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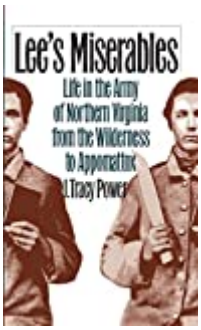

J. Tracy Power. *Lee's Miserables: Life in the Army of Northern Virginia from the Wilderness to Appomattox.* Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1998. xxii + 463 pp. $34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2392-7.

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Books about the "common soldier" of the American Civil War have become increasingly popular since Bell Wiley issued his *Johnny Reb* and *Billy Yank*. Yet, as Tracy Power points out in his preface to *Lee's Miserables*, "no study published to date has focused solely on [the Army of Northern Virginia] and comprehensively investigated its extant manuscript material…" (p. xiii). This fine new work certainly helps fill that yawning gap. In his book, Power focused his lens on the last year of the conflict, a period he said was "arguably the most significant and compelling of its entire history" (p. xiii). His goal was not only to shed new light on the men who made up the Confederacy's most successful army but to re-examine and clarify some of the reasons for the young nation's failure to win its independence.

Robert E. Lee's soldiers entered the Spring 1864 campaign with their morale high and with deeply felt optimism for victory. They had complete faith in Marse Robert's ability to defeat his new opponent, Ulysses S. Grant, just as he had the string of generals who had proceeded him. Having engaged the enemy in intense hand-to-hand combat at the Wilderness and Spotsylvania, the Confederates knew that they were fighting "not [only] for victory but to survive" (p. 33). They considered both battles as victories and, in their accounts, expressed confidence that they would continue beating the Yankees even if they had given up some ground. After the Wilderness and Spotsylvania, the Confederates had more difficulty in giving precise descriptions of their movements and the results of their battles. The constant marches and engagements left the men little time to write and few opportunities to learn about the larger picture of what the army was doing.

Morale in the Army of Northern Virginia remained high after the aforementioned battles, though many soldiers recognized the drain on the army's strength and wondered whether it could continue to sustain such losses. The bloodbath at Cold Harbor gave additional encouragement to Lee's veterans. Many of them expressed the hope that Grant would continue to send his men against the Confederate trenches in frontal assaults. Letters from the Southerners talked confidently of one more large battle that would permanently decide the war in their favor. Though that battle did not occur and the army found itself locked in trench warfare around Petersburg and Richmond, the same air of confidence was present in soldier letters and diaries written in June and July. According to Power, "Many veterans thought that their battles of May and June confirmed their innate superiority over their enemies" (p. 88).

The troops who went with Jubal Early to the Shenandoah Valley found themselves in a much different situa-

tion than the one they faced from the Wilderness to Cold Harbor. Constant marches during July and August left them little time to write letters or keep up with diary entries. Many of Early's men seemed uncertain of their objectives. Generally, their outlook remained positive during those weeks. Once the army began to suffer a series of defeats, these veterans commented on the panic that seized the army, and their writings indicated that they came easily to accept or even "approve of the disgraceful behavior" (p. 152). The army's chances for success were further diminished by the loss of a number of experienced officers. Early lost the trust of many of his men, who believed that his poor generalship led to the defeats.

Life in the Petersburg trenches became difficult for the men during the summer of 1864. Extreme heat and rainless weather took their toll. The soldiers found the impersonal nature of death and injury from sharpshooting and artillery bombardments a greater drain on morale than the casualties sustained in May and June. A spectacular victory in the Battle of the Crater buoyed their confidence and seemed to them another sign that the Federals could not defeat them. Though these Confederates blunted other Union attacks in succeeding months, they could not block the westward extension of the enemy siege lines. The loss of regimental and company officers in these engagements resulted in declining discipline and a failure to take care of the soldiers' needs. Many Confederates wished to get away from trench warfare and to fight again in the open.

Morale clearly waned during the winter of 1864-1865 because of the hardships the men had to endure. The re-election of Abraham Lincoln and military reverses in other theaters made some soldiers pessimistic about winning independence even though they remained confident of their ability to defeat Grant's armies. Desertions increased in early 1865 due primarily to poor rations and news of hardships at home. Following the failure of peace talks in February 1865, many regiments and brigades held meetings to pass resolutions stating their loyalty to the cause and their willingness to continue fighting until independence was gained. Nevertheless, men continued to desert, and Lee and his generals were powerless to stop them. The fall of Richmond and Petersburg in April clearly had an adverse effect on morale, but the majority of the men who remained in the ranks had still not given up completely prior to the surrender at Appomattox.

In his concluding chapter, Power argued persuasively that many of Lee's veterans saw themselves and their army as the only force able to win independence for the Confederacy. As battlefield losses removed experienced generals and lower ranking officers, the bond between Lee and his men became stronger. Power wrote, "as the war dragged on with no real end in sight, some ... members of the army who managed to persevere seemed to be fighting as much for Lee himself as for the Confederate government, for the idea of a Southern nation, or even for their families and homes" (p. 298). Psychological and physical factors affected the morale of the army. Many men reached the point where they paid no attention to the war's objectives but "began to base their relationship to the army almost entirely on their physical wants and needs" (p. 302). If those needs were not met, then men left the army.

Lee's Miserables is an important book and may well be the precursor of similar studies of the soldiers Army of Northern Virginia in other campaigns. Power concentrated his research in the letters and diaries of Lee's soldiers and chose not to include postwar writings because of their unreliability. He seems to have scoured every archive and library in the country, and the bibliography alone is a contribution to the literature. The publisher could have improved this book by providing better campaign and battle maps even though the engagements are fairly well known to scholars and buffs. That nitpick aside, this reviewer heartily recommends *Lee's Miserables* to professional and amateur historians alike.

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