

# Valor Couldn't Save Them

## EMBATTLED COURAGE

*The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War.*  
By Gerald F. Linderman.  
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By Stephen W. Sears

CONSIDERING how long man has been making war, the question of what makes soldiers fight has received surprisingly little attention. To be sure, we have been treated to why generals and governments and propagandists think they fight, but glimpses of their own inner views on the matter are less common. In 1976, in "The Face of Battle," John Keegan wrote a pioneering study of the matter, ranging widely through history. Now, in "Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War," Gerald F. Linderman has gone deeply into the subject by narrowing the focus to a single war.

Mr. Linderman, a professor of history at the University of Michigan and the author of "Mirror of War," probes Civil War combat through the letters, diaries and memoirs of the men who made up the core of both the Northern and Southern armies, the volunteers of 1861-62. Later groups — conscripts, bounty men and black soldiers — are not a part of this story except as they were seen by the original volunteers. The result is a work fully as original as Mr. Keegan's, one that comes a good deal closer to a true understanding of the Civil War soldier than we have had before.

From what Mr. Linderman has found, it appears that these men were unique in American military history. For one thing, they were astonishingly innocent of war. There was only the conflict with Mexico to call on for experience, and that had hardly been testing. In 1856 Joseph E. Johnston, the future Confederate general, remarked of the Mexican War to his friend George B. McClellan, the future Union general, "there is no comfort like that of going into battle with the certainty of winning." The common image of what war was like was pictorial. In 1862, after his first experience of combat, a young private wrote home that in pictures of battles he had seen "— they would all be in line, all standing in a nice level field fighting, a number of ladies taking care of the wounded, &c &c but it isn't so."

In their innocence they went to war confident that courage alone would see them through. It was a matter of duty and of honor to demonstrate courage; men protected those who were courageous and rewarded them with victory. "Put as simply as it appears to have been understood in 1861," Mr. Linderman writes, "the brave would live and the cowardly would die."

Courage was the cement binding these ill-disciplined armies together. This became a fact of life to line officers. Many an officer felt (and his men agreed) that the only way to gain respect and obedience was to exhibit courage on the battlefield. Their displays of bravery seem almost theatrical, yet by all accounts they happened just that way. An Ohio colonel recorded that in the Battle of Perryville he ordered his men to lie down while he deliberately remained standing amidst shot and shell and canister "thick as hail." His regiment was won over, he wrote, "now they are, without exception, my fast friends."

Army life is never conducive to innocent illusions, but the illusions about the benefits of courage ran hard up against an especially brutal reality in the Civil War. Men went into battle according to the tactical doctrines of the last war and encountered weapons virtually of the next one. Civil War muskets look old-fashioned but

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Stephen W. Sears is the author of "Landscape Turned Red: The Battle of Antietam" and a forthcoming biography of Gen. George B. McClellan.

# Valor Didn't Save Them

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they were rifled — their barrels grooved to extend their range — and exceedingly deadly, and all that prevented far greater slaughter was the fact that they were muzzle-loaders and could only be fired about three times a minute. At places like Shiloh and Malvern Hill men marched elbow to elbow toward an enemy armed with weapons that began to kill them when they were still a quarter of a mile away.

It was soon apparent, as many a failed charge demonstrated, that courage was not invariably rewarded by victory. God did not seem to protect the courageous. Indeed, it seemed that the bravest were killed first and most easily. One of Sherman's men wondered if God even knew who among the dead were courageous and who were cowardly. The bravest, too, were most often wounded or were captured in gallant exploits, and their fate then was as bad as it might be. Medical practice of the day was no less primitive than the tactics that sent so many men to the military hospitals (which, but for the "screams and groans of the poor fellows undergoing amputation," resembled "the dim caverns of the Catacombs"), and a common theme in soldiers' letters was the dread of falling into the hands of an enemy doctor. As for prisoners of war, it is one of the grimmer statistics of the Civil War that as many Americans died in prison camps, North and South, as

died (for example) in the Vietnam War.

Disillusion came in time, of course, and it was so total that it also set Civil War soldiers apart from those of our other wars. Vietnam veterans might dispute this, but Mr. Linderman makes a strong case that at least the fall was greater for the men of the 1860's. Just when the change came can be argued. For at least the first two years of the war, as a Confederate soldier and writer, John Esten Cooke, phrased it, there were "pitched battles once or twice a year," in which the two sides spent all day killing each other, "and then relapsed into gentlemanly repose and amity." Cooke exaggerated only somewhat. The Army of the Potomac, during the two years from Bull Run to Gettysburg, spent only a total of perhaps a month in pitched battle, however bad those days may have been.

By 1864 warfare was virtually continuous. In Sherman's final year-long campaign against Richmond, his army and Lee's were hardly ever out of killing range of one another. Sherman's Atlanta campaign was shorter but also without letup. As one of Grant's men wrote, it was a case of "living night and day within the 'valley of the shadow of death.'" Values were greatly altered, Mr. Linderman writes. "The changing nature of combat weakened drastically the original soldier conviction that at the center of war stood the confident individual." Survival became paramount. Troops dug in automatically. A man wrote that in 1864, "We learned more and more to protect ourselves as we advanced, keeping

behind trees and displaying ourselves as little as possible." Confederate Gen. John Bell Hood was deprecated as "simply a brave, hard fighter" who thought only of attack, and his men called him Wooden Head.

Yet in the midst of this revolution no less than 140,000 Union soldiers signed up again on the expiration of their three-year terms. That would seem to contradict Mr. Linderman's thesis. What has not been understood about this process, however, is the importance of the furloughs granted as rewards for re-enlisting. As the author points out, many men saw no hope of surviving the fighting they would face in 1864 before their terms were up, and they balanced off the added risk of staying on against the chance to see home and family one last time before they were killed. As one of them wrote, he was willing to risk "three years more of hell" in exchange for "thirty days of heaven — home."

The paradox in all this — and Mr. Linderman is at his best here — is that in the postwar years there was a complete reversal of convictions. Perhaps it was a process of healing or of benign forgetfulness or simply a search for justification, but the final irony was the nation's enthusiasm for the Spanish-American War in 1898. "The picture of war that the sons carried to Cuba was false because their fathers' memories had become false to the war of 1864-65," Mr. Linderman writes. By the turn of the century Civil War veterans had come to symbolize the changelessness of values, "but only by obliterating or amending an experience of combat so convulsive of their values that it had for a time cut the cord of experience."