

The War for the Common Soldier: How Men Thought, Fought, and Survived in Civil War Armies

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Review

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Walt Whitman was Wrong

Most Civil War scholars are familiar with poet Walt Whitman's claim that the real story of the war "would never get into the books." This may have been true in the nineteenth century, but in no way could Whitman have predicted historians like Peter Carmichael. Carmichael, the Robert C. Fluhrer Professor of Civil War Studies at Gettysburg College, is the latest in a loosely-connected group of authors determined to build on Bell I. Willey's foundation from the 1940s and get to the heart of soldier participation in the Civil War.

Carmichael's book examines how Civil War soldiers endured their life in the Union and Confederate armies. These men were volunteer soldiers, for the most part, so military life was a shock for most of them. One example concerns uniforms and the difference between Union and Confederate reactions. At the beginning of the war, everyone got a new set of clothes and a pair of shoes. For Yankees, this was a reasonably regular occurrence, but for Rebels, a new set of clothing or a pair of shoes of any variety was difficult to obtain. Carmichael uses letters and records from individual soldiers to examine soldier reaction. It is heartbreaking to read the words from southern men. The very government for which they were willing to die could not even keep them clothed.

The choice of letters in this volume is a little different from those examined in other books. Carmichael goes deeply into his sources, looking for correspondence and notes from men who were either not literate or limited in that area. His search for authentic voices is successful. Even letters dictated to friends or willing writers create the discussion of capturing verbal interactions in detail, with Carmichael pointing his readers in interesting, sensitive directions.

The War for the Common Soldier begins with early letters concerning new friends and the community of camp life. Cheerfulness as a psychological state gets a nod—apparently, it was essential to control one's state of mind in order to avoid depression, loneliness, or fear. Letters to the home front often complain that those to whom they wrote did not understand what life was like for them in war, but the nearly universal reluctance of soldiers to discuss cowardice and anxiety does not help those at home sympathize or support more effectively.

The end of the war brought thoughts of desertion and defeat to men on both sides. Military justice was often brutal. Once again, Confederate soldiers are angry that the government has done such a poor job supporting their families, forcing many to move in with relatives. The Union did a little better, but blue-clad soldiers were angry about delayed pay, unpaid bonuses, and presidential politics as well. Carmichael describes one Confederate soldier who considers desertion as "broke, starving, and in need of clothes."

Letters cease as men return from war, but author Carmichael examines those final letters, looking for bitterness, unrelieved anger, shame, and thoughts of revenge. What he mostly finds is tired men, changed by their experiences, who want to return to home and loved ones more than anything else. Some have sent relics and souvenirs home from battlefields. Carmichael asks the reader to consider why this occurred. Was it to prove to themselves that it all truly happened? Was it to show the home folks a bit of the reality of the war? Was it to keep the memory of the fight—either for the Union or another type of government—alive for the future?

No matter how a reader may answer the hard questions Peter Carmichael asks, there is no doubt that the more books like this conceived, researched, and written bring us closer and closer to understanding the war and those who fought on both sides. The worlds they left behind were undoubtedly not the same ones to which they returned. The people who left were changed as well. Some never returned, some returned maimed in body and soul. Most returned with "cheerful hearts," ready to rebuild their lives in a world the war had changed. Peter Carmichael's pertinent analysis of how men *thought, fought, and survived* is a powerful addition to getting to the "real story."

Meg Groeling received her Master's Degree in Military History, with a Civil War emphasis, in 2016, from American Public University. Savas Beatie will publish her second book, First Fallen: The Life of Colonel Elmer Ellsworth, in 2020. She is a regular contributor to the blog Emerging Civil War.