



2015-117

Brian R. McEnany, *For Brotherhood and Duty: The Civil War History of the West Point Class of 1862*. Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 2015. Pp. xii, 494. ISBN 978-0-8131-6062-7.

Review by William A. Knowlton Jr., National Defense University (knowltonw@verizon.net).

Many West Point classes have graduated during wars, but those who did so during the Civil War faced an extraordinary situation: graduates were fighting on *both sides*. Other authors have examined how senior commanders like Ulysses Grant, Robert E. Lee, James Longstreet, George McClellan, and Thomas (“Stonewall”) Jackson at the highest levels of the Union and Confederate armies faced friends and classmates on the battlefield,¹ but little has been written about the classes that graduated just before or during the Civil War. Brian McEnany, himself a West Point graduate and retired Army officer, now fills that gap with “a collective biography about the experiences of the twenty-eight graduates”² (ix) of the Class of 1862 (hereafter, “the Class”).

This extremely well researched book concentrates particularly on fourteen of the twenty-eight graduates as well as four (of twenty-one) cadets who resigned from the Academy when their states seceded from the Union and fought for the South (344-45).³ McEnany’s sources include “letters,⁴ articles, official records, regimental histories, historical cadet records, articles, books about cadet life during the Civil War, and data held at national battlefields” (x).

The book comprises part 1, “The West Point Years,” on the period from the Class’s entry to West Point in 1858 to their graduation in June 1862, and part 2, “The Civil War Years,” which continues the story to the end of the war. Most of part 1 describes the bleakly Spartan life of a cadet in the 1850s and early 1860s. Skillfully using McCrea’s letters, McEnany describes a routine consisting of little but study, classes, and drill; cadets endured harsh discipline in cold, sparsely furnished barracks in the winter and drafty tents in summer, subsisting on an unappetizing and limited menu in the mess hall. Diversions were few and the distinct possibility of dismissal for unsatisfactory performance on exams made for a stressful environment. On a positive note, the men did form strong friendships with classmates and roommates.⁵ However, some of those relationships would be sorely tested in looming war.

McEnany gives a fascinating account of the impact the events leading up to war had on the cadets and officers at West Point.

That fall [1859] the Corps [of Cadets] was not immune to the passions that swept the rest of the country. Polarization between Northern and Southern cadets did not take place all at once—it just grew more slowly at West Point than in the rest of the country. Ten or fifteen years earlier, cadets seldom argued over sectional issues. Most respected political conservatism, polite manners, and an ordered social structure. Over the years, the professors and instructors removed offending text from books used by cadets and refused to allow any such discussion in the classroom.... But John Brown’s Raid at Harpers Ferry in the autumn of 1859 became an event

1. E.g., John C. Waugh, *The Class of 1846: From West Point to Appomattox: Stonewall Jackson, George McClellan and Their Brothers* (NY: Warner, 1994), and Gerard A. Patterson, *Rebels from West Point: The 306 U.S. Military Academy Graduates Who Fought for the Confederacy* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole, 1987).

2. One might wonder about the small size of the Class. McEnany explains that it began in 1858 with seventy-five members (31), not an unusual size for that era since the maximum number of cadets authorized at West Point in 1858 was 280 (9). Normal attrition, primarily due to academic deficiency or disciplinary infractions, accounted for the loss of about one third of the Class and resignations of cadets from the Southern states accounted for about another third (341).

3. Because they did not graduate from West Point, those cadets who resigned before graduation are not usually included in the official records or accounts of graduates who fought for the Confederacy, which makes McEnany’s accounting particularly valuable.

4. Particularly, the 250 letters Tully McCrea wrote to his cousin Belle in 1858-65. Excerpts and summaries of those letters were first published in Catherine S. Crary, *Dear Belle: Letters from a Cadet and Officer to His Sweetheart* (Middletown: Wesleyan U Pr, 1965).

5. McCrea’s first roommate was George Armstrong Custer, who graduated in June 1861, a year before McCrea (33).

that polarized the cadets.... The voices and views of Southern cadets became more strident after Brown's raid. Morris Schaff [a classmate] later wrote that during Brown's trial.... [Southern cadet] Pierce M.B. Young swung his sword around him in an arc and loudly proclaimed, "By God, I wish I had a sword as long as from here to Newburgh, and the Yankees were all in a row. I'd like to cut off the head of every damned one of them." (49-51)

Tensions mounted during the 1860 presidential elections: when the cadets conducted a straw poll, fist fights broke out between Southern cadets and supporters of Abraham Lincoln, including McCrea. After Lincoln's election, the first Southern cadets resigned, followed by more as states seceded and Fort Sumter was fired on.⁶ Many Southern cadets struggled with divided loyalties to their states and to the Union. As resignations increased, all cadets were required to take a more stringent oath "[I] swear that I will support the Constitution of the United States, and bear true allegiance to the National Government; that I will maintain and defend the sovereignty of the United States, paramount to any and all allegiance, sovereignty, or fealty I may owe to any State, county, or country, whatsoever..." (102). Any cadets who refused the oath were dismissed or allowed to resign. In the end, only twenty-eight members of the Class graduated. The men who entered the Academy in 1858 were irrevocably split, never to be reunited.⁷

In part 2, McEnany broadens his focus beyond Tully McCrea to the other seventeen men he has selected. Though he does not explain his criteria for choosing these individuals, it is likely that they were the ones for whom the most information was available and who were most involved in active campaigning and fighting.

