



Faces of the Civil War Navies: An Album of Union and Confederate Soldiers by Ronald S. Coddington.

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In *Faces of the Civil War Navies*, Ronald Coddington¹ continues his project of “documenting the photographic history of the U.S. soldier and sailor.”² The nonscientific sample of seventy-seven images chosen for the present volume derives mainly from the 4 x 2.5 in. calling cards (*cartes de visite*) that were so “enormously popular during the Civil War era.” Although commercial photography was only twenty-two years old in 1861, the cards had become affordable for the men, both Union and Confederate, “who served, mostly anonymously, as acting volunteer lieutenants, master’s mates, ensigns, and midshipmen, as well as ... enlisted men: firemen, boatswains (bo’suns), even landsmen” (ix-x). They depicted their owners in full-length images, standing or seated, posing with props that conveyed who they were or aspired to be in service of their nations.

For example, Lt. Benjamin Horton Porter, the greatest popular hero of the men Coddington profiles (264-71), poses seated in full uniform with an elaborate sheathed sword cradled in his left arm, its impressive haft secure against his upper left jacket sleeve. Friends back home had given him the weapon “as a testament of their pride in his achievement” during an amphibious attack against Confederate artillery and infantry dug in on Roanoke Island (7 Feb. 1862), when he was just seventeen years old. His face is calm, confident, movie-star handsome, but somehow trance-like and unworldly, gazing far beyond the camera’s lens. Porter’s image made me wonder what Achilles or Diomedes in the *Iliad* or the hero of the *Aeneid* would look like, had they sat for *carte-de-visite* photos. Homer and Vergil never describe their heroes’ faces.³

Porter certainly behaved like a Homeric hero: according to his after-action report, he led his crew members and their battery of six howitzers onto land where, as marines, they joined ten thousand infantry troops and advanced in stages, firing and then pulling, to “the open space directly in front of the rebel battery, where we made a stand under the most destructive fire from the rebel infantry.” As he manned one of the howitzers, “a slug passed into [his crewmate’s] ... throat, from which the blood streamed out; he looked into my face, choked, fell down, and died. This made me *madder* than ever and I went in on my muscle.” Like the World War I poet Wilfred Owen, Porter wrote this matter-of-fact account of death in battle in a letter to his mother.

Since the mainly rank-and-file men in the author’s photo album, like their counterparts in the *Iliad*, leave no trace in historical accounts, what can be said about them must be culled from un-

1. Editor of *Military Images* magazine – www.miwsr.com/rd/1803.htm. He is also the author of *Faces of the Civil War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U Pr, 2004), *Faces of the Confederacy* (id., 2008), and *African American Faces of the Civil War* (id., 2013).

2. The book is enhanced by a helpful demographic description of its subjects and a bibliography for further reading.

3. See, further, my “Faces and Attachment in Homer and Later War Writing,” in L.A. Tritle and J.W. Warren, eds., *The Many Faces of War* (Los Angeles: Marymount Inst Pr, forthcoming), and Mark W. Griffith, “What Does Aeneas Look Like?” *Classical Philology* 80 (1985) 309-19.

exciting sources like obituaries; local newspaper clippings; military service, state pension, and courts-martial records; and, latterly, online resources.⁴ As compared with the searing accounts of battle in Mark Bowden's *Hue 1968*,⁵ Frederick Downs Jr.'s *The Killing Zone*,⁶ or Michael Herr's classic *Dispatches*,⁷ the brief personal biographies of the soldiers Coddington presents seem at first emotionless, lacking in intensity and drama. None comes close to Benjamin Porter's personal writing.

But Coddington's profiles focus on the lives of his subjects rather than dramatizing the military actions they took part in. The seventy-seven stories and photos constitute a unique kind of social history, a cross section of ordinary human lives before, during, and after the most traumatic and lethal conflict in American history. Their cumulative effect, like Lieutenant Porter's preternaturally emotionless gaze, strikes me as a Civil War equivalent of the "two-thousand-yard stare" captured by battle-artist and correspondent Tom Lea's famous portrait of a marine at the Battle of Peleliu (15 Sept.–27 Nov. 1944).⁸ The profiles also evoke the mainly poor immigrant population of Black River Falls, Wisconsin (ca. 1890–1910), whose lives Michael Lesy⁹ captured primarily through newspaper photographs (often of dead children) and bits of information in news articles, institutional records, and the work of contemporary regional novelists. Both give us cause to wonder how human beings endure and endure and endure.

Take, for example, acting master's mate William Pittman Higbee (b. 1841), the younger of two sons of a Cincinnati merchant. Higbee, whose mother had died when he was a toddler, was a high school graduate working as a clerk when the war broke out. He was aboard the warship *Lafayette* when its flotilla in the Mississippi squadron ran the "formidable enemy batteries defending Vicksburg" (125) on the night of 16 April 1863. The *Lafayette's* commander compared the hour-long barrage from Confederate artillery that struck the ship nine times to "earthquakes, thunder and volcanoes, hailstones and coals of fire; New York conflagrations and Fourth of July pyrotechnics" (127). Higbee was promoted to acting ensign and survived to be discharged in September 1865. But he had contracted tuberculosis and died four months later, unmarried.

