

Days of Glory: The Army of the Cumberland, 1861-1865

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Review

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The forgotten army

A history of the western juggernaut

Throughout the massive and expanding historiography of the American Civil War, the U.S. Army of the Cumberland has been persistently neglected. Although the second-most-powerful army of the war, surpassed only in numerical strength by the Union Army of the Potomac, the indifference displayed by historians to the Cumberland army appears associated with the eastern slant of how postwar America has chosen to remember the war. Historian Larry J. Daniel now alters this course, using his notable analytic and narrative skills to interpret the history and mission of this lethal fighting force of the West.

Daniel examines the Cumberland army from the perspective of command and through the experiences of the rank and file western volunteers assigned to its divisions, illustrating how the dynamics of disharmony, political in-fighting and feeble ineffective leadership plagued an army exasperated from achieving its full operational potential. The only previous serious history of the army, Thomas B. Van Horne's two-volume *The Army of the Cumberland*, first printed in 1870, ignored the intra-army bickering that adversely affected unity of command within the army. Furthermore, Van Horne's narrative style was impersonal and lacked depth in its analysis of the army's various leaders, particularly George H. Thomas, who emerges in Van Horne's prose as the army's most brilliant general officer and greatest hero.

In this new study, Daniel finds Thomas was truly the catalyst which gave the army its fighting edge. But, he offers a fresh and far different opinion of Thomas' generalship, particularly in the early stages of the war, citing the loyal Virginia-born general was a flawed officer whose military skills fail to mature

until late 1863 when he assumes command of the army. The book examines what Daniel considers to be the negative influence of early army commanders Robert Anderson and William T. Sherman, and offers probing analysis into the poisonous atmosphere of pettiness and parochial thinking he believes significantly hindered the performance of Thomas' predecessors Don Carlos Buell and William S. Rosecrans.

The author devoted seven years of exhausting research to explore a widespread and extensive bibliography of letters, diaries, and reports to shape his epic portrait of the fighting force historian Albert Castel has called Lincoln's other army. The army's history is traced from its initial core mission to liberate East Tennessee through the invasion of the Deep South during the Chickamauga, Chattanooga, and Atlanta Campaigns. One oddity examined by Daniel was the length of time it took for the organization to evolve and solidify. Until December 1862, the various divisions assigned to the army did not fight a single battle as a cohesive unit. At Mill Springs, Shiloh, and Perryville, only certain divisions—and unfortunately not all the same ones—were engaged. Until the titanic and momentous battle at Stones River, none of the regiments assigned to the army could claim more than one battle honor on their regimental standard. However, the army's veteran character steadily unfolds as Daniel records the evolution of the army's volunteers from untrained recruits to seasoned soldiers. This hardening of the army's behavior was vividly chronicled by the soldiers themselves, as they increasingly voiced their evolving abolitionist views and hatred of the rebels, and began to openly retaliate against the property and homes of their rebellious countrymen.

Readers may discover the manner in which Daniel chose to end the book somewhat problematic, for he concludes his study of the army's history with the capture of Atlanta in September 1864. In the aftermath of Sherman's occupation of the city, the Army of the Cumberland was virtually discontinued when two of its corps were reassigned, marching off in November with Sherman to the sea while the remaining corps withdrew under Thomas to Middle Tennessee. Thus, the book abruptly concludes with a brief epilogue concerning the activities of Thomas's remaining corps at the Battle of Nashville, and offers no analysis of the other two corps, now christened the Army of Georgia, campaigning with Sherman's offensive through Georgia and the Carolinas. If the sudden conclusion leaves the reader a little troubled and desiring more, it may simply mean the book accomplishes its intended subtle purpose, by creating relevance and understanding for the lethal experiences of this formidable but troubled army of

prideful Cumberland veterans, which unfortunately witness the dismantling of their great host at the supreme height of its power and combat effectiveness.

Stacy D. Allen serves as chief park ranger/historian at Shiloh National Military Park in Tennessee. He is currently editing a Civil War memoir by William Royal Oake, 26th Iowa Infantry, for Far Country Press, slated for publication in 2005 as On the Skirmish Line, Behind a Friendly Tree.