

Fighting Means Killing: Civil War Soldiers and the Nature of Combat

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Review

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Steplyk, Jonathan M. *Fighting Means Killing: Civil War Soldiers and the Nature of Combat*. University Press of Kansas, \$29.95 ISBN 9780700626281

“War means fighting, and fighting means killing.” Famed Confederate cavalryman Nathan Bedford Forrest’s well-known and brutally concise statement of the essence of war serves to set the theme of Jonathan M. Steplyk’s study of the nature of killing in Civil War combat. Utilizing wartime and postwar accounts of participants, a number of which are quite familiar to Civil War readers, Steplyk analyzes this peculiar and ultimate experience of war from the point of view of the men who were necessarily tasked with killing their erstwhile countrymen.

The book is organized into seven chapters wherein Steplyk examines a series of themes that define his subject, the first being the cultural and societal factors that served as a background for contemporary attitudes toward killing. He notes that the men of the 1860’s, particularly those from the South and the Northwest, came from rural settings where familiarity with firearms from frequent use was common. The theology of killing from a Christian perspective, the political ideology of the warring sides, and the cultural familiarity with death are among the factors examined to demonstrate the willingness of a Civil War soldier to kill his opponents.

Steplyk follows with a survey of the wide range of experiences, conditions and emotions which might affect the soldier’s attitude toward killing. On page 175, the author notes: “Multiple factors in battle could prompt soldiers to fight in a potentially lethal fashion, including military discipline, survival, excitement, anger, and desire for revenge.” Of particular interest is Steplyk’s examination of the impact that low visibility on the battlefield had on the killing experience. Clouds of smoke from the discharge of black powder often made lines of individuals just a mass, itself clouded with smoke from return fire. In this common experience of battle, a soldier bent on destroying his enemies had a hard time doing anything more than firing in their general direction.

Frequent readers of soldier's accounts of battle will recognize the many euphemisms soldiers used to describe their efforts at killing the enemy. Words and phrases such as "peppering," "deliberate aim," "good execution," and sending an opponent to his "long home" (coffin or grave) were used to convey the simple concept of "killing". On page 89, Steplyk observes that while some of these terms could demonstrate a reluctance to own up to killing their foes, these words more often than not "reflect a significant portion of fighting men who could tolerate, affirm, and even celebrate fighting and killing."

The rare experiences of hand to hand, or "melee" fighting and fighting involving sharpshooters (the modern equivalent of snipers) involved a level of deliberation not seen when blazing away through the smoke at a mass of opponents. Steplyk examines the unique contests at Spotsylvania and Franklin as examples of sustained melee fighting, and found that even then, the opponents crouched behind fortifications and frequently fired blindly rather than deliberately over the works, a curious combination of close up fighting and self-preservation. Conversely, sharpshooting/sniping involved dealing death from a distance, and sharpshooters are found to have had a greater comfort level with the specific targeting and killing of their targets. Steplyk concludes that while there was some disdain for the sniper's method of fighting, he notes on page 141 that "this abhorrence was hardly universal."

The final broad theme of Steplyk's study is the effect of racial hatred on the experience of killing. Unfortunately, the bulk of the available evidence relating to this line of inquiry comes from Rebel sources. As a matter of background, the southern system of slavery, and particularly the fear of slave revolts, is shown to have had a significant impact on the reaction of the southern soldiery to facing black men in blue uniforms. The Confederate government even took steps to define the employment of black soldiers as a war crime. With that background, the slaughter (and in many cases murder) and brutalization of black soldiers at Fort Pillow, Tennessee, Saltville, Virginia and in the Crater at Petersburg, while horrendous, was not unexpected. Several accounts show that the black soldiers retaliated in kind.

In contrast to the general rules supporting his themes, Steplyk finds evidence where soldiers showed mercy to their opponents, for example, where killing of obvious targets was avoided, and where helpless enemies were taken prisoner rather than killed. Indeed, as is well known, soldiers on both sides during down time enjoyed genuine times of fraternization.

To the experienced Civil War reader, the battles, occurrences and a number of the soldier accounts Steplyk examines are familiar. The conclusions that he draws relative to the subject matter of his study, however, are fresh. Being the first study of its kind, Steplyk's book is likely to inspire future investigation of his themes and conclusions. It is a welcome addition to the historical study of the Civil War.

Sam D. Elliott is a practicing attorney in Chattanooga, Tennessee. He is the author or editor of five books on the Civil War, the latest being John C. Brown of Tennessee: Rebel, Redeemer and Railroader (2017), the winner of the 2017 Tennessee History Book Award.