

Valley Thunder: The Battle of New Market and the Opening of the Shenandoah Valley Campaign, May 1864

Robert G. Tanner

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Review

Tanner, Robert G.

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Knight, Charles R. *Valley Thunder: The Battle of New Market and the Opening of the Shenandoah Valley Campaign, May 1864.* Savas Beatie, \$29.95 ISBN 978-1-932714-80-7

Fresh Perspective on the Opening of the 1864 Shenandoah Valley Campaign

Charles R. Knight is a former historical interpreter at the New Market Battlefield in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley, and his time spent in the area has been excellently applied to this new study of the May 15, 1864 battle of New Market. The battle itself was, in comparison to other actions in this war, a small affair, hardly 10,000 men participated on both sides. Nonetheless it proved a very significant action. Knight is careful to put the battle in its larger strategic context, demonstrating how it successfully shielded the flank of Robert E. Lee's army as it fought through the Wilderness with the Army of the Potomac, but the focus of Knight's book is a careful reconstruction of the actual battle, with particular emphasis on the terrain and its impact on the fighting. Numerous maps complement Knight's clear writing. He gives ample attention as well to the battle's impact on the civilians in whose backyard it was fought.

The author makes frequent use of first-person accounts, particularly letters and diaries from soldiers who fought this battle. He looks impartially at both sides and is even-handed in pointing out shrewd moves and blunders made by each. Indeed, the wealth of first-person accounts adds much to the sometimes drab reports of the senior officers. Those senior officers included on the Confederate side a former Vice President of the United States John Breckinridge and, on the Union side a German immigrant, Franz Siegel, who was described by his Union superior as "unfit for the rank" he held.

Knight has not hesitated to address popular myths of the battle, not least of which is the role of the Corps of Cadets of the Virginia Military Institute. The Confederacy was down to its last manpower reserves in the Spring of 1864, and

among those reserves was the 260 man (actually boys) VMI Corps, which Confederate General Breckinridge summoned to help him stop Siegel's advancing army. Breckinridge initially intended to hold the Corps in reserve, but the flow of battle was such that at a crucial moment he was forced to commit it to the front rank. In heavy fighting the Corps suffered more than 20% casualties, including 10 killed and 59 wounded, and yet participated in the final charge to cap a Southern victory. This episode is still commemorated yearly at VMI and as well on the actual battlefield, which is now a well-preserved historic park. A huge picture of the cadets' charge hangs at VMI – painted years later by one of the cadets who fought there - and the charge was said even to have been inspiration for a scene in the John Wayne film *The Horse Soldiers*, in which a corps of cadets chases Federal cavalry raiders out of Mississippi. Because he is an even-handed author, Knight looks carefully at this charge, placing the action of the Corps of Cadets in its proper role within the overall battle.

The solid scholarship and excellent writing of this book are demonstrated, ultimately, by the lack of a concluding chapter in which the author dissects the reasons for Confederate victory or Federal defeat. Many Civil War histories feature such a concluding section and they can be valuable indeed. However, Knight has so carefully traced the strengths and weaknesses of the opposing commanders, their strategies and movements to the battle, as well as the manner in which the battle was fought, that no such summary is necessary. Upon concluding this well-written and thoroughly researched book, the reader will be more than able to assess for himself or herself exactly what led to the outcome. This is the hallmark of a well-written battle study, which is what Knight presents.

Robert G. Tanner is the author of Stonewall in the Valley, a detailed study of the Shenandoah Valley Campaign of 1862 and a 1969 graduate of the Virginia Military Institute.