

Baring the Iron Hand: Discipline in the Union Army

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Review

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Ramold, Steven J. *Baring the Iron Hand: Discipline in the Union Army.* Northern Illinois University Press, \$40.00 ISBN 978-0-87580-408-8

Examination of Discipline in the Union Army

Steven J. Ramold has written an interesting book on an important topic. Students of the Civil War generally, and especially those interested in the life of the common soldier, will want to read this book. *Baring the Iron Hand: Discipline in the Union Army* has much to say about why Union soldiers volunteered to fight and why they endured the stress of long campaigns and actual combat.

Ramold notes in his introduction that there are two meanings of discipline. One type is the willingness to go into combat and kill the enemy even at the risk of death. The second form of discipline refers to the routine of army life, "to obey orders, subordinate oneself to military practice and custom, and accommodate the needs of the group over the wishes of the individual" (3). Tradition holds that camp discipline is necessary to create combat discipline. Ramold, however, maintains that the volunteers in the Union army never fully yielded completely to the former but still displayed enough of the latter to ensure final Union success.

The first chapter traces the origins of codes of military justice to ancient history but finds the beginnings of modern forms in the efforts of Gustavus Adolphus in the Thirty Years War. American versions of military codes were heavily influenced by the British and began to develop during the American Revolution. Growth of a permanent set of Articles of War was haphazard until the Civil War partly because of the small size of the regular army and the small number of wars. Even the relatively large influx of volunteers in the war with Mexico did not lead to an established code of conduct. When the onset of the Civil War brought in unprecedented hundreds of thousands of volunteers, the

army faced a gigantic challenge to develop and maintain uniform discipline. According to Ramold, the army largely failed in this effort.

Ramold argues that the major cause of the army's failure was the volunteers' insistence on the same rights and liberties that they had enjoyed as civilians. They were willing, he says, to fight and even die for their country but they were civilians first and soldiers second. In addition, the volunteers' ideas about what constituted manhood and honor often conflicted with Victorian moral standards as indicated by the army's efforts to contain drink, gambling, and prostitution as well more critical infractions.

Chapter two covers relations between enlisted men and their officers. Here Ramold notes that officers who were willing to cut their men a bit of slack were usually more successful than the martinets often encountered in the army. Chapters three through seven review the variety of offenses committed by the troops, from abuse of alcohol through desertion. Readers familiar with the standard works on soldiers in the war will find the most new material in chapters eight and nine. Eight describes the organization and operations of courts martial and nine deals with attitudes toward punishment of those convicted.

Judicious editing would have made *Baring the Iron Hand* a better book. Several times Ramold seems to be moving from listing examples of infractions to considering the ways the army dealt with them, then goes back to listing more examples of infractions. There is also a great deal of repetition both of offenses committed and efforts to deal with them. The material in chapters eight and nine could easily be combined into one shorter chapter. Finally, while it is interesting to read of examples of the ingenuity of enlisted soldiers as they tried to evade army regulations (smuggling whiskey into camp in rifle barrels was new to me), Ramold, perhaps wanting to get the most out of his extensive research, has a tendency to extend the list until it simply becomes tedious.

Baring the Iron Hand is a valuable addition to our understanding of the common soldier of the Civil War and offers another piece in the puzzle of how the Union won the war. Ramold does not consider the Confederate soldier but one can imagine that they shared many of the attitudes of the Union volunteer.

Michael D. Pierce, retired professor of history at Tarleton State University, is the author of The Most Promising Young Officer: A Life of Ranald Slidell Mackenzie.

