

EMBATTLED COURAGE  
THE EXPERIENCE OF COMBAT IN THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

by

Gerald F. Linderman

A REVIEW ESSAY

by

Melissa K. Hackey

Civil War

Dr. McKnight

Tuesday/Thursday - 2:00 p.m.

A+  
Extremely well  
done!

In Embattled Courage, The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War, Gerald F. Linderman brings to life the personal war experiences of the fighting soldier and expresses the soldier's transition from fighting a war of courageousness and romanticism to a war of shocking reality and brutality. Linderman displays this transition by dividing the book into two parts, "Courage's War" and "Perilous Education". This division makes much sense in the respect that it forces the reader to understand the dramatic transformation of the soldiers' feelings along with the changing scope of the war. He breaks Part I into chapters that describe how courage was used by the individual soldier on the battlefields and in the hospital to combat fear, how it was used by officers as "cement" to hold their armies together and to provide discipline, and how it was used by civilians to encourage their sons, husbands, brothers, etc. to fight honorably to fulfill their duty to the Union or Confederacy. Linderman gives direct examples of the many uses of courage during the beginning years of the Civil War.

Courage was used to "insulate" the soldier against the trauma of combat". At all times a soldier had to exemplify his courage to his comrades, officers, family members as well as to himself. No one wanted to be considered a coward and risk being ridiculed by his comrades and place shame on his family. Linderman goes on to prove how courage was used as "insulation" by providing scenarios of how soldiers remained courageous and brave at the face of death. They concealed the pain and agony of

bad quote

battle wounds all in the name of courage and their fear of being labeled a coward so as to die an 'honorable death'. One scene that typifies the soldiers' inability to express fear is when Mary Livermore, a Sanitary Commission organizer traveled to a hospital and heard a dying soldier say that he was afraid to die. Ms. Livermore commanded the soldier to "be quiet" and continued by saying "...If you must die, die like a man and not like a coward." This example sums up the thoughts and feelings of all civilians who were not involved in actual combat.

It is explained how at the beginning of the war, officers were unable to control and discipline their soldiers due to the lack of respect soldiers had for their officers. Rank-in-file soldiers felt as though they were equal to officers and that officers should be treated accordingly. In many instances officers would go out of their way to display courage in hopes of gaining soldiers respect so that they would be able to instill discipline and at the same time build up the soldier's confidence and character to that of good militiamen. This was all to be done within the Civil War soldier's concept of courage. Another point being proven by Linderman throughout Part I is how soldiers in both the Union and the Confederacy went into combat possessing strong moral values. He shows how those moral values kept the soldiers fighting like respectful 'gentlemen'. They were considerate and respectful of the actions and feelings of not only their comrades but of their enemies as well. The concept of courage was so powerful in the early years of the war

that it acted as a "bond between enemies" with enough energy to "weaken war's primary assumption, that the first purpose was to kill the enemy." A scene is presented where a soldier sees an enemy soldier on a white horse ride from the rear of the troops to the front to hand a paper to the officer. The soldier sits on the horse in the line of fire as though he were unafraid of the final consequence, death. The on-looking soldier describes himself as having so much respect and admiration for the courageously, brave enemy soldier that he desperately hoped that the soldier would not be shot. Linderman depicts other episodes representative of the respect and admiration that Union and Confederate soldiers had for each other. All of the scenes give the reader the sense that the Civil War soldier was not ready to commit himself to war, which involves killing the enemy.

It is evident after reading Part I that the civilian population was oblivious to the realities of war atrocities. Linderman devotes an entire chapter to explaining how families sent their men off to war to fight honorably and courageously for 'the cause' while expecting them at all times to remain true to their moral values regarding "religious faith and purity in personal habits". It is shown how soldiers were unable to write home to loved ones and express their true feelings of fear, but instead when writing, had to continue to <sup>Wear</sup>(charade) the mask of courage to again resist being labeled a coward. Civilians were more concerned with their soldiering family members being brave rather than being safe and using any means to survive. One

parent wrote, "My son, do your duty, die if it must be, but never prove yourself a coward." Family members commonly encouraged their sons and husbands to re-enlist without giving regard to the debilitating effects the war had on the soldiers. It is examples such as these that Linderman uses to impress upon the reader the recurring headline of courage versus cowardice that constantly dwelled in the minds of soldiers and civilians between 1861 and 1862.

