

Brothers One and All: Esprit De Corps in a Civil War Regiment

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Recommended Citation

Ross, Stephen (2005) "Brothers One and All: Esprit De Corps in a Civil War Regiment," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 7 : Iss. 1 .

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol7/iss1/34>

Review

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Winter 2005

Dunkelman, Mark H. *Brothers One and All: Esprit de Corps in a Civil War Regiment*. Louisiana State University Press, \$39.95 ISBN 080712978X

Camaraderie in combat

Soldiers' devotion proved powerful

During the Civil War, regiments served as the backbone of both the Union and Confederate armies. An individual regiment's ability to endure the hardships of battle and to fight effectively often spelled the difference between an army's ultimate success or disaster. Just how well regiments withstood their trials by fire depended on their training, equipment, leadership and the soldiers' devotion to their regiments--their esprit de corps.

In **Brothers One and All**, Mark H. Dunkelman provides perhaps the first in-depth analysis of Civil War esprit de corps. In his examination of the experiences of the 154th New York Volunteer Infantry, Dunkelman traces the development of the regiment's esprit de corps from its recruitment and training period through its tests in battle to a time long after Appomattox when the 154th's wizened veterans still proudly recalled their service.

According to Dunkelman, esprit de corps existed at all levels of the military hierarchy but it was strongest at the regimental level. Soldiers who hailed from the same communities fought next to friends, family members, and neighbors, and quickly formed organizational pride and unit loyalty. The 154th became the military family for its soldiers as comrades provided support, comfort, and relief from adversity and developed life-long bonds that were cemented by their common experiences. If the men themselves were the heart of a Civil War regiment, Dunkelman writes on page five, esprit de corps was its soul.

The 154th's strong devotion helped the regiment overcome staggering casualty rates in its first battles at Chancellorsville and Gettysburg, enabling

them to continue fighting at Chattanooga, and in the Atlanta Campaign, and to participate in Sherman's March to the Sea. Dunkelman asserts on page 98 that They fought on for personal honor, for the Union cause, and for the good name of the 154th New York Volunteers.

For some, personal honor, the Union cause, and the regiment's good name proved insufficient motivation for them to fulfill their duty. Shirkers and fakers who avoided combat could disturb the regiment's esprit de corps. Men who participated in such behavior drew the everlasting resentment of those who stayed with the regiment. The most scorn was reserved for deserters. Desertion posed the most dangerous threat to a unit's devotion because as Dunkelman writes on page 86 A deserter turned his back on the cause, his comrades, and his regiment. His act was the ultimate repudiation of esprit de corps.

Class differences between officers and men could also disrupt the regiment's esprit de corps. The existence of differential privileges for officers and enlisted men created a gulf between them. Officers' abuse of authority also hurt the unit's overall combat effectiveness. To gain the men's respect and strengthen the regiment's esprit de corps, good officers learned to balance the need for discipline with a friendly and fatherly regard for the soldiers under their command. The attrition of incompetent officers and the promotion of good officers solidified the 154th's esprit de corps, striking an ideal balance between its officers and men that led to ultimate victory.

After the war, the veterans' affiliation with their regiment remained strong well into the 20th century. Aging soldiers formed regimental associations, attended reunions, oversaw Memorial Day commemorations, and contributed donations for war memorials. The 154th's devotion, which had been evident from the very beginning of its service and strengthened in the crucible of combat, remained strong until the last of the regiment's soldiers died.

Brothers One and All is a remarkable social history that examines a phenomenon that other historians have only briefly discussed. Dunkelman's analysis of Civil War esprit de corps is grounded in excellent scholarly research based upon more than 1,000 of the 154th veterans' wartime letters and diaries. Dunkelman's assessment of the 154th's esprit de corps poses questions about the universality of his conclusions. A more complete understanding of this phenomenon will only be available when other units are studied from this perspective; **Brothers One and All** provides an admirable start.

Steve Ross is a journalist for SpecComm International. In 2000 he worked at the Stonewall Jackson House in Lexington, Virginia, as the Edmund N. Snyder Graduate Fellow. He is the author of 'To Prepare Our Sons for All the Duties that May Lie Before Them: The Hillsborough Military Academy and Military Education in Antebellum North Carolina, North Carolina Historical Review (2002).