

Soldiers From Experience: The Forging of Sherman's Fifteenth Army Corps, 1862 - 1863

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Review

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Burke, Eric Michael. *Soldiers From Experience: The Forging of Sherman's Fifteenth Army Corps 1862-1863*. Louisiana State University Press, 2022. HARDCOVER. \$49.00 ISBN 9780807178096 pp. 338.

Unit histories are common across the spectrum of Civil War scholarship, and most of them, regardless of particular thesis or focus, tend to provide a degree of analysis on how particular units fought: their reputations, what they did well, tasks they struggled with, etc. But it is rare for a study to focus primarily, if not solely, on the “whys” of these questions. Eric Burke, in his fascinating study, *Soldiers from Experience: The Forging of Sherman's Fifteenth Army Corps 1862 – 1863*, examines the development of the Federal XV Corps, from its origins under General William T. Sherman in 1862 through the end of 1863, by which time, Burke argues, the Corps had forged a very particular “tactical culture” that distinguished it from other units, not only in the Western Theater of operations, but throughout the entire Federal Army.

Burke meticulously examines each successive campaign in which the XV Corps participated, with particular emphasis on the core units of the organization, those divisions led initially by generals Morgan Smith and Frederick Steele, to explain why the XV Corps fought how it did. By the end of 1863, Burke concludes that the Corps' character had been fully established and consisted of a number of different essentials, which he summarizes on page 9, emphasizing how the Corps “organically developed an informal doctrine which anticipated most of all the postwar Army's tactical doctrine of predominately open-order light infantry tactics, a preference for the use of field fortifications to defend against Rebel counterattacks even while plunging ever deeper into the so-called Confederacy, and a powerful bias toward the seizure or destruction of Rebel means to prolong the war in lieu of direct confrontation with usually entrenched enemies on the battlefield.” He further argues that the development of this tactical culture was reciprocal in nature, as the growth of these characteristics helped shape the approach of the corps commander, culminating with the Atlanta campaign and Sherman's inclination to conduct flanking movements opposed to frontal attacks.

The progression of the narrative is straightforward and chronological, which suits Burke's analytical framework. The first chapter discusses the formation of the Corps throughout 1862, and the experiences of its disparate parts prior to official establishment at the end of 1862. While Burke notes the mix of experiences and personalities of the various components, ranging from conventional combat at Shiloh and other battles, to operations against guerrilla elements in Missouri and Arkansas, to no combat experience at all, he specifically emphasizes the importance of Smith, who instilled the importance of Zouave tactics first in his own 8th Missouri, then in his subsequent commands leading a Brigade and a Division.

The subsequent two chapters discuss the first two battles in which the Corps fought as a unique entity, Chickasaw Bayou and Arkansas Post. While the latter fight was an operational success, Burke emphasizes how both of these battles followed similar patterns that instilled particular tactical perspectives in the men of the Corps. These perspectives included the failures of frontal attacks, the efficacy of zouave tactics (short rushes and skirmishing prowess), and a lack of confidence in senior leaders (i.e. Sherman) in conducting operations.

The Corps' next experiences, which Burke addresses in his fourth chapter, helped ingrain different cultural aspects. The initial campaigns against Vicksburg, specifically the Corps' involvement in the Young's Point operation and the Steele's Bayou expedition, while not successful, infused an ability to overcome adversity and to maintain cohesion in times of tremendous duress. Additionally, the Corps gained an appreciation for area denial operations, which struck at the foundations of the Confederacy's supply and logistical base and influenced Southern ability to sustain their war effort. Finally, the Corps was able to integrate improvisation to many tasks, finding unique solutions to the challenges of the treacherous and changing environments in which they operated prior to closing on Vicksburg.

The fifth and sixth chapters discuss the Vicksburg and Jackson campaigns, which reinforced many of the lessons previously learned, as the Corps participated in not only more failed frontal assaults in May, but also lived successfully off the land during the extended operations. Perhaps more importantly to Burke was the role the Corps commander played in these operations. Burke argues that it was during these summer months that Sherman began to understand the Corps' tactical culture, and to employ it more regularly where its strengths could be best utilized, most notably the final siege of Jackson. Conversely, the men of the corps began

to feel an affinity for Sherman, first after the successful conclusion of the siege of Vicksburg, and then during the conduct of the Jackson campaign, where no frontal assaults were undertaken.

Chapters 7 and 8 examine the Chattanooga campaign, during which the different components of the Corps' tactical culture came together. While not every mission was successful, Burke highlights Sherman's improved handling of his corps throughout the battles that drove the Confederate Army of Tennessee, again, out of Tennessee. Of note, Burke is less critical than most scholars, although certainly not entirely forgiving, of Sherman's actions directing the Federal attacks at Tunnel Hill. One of the most informative parts of Burke's entire analysis occurs in Chapter 8, with Burke's examination of the Battle of Ringgold Gap. As part of this analysis, Burke is able to contrast the XV Corps' experiences against that of the XII Corps Brigade of William Creighton, whose men had fought most of the war in the Eastern Theater, achieving some success with frontal assaults and developing a very different tactical culture. The substantially different tactical experiences of the XII Corps unit provide an intriguing framework to look at some comparable models.

Burke's conclusion summarizes the tendencies developed throughout the course of his analysis, with a particular perspective on future doctrinal development. While recognizing that by the end of the war, most organizations throughout the Federal Army (east and west) had achieved similar tactical cultures regarding issues such as frontal assaults, field fortifications, and war against Confederate resources, Burke argues convincingly that the XV Corps was able to achieve these perspectives earlier than most, a development which helped the unit succeed across numerous battlefields throughout 1864 and beyond.

Burke's argument is convincing, coherent, and thought-provoking. He tackles the development of a unit identity in a much more comprehensive manner than traditional unit histories and sets a new paradigm for examining unit identities; most of the questions that come to mind when reading his narrative are not based on particular analytical critique, but more on potential application of his methodology across different contexts and units. There are a few quibbles that perhaps could be developed in his narrative, but none rise to the mark of significant issues. For instance, while the roles of Sherman and other subordinate leaders (e.g., Smith, Steele, and MG Peter Osterhaus) are central to his analysis, the role of junior officer survival and development is also key to the Corps' cultural growth, yet leadership training and development (other than by experience) is only addressed briefly and in passing. Also, Confederate tactics and

culture are relatively underplayed—for most of the narrative, the Confederates are an enemy who (mostly) sit behind fieldworks and shoot at the Federals. While that truism is certainly par for the course for the Corps experience, there are notable times where a Confederate exception to this model could be developed, such as at Tunnel Hill.

As noted, though, these critiques are very minor. The Chapter 8 discussion and comparative discussion of Creighton's brigade is truly insightful and demonstrates some valuable potential for further analytical study and research. Additionally, his focus and manner of writing make this work extremely accessible to a wide variety of interested readers. Burke should be commended for this detailed study, which sets a new model for the investigation of unit histories.

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