

Desperate Courage': Griswoldville's Lopsided Outcome Signaled The Confederacy's End

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Review

'DESPERATE COURAGE'

Griswoldville's lopsided outcome signaled the Confederacy's end

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Bragg, William Harris *Griswoldville*. Mercer University Press, 2000-03-01. ISBN 865546789

Judging by the total number of troops involved (no more than 4,000), the casualties for both sides (fewer than 700), and its strategic significance (none at all), the clash that took place near Griswoldville, Georgia, in November 1864 was not a battle, but merely a minor engagement.

Yet Griswoldville is one of the most written-about military actions of the entire Civil War. The reason for this is threefold. First, it was the sole sizeable infantry encounter throughout the course of Sherman's march from Atlanta to the Atlantic in fall 1864. Second, it saw 1,500 Union troops repulse an attack by 2,400 Confederates, suffering in the process only 62 casualties while inflicting close to 600. Third, the Confederate force consisted almost entirely of Georgia militia - boys and old men - fighting for the first time, whereas the veteran Federal troops had become skilled killers on the bloody battlefields of Tennessee, Mississippi, and Georgia. Thus the one-sided slaughter at Griswoldville embodies, more than any other event of the War, the desperate courage of a South striving to save a cause already lost.

Disappointingly, **Griswoldville** fails to do full justice to the engagement's tragedy because it neglects to place it in the context of the Civil War's final phase. Instead, the initial two-thirds of the book is devoted to recounting such events as how the now-extinct village that lent its name to the battle came into existence, the transformation of its cotton gin factory into a wartime manufacturer of revolvers, and the futile attempt by Union cavalry raiders in July 1864 to liberate prisoners at the nearby town of Macon. Not until page 95 - and the text ends on page 155 - does a description of what happened at Griswoldville on November 22, 1864, begin. Even then there is no attempt, beyond the facts

presented and documents quoted, to evoke the twilight of the Confederacy as the night of defeat descended upon it.

However a book should be judged for what it is, not for what one wishes it to be. On that basis, it is the best account of the engagement at Griswoldville ever published and should long remain so, based on its exhaustive research, intelligent interpretations, and clear writing. The text is enhanced by a superabundance of maps and illustrations, some of which appear here for the first time. My only suggestions to the author, who has written extensively about the history of the Civil War in his native Georgia, involve minor technical considerations. If there is a second printing of the book, he might consider repositioning the map on page 76, recaptioning the portrait of Sherman on page 83, and providing specific documentation for his assertions that the Union troops at Griswoldville were armed mainly with Spencer repeating rifles (these were not standard infantry issue in Sherman's army).

Albert Castel, a retired professor of history, is the author of more than ten books about the Civil War, including the prize-winning Decision in the West: The Atlanta Campaign of 1864 (1992). His latest, Tom Taylor's Civil War, was published in November.