
The Future of Civil War Soldier Studies: The Failure of Courage

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It was the transformative event of United States history and has inspired a mountain of research and literature in the 150 years that have elapsed since its conclusion. As a major struggle at the dawn of the modern era, it has received attention from prominent military historians around the world, digging for lessons for officers and politicians and other matters of military significance. Despite all of this, the American Civil War remains a ripe subject for description and historical inquiry. In order to determine the value in future examination of the American Civil War, one must explore the progress of study thus far. To examine the full historiography of the Civil War would itself be a monumental task – one at which historians such as Gary Gallagher and Caroline Janney have attempted to chip away, in books such as *Causes Won, Lost, and Forgotten* and *Remembering the Civil War*.¹ Much of Civil War history literature has been focused – understandably, due to the popularity of such work – on battles and leaders of the conflict. This was propelled by the late nineteenth century effort of that very name; *Battles and Leaders*, written by participants of the war, disputed tactical decisions, and continued to wage long dead interpersonal conflicts, but did not delve deeply into the war’s issues. Gradually, the common soldier became more prominent in the histories of the war and these soldier studies hold a future potential for original Civil War historical research. The Civil War is uniquely qualified for examination of the common soldier’s experience. As Aaron Sheehan-Dean wrote, “Historians of the Civil War face [a] problem. They have not too few sources from common people but too many.”² Despite this plethora of source material, Civil War soldier studies have not come close to reaching their potential – as soldiers are too often seen as being cleanly divided between analogous groups rather than being complex individuals.

The Victorian ideals of American society in the Civil War era provided for certain expectations in the actions of Union soldiers – both on the battlefield and in camp life. Primary among these expectations were those related

to the definitions of courage and honor.³ There was a debate over both concepts which focused on whether those values were intrinsic or could be earned. This debate has been examined by numerous pieces of previous scholarship, but the causes and effects of breakdowns in courage have rarely been explored. Reasons for this breakdown of courage are critical to examine, as is the concept of *moral* and *physical* courage as separate entities which Earl Hess examined in his scholarship on the Union soldier.⁴ The source of courage is less important to understand in the context of this study than the loss of it. The same is true of honor. Accusations of being a coward would certainly cast aspersions on the honor of any man of the era. It is conceivable that soldiers who were returned to their units following such accusations would attempt to redeem their reputations by displaying more conspicuous bravery for the duration of the war. The story of these soldiers who were disgraced by accusations of cowardice cannot be told without examination of how their dishonor endured after their stumbles. Whether it was political opponents bringing up the matter and causing lawsuits, or veterans speaking at reunions, the subject of malingerers never quite disappeared – potentially isolating these soldiers from their comrades. Comprehending the level of isolation that these men felt in the aftermath of the war, or the amount of reintegration which they achieved, is critical to understanding the Civil War soldier experience.

The secondary literature on the Civil War soldier experience has largely focused on the concepts of bravery and endurance. The question of what motivated soldiers to do their duty has received extensive treatment from scholars including Hess, Gerald Linderman, and James McPherson.⁵ All of these explore the question of why men did their duty despite adversity. Soldiers failing in their duty, and the methods which they employed to avoid prosecution while avoiding battle, were explored by R. Gregory Lande in his *Madness, Malingering, and Malfeasance*. Lande, however, did not go into detail about the lingering effects of suspicions which men held toward their comrades who failed in their duties, and described these malingerers as unique cases. What happened to his malingerers after the war? Did people on the home-front know anything about this issue? It is valuable to delve into those questions. Value would be found in exploring the issue of soldier psychology upon returning home. This research is greatly aided by the previous scholarship of Eric Dean's *Shook Over Hell*, as well as John Talbott's "Soldiers, Psychiatrists, and Combat Trauma" and "Combat Trauma in the American Civil

War.” However, both Dean and Talbott tended to treat their subjects as unique – an issue in Civil War soldier studies.

Primary sources which touch on the issues relevant to this study are numerous. Records of the Grand Army of the Republic and of regimental reunions can provide a picture of the level of comfort which potentially-disgraced soldiers felt with their former comrades. Period newspapers, soldier letters, regimental order books, and regimental histories also paint the image of these soldiers’ environments and experiences – including the subjective perceptions held by others.

