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Feature Essay

WAR IS ALL HELL'

Guest columnist Robertson Jr., James I.

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Blake, Henry Nelson *REDISCOVERING CIVIL WAR CLASSICS: Three Years in the Army of the Potomac.*

'War is all Hell'

The number of memoirs by Civil War soldiers runs into the tens of thousands. Since that conflict was the biggest event that ever occurred in the lives of those men, many who had never written much felt compelled to record their experiences. Practically all of them understandably wrote with pride, patriotism, and a sense of accomplishment. A glaring exception to that pattern was Henry Nelson Blake.

His reminiscences, **Three Years in the Army of the Potomac** (Lee and Shepherd, 1865), contrast the pleasant and positive recollections of such fellow Massachusetts soldiers as John D. Billings and Alfred S. Roe. Little that was glamorous or dramatic passed before Blake's eyes. He had open contempt for practically everything associated with the war. Had Blake been a semi-literate private who was continually given unpleasant duties, this negativism would be understandable. Yet the complete opposite was the case.

Born to rather affluent parents, Blake was an established attorney when he answered the call to arms. Promotions to lieutenant and captain gave the appearance of a dedicated and worthy officer. A wound at Spotsylvania was Blake's "red badge of courage." However, he was discharged from the army the following month at the reduced rank of lieutenant.

Three months earlier, a realignment of Blake's brigade so infuriated him and four of his compatriots that they openly criticized their superiors. The quintet was promptly arrested and charged with misconduct. That affair brought Blake's military career to an end. Yet it only exacerbated his disgust with the Union war

effort. Blake began writing an account of his service before his discharge. The completed work appeared in book form just after the Civil War ended. It is such a cynical, carping narrative that historians usually refer to it only for contrasting viewpoints. That Ambrose Burnside and Joseph Hooker were Blake's favorite generals gives a hint of his unorthodox thinking. As for other Union commanders: John Pope "acted like a dunderpate;" William B. Franklin had "the most supercilious bearing."

Foreigners and most private soldiers belonged in species somewhere between man and ape. Blake considered surgeons and chaplains to be butchers and exploiters, respectively. Confederates were no more hesitant about mutilating corpses than Federals were in robbing them. If Blake's narrative is accepted at face value, he saw more cowards than any other participant in the Civil War.

The Massachusetts officer similarly displayed little use for New York regiments, all congressmen, the Invalid Corps, the ambulance system, sutlers, and the tactics employed in every battle of which he was a part. Army camps universally had their portions of profanity, gambling, drinking, petty quarrels between officers, desertion, and discriminatory justice. Indeed, one finishes reading Blake's reminiscences with the lingering question of how the Army of the Potomac, composed in the main of worthless leaders and shiftless soldiers, managed to emerge victorious in the war.

Blake's criticisms should not be dismissed as the baseless faultfinding of a malcontent. War can bring out the worst in human behavior. If Blake sometimes exaggerated the evils he came into contact with, he at least did not convert a war of death, bloodshed, suffering, and homesickness into a popular carnival of nothing but color, drama, and excitement.

A keen sense of observation lay underneath Blake's caustic nature. He presented one of the most revolting pictures of a battlefield when he described Seven Pines, Virginia, after that engagement. "Scores of horses, and the swollen and black corpses of hundreds of rebels, were stretched upon the ground, and on spots lay in groups, that showed a fearful waste of life; and myriads of maggots were feasting upon the putrified forms, and swarmed upon the earth, so that it was difficult to walk without crushing them beneath the feet."

Blake died in 1938 at the age of 95. If he ever changed his mind about anything he saw in the Civil War, he kept it to himself.

Guest columnist James I. Robertson Jr. is Alumni Distinguished Professor of History at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. His recent books include Standing Like a Stone Wall: The Life of General Thomas J. Jackson (2001) and Soldiers Blue and Gray (1998).