

War's Relentless Hand: Twelve Tales of Civil War Soldiers

Derek W. Frisby

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

Recommended Citation

Frisby, Derek W. (2007) "War's Relentless Hand: Twelve Tales of Civil War Soldiers," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 9 : Iss. 2 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol9/iss2/21>

Review

Frisby, Derek W.

Spring 2007

Dunkelman, Mark H. *War's Relentless Hand: Twelve Tales of Civil War Soldiers*. Louisiana State University Press, \$34.95 hardcover ISBN 807131903

The Lives of Civil War Soldiers

Civil War historiography is replete with edited collections of diaries, letters, and reminiscences detailing soldierly experiences during the conflict, however, *War's Relentless Hand* accomplishes much more than any of this standard fare. A freelance artist, musician, and self-appointed regimental historian of the 154th New York, Mark Dunkelman has authored previous volumes of this unit chronicling its *esprit de corps* during hard fought campaigns in both theaters, as well as the celebrity and mystery surrounding one soldier's death at Gettysburg. Dunkelman's innovative approach for this latest installment compiled twelve biographies to give life to otherwise obscure names on the regimental roster, and it does far more than recount the wartime experience these men shared. Instead, these tales encompass their transformations from civilian to soldier and back again (if they survived), and explores each man's relationships with their family and friends whom they relied upon for physical and emotional support. Such an approach humanizes the impersonal Civil War regiment and provides a more complete portrait of how Civil War service affected all aspects of American society.

Dunkelman chose his collection of tales to reflect the many fates of Civil War servicemen. Five individuals died from disease or mortal wounds during the war, two others succumbed after the war from their wartime injuries, three dealt with the lingering disabilities incurred in the service, and two more who survived the war though death tragically found them in the postwar period. These separate narratives, built around their shared experience, offer fascinating insights into the soldier's struggle to reconcile their aspirations and expectations with the realities of war. There is truly something for everyone seeking insight into the Civil War soldier. *War's Relentless Hand* relates one soldier's adjustment

from his carefree civilian life to the drudgery and frustration of camp (including veiled allusions to masturbation among the soldiers), another's tragic story of the clerical error that doomed him, one horrific account of Andersonville, an account of the pension system bureaucratic nightmares, the veterans haunted until death by their wartime memories, the story of a mortally wounded soldier whose shattered leg ended up as a medical curio, a soldier's search for solace in religion, and one's slide into insanity. Each tale is a well-crafted and engaging narrative deftly culled from primary sources supplemented by official records and even interviews with relatives struggling to remember their veterans. The casual Civil War historian and academic alike will enjoy this volume for the breadth of material it covers and for how well it is researched and written. It should strongly be considered for supplemental reading in undergraduate-level Civil War-related courses for its appealing material and for graduate Civil War students for its fresh approach to a familiar genre.

For all his efforts to illuminate the lives of these Civil War soldiers, Dunkelman casts a pall over them. In his introduction, he suggests that these men were common soldiers displaying uncommon virtues, and few could question his assertion here that they displayed an extraordinary perseverance, resilience and devotion to cause and comrades.[PAGE NO?] But missing from his study are the tales of those in the 154th New York whose wartime experiences made them stronger, more determined, and more disciplined. Enlistment provided a broader world perspective than their previously sheltered and limited antebellum lives. From these experiences, these veterans shaped the character of postwar America, and their stories are just as relevant and intriguing as those included here. With his extensive knowledge of these men surely Dunkelman could provide a companion volume illustrating these qualities, too.

Unfortunately, perhaps no regiment has a better champion than the 154th New York has in Dunkelman. Future historians would be wise to take note of his novel approach of giving a full accounting of individual's experiences antebellum, wartime, and postwar experiences within a single regiment. We can better understand and personalize the conflict from this type of study and glean how the Civil War and its memory have shaped us as well.

Derek W. Frisby is an assistant professor at Middle Tennessee State University, editor of the West Tennessee Historical Society Papers, and USMC veteran of Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm. He has published several articles and chapters on the Civil War in Tennessee and continues his work on

*related projects, including revising his 2004 dissertation, *Homemade Yankees: West Tennessee Civil War Unionists in the Civil War Era*, for publication with the University of Tennessee Press.*