

Going Back the Way They Came

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Review

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Coffman, Richard M. *Going Back The Way They Came*. Mercer University Press, \$35.00 ISBN 978-0-88146-187-9

Telling the Tale of the Georgia Legion

In Richard M. Coffman's *Going Back The Way They Came*, the Phillips Georgia Legion Cavalry Battalion finally has a history worthy of its arduous service. Coffman's work joins a growing body of micro, unit-level history, providing a welcome balance to the long-established abundance of campaign studies published so often.

This brief, 112-page history of the cavalry battalion is meant both to "complement and complete" Coffman's earlier history of the Legion's infantry battalion (preface). The volume does just that, tracing these horse soldiers from the heady days of their enlistment in Georgia to the sorrow of their surrender in April of 1865. In between those two milestone events, Coffman follows the men from each action to the next in some of the greatest campaigns of the Eastern Theater. In addition, the work is replete with an impressive roster of each company detailing the known record of each soldier, a resource of unparalleled value to any interested descendant.

While most students of the Civil War are quite familiar with the various service branches, the Civil War era "Legion," continues to mystify and is oddly often overlooked by scholars. Coffman's work addresses this confusion head-on and uses copious manuscript resources to explain how these legions operated, and how the soldiers within the cavalry battalion understood their relationship to the rest of Phillips Georgia Legion. The dynamic is well-illustrated with the notation that some cavaliers' letters spoke of "our Legion," despite their normal separation from the larger unit.

Ultimately, Coffman's extensive use of manuscripts – the fruit of years of tireless research – is what makes this book so compelling. While still reserving the historian's right to analyze actions and decisions, Coffman's greatest achievement may be in the proper and downright enthralling use of primary source material. Unlike statistically driven micro-studies that often overlook these captivating resources, Coffman excels at using them and allowing the veterans of the Legion to tell this story themselves through the compelling and heartfelt letters, that provide an emotional base for the text.

The fact that the author's ancestor served in the ranks of this famed organization is well-noted, as is a true love for the subject, yet Coffman's text remains impressively devoid of any hero-worship, enabling him to place blame where necessary. What is, however, lacking from this volume is any post-war discussion of what became of the men of the legion. With such compelling wartime text, the reader is left wondering how these brave souls found their way in a Georgia much different from the one they knew only a few short years before. After forming such an emotional connection with the soldiers, discussion of their postbellum lives would have been uniquely satisfying and could have elevated this volume to the "next generation" of unit-level studies, those that consider this important, yet sadly overlooked, aspect of the Civil War — the lot of the citizen-soldier returning home, his service completed and cause lost. In addition, while the maps included are well-drawn and clear, they are few and far between; for the graphically inclined student of the war, gaining an understanding of each clash's blow-by-blow mechanics would have been made simpler with additional maps.

Despite these minor failings, the book is still worthy of praise and would be a welcome addition to the library of any serious student of the war or the Confederacy. Annotated expertly, illustrated beautifully with an impressive collection of period photographs, Coffman has done justice to the service of these brave souls.

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