

A Broken Regiment: The 16th Connecticut's Civil War

Robert Grandchamp

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Review

Grandchamp, Robert

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Gordon, Lesley J. *A Broken Regiment: The 16th Connecticut's Civil War.* Louisiana State University Press, \$49.95 ISBN 9780807157305

War Without Glory: The Trials of the 16th Connecticut

Late in the afternoon of September 17, 1862 a regiment of green Connecticut soldiers marched headlong into Otto's Cornfield at Antietam. Forming part of the extreme left flank of the Army of the Potomac, the Nutmeggers, only days removed from Hartford, and who had barely been given any instruction in loading their rifles walked straight into Gregg's Brigade of South Carolinians. Within minutes the Sixteenth Connecticut disintegrated, losing a quarter of their strength as the battalion ran for their lives. According to Lieutenant Colonel Joseph B. Curtis of the Fourth Rhode Island, which was on the left flank of the Sixteenth, and was also forced to retreat against the Confederate assault, the Sixteenth was "a broken regiment." The Battle of Antietam and the capture of nearly the entire regiment at Plymouth, North Carolina in the spring of 1864 became the legacy of the Sixteenth Connecticut. No glory found the men of the Sixteenth; instead the regiment suffered terribly, both on the battlefield and at Andersonville, and left behind a legacy that was vastly different from most Civil War regiments.

This book has been eagerly awaited by the Civil War community for years. Originally based on an article for Gary Gallagher's *The Antietam Campaign*, Gordon, a professor at the University of Akron has expanded this article into a full-fledged regimental history, based almost entirely on primary manuscript sources gathered at the Connecticut State Library and Connecticut Historical Society, which is home to a vast collection of material on the Sixteenth Connecticut.

Hastily raised in Hartford County under Lincoln's call of July 1862, the Sixteenth Connecticut was composed largely of farmers and mill workers from towns along the Connecticut River; few had military experience. Under the

command of a West Pointer, and after a few weeks of basic training, the Sixteenth was sent south and assigned to the Third Division of the Ninth Corps. Although the precise date cannot be established, the men were issued antiquated smoothbore muskets just days before Antietam, and most did not know how to use them. This combination of inexperience, ineffective weapons, and being placed on the left flank of the Army of the Potomac all proved to be disastrous at Antietam. Thinking the South Carolinians to their front were Ohio troops, they withheld their fire. The Carolinians, wearing captured blue uniforms from Harpers Ferry literally destroyed the regiment, causing over two hundred casualties, killing forty-five, and sending the regiment reeling in retreat; indeed two members of the regiment deserted and fled all the way to England for the duration of the war. Antietam was a brutal baptism. After the war, as Gordon studies in-depth, the veterans successfully managed to record in the history books that it was through no fault of their own that the events at Antietam happened to them, blaming it on their inexperience, and honoring those who fell as brave defenders of the republic.

Held in reserve at Fredericksburg, the Sixteenth took a leading role during the Suffolk Campaign, and redeemed itself in several minor skirmishes. After that the regiment was sent to garrison Plymouth, North Carolina, a backwater garrison. The garrison was surprised by a large Confederate force under George E. Pickett in April of 1864 and was forced to capitulate. The regiment was captured nearly to a man, and sent to Andersonville where dozens died of illness. One member of the regiment, Sergeant Robert Kellogg wrote one of the best memoirs of his experiences there and became a key witness in the Wirz trial. As with Antietam, the veterans in the postwar years successfully managed to escape blame for the events that happened at Plymouth, and led the efforts for Connecticut erect a monument to the regiment at both Antietam and Andersonville. Lieutenant Bernard Blakeslee who wrote the unit's thin, post-war regimental history after the war recorded, "The Sixteenth was always called an *unfortunate regiment*; for if there was any special hardship to endure the regiment was sure to be called on to experience it, either by accident or otherwise. It was our bad luck."

In conclusion, the regimental history is one of the more difficult books to write about the Civil War era; this reviewer has authored three regimental histories about Rhode Island units. A regimental requires the author to conduct in-depth research across a variety of sources such as letters, journals, newspapers, pension and service files, and cemetery records, and link the

experiences of a small group of men into the overall picture of the Civil War. Many authors attempt to write a history of this nature, but fail in either source gathering or the writing of the narrative. In *A Broken Regiment*, Dr. Lesley Gordon has mastered the art of writing a regimental history. She has conducted years of in-depth manuscript material, traveled far and wide, and written a very detailed study of a Civil War regiment that experienced the conflict differently from many of their peers. This book shows that not every regiment experienced the “glories of war.” Rather the Sixteenth Connecticut experienced war at its worse and left an interesting tale to be told. Dr. Lesley Gordon’s *A Broken Regiment* is regimental history at its best.

Robert Grandchamp earned his M.A. in American History from Rhode Island College. He is the award winning author of nine books, including most recently, A Connecticut Yankee at War. He is an analyst with the government and resides in northern Vermont.