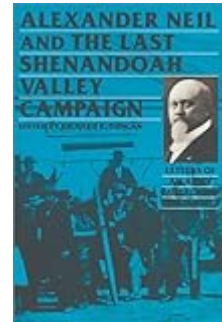




Richard R. Duncan, ed. *Alexander Neil and the Last Shenandoah Valley Campaign: Letters of an Army Surgeon to His Family, 1864.* Shippensburg, Pa.: White Mane Publishing, 1996. x + 140 pp. \$19.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-942597-95-0.



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From Humiliation to Triumph

Michael C. C. Adams (no relation) noted at the 1994 Gettysburg College Civil War Institute that each year over 90,000 books and articles are published about the Civil War (see “Retelling the Tale” in *War Comes Again*, 1995, p. 199). All too often we reexamine some commanding general’s failure in a battle or reduce the most complicated set of circumstances of a campaign to a pithy conclusion. Richard Duncan has done neither with his astute editing of Dr. Alexander Neil’s letters.

Alexander Neil, a native Ohioan, received his commission as assistant surgeon of the 12th West Virginia Infantry in July 1863. He had recently been graduated from the Cincinnati College of Medicine and Surgery and undoubtedly looked to the Union Army for practical medical experience. Duncan notes, also, that Neil accepted the commission because, as Neil wrote, “I could [not] refuse as the draft was imminent at home” (p. vii). Although Neil joined his regiment at Sharpsburg, Maryland, on August 2, 1863, the letters published here begin February 28, 1864, as the regiment was resting in Cumberland, Maryland, following several months of tiring and somewhat

uneventful guard duty along the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad.

Duncan provides a fine biographical sketch of Dr. Neil and an excellent introductory summary of the Shenandoah Valley’s importance to Federal and Confederate war strategy while thoroughly and competently annotating the movements, personnel, and incidental details in the letters themselves. Lacking, however, is a decent map of the campaign. What is published is a poorly reproduced Hotchkiss map of the Shenandoah Valley from the collection of the Handley Library in Winchester, Virginia. That is the only critical flaw in this work and one that certainly does not detract from the work as a whole.

The first set of letters, February 28–July 3, 1864, Duncan has collectively titled “The Valley of Humiliation.” Neil conveys in these letters to his parents the typical problems associated with life in a campaigning army—lack of pay, endless marching, high prices for room and board—and the ever-present complaints about commanding generals. Occasionally we see a little of his humor:

“[We marched] over the worst roads and through the deepest mortar I ever saw, a great portion of the time we could only see, as the wagon train passed, the mules ears sticking from beneath the mud” (p. 16). As well, his attitude toward “contrabands” is exhibited after his failure to retain one to curry his horse: “You ask about my boy George. I discharged him some six weeks since, for worthlessness.... I then employed another black boy Edward who had been a former servant of President Davis at Richmond, but he, proving to be of no account, I also discharged him.... I now have a white man to take care of my horses &c. and henceforth will have nothing to do with the nigger” (p. 13).

The last set of letters, July 8-December 17, 1864, Duncan has titled “Dark Valley of the Shadow of Death.” Although the editor has taken the titles for both sets from Neil’s letters, a better title for this last set would have been “The Vally of Triumph.” Neil himself recognized the importance of the Valley Campaign, and after two key victories at Winchester and Fisher’s Hill, he noted, “This valley which has always heretofore been the ‘Valley of Humiliation’ has now become the ‘Valley of triumph’ [*sic*]” (p. 67). Neil saw action in ten battles and skirmishes by October 1864, and his sense of “the moment” is uncanny. Historians interested in Major General David

Hunter’s campaign of vengeance and the subsequent retributions by Jubal Early and John Mosby will find Neil’s comments particularly valuable.

Finally, and most disappointing to a medical historian, is the lack of insight into Neil’s cases, his responsibilities as regimental and division surgeon, and his consistent and unexplained exaggeration of battle casualties. In one example to his parents, he noted that his division was down to 3,500 men by July 8, 1864, from 7,900 men at the beginning of the campaign. Duncan cites the *Official Records* casualty report for the division from June 10 to 23 as 940 killed, wounded, captured, or missing. “I know something about this,” Neil wrote, “as it is part of my business to make out lists of killed & wounded” (p. 47).

Alexander Neil’s letters are enjoyable to read. Duncan’s editorial work is a model for all who wish to publish soldiers’ letters and diaries.

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