As Lorien Foote discussed in *The Gentlemen and the Roughs*, the military justice system was a portion of the soldier experience, not exclusive from it.⁶ By extension, one can establish the failure of courage as part of the soldier experience shared by many – not a rare occurrence that isolated individual men. Despite the valuable social examination provided by Foote’s scholarship, the book suffers from a problem similar to that of another social history effort: *Heroes and Cowards* by Dora Costa and Matthew Kahn. Both Foote and Costa/Kahn fell into the trap of creating and then isolating two very broad social groups. Costa and Kahn, as social scientists rather than historians, wrote that their work was “about the effect of peers on people’s behavior,” and yet by utilizing only statistical data, they largely failed to effectively show the cause-and-effect chain of the events they attempted to shed light upon.⁷ By ultimately reducing soldiers to charts of statistics, the effect of the work is tragically similar to the time before the dawn of soldier studies as a field; a large desertion number is startling, but is startling in the same manner as a casualty number from the Battle of Gettysburg – without the personal emotion evoked by individuals’ stories or the complex interconnections of individual soldiers’ thinking.

The problem encountered by Costa and Kahn is an issue about which one of the original progenitors of soldier studies as a field, John Keegan, warned. In his seminal work, *The Face of Battle*, Keegan pulled no punches in pointing out the insufficiencies of traditional historiography in military history. Aside from mere criticism of the general ignorance or indifference demonstrated toward the common ranks in traditional history narratives, he was particularly pointed in his assault on the art of history writing. He harshly stated that private soldier’s accounts were used improperly: “At worst, they are mined for ‘interest’, to produce anthologies of ‘eye-witness accounts’ in series with titles like *Everyman at War* (*The Historian as Copy-typist* would be altogether more frank); at best, they serve as the raw material for what is not much more than anecdotal history.”⁸ He also deplored those who – like

Costa and Kahn ultimately did – took a scientific approach to history too far, and “achieved the remarkable feat of writing an exhaustive account of one of the world’s greatest tragedies without the display of any emotion at all.” Keegan admitted that “Historians, traditionally and rightly, are expected to ride their feelings on a tighter rein than the man of letters can allow himself,” but such an entirely emotionless result was inexcusable.⁹

However, when Keegan turned his own attention to the Civil War as a subject for detailed study, he surprisingly failed to propel the field of soldier studies. Rather than focus his work on the soldier experience, he examined grand themes of geography and climate. One of his rare statements about the soldiery came when he stated, “They fought with chilling intensity.”¹⁰ Keegan went on to say, “Men who performed the act and survived the consequences were transformed as citizens. Their understanding of ‘duty’ and ‘sacrifice’ were thereby revolutionized. Men who had stood shoulder to shoulder to brave the volleys of the enemy could not thenceforth be tepid or passive citizens.”¹¹ His societal conclusions primarily related to the failure of socialism to take hold in the United States in the post-war period. Speaking of the common American laborer, he wrote, “He had no desire to form industrial armies, having in his hundreds of thousands already formed and served in real armies and learnt by his experience that armies brought hardship and suffering. One experience of army life was enough for a lifetime and not only for an individual lifetime but for a national lifetime as well.”¹² The book was a disappointing ending to a superb historian’s career, and demonstrated the difficulty of delving into the Civil War soldier experience despite the tremendous amount of material for research. Without qualification within his statements about chilling intensity and about veterans becoming “pillars of the Republic,” Keegan painted an appallingly rosy picture of the soldier experience that is all-the-more discouraging within the field considering Keegan’s decades of pre-eminence. It essentially took Costa and Kahn’s faulty argument, which clumped all men whose courage ever failed them into a category of cowards who were ruined for life, and it went too far in hyperbole in the opposite direction, claiming that all men who served through the war became leaders of society.

For many American veterans of the Civil War, Keegan’s conclusion was, of course, correct. The power wielded by the Grand Army of the Republic in the post-war period was undeniable – serving as the precursor to modern political

organizations such as the AARP, lobbying for legislation with tremendous effect. In politics, business, and all other elements of American life, the Grand Army of the Republic was “made of as much governing force as religion.”¹³ However, the Grand Army of the Republic also contributed to the hegemonic prevalence of a universally gallant description of all soldiers in early histories of the war. In their publications and statements, the organization’s leadership portrayed the war “as an unassailable monument rather than as an equivocal triumph.”¹⁴ As such, they officially acknowledged no shortcomings of bravery in the performance of duty. The Grand Army served to demonstrate the place of veterans within the broad community of former soldiers – as it attempted to emulate the military structure of the armies of the Union to the fullest

possible extent. For those whose courage had failed at some point in the war, earning a place within the Grand Army of the Republic could be a sign of redeemed reputation. One such case was that of Lieutenant George