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BOOKS | BOOKSHELF

Five Best: Peter S. Carmichael on Life as a Civil War Soldier

From the author, most recently, of 'The War for the Common Soldier: How Men Thought, Fought, and Survived in Civil War Armies'

By Peter S. Carmichael

April 12, 2019 10:56 a.m. ET

No Freedom Shrieker: The Civil War Letters of Union Soldier Charles Biddlecom

Edited by Katherine M. Aldridge (2011)

1As soon as New Yorker Charles Biddlecom joined the Army of the Potomac, he wanted to escape. Drafted in 1863, he shared none of the idealism of the volunteers of 1861. In virtually every letter to his family he complained about politicians, generals and, above all, army life. He told his wife that "I think sometimes if it was not for you and my children I would blow out my brains." Biddlecom pulled through this dark period, but nearly deserted in the spring of 1864. He remained for the Overland Campaign, a brutal operation of some 22 days that resulted in nearly 55,000 Union casualties. Though he was in a state of shock, and surrounded by fellow survivors whose faces were "full of grief," the battle changed Biddlecom's feelings about the war. His letters are far more introspective and candid than those of most Union and Confederate soldiers. Here are the thoughts of a man keenly aware of his own transformation. "I must not hold back [from battle] now after going through so much danger," he wrote to his wife. "I have won character as a soldier."

Last to Leave the Field: The Life and Letters of First Sergeant Ambrose

Henry Hayward

Edited by Timothy J. Orr (2011)



'Home, Sweet Home' (ca. 1863) by Winslow Homer. PHOTO: BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

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2Punctuation, spelling and writing conventions did not keep Pennsylvania's Ambrose Hayward from writing in his own vernacular, a conversational style that imbues his correspondence with the power of immediacy. "A ball knocked off[f] my cap and nearly took me

from my feet," he wrote of Antietam. "I put my hand up and saw there was no blood and Smiled." By 1863, he was a hardened veteran who had seen "death in every shape." At Ringgold, Ga., he lost his best friend. "Poor Fithian," he wrote. "The ball struck him in the side. He dropped his Rifle. I saw that I could not reach him. I turned away dreading to see him roll down the mountain." Yet he thought it was "glorious to be a Soldier after the Battle is over." Hayward was repulsed by combat but also drawn to it. He believed that the blood sacrifice of its

soldiers was a noble and necessary act if the Union was to be preserved—a cause for which he gave his own life after being mortally wounded near Atlanta in 1864.

The Civil War Letters of Joshua K. Callaway

Edited by Judith Lee Hallock (1997)

3Confederate Lt. Joshua Callaway begged his comrades to leave him on the field. Shot

while rallying frightened soldiers on Missionary Ridge, the former Alabama teacher would be placed under a tree to die alone. Just a month earlier he had stood on this same ground, with its commanding view of the Tennessee Valley. Thoughts of “home and peace and the company of my loved ones” overcame him. Callaway longed for the comforts of family, but his hatred for the enemy trumped his homesickness. “I am as sick of the war as any man who ever deserted. But do not you think I have any notion of a similar course. No never.” Callaway’s fears and anxieties continued to plague him, but he believed that surrendering to his darkest thoughts would keep him from doing his part to defeat the Northern invaders.

Four Years in the Stonewall Brigade

By John O. Casler (1893)

4Virginia’s John O. Casler built a shocking record of rebelliousness in the ranks. On five occasions, he was arrested for leaving his regiment without permission. He stole from comrades. He even robbed from the dead and wounded. At Chancellorsville he took a sword from an injured Ohio officer before strip-searching the Yankee for his pistol. By his own admission, Casler was more of a forager than a fighter. His memoir is a straightforward confession of his quest for survival. He had witnessed the ghastly execution of 10 deserters after Gettysburg: “The more they shot the more deserted.” Though a far cry from a model Confederate soldier, Casler never questioned the justness of the Southern cause, even in his dotage.

This Infernal War: The Civil War Letters of William and Jane Standard

Edited by Timothy Mason Roberts (2018)

5As the war neared its end, Illinoisan William Standard calculated that he had marched “over four hundred miles, fought in thirteen different battles, and [was] under fire of the enemies’ guns for 87 days.” He was a severe critic of the war—he despised the draft and denounced emancipation—and spoke for a class of Union soldiers strongly opposed to the ideals of the Lincoln administration. These political sentiments were not unusual in conversation, but to find them in published correspondence is rare. “This Infernal War” presents the Civil War soldier within the context of family and household. The feisty Jane, Standard’s wife, regularly lectured her husband that his place was at home. Only the fear of dishonor kept him from deserting. Just before he returned to his farm, William asked Jane to keep their impending reunion private. “I do not want anyone to see the kind and affectionate tears that will flow freely from both on that happy day.”