

The Rifle Musket in Civil War Combat: Reality and Myth

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Review

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Hess, Earl J. *The Rifle Musket in Civil War Combat: Reality and Myth*. University Press of Kansas, \$29.95 hardcover ISBN 9780700616077

Weaponry and Innovation in the Civil War

Earl J. Hess has demonstrated in recent years that he is one of the top military historians of the American Civil War. His series on fortifications in the Civil War—*Field Armies and Fortifications in the Civil War: The Eastern Campaigns, 1861-1864* (2005) and *Trench Warfare Under Grant & Lee: Field Fortifications in the Overland Campaign* (2007) with a third volume on the fortifications of the Siege of Petersburg forthcoming—is a substantial addition to the historiography of the conflict in an area that has not received much attention. His most recent book, *The Rifle Musket in Civil War Combat: Reality and Myth* veers away from the topic of fortifications but nonetheless serves to enhance his already well-deserved reputation as a Civil War scholar. This book forces a significant re-evaluation of that weapon and its effect on combat tactics, casualties, and decisive battle.

The historiographical debate pits those who argue that the rifle musket revolutionized the battlefield and forced significant changes to tactics against those who argue that it did not make earth-shattering changes to the battlefield, and that the lengthy casualty lists can be explained by other factors. Perry Jamieson and Grady McWhiney's *Attack and Die: Civil War Military Tactics and the Southern Heritage* (1982) states that the rifle musket profoundly changed conditions on the battlefield during the Civil War. The decisive battles of the Napoleonic period and even the U.S.-Mexican War of 1846-1848 were no longer possible due to the longer range of the rifle musket. Artillery lost its offensive capability and became primarily a defensive weapon. Cavalry also lost its role on the battlefield as a decisive arm, and massed infantry assaults became obsolete due to the greater reach of the rifle musket. Paddy Griffith argued against this in his study *Battle Tactics of the Civil War* (1989), asserting that the

rifle musket did not significantly change conditions on the battlefield, and that most battles were fought at approximately the same ranges as Napoleonic battles. The lack of decisive results he explained away with the observation that both Union and Confederate units lacked the training to successfully drive home a Napoleonic-style attack. Historians have gradually been moving toward Griffith's view and away from Jamieson and McWhiney's since the early 1990s, but Hess's *The Rifle Musket in the Civil War* is the most persuasive argument about the rifle musket's role on the battlefield to date.

In many ways, Hess's argument is an extension of the previous works on fortifications. He argues in those earlier studies that the rifle musket did not compel armies to dig fortifications, but rather that the close proximity of opposing forces prompted fortification. The conclusions of *The Rifle Musket in the Civil War* flow logically from those studies. The rifle musket did influence "skirmishing and sniping" (4) during the war, but it was "Increasing the rate of fire with magazine-fed weapons that had improved reloading capabilities" (5) rather than the mass-produced muzzle-loading rifle musket and minie ball that revolutionized the battlefield during the mid-nineteenth century.

Hess details the history of the musket and rifle in combat and then explains the problems with the rifle musket. The rifle musket had not just one, but two killing zones. The first one was roughly the same as the killing zone as a smoothbore musket—to roughly 100 yards. However, the muzzle-velocity of a projectile leaving the barrel of a rifle musket was actually *slower* than a projectile leaving a smoothbore musket. Thus, in order to hit a target at the longer ranges, up to 1,000 yards, the soldier had to aim well above the target as the trajectory of the bullet traveled in a parabola—an arc. This required tremendous skill and training, training that the vast majority of soldiers on both sides in the Civil War simply did not have. The second killing box for a rifle musket was much smaller, and continued to shrink the further away the target was from the shooter. Since most soldiers could not hit a target at the longer ranges without intensive training, Hess questions whether the rifle really was effective at the longer ranges. His conclusion that the real revolution came later with magazine-fed quick-loading rifles makes considerable sense.

Whether or not one agrees with the conclusions of *The Rifle Musket in the Civil War*, it is still a significant work on Civil War combat. It does not answer all the questions about rifle muskets on the battlefield—and does not claim to do so. However, it does add a new layer of research and analysis to this question.

Well researched and written, this volume will be indispensable for any student of Civil War battlefields. Earl Hess has added a major work to his already impressive vitae.

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