McEnany reports that seven members of the Class were commissioned in the Engineer Corps, four in the Ordnance Corps, fifteen in the Artillery, and two in the Cavalry. Almost all the featured Union officers were artillerymen, with the notable exception of Ranald Mackenzie, who served as an engineer, staff officer, and aide before commanding infantry and cavalry units later in the war.⁸ All four of the Academy dropouts served in Confederate artillery or cavalry units; one of them, James Dearing, was a brigadier general of a cavalry division when he was killed in 1865 (344-45).

The chapters in part 2 are roughly chronological, each detailing a particular battle or campaign. Chapter 9, on Gettysburg, is typical of the author's technique. Four members of the Class—Calef, Mackenzie, McCrea, and Egan—fought for the Union at the battle, while former classmates Dearing and Blount fought for the South. Calef commanded an artillery battery with Buford's cavalry on the first day of the battle and helped delay the Confederate advance until Union infantry could reach the battlefield; Mackenzie, assigned as one of General Warren's aides, was instrumental in getting Union troops up on Little Round Top in the nick of time on the second day of the battle. One of the times when former classmates directly engaged each other occurred on the third day, when Dearing's artillery battalion, with Blount commanding one of his batteries, bombarded the Union line on Cemetery Ridge and McCrea and Egan, commanding sections in Woodruff's battery, returned fire.⁹ McEnany neatly integrates the actions of the protagonists into his description of the battle. He also includes schematics that show the locations of the primary players, although it is sometimes hard to determine which individuals are being indicated.

Gettysburg is familiar, of course, to many readers and is therefore easy to follow, but engagements featured in other chapters, like the Battle of Olustee, Florida, in February 1864 (chapter 11), where McCrea was badly wounded, are less well known and therefore more confusing. McEnany has meticulously researched and identified all the engagements where members of the Class were present. There is, however, some dis-

6. One former member of the Class, Henry Farley, fired the first shot at Fort Sumter (79-80).

7. Some popular cadets and officers were farewelled without animosity as they resigned and joined the Confederacy, and it is well documented that some friendships between those who fought on different sides survived the war.

8. McEnany points out the sharp discrepancy in promotion between men in regular army units and those who took appointments with volunteer (state) units. Most of the former (including McCrea) ended the war as first lieutenants, while the latter advanced rapidly to much higher ranks—Mackenzie was a major general by war's end and Custer a brigadier general two years after graduating from West Point (337-41).

9. The author does not make it clear whether the former classmates were aware of the presence of those on the other side.

continuity in the chapters in part 2. Some men, like McCrea, Dearing, Egan, and Mackenzie, fought at several battles and so appear and reappear in several chapters, making it easier to track their progress during the war. But many others, like Murray, Lord, and Bartlett, appear only once, forcing the reader to consult the appendix for a clear chronology of their Civil War service.

McEnany's helpful epilogue assesses the achievements of the Class, with sections on Promotions, Volunteer Service, and North-versus-South Animosity. Tables show the graduation order and first assignments of all the graduates, the Confederate Class members, Union volunteers (that is, men who resigned to volunteer for service in the Union armies), and members dismissed before the war. The following appendix provides biographical sketches of all Class members, including their post-Civil War service.

One discordant note is struck by McEnany's penchant for a literary device popularized by books like Michael Shaara's *The Killer Angels*¹⁰—at the beginning of each chapter he includes a fictitious first-person reminiscence by Tully McCrea of his experiences at the Military Academy and during the Civil War, after he had become an instructor at West Point after the end of the war. McEnany “used [the] technique to ... [provide] context for what follows.”¹¹ But, where the device brilliantly evoked the thoughts of major characters in Shaara's novel, here it distracts the reader by constantly jumping between McCrea's cadet days, wartime experiences, and postwar assignment.

McEnany admirably achieves his goal of chronicling the careers of the Class of 1862. It would be hard to find another West Point class that has been so well documented. *For Brotherhood and Duty* will engage and instruct students and historians wishing to learn more about West Point in the Civil War era and the service of its recent graduates in that conflict.

10. Philadelphia: McKay, 1974.

11. “A Conversation with Brian McEnany,” Univ. Press of Kentucky press release, undated.