



A Thousand May Fall: Life, Death, and Survival in the Union Army

by Brian Matthew Jordan.

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In *A Thousand May Fall* historian Brian Jordan¹ delivers a vivid portayal of the lives of soldiers and veterans of the US Civil War era. He focuses here on his home state of Ohio and the service and legacy of the 107th Ohio Volunteer Infantry Regiment. Since nearly 70 percent of the regiment were non-native, the 107th was one of just thirty US Army regiments considered “ethnically German.” Among the thirty-five hundred Union regiments, Jordan reveals that the wartime experience of was both “ordinary and unique” (7). Starting with their the regiment’s recruitment and concluding with the passing of its final member, Jordan presents an unsanitized story of the lives and feelings of the men of 107th as they lived through the nation’s bloodiest conflict.

Most of the men of the 107th were among the ca. 200,000 German immigrants who enlisted in the US Army during the war. Even though German-Americans constituted over 10 percent of the Union armies, they were often overshadowed by Irish immigrants. Inspired by other recent unit histories, Jordan offers an in-depth history of an overlooked (sometimes cursed) regiment from Northeast Ohio. It is a “messy tale of pride and pain, courage and cowardice, loyalty and betrayal, life and death—a narrative that embraces the war’s complexities, ponders its contingencies, and challenges its chronologies” (19).

Jordan begins with the recruitment of the 107th in spring 1862. In the course of the war, Ohio—the nation’s third most populous state—furnished over a hundred infantry regiments, thirteen independent batteries, and six cavalry outfits for the war effort. The 107th was one of four ethnically German units. By reading their diaries and letters, Jordan learned why exactly the men joined the army. Some wanted to fight alongside the famed German revolutionary Franz Sigel. For others, the promise of a steady salary was more enticing than the ideological ideal of preserving the Union. For many of the men, there was no single motive to enlist. Like the soldiers that scholars like Peter Carmichael and Aaron Sheehan Dean have studied, the men of the 107th were driven by a myriad of motives, including steady pay, the lure of adventure, ideological convictions, loyalty to a cause, abolitionism, and peer pressure.²

Jordan follows the men of the 107th from their training at Camp Cleveland to their “seasoning” as soldiers. Other historians,³ have described the “seasoning” of Civil War soldiers as the acquisition of physical immunities and psychological coping strategies needed to survive army life and the war. But Jordan expands this definition to include the men’s understanding of war itself—

1. His previous work includes *Marching Home: Union Veterans and Their Unending Civil War* (NY: Liveright, 2015), which was a Pulitzer Prize finalist in history.

2. Cf. Aaron Sheehan-Dean, *Why Confederates Fought: Family and Nation in Civil War Virginia* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina Pr, 2007); Peter Carmichael, *The War For the Common Soldier: How Men Thought, Fought, and Survived in Civil War Armies* (id., 2018).

3. E.g., Kathryn Shively Meier, *Nature’s Civil War: Common Soldiers and the Environment in 1862 Virginia* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina Pr, 2013).

something the 107th Ohio began to experience in fall 1862 as they marched off to war. “Seasoning” may have prepared men for war, but it also highlighted the growing divide between home and the front. Veterans often complain that only those who experienced war can truly understand it and the men of 107th were no different. Even when they tried to convey their experiences to their families back home, Jordan notes, civilians could never really understand.

It was not just these new hardships that separated the 107th from their home communities. Jordan explains that nativist bias against German immigrants and Ohio Democrats’ antiwar stance also drove a wedge between civilians and soldiers. By consistently juxtaposing Midwestern politics with the 107th’s experience in the field, Jordan reveals that its men felt attacked on all sides and felt isolated even from their non-German comrades. This was especially clear after Chancellorsville (2 May 1863) “changed forever” (89) the lives and legacies of the 107th.

Jordan’s talent for vivid narrative rivals John Keegan’s as he evokes the horrors of Stonewall Jackson’s flanking maneuver, which collided with the 107th near Orange Turnpike. Despite the physical and psychological wounds they sustained during the battle, the unit was determined to continue on. And continue they did—to Gettysburg, Charleston, Florida, and beyond.

To the end of their sometimes very troubled lives, the veterans of the 107th tried to fathom the meaning of the war and their role in it. Like many Union veterans, the survivors of the 107th fought to secure pensions and recognition for their hardships, as well as correct any blots on their wartime records. They attended reunions, sponsored a monument at Gettysburg, and recorded their narratives of the war. They were determined not to let their tale of service be forgotten. By retelling their story and all the human and emotional realities of war, Jordan guarantees that their story will endure in the minds of his readers. The story of the 107th Ohio is not one of adventure, brave charges, and celebrations. But this is what makes it a welcome and essential contribution to the scholarship on the common soldier.

One significant weakness of the book is its far too simplistic map program. Readers unfamiliar with the engagements will find them hard to decipher. That said, Jordan is not attempting to write in-depth battle histories. The true strength of his book is its evocation of the the dizzyingly complex experience of the men who fought to preserve the Union. Brian Jordan has packed his book with discussions of matters from race, gender, class, and politics to the drudgery of drill, guard service, imprisonment, and, yes, the thrills and horrors of combat. Anyone interested in life, death, and survival in the Union Army should read and reflect on *A Thousand May Fall*.