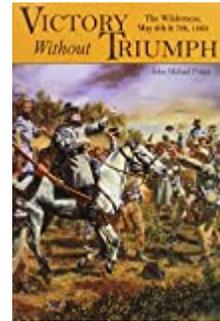


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**John Michael Priest.** *Victory Without Triumph: The Wilderness May 6th & 7th, 1864.* Shippensburg, PA: White Mane Publishing, 1996. xvii + 331 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57249-009-3.



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Grant's Wilderness campaign was both bloody and inglorious, a melee lasting four days (May 4-7, 1864). Tactically, it was a southern victory. Northern casualties doubled those of the South; the Union gained almost no ground. If the Union leader had been anyone but Grant, northern troops would have retired to regroup. With Grant, the Union forces accepted their losses and moved forward to the next blood-letting at Spotsylvania. Lee won the battle, but there was little doubt that the South would lose the war of attrition Grant had forced on it. This is the background for John Michael Priest's two-volume account of the Wilderness. The present volume (2) follows *Nowhere to Run: The Wilderness May 4th and 5th* (White Mane, 1995).

*Victory Without Triumph* (Volume 2) is not a replacement for Edward Steere's *The Wilderness Campaign* (Bonzanza, 1968) or Gordon Rhea's *The Battle of the Wilderness* (LSU, 1994) as a source on strategy and generalship in the Wilderness. Instead, Priest's stated purpose is to show the battle chronologically from the perspective of the front line soldiers, a perspective similar to that employed in his earlier works, *Before Antietam* and *Antietam: The Soldiers' Battlefield*. His chosen viewpoint leads both to the greatest strengths and greatest weaknesses of the narrative.

By concentrating on the actions of individual soldiers

and units, he skillfully recreates the battlefield. Though at times one tires of stories about soldiers shot down while friends and mess mates watch, Priest paints these scenes (facial wounds, fingers, arms, legs blown away) with bloody realism. His narrative captures the heightened senses of soldiers in battle who remember precise details of comrades' wounds even as they are unsure of their own fate.

Priest gives glimpses of the reason so many officers were killed in the Civil War. From General John Sedgwick (who survives this battle), to General James S. Wadsworth (who dies), to the captains and lieutenants of both armies, battle fever and the determination to set an example for their men initiate foolish behavior that inevitably leads to high death rates. The loss of two horses as he led troops should have warned Wadsworth of his danger, but he took no heed. Other officers were admonished by their peers to behave sensibly, to lie down or to be less reckless in exposing themselves, but they are unable to take advice and so tempt fate and die. While it is surprising to see so much macho behavior from veteran soldiers this late in the war, Priest makes clear the relationship between machismo and death in modern warfare.

But all is not heroism. Priest does not neglect the comic, as seen in his tale of the Alabama major who pur-

posefully ignored a comrade's plea that he not expose himself to fire, hides behind a tree, and stuck out his arm so that he would be shot and "get a furlough." This same major, on his way to the rear, stopped to berate a skulking private. When the private, aware of the major's actions, threatened him in turn, the major left for the rear in a great hurry. Though such incidents are balanced with actions of great personal courage, they clearly show that neither leaders nor common soldiers were imbued with a strong patriotism. In one particularly graphic instance, a new recruit in the 4th New York Heavy Artillery urged his mates not to complain when asked to dig an artillery embrasure because "it is all for the country." A veteran was about to reply with "a string of profanities" when he was distracted by new orders.

Priest also lends credibility to actions that have acquired mythic quality. There is the famous instance of Robert E. Lee exposing himself to danger until a group of Texans refused to move forward unless he moved to the rear. As painted here, Lee exposed himself twice. In the first instance, three Texans moved to stop him; in the second, one Texan noticed him and grabbed his horse. In both instances, Lee seemed as unaware of his danger as Wadsworth and Sedgwick. He seemed to have no purpose in being where he was. In fact, Lee seems disoriented throughout his appearances. We cannot fail to be impressed with the number of times that Lee had to ask which troops were coming, nor can we miss his desire as commanding general to motivate all his units to believe they were essential to victory. Whether Texans or South Carolinians, they were just the men to whip the Yankees.

Priest is particularly effective in humanizing Lee and other generals. Sedgwick is shown riding around VI Corps' battlefield, appearing wherever it seemed possible to rally his troops and unsuccessfully urging them to re-group. Gordon narrowly avoids capture when he unwittingly rides into a group of milling Union soldiers.

The book is intriguing, too, in the sense of history revealed by certain participants. For example, Private David Walden (10th Georgia), who had been shot in the head, mused over the politician who predicted that he could wipe up all the blood to be spilled in the war with his handkerchief. Walden wondered how a handkerchief could mop up the growing pool of blood from his own wound.

The major defects of the book arises from the strict chronological portrait of events and the emphasis on a soldier's eye view. It is frequently hard to keep track of people and events. The narrative moves from Sanders

Field, to the Tapp house, to the Plank Road with such speed that actions are left hanging and only picked up later when the reader's interest has been refocused elsewhere. This makes it necessary to flip back several pages for continuity. Units such as the 56th, 57th, and 59th Massachusetts are introduced, then left for several pages before we find them finally entering the action. By then, it is difficult to remember why they were at a particular place. Nor are the maps particularly helpful. They show only fragments of actions. Units mentioned on adjoining pages are not always located. As the action shifts radically from position to position on the battlefield, the maps, too, make us lose sight of related actions. On a positive note, Priest provides photos and capsule commentaries on a variety of soldiers, many of them seldom seen elsewhere, to lend a note of realism to his text.

Although Priest works with an extensive, ever-changing cast of characters, he makes most of them live. It is as easy to comprehend Wadsworth's determination as it is to understand the swagger of the color bearer who carelessly exposed himself to enemy fire because he did not think the Rebs were nearby. We can understand the equations that led some men to risk everything for dying comrades as well as we can for others who refused to help because of the danger. Even thievery on the battlefield became a well-thought out, though dangerous, ritual when a South Carolina sergeant requested and received permission to rob the dead, wriggled around the field, always keeping a body between himself and the enemy, before slithering back into his lines with his treasure. Values are shown when he gave one pocket watch to the commander who authorized his foray, but charged a mess mate for another.

In short, Priest's book does not look to grand strategy, nor does it say much about battlefield tactics. Some of his stories have been frequently repeated. However, for a look at the individual soldiers, for humanizing historical myth, and for a sense of battlefield realism, Priest does a splendid job. Yet he leaves questions unanswered. I still want to know why he tells of two soldiers who left the battle never to be seen by their regiment again, but who then return to the army. In another instance, George A. Custer appears in the early stages of the fighting around Todd's Tavern, but quickly disappears and is not heard from again, even though his presence could have made a critical difference in the action. We are never told the reason for his disappearance.

When the Union troops march off toward Spotsylvania on May 7, Priest reminds the reader of the stage

for the next battle. He re-states the tremendous human cost for both Federals and Confederates, a cost that is more horrifying because of the loss of so many individual soldiers Priest has helped us to know. As the troops march on to Spotsylvania, it is hard not to wonder how many of those whom we have met will survive. Priest's two-volume account of the Wilderness does not rank as highly as his earlier work on the Antietam campaign. This is probably due to the convoluted nature of the campaign itself. So much happens almost simultaneously at so many different locations that Priest's strict chronological approach is hampered. A sense of relation-

ship among actions is badly needed to provide continuity. Still, the realism of the battle as the soldiers fought it is clearly present. It is doubtful that many of them had a better picture of what was happening than do Priest's readers. Priest brings us close to the isolation of individuals and units in battle. This is his greatest triumph.

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