

A Fine Body of Men: The Orleans Light Horse, Louisiana Cavalry, 1861-1865

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Review

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Moriarty, Donald Peter II *A Fine Body of Men: The Orleans Light Horse, Louisiana Cavalry, 1861-1865*. The Historic New Orleans Collection, \$30.00
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A Meticulous History of a Little-Known and Little-Documented Cavalry Unit

Donald Moriarty's *A Fine Body of Men* is a unit history written in the traditional style. It profiles the Civil War experiences of the Orleans Light Horse, an independent cavalry troop organized in New Orleans in February 1861. The book describes the Light Horse's various military campaigns, when it was assigned to the Army of Mississippi and the Army of Tennessee. Unlike most cavalry units assigned to these two large western armies of the Confederacy, the Orleans Light Horse did not experience pitched combat. That is, it did not ride out ahead and go into skirmish line, nor did it participate in any saber-swinging cavalry charges. Instead, the Orleans Light Horse received a less-appreciated (but perhaps a more important) assignment: it became the escort company assigned to headquarters of a Confederate corps commander, Lieutenant General Leonidas Polk. Throughout the war, the troopers served a thankless but integral job, acting as personal escorts, as security details, as reconnaissance forces, and as couriers. Although the Light Horse stood among the units that surrendered with General Joseph Johnston in April 1865 in North Carolina (when only thirty-one men remained with the regiment), only four men had died from wounds received during all four years of the conflict. It was bloodless duty, to be sure, but without the diligent troopers of the Light Horse, the Army of Tennessee could not have carried out its command and control activities.

The book's strength lies in its attention to statistical data. Helpfully, the author adds a 148-page appendix containing biographical and service data on all 215 members of the regiment, taking into account each trooper's age, occupation, and place of residence. When fully compiled, this data helps the

author, Moriarty, offer a solid demographic analysis of the Light Horse in his opening chapter. Although local newspapers often billed the Light Horse as a unit representing the “first families” of Louisiana, Moriarty’s data proves this was not the case. The Light Horse contained a diverse assortment of social classes and men born outside of Louisiana (including eleven born outside of the Confederacy). Additionally, Moriarty includes at least one chart in each chapter, showing the recorded strength of the Light Horse on a nearly month-by-month basis, giving readers a profound sense of the constancy of the personnel additions and subtractions. Finally, the author has collected a useful assortment of images—mainly photographs of the officers—to illustrate the Civil War as the Light Horse saw it.

As a unit history, *A Fine Body of Men* offers a noticeably unembellished approach. Primary sources pertaining to the activities of the Light Horse are scarce; consequently, the textual chapters offer little more than a broad narrative of the Army of Tennessee’s famous campaigns. When an opportunity arises to describe what the Orleans Light Horse did in a specific engagement, the author takes a moment to reflect on the narrow view from perspectives of the men, but those moments are rare. In short, the book’s greatest weakness rests with its inability to provide any human interest. Stories from the men who served in the Light Horse are noticeably absent. This is not the fault of the author, of course. The problem is archival. Few veterans of the Light Horse described their experiences in the postwar era and only a handful of letters written during the war have survived. A comprehensive unit history can be constructed only as Moriarty has accomplished it here, by relying primarily upon the compiled demographic and service data. If any missed opportunity exists, it lays in the fact that *A Fine Body of Men* does not do much to explain how escort and courier service differed from regular cavalry service. At times, the narrative hints that the Light Horse followed a prescribed set of rules and regulations when delivering orders or when serving as General Polk’s bodyguard. It was refreshing to see this unexplored aspect of Civil War service described, but the narrative begged for more analysis, something to illuminate the day-to-day activities of the men who essentially served as the central nervous system of the Army of Tennessee.

In short, *A Fine Body of Men* is a traditional unit history chock-full of well-organized service data and beautiful illustrations, but its narrative does not expand the history of the Light Horse beyond the well-studied campaigns of the Army of Mississippi and the Army of Tennessee. This book will appeal to

specialists who are in need of demographic data, but those readers who are most interested in a narrative of the inner-workings of a cavalry company at war may find this book unrewarding.

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