

Courage Under Fire: Profiles in Bravery From the Battlefields of the Civil War

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Recommended Citation

Fairweather, John E. (2008) "Courage Under Fire: Profiles in Bravery From the Battlefields of the Civil War," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 2 .

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol10/iss2/12>

Review

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Spring 2008

Sword, Wiley *Courage Under Fire: Profiles in Bravery from the Battlefields of the Civil War*. St. Martin's Press, \$29.95 hardcover ISBN 9780312364711

Civil War Courage

What is courage? What does it mean to be brave? Is courage something concrete that one can identify, or is it that simple? Is it driven by goals and to what extent does courage affect people's everyday lives? Ask anyone what courage means, and they could probably give a definition, but ask for an example, and the differences of opinion are sure to generate debate.

In his new book, *Courage Under Fire*, Wiley Sword takes on these questions. With excerpts from letters and documented events, Sword shows the courage and the suffering of people caught in the maelstrom of the Civil War in a very real sense. A Pulitzer Prize nominee and winner of the Fletcher Pratt award for his book *Embrace an Angry Wind* (1994), Sword has put names and faces to the word courage, showing that the definition of the word can be as varied as the people who define it.

If hindsight is 20/20 then foresight should be considered legally blind. Much like a court case, it is important for all involved to see the entire body of evidence before passing judgment. When ordered to attack a heavily defended Confederate position, Lieutenant Colonel Frank Curtiss of the 127th Illinois Infantry refused. Curtiss, a battle hardened veteran, believed that the attack, scheduled to take place across open terrain near Atlanta, Georgia, on August 3, 1864, was foolhardy and refused to allow his men to become cannon fodder for the enemy. Curtiss was subsequently removed from his command, and the attack went on without him. Major Thomas Taylor, of the 47th Ohio Volunteer Infantry did take part in the attack, which resulted in a Union victory although the unit took heavy casualties during the fighting. As one might suspect, he was outraged at the conduct of his superior officer, and hoped that Curtiss would be arrested and charged with desertion under fire. Based on this situation, does it

take more courage to challenge authority, or to accept the dangers and try against all odds to succeed?

In another story of courage, two individuals are faced with the same question. Their solutions are exact opposites, though the circumstances are somewhat similar. The two individuals are Jefferson Davis and Abraham Lincoln. Both men faced the question of whether or not to replace troublesome generals on the eve of a critical battle. Davis has to decide whether or not to remove General Braxton Bragg from command, based on complaints from other officers who claimed that he had bungled previous actions, such as Perryville and Stone River. Despite the complaints, Davis refused to replace him. At the same time, Lincoln was at odds with General William S. Rosecrans who, despite orders direct from General U. S. Grant, refused to advance on the enemy. With faith in Rosecrans fading and the fate of the Western army hanging in the balance, Lincoln had to act. He replaced Rosecrans with General George H. Thomas, the hero of Chickamauga. Though unknown at the time to either Lincoln or Davis, these two command decisions helped to dictate the outcome of the battle of Chattanooga and Missionary Ridge before a shot was ever fired.

Sword's book gives sharp contrast to the question of courage. His conclusions give credence to the idea that courage can be a very personal thing indeed and can be manifested in many ways. Sword writes in clean and straight to the point prose; names, dates and locations can be found in each chapter as a reference for those who wish to further study an event. His summaries bring in his thoughts and conclusions, along with some religious references that seemed to be more personal belief, than evidentiary perspective. Still, one may agree or disagree with a specific reference, and yet see that courage, either physical or moral, is easily identifiable in the situation. The stories also contend with human traits other than courage; greed, wrath, envy and pride are all evident in individuals on both sides, and at all levels of power, accounting for about half of the seven deadly sins.

This book is a worthy read for anyone in a position of leadership, for it lays out the rigors of sending others into harm's way, which is a brand of courage, in itself. Also, it is a must for anyone who has an interest in human nature. For those with a preconceived notion of what they think courage means, read *Courage Under Fire* before drawing too many conclusions.

John E. Fairweather and his family live in South Portland, Maine. He reviews books for several publications, is a writer of short stories, and an access producer with SPC-TV in South Portland.