What do these kinds of lives mean? Battle-hospital poet Walt Whitman offered an elegy in their honor after the assassination of Abraham Lincoln:

I saw the debris and debris of all the dead soldiers of the war
But I saw they were not as was thought;
They themselves were fully at rest—they suffer'd not;
The living remain'd and suffer'd—the mother suffer'd,
And the wife and the child, and the musing comrade suffer'd,
And the armies that remain'd suffer'd.¹⁰

Other stories are picaresque beyond fiction. Take Hilary Cenas (1839–77) of New Orleans,

4. E.g., *Ancestry.com* (genealogical information), *Fold3.com* (military records), and the *American Historical Research Database* (regimental histories and the like).

5. Subtitle: *A Turning Point of the American War in Vietnam* (NY: Atlantic Monthly Pr, 2017).

6. Subtitle: *My Life in the Vietnam War* (NY: Norton, 1978).

7. New York: Knopf, 1977.

8. "Peleliu: Tom Lea Paints Island Invasion," *Life* (11 June 1945) 65, captioned "Battle Fatigue."

9. In *Wisconsin Death Trip* (NY: Random House, 1973).

10. "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" (1865), 15.

whose *carte-de-visite* photo, an unorthodox head shot set in a hazy dreamlike surround, suggests he marched to a different drumbeat. By autumn 1864, he was a Confederate naval lieutenant in charge of the heavy artillery Battery Semmes “dug into the banks of the James River just a few miles south of the capital.” In a story of comradeship across enemy lines,¹¹ Cenas, taken with the accuracy of the Union artillerist returning fire on his battery, “would emerge from the works with a barrel or tobacco box and set it down atop an old stump..., wave his arms as a signal to his favorite gun-pointer on the other side” and take pleasure when “both stump and gun barrel would be knocked into smithereens” (251). Oddly, Coddington takes this chivalrous respect for the skill and tenacity of an enemy as a character flaw.

Failing to gain admission to West Point, Cenas attended South Carolina College and transferred to the US Naval Academy, graduating fourteenth in a class of twenty in 1859. He resigned his Union commission in summer 1861 and was eventually exchanged for a US Navy officer (21 Dec. 1861). He joined the Confederate Navy as a 2nd lieutenant on Christmas Eve. After the abandonment of Battery Semmes (2 Apr. 1865), he managed to make it to the Army of Northern Virginia in time for the surrender at Appomattox Courthouse. Later, in New Orleans, he engaged in violence against Republicans and Reconstruction; an admirer called him “ardent, fearless and chivalrous, ... a foremost leader of his race against carpet-bag domination” (254). He died of a gunshot wound to the foot that did not heal over the last four years of his life.

Coddington’s account of Cenas (251–53) has traces of bias. He writes that the president of South Carolina College was “pleased to be rid of him” because he wrote a rather standard letter of recommendation to the Naval Academy: “His standing has been fair, & his deportment, as far as I have had the opportunity of knowing, unexceptionable—& I take great pleasure in commending him to the kind regards of the Naval School.” It should be noted that “unexceptionable” was not at the time a pejorative; for instance, a theater notice in the *Richmond Dispatch* (28 Dec. 1860) lauds “the deservedly popular actress” Mrs. Waller, who will play her parts “in the most unexceptionable manner.” Coddington also remarks that Cenas graduated from the Naval Academy “with less than flying colors.”

Yet we can rank Cenas’s gentlemanly respect for the Union artillerist alongside the “southern” chivalry of Capt. Raphael Semmes of the CSS *Alabama*. Semmes, like Cenas a former Union officer, rescued the defeated crew of the sinking USS *Hatteras*. Having taken them captive, he “minutely superintended everything” regarding their treatment, including furnishing Confederate medical supplies for five wounded Union seamen. Newspaper accounts stressed that the captured “officers and men of the *Hatteras*, without exception, speak in terms of eulogy” (98–99) about their treatment. Throughout the carnage and destruction, many Civil War soldiers maintained a gentility of manners.

Coddington reminds us that, during the Civil War period, “poetry was a fixture on the pages of the popular newspaper” (243), echoing Oliver Wendell Holmes’s designation¹² of Ensign Henry Howard Brownell as the “Battle Laureate.” Brownell, standing on a deck that had become “an absolute slaughterhouse,” converted the scene into poetry: “You could hardly choose but tread / On the ghastly human wreck / (Dreadful gobbet and shred / That a minute ago were men!).” Yet such were the codes of decorum that, although Admiral Farragut, lashed to the rigging, the better to see and strategize the battle, had in the moment shouted “Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead!”, he later “ordered his ensign-poet to suppress the profane language” in his poetic account. Brownell wrote “Go on!”

11. Cf. Homer’s Glaucus and Diomedes, Michael Herr’s “Luke the Gook,” or the Christmas Truce of 1914.

12. *Atlantic Monthly* (May 1865).