

Uncommon Valor: A Story of Race, Patriotism, and Glory in the Final Battles of the Civil War

Gregory J.W. Urwin

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Urwin, Gregory J.W. (2007) "Uncommon Valor: A Story of Race, Patriotism, and Glory in the Final Battles of the Civil War," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 9 : Iss. 1 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol9/iss1/18>

Review

Urwin, Gregory J.W.

Winter 2007

Claxton, Melvin and Puls, Mark. *Uncommon Valor: A Story of Race, Patriotism, and Glory in the Final Battles of the Civil War.* John Wiley & Sons, Inc., \$24.95 cloth ISBN 471468231

Understanding Courage in Battle

The literature on the American Civil War is replete with tales of soldierly courage. Scholars have written countless books and articles commemorating the brave deeds of both lowly privates and high-ranking officers. While this literature tends to be redundant and hagiographic, it provides cathartic gratification to those legions of Civil War buffs who view America's greatest tragedy as an act of national consecration fought by self-sacrificing heroes who deserve everlasting honor. *Uncommon Valor: A Story of Race, Patriotism, and Glory in the Final Battles of the Civil War* by Melvin Claxton and Mark Puls fits nicely with this well-established genre. What makes it stand out from most of its predecessors, however, is that the heroes it celebrates were all African Americans.

Uncommon Valor focuses on the fourteen black soldiers who received the Congressional Medal of Honor for the courage they exhibited while assaulting Confederate earthworks at New Market Heights, Virginia, on September 29, 1864. Since the United States Colored Troops (USCT) produced only sixteen black Medal of Honor recipients, New Market Heights deserves a prominent place in the history of the black military experience in the Civil War. (Two of the USCT's thirteen white officers to receive that decoration were also honored for their conduct in the same engagement.) The fact that the African Americans who fought and died at New Market Heights not only strove to preserve the Union, but to earn freedom and equality for an oppressed race, endows their story with a timeless element that should appeal to all Americans, and not just devotees of the Civil War.

Melvin Claxton, a Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative reporter with the Nashville *Tennessean*, and Mark Puls, another award-winning journalist, are well equipped to develop the drama and pathos in the chain of events that led 3,000 African-American soldiers from their varied civilian pursuits to the blood-stained slopes of New Market Heights. The authors have succeeded in crafting a well-written narrative that recreates the prejudices, hardships, and dangers faced by the black men who rallied to the Union cause and pledged their lives to its vindication. They make especially good use of the papers left by Christian Fleetwood, the sergeant major of the 4th U.S. Colored Infantry, who emerges as the main character in this account.

While *Uncommon Valor* succeeds as a good read, it suffers from the authors' lack of historical background. For instance, they refer repeatedly to the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, the Union Army's most famous black regiment, as the 54th U.S. Colored Infantry. As most USCT students know, Governor John A. Andrew of Massachusetts, the 54th's leading promoter, refused to add the word Colored to this regiment's title because he wanted it to be regarded as equal to the first fifty-three white infantry regiments raised by the Bay State. In addition, this mistake confuses the 54th Massachusetts with the real 54th U.S. Colored Infantry, which was originally organized in the second half of 1863 as the 2nd Arkansas Regiment of African Descent.

The authors commit other technical errors that could have been eliminated had they asked a competent Civil War historian to review their manuscript prior to publication. For instance, they claim that Jefferson Davis was serving as President Franklin Pierce's Secretary of War in 1860 — three years after both of these politicians had left those respective offices. The authors depict Brigadier General George A. Custer as participating directly in Brigadier General Hugh Judson Kilpatrick's Richmond Raid in early 1864. In reality, Custer led a diversionary strike to draw Confederate attention far to the west of Kilpatrick's column. Claxton and Puls also have Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant taking command of the entire Union Army from Major General George Gordon Meade, missing the fact that Meade commanded only one of the North's field armies and officially retained his post even after Grant placed the Army of the Potomac under his personal supervision.

On the interpretive level, Claxton and Puls mistake the true import of Abraham Lincoln's famous letter to Horace Greeley in which the president asserted, My paramount aim in this struggle is to save the Union, and not either

to save or destroy slavery. They miss the fact that when Lincoln wrote these words in the summer of 1862, he had already decided to issue an emancipation proclamation and was merely using Greeley's *New York Tribune* to test the waters of public opinion. Of even greater concern, the authors often fail to clearly describe military organization, tactics, and movements, a failing exacerbated by this book's complete lack of maps.

Uncommon Valor deserves credit for addressing a neglected facet of Civil War heroism, but a little bit more time and care on the part of the authors might have resulted in a book worthy of its subject. Like the Union assault on New Market Heights, there is much to admire in this effort, but the end result is disappointing.

Gregory J. W. Urwin is a professor of history and associate director of the Center for the Study of Force and Diplomacy at Temple University. His latest book is Black Flag over Dixie: Racial Atrocities and Reprisals in the Civil War.