

The Free Lance – Star * Fredericksburg, Virginia * Saturday, April 26, 2008

BOOK REVIEW Michael Aubrecht

No Soap, No Pay, Diarrhea, Dysentery & Desertion
A Composite Diary of the Last 16 Months of the Confederacy 1864-1865

- - - - -

PERSONAL TOLL IS COMPELLING

More than 600,000 soldiers lost their lives in the American Civil War. It has been estimated that twice as many of them died as the result of sickness than of gunshot wounds. . . . disease, dysentery, poor hygiene and woefully lacking sanitation threatened the soldier's life on a daily basis.

Army campsites were often more deadly than the battlefield, and diseases from this breeding ground for sickness often spilled over into the local civilian population. Contaminated water, spoiled rations and the inability to stay clean while on campaign added to the misery and suffering of all those caught up in the nation's conflict. . . .

Unfortunately, it is this brutally honest, yet disturbing perspective that is usually omitted from the historical narrative in favor of military tactics and political analysis. The result is a gap in the published recollections of infantrymen, cavalymen and artillerymen that made up the ranks of both armies, as well as the civilians, who also bore the residual pains of war.

As the war progressed, the quality of life for Confederate soldiers deteriorated at an alarming rate. By mid-1864, and through the early part of 1865, much of the South lay in ruins and those fighting on behalf of the Confederate States struggled to maintain a positive outlook for the future. No surprisingly, descriptions of the sights, sounds and smells of suffering often found their way into written correspondence and memoirs.

It is these diaries, journals and letters home that provide the basis for Jeff Toalson's highly original work "No Soap, No Pay, Diarrhea, Dysentery & Desertion."

In addition to boasting the best title for a book that this reviewer has ever read, Toalson's contribution to Civil War history has opened the door to a far-too-neglected subject, the day-to-day strife of the common soldier and his constant challenge to remain alive in the most nauseating of circumstances.

LOCAL BATTLE ACCOUNTS

"No Soap, No Pay" presents the last 16 months of the Confederacy, as told from the first-person perspectives of a plethora of soldiers and citizens from all walks of life. Of those quoted, 220 men and 50 women recalled the War Between the States and the tenacity that was required in order to survive it.

Beyond adverse living conditions the recollections in "No Soap, No Pay" include some Southerner's insights into slavery, religion, inflation and the undying hope for their fledgling cause. The concept of this book is so simple, yet brilliant, and the collection of quoted material is superb. "No Soap, No Pay" contains a wide variety of contributors that add to the enjoyment of the read.

[Area] residents will be particularly interested in the diary entries that reference the local battles of [The Wilderness] and Spotsylvania. The accounts of those, both in the fight and at home, paint a vivid portrait of life and death in the field. For example, Lt. J. S. Dozle, of the 33rd Virginia Infantry dramatically writes: *May 12, 1864, Spotsylvania, Muleshoe Salient: The atmosphere was obscured by a thick fog which was increase in density by the smoke of battle that, in the absence of any breeze, hung in heavy masses in the wood. The scene was terrible . . . men seen dimly through the smoke and fog . . . the woods ere lighted by the flashing of guns . . . the din was tremendous and increasing . . . Men in crowds with bleeding limbs, and pale, pain-stricken faces, were hurrying to the rear, and, mingling with these could be seen many unwounded who had escaped from the wrecks of their comrades.*”

However, there is much more to this narrative than graphic descriptions of battlefield tales and bloody heroics. The desperation of the South is repeatedly presented, with frustration over the devaluing of Confederate currency, the lowering of the draft-age, diminishing furloughs, bad food, lack of basic necessities and the poorly managed postal service. As the book progresses, a virtual timeline is plotted, as the inevitable defeat of the Southern army becomes apparent in the entries.

The civilian perspectives are equally compelling, as topics range from unmarried pregnancy and prostitution, to unsanitary medical practices and the lack of food and clothing.

THE COMMON VOICE

In an e-mail interview with me, editor Jeff Toalson explained his own vision for the book. He said, “The common voice, soldier and civilian, is often overlooked in history. Yet those voices often have the truest and most human ring. This first person narrative is remarkable in its simplicity and stunning in its scope.”

He added, “The books sells equally well to both men and women. It is also being used by middle school teachers and home-schoolers to involve the students in the lives of actual participants to help bring history to life.”

At nearly 500 pages, armchair historians interested in conducting their own research into the plight of these individuals will appreciate the triple index that is provided. This extra step enables the reader to locate the memories of individuals by referencing their name, command or general subject.

Perhaps the greatest contribution of this endeavor is found in the “voice” that has been given to the personal memories of these 270 courageous men and women, who lived through the darkest of times in our nation’s history. By sharing their most intimate and personal recollections, Toalson presents an opportunity for us to learn what really happened, as their cause and their country came to an end.

- - - - -

iUniverse – 514 pages – 6x9 paperback – Amazon price \$29.95

view original at: <http://www.fredericksburg.com/News/FLS/2008/042008/04262008/374031>