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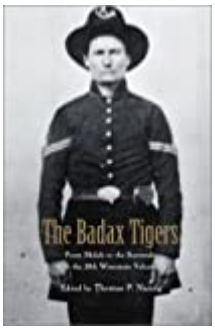

Thomas P. Nanzig, ed. *The Badax Tigers: From Shiloh to the Surrender with the Eighteenth Wisconsin Volunteers.* New York and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001. x + 362 pp. $36.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7425-2084-4.

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Searching for Private Davis in a Company of Badgers

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With the advent of historic reenacting and the popularity of local history in the past few years, publications on the Civil War have increasingly taken a turn towards the experiences of the common soldier and of unit histories. As part of this trend in scholarship, Thomas P. Nanzig offers readers his *The Badax Tigers: From Shiloh to the Surrender with the Eighteenth Wisconsin Volunteers*. However, despite his attempts to blend the two methods into an edited volume, Nanzig's book ends up being something entirely different. It is a biography of Private Thomas Jefferson Davis masquerading as an edited volume of letters and newspaper articles about a typical Midwestern volunteer unit. This is ultimately both the strength of the book as well as the source of occasional frustration for the reader.

Nanzig should not be faulted, out of hand, for his choice to opt for a unit history approach rather than a full fledged biography. After all, as readers discover rather quickly, Davis, despite serving for almost the entire length of the war, experiences combat infrequently, displays no Medal of Honor type heroics when he does, and largely spends the war in various encampments throughout the Western theater wanting to get home to his family. While no doubt the common experience of the war for the vast majority of soldiers in both armies, it does not lend itself to riveting biography. However, since Davis's letters are the heart and soul of the narrative, with relatively few letters from others and scattered local newspaper clippings, the book is ultimately a biography of him, not of the unit in which he served, despite Nanzig's efforts. Had Nanzig admitted this to both himself and to the reader from the start, the end result may very well have been a stronger book.

Quibbles on the direction the book could have taken aside, Nanzig's account of Davis's life in the field is intriguing. Since Davis is presented as a typical soldier in a typical unit, readers are given a tremendous insight into camp life. The reasons for this, and no doubt the reason for Nanzig's devotion to Davis's letters since encountering them in graduate school, are not just what Davis has to say to the friends and family members he writes to in his frank manner, but the fact that he does so from the moment he musters in until the moment he leaves the

service. It is the breadth and at times depth of Davis's letters, the richness of the source, that make *The Badax Tigers* a book worth reading. The camp life that Davis recounts, for readers then and now, is one of life within the army yet outside of it. Unhappy, or more to the point, unsatisfied with their government rations, soldiers foraged for and bought food from "sutters" and "huxters" to supplement their diet. Out of touch with the outside world, especially as the war progressed and General William T. Sherman banned newspapermen from and limited easy access to newspapers in his army, there is the near constant longing for a word from home. There were also simple needs the men required, such as stamps to mail letters, and pens and paper to write with to name just a few of the things that Davis discusses. Camp life of this nature also allowed for entrepreneurship to blossom, of which Davis is both a chronicler and a participant, loaning money at interest to fellow soldiers in advance of pay day, which never came soon or regularly enough, and at other times selling goods for profit.

But the insight into camp life brought out in Davis's correspondence is only the beginning of how his letters make the common soldier's Civil War come to life. Readers are given the ebbs and flows of combat, not just the fighting, but the scouting, picket duty, guard duty, that made up life for an army in the field. They are also shown something that was once more common in military conflicts than it is today, and that is the capturing and paroling of enemy prisoners. However, Davis's insights on other areas are equally enlightening to readers. Davis remains, with the exception of a work induced injury, remarkably healthy. As a result, he gets to witness nearly the entire war, though what he does see of hospitals corresponds rather well with what students of the period already know, that it paid to stay healthy. His comments on religion are also revealing, for while he may be culturally Protestant, he seems rather bored with matters of the spirit generally. That he was part of Sherman's Pioneer Corps later in the war is also of interest because it shows another side of field operations. These facts, however, may make readers wonder how typical a solder Davis actually was, despite Nanzig's efforts to present him in this light.

Since the Davis correspondence covers the entire period of the war, there is opportunity for the reader to glimpse, and for this Nanzig is to be praised, the evolution of both the war and the maturation of the men fighting it. That Davis is a patriot there is no doubt; he volunteered for service to preserve the Union. But like so many, those early days of conflict quickly gave way to a harsh reality that the war was going to be long. In the Davis letters, readers get to see the transition in a man who in 1862 talked of a possible compromise with the South, to one who showed not a trace of empathy to the rich Southern landowners displaced by the North's victories in 1864. Indeed, his decision to reenlist as a veteran, even though his tour of duty as a volunteer was about to expire, is one of the most compelling sections of the book. Additionally, readers can see how Davis's opinions about African Americans evolve as he actually encounters them and comes to understand that slavery cannot remain a part of the American way of life. Indeed, these evolutions of thought and the observations Davis makes as a Northerner traveling through the South comparing everything from plants, to farming, to towns, to the habits of women (he is especially repulsed by Southern women who chew tobacco), are among the highlights of the book.

These topics, as interesting as they are, are largely left unexplored by Nanzig, for even though he ends up writing a biography of Davis, he tries very hard not to do so. This is regrettable, for these topics deserved more consideration by the author. But there is a larger area of neglect than Davis the soldier, and that is his relationship to the recipient of most of his letters, the source of all his future hopes and dreams, Lucinda Spaulding Davis. Here is a largely uneducated young woman–she was but seventeen when she married the twenty-nine year old Davis shortly before he enlisted–who becomes a mother while her husband is away, was isolated from her family because she now lived in Davis's rural Wisconsin home, and whose responsibility was to keep that home ready for her husband's future return like so many other soldiers' wives. In part we can blame the life Davis led for this. While in the field, he could not save her letters to him, whereas she could save his letters to her at home. But readers can also wish that if this was a traditional biography, Lucinda would have become as well known to them as her husband.

What this book could have been and what it is, of course, are two very different things. Despite his attempts at including the newspaper dispatches of Ransom Chase (another volunteer in the Eighteenth Wisconsin), some newspaper accounts, and excellent footnotes, Nanzig does not deliver on his promise of giving readers a unit history. What he does do, in the guise of a unit history, is give readers an excellent account of one common soldier's experiences in the Civil War. For that reason, *The Badax Tigers* should find a home on the bookshelves of anyone interested in how common men fought

the Civil War.

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