

Civil War Infantry Tactics: Training, Combat, and Small-Unit Effectiveness

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Review

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Hess, Earl J. *Civil War Infantry Tactics: Training, Combat, and Small-Unit Effectiveness*. Louisiana State University Press, \$45.00 ISBN 9780807159378

Overturning Old Assumptions about Civil War Tactics

For the last twenty-five years, military historians of the Civil War have worked diligently to slowly overturn the famous thesis of Civil War combat put forward by Grady McWhiney and Perry Jamieson in 1982. For those unfamiliar with it, the formulation runs approximately: the Civil War was so indecisive and bloody because commanders were unable to adapt their obsolete system of linear tactics to an enemy armed with rifled weapons that could engage attackers more accurately and at far greater distances than ever before. Despite a series of convincing books that have shown engagement distances did not actually increase over previous wars, few other than the shrinking circle of Civil War military historians have taken note. In his latest book, *Civil War Infantry Tactics: Training, Combat and Small-Unit Effectiveness*, however, Earl Hess suggests that with the battle over the rifle over, it is time for historians to take the next step and ask if the linear tactical system used by the Union and the Confederacy was truly outdated. He also takes on the claim that the amateur citizen armies of the Civil War were simply too inept to use the linear system effectively. Ultimately, Hess concludes that the vast majority of volunteer regiments were proficient in their tactical drills and that the “linear system was not obsolete.” In fact, it was “the correct system to be used with the rifle musket” (xiv).

To arrive at these answers, Hess—who is the Stewart W. McClelland Chair in History at Lincoln Memorial University—goes back to the basics of Civil War research. He closely analyzes the three main drill manuals available to Civil War officers: *Scott’s, Hardee’s and Casey’s Tactics* to form a theoretical background and then uses battle reports from the *Official Records of the War of the Rebellion* as well as numerous other archival and printed sources to examine how theoretical practice translated into battlefield performance.

The book itself is divided into five sections. In the first, Hess provides the reader a helpful introduction to the European origins of the linear tactical system and discusses how conditions in the Americas influenced its development through the Mexican American War. In the second section, Hess carefully illustrates the similarities and differences between the three major instruction manuals available to Civil War officers and then explains how these officers inculcated these drills to their soldiers in training on the parade ground. In the third and largest section, Hess covers the transition from the parade ground to the battlefield and explains how soldiers maneuvered under fire. Hess concludes his work with an explanation of the post-war developments in the linear system.

The strengths of this work are substantial and I will only highlight a few key points that I found most impressive. In addition to being a well-researched and thoroughly engaging read, Hess provides his reader with an excellent introduction to the historiography of Civil War tactics that is well worth reading on its own. His discussion of tactical developments after the Civil War was particularly enlightening as well. Following in the footsteps of the tactical manuals he discusses, Hess includes a great number of diagrams and a helpful glossary of tactical terms that greatly improve the reader's understanding of his overall argument.

I have only one reservation about this book. As the title notes, this is a book specifically about *infantry* tactics, however, it contains no discussion about how the infantry interacted with the other two branches on the battlefield. While it is true that the American Civil War was largely a fight between two forces of infantry, it was not always and evaluating tactics in an infantry vacuum ignores the decisive role of artillery and cavalry in battles like Malvern Hill and Cedar Creek. Frustratingly, the book leaves the reader wondering to extent the cavalry and artillery remained relevant to the linear tactical system. Hopefully Hess will soon follow up this work with a book on the tactics of these two branches.

Ultimately, this is an excellent work of military history which all Civil War or military historians would benefit from reading. Unfortunately, however, since it is a book of battlefield tactics, those Civil War historians who see military history as divorced from the race, class and gender considerations so in vogue today will likely dismiss this fine book as being simply a relic of a bygone era. This is a shame, since they would probably be the ones who would profit the most from reading it.

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