

Lee's Army During the Overland Campaign: A Numerical Study

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Review

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Young, Alfred C. *Lee's Army during the Overland Campaign: A Numerical Study*. Louisiana State University Press, \$29.95 ISBN 978-0-8071-5172-3

Understanding is more important than certainty, but certainty is nice when you can get it.

This is an important book on a rather narrow topic. Decades in the researching, it presents a new and likely definitive picture of what the Army of Northern Virginia (plus attached forces in theater) endured between the opening of the Wilderness battles in early May 1864 and the final phases of Cold Harbor a month later. By prodigious research in published and unpublished records, including newspaper casualty listings that were unknown to most earlier scholars, Alfred Young gives us the clearest picture yet of the cost of those operations to the Confederacy's finest army under its best army commander.

In large measure, this book is a gloss on the works of Gordon C. Rhea, who provides the foreword, and whose works about the campaign dating from the early 1990s to the early 2000s are the source of all the maps and many of the textual footnotes in this book. Young's major discovery is two-fold: that the ANV was larger at the start of the campaign by six to eight percent than previously estimated, and that its casualties were also larger by roughly the same degree. That is, the traditional accepted figure of roughly 62,000 in the ranks should be replaced by the figure of 66,000 or more, with corresponding changes to the total casualties. The author's reasoning and conclusions are clearly stated, whether the focus is a on the total headcount of the Army of Northern Virginia or the headcount of one of its constituent units.

The structure of the book is starkly simple. After some preliminary scene-setting and explanation, the narrative consists of divisions, brigades, and artillery battalions passing in review as they were organized at the time—First Corps, First Division, X Brigade, Y Brigade, etc. Brief histories of the units in question are given in that order, followed by discussions of the known facts as to

casualties suffered by the large units and their constituent regiments and battalions from early May through early June. Artillery and cavalry units are covered as thoroughly as the infantry. (Readers who do not have the order-of-battle memorized should flag Appendix C on pp. 380-381—they will need it.) There is a full account of additions and reinforcements to the ANV during this campaign also.

The brigade- and (artillery) battalion-level descriptions of the fighting impart an unusual prismatic quality to the story due to the chosen structure, but it's hard to think of a better approach for this specific purpose. That being said, there are several factors that make the book a bit similar to a Rubik's Cube. Instead of having brigade starting strengths in the regimental, battalion, and battery casualty tables which make up over a hundred pages of the book, those are given in the text and in a separate set of tables. The casualty figures themselves are sorted into standard categories such as KIA, WIA, W&C; (wounded and captured), MIA, and total, and are given for each battle or action. (Not even the one or two soldiers per unit who were "probably left behind as medical orderlies for the wounded and sick" escape the author's attention to detail.) Another problem is that some of the tables take up more than one page and not all of those are on facing pages; some of them are oriented to the top of the page and others to the gutter or the fore-edge. Since some of the maps are similarly displayed, a few extra fingers or a third hand could be useful as the reader flips and rotates among text, tables, and maps.

Also problematic is that the author refers to Union forces in the narrative sections by their numerical designators, i.e. "First Division of II Corps," but the forty pages of maps reproduced from Rhea's books identify units only by commander, making it difficult to follow the narrative without a cheat sheet. For that matter, some of the maps are lacking in clear shading contrasts (to my eyes anyway).

So, the book provides new certainties where some things had been obscure. How does it do on the understanding side of the equation? In my opinion, very well, but only with considerable effort on the part of the reader to assimilate and integrate the information scattered through the book. Close attention to the actions and losses of each unit is rewarded with an understanding of why some units were considered crack and others so-so (or crack at the beginning and so-so later on in some cases). The same could be said of the leaders whose actions are covered.

Anyone who desires to study the military events of 1864 in Virginia in depth should have this book. As I read about the bloody fighting and remarkable heroism on both sides, I was reminded of something the late John Keegan wrote in a review article in *The New Republic* some years ago: by 1864, the soldiers of both armies should mostly be considered de facto volunteers regardless of their actual enlistment circumstances, because by this time the dangers of service were well known to all, and desertion was neither particularly difficult nor particularly dangerous. Young's neat tables should be studied with that in mind.

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