to be developed and explored fully and effectively. In the case of the 15th the particular position of Kentucky, a slave state that remained in the Union, is nicely treated as it affected the 15th. The War and its individual engagements are seen through the lens of the unit — not the overall campaign, the particular battle, or commander. This offers a chance to look at the War from a vantage point much closer to the perspective of the soldiers who fought it than others. The regimental history even has some advantages over the diaries and letters of individual soldiers, which, while powerful, can be idiosyncratic and overly individualized. Jenkins is to be commended for choosing such a fruitful approach and executing it so well through very thorough and impressive research. While Jenkins is not the first person to revive the regimental history, he has done it exceptionally well. We can only hope that others will pursue this approach and offer similarly detailed and nuanced studies of individual units, Union and Confederate.

The 15th was an active, fighting unit, involved in some of the major battles in the Western Theatre — Perryville, Stone's River, Chickamauga, and the Atlanta campaign. This extensive activity was not without human cost. Of the 969 men who served in the regiment 124 were killed in action, 240 wounded, and 243 discharged on disability. Only 30 regiments in the Union Army had a higher proportion of casualties. The story of the 15th is an active one involving significant battles and campaigns, a unit on the move and in the thick of important action. It is a compelling and interesting history that Jenkins has researched thoroughly and presents in a very readable way. Maps are used effectively to make the role of the 15th in individual battles easier to follow.

One of the strengths of the regimental history format is the potential for attention to individual soldiers within the structure of the unit. **The Battle Rages Higher** has an extensive Biographical Roster that provides biographical sketches of the men who served in the regiment. Organized by company, the sketches provide what Jenkins has been able to discover about each man. It is impressive. For many the information is little more than what would be on their enlistment papers, but for others — and not only officers — there is information about their postwar lives. The unit had three colonels during its service, Curran Pope, James Brown Forman, and Marion Cartright Taylor. Pope and Curran were both from Louisville and died during the war. Pope of typhoid fever while recovering from wounds received at the Battle of Perryville and Forman at the Battle of Stone's River. Taylor commanded the regiment for the rest of the war despite being wounded at the Battle of Resaca. The biographies also help identify soldiers born in Germany and Ireland as well as personalizing the experience of the men who fought.

The Battle Rages Higher is a welcome addition to the literature of the Civil War in several important sub-areas. The experience of the 15th Kentucky, as a unit, offers new perspectives and insights into the western theatre and the battles the unit fought. It also offers a detailed, carefully researched exploration of the process by which Kentuckians decided which side to support and the consequences of that decision. Jennings has done a first-rate job of research and an equally good job of presenting an interesting and engaging story.

William H. Mulligan, Jr. is professor of history at Murray State University and director of the Forrest C. Pogue Public History Institute. He is also one of the founders and past-President of the Kentucky Civil War Sites Association.