In Part II, "A Perilous Education", Linderman uses the same style of writing such as providing quotations and describing scenes that display the exact opposite of what was described as the concept of courage in Part I. He separates Part II into chapters that guide the reader through the changing nature of war. It is in this part that the reader witnesses the complete transformation of the American soldier from a sympathetic, courteous and 'gentleman-like' soldier to a ruthless, unconscionable killer. Union, Confederate soldiers and civilians alike change their expectations and viewpoint of the realities of warfare. These individuals make personal changes in their mentality (way of thinking) to commensurate with their new insights regarding war. It is in Part II that the reader also witnesses soldiers' realization that courage could not insulate them from such things as death, illness, fatigue, discouragement, military camp life, depression and any other adversities associated with war. Linderman now expresses how courage ceased

to be the backbone that provided the soldiers with strength and tenacity needed for survival. Courage was no longer defined within the narrow context of soldier who was dauntless in the line of duty. It was no longer the thread that held armies together. Men began showing their fear after seeing, for the first time, dead bodies mutilated by musket balls and shells. They began to see themselves as victims of war. When soldiers could no longer understand why courage had not assured them victory, they began changing their way of thinking. "Some of the men were sad, some indifferent, some so tired of the strain on their nerves that they wished they were dead and their troubles over...the impression among the intelligent soldiers was that the task cut out for them was more than men could accomplish." Linderman furthers the discussion by explaining the ramifications resulting from the soldiers change in thought. Officers found it more difficult to discipline their troops due to the fact that courage was no longer a catalyst in getting the men to fight gallantly. The enthusiasm of soldiers had dwindled to nothing. Discipline started being strictly enforced. However, most of the soldiers who felt the effects of tighter discipline were not the volunteers of 1861, but rather the conscripts and substitutes enlisted after 1862. Had the tighter discipline been enforced on the volunteers, officers may have been faced with many more problems. Soldiers were often shot for not obeying.

Linderman graphically explains how the war changed from being a war fought not only against those who were armed but

against the civilian population as well. Although there continued to be admiration and respect towards the enemy, the soldiers no longer minded killing their opposition. In the early years of the war, in Part I, there were instances where officers told their men to hold their fire from men who were displaying extreme bravery. However, during the latter part of the war, in Part II, officers and their men held fire from no one who was considered to be an enemy. It is apparent from Part II that soldiers did what was necessary to survive without any consideration of the concept of courage that was so vividly entrenched in their minds in previous years. Earlier in the war there was strict discipline enforced against anyone who took possessions belonging to civilians however, during the years of 1863 until the end of the war, soldiers pillaged food and looted the dead for survival purposes as well as for vengeance. The war was by no means confined to the battlefields. Total war had been unofficially declared. This part of the war gives new meaning to the phrase, "no more mister nice guy." It is during this time in the war where Linderman gives accounts of soldiers saying that they were finally learning how to be real soldiers and that all the pillaging, looting, killing and death was all a part of war. Soldiers grew resentful of the people at home and of their inability to understand the hardship they faced on a day to day basis. Soldiers became close to their comrades and relied on them for support rather than their relatives. By 1864, the feeling by most was that war was harsh, savage and brutal.

Soldiers finally knew what war was all about.

Linderman successfully achieves the effect of characterizing the changing nature of the war. By dividing the book into two parts, Linderman is able to provide distinctive clarity regarding the soldier and civilian views on war from the beginning to the end of the book. The division of the book symbolizes the separation of views of individuals at the outset of the war to those at the close of it.

In the Epilogue, Linderman introduces another division of American views after the end of the American Civil War. I believe he introduces this division to display how Americans never fully understood the meaning of war. In "The Hibernation", he writes of how civilians did not want to hear of the changing nature of the war, but instead they wanted to hear about such things as how the enemy was killed and other details totally unrelated to the change. Soldiers remembered only certain episodes of the war and repressed most of the harsh memories. Linderman gives the impression that this is so because American civilians still did not comprehend the nature of the war and therefore forced soldiers to repress the actualities of war which caused them to 'hibernate' their true feelings. In "The Revival", he brings home the idea of how Americans, due to their incomprehension of the war, tried to re-create the experiences of the soldier so as to fit their romanticized misconceptions of war. During this period the public completely sensationalized



the war which, in my opinion, discredited all of the suffering, death and pain experienced by everyone, especially the soldiers.

In my opinion, Embattled Courage is an extremely intriguing novel that truly brings to life the atrocities and the traumatizing effects that the Civil War had on the soldiers. The style in which it is presented makes the book easy to read and to comprehend. Before reading this book, I had never really read or thought about what the individual soldier went through on the battlefield. Most books written about the Civil War do not give an in-depth discussion of the physical and psychological effects of the war on the players involved. Too often the authors of such history books focus on the generals and officers and their great accomplishments while totally overlooking the importance of the soldiers they commanded. This novel acts as a great supplement to textual readings on the Civil War. It gives a humanistic perspective much different from the military perspective of most Civil War reading. What I like most about this book is that Gerald F. Linderman draws a definite distinction between Webster's Dictionary definition of war and the true-to-life physical and psychological meaning of war. It was definitely an 'eye-opening' book.

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not  
fiction*