

# Fields of Honor: Pivotal Battles of the Civil War

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## Review

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**Bearss, Edwin C.** *Fields of Honor: Pivotal Battles of the Civil War*. National Geographic Books, \$28.00 ISBN 792275683

From Armchairs to Battlefields

Highlighting Hallowed Ground

**Fields of Honor** is a pan to the iconic Civil War historian and battlefield guide, Edwin C. Bearss, Chief Historian Emeritus of the National Park Service. Culled from recordings of his legendary tours, assembled by the Blue and Gray Education Society, filed with Bearss's personal archives at the Marine Corps University Library, and coupled with a biographical introduction by Professor James M. McPherson (along with a concise contextual narrative by historian Brooks Simpson and editor Harris Andrews), the volume stands as a tribute to Bearss, a combat Marine, senior National Park Service official, and raconteur extraordinaire. **Fields of Honor** focuses on precisely the words of its title: fields of strife, honor, gore, and glory—the traditional stuff of military and Civil War history that is spiced by minuti, Bearss's particular style, interpretation, and opinions. Encyclopedic in knowledge, you either like or dislike Bearss's approach, and those who have heard him know that he likes to make his pitch in the present tense with a staccato style of emphasis and determination bordering on certitude.

Choice is always a crucial ingredient in any historical recitation and arguably for authors and readers alike. Whether or not any or all of the fourteen battles or incidents captured in Bearss's treatment fit such a category for the myriad of buffs, experts, or merely tour participants must remain a question. In any event, the book's compilers have chosen Harpers Ferry, Fort Sumter, First Manassas, Shiloh, Antietam, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, Vicksburg, Chattanooga, The Wilderness, Spotsylvania, North Anna-Cold Harbor-and Petersburg. An epilogue recounts Bearss's involvement with raising the ironclad *Cairo* from a watery grave to its present post of honor on the Vicksburg

battlefield. One could just as easily plumb for other sites and episodes as pivotal (Forts Henry and Donelson, Fredericksburg, Franklin and Nashville—all of which Bearss understands like the back of his hand), and one does wonder why Coastal and Trans-Mississippi subjects are not included. Frankly, the attention dedicated to Eastern battles is palpable.

Nonetheless, nice still-life black and white photographs lend tone, while the dearth of tactical operational maps (Bearss's forte when a struggling and rising star as research historian with the NPS) is a distinct limitation. Bearss's kudos to friends and colleagues at the end of the volume provides a nice touch, although the absence of any Bearss Suggested Reading List is notable. In short, we have a readable, enjoyable snapshot of the thoughts and words of the redoubtable Ed Bearss. They are something to treasure and tramp with over those **Fields of Honor** themselves—for that has truly been Ed's mission in life—to get us out of our armchairs and walk the ground so wonderfully preserved and interpreted by public institutions for the public. His words and the book that captures them form a monument just as those fields of honor are dotted with monuments. They conjure a vision of the octogenarian Bearss at work, even yet flailing the air at the Highwater Mark, stalking unit flank positions in the Wilderness, and savoring the folklore as well as the facts surrounding battles and commanders, foot-sloggers, and the Army Mule as something to pause, ponder, and cherish forever.

*Dr. B. F. Cooling is currently Associate Dean of Academic Programs, Industrial College of the Armed Forces, National Defense University, Washington D.C., where he teaches courses in national security studies, resourcing the Civil War, and business-military relations. He is the author of books concerning the defense and defenses of Washington, Jubal Early's Raid on the capital in 1864, Forts Henry and Donelson, as well as the war in Kentucky and Tennessee. His Counter-Thrust; From the Peninsula to Antietam awaits publication in the University of Nebraska Press Civil War Campaigns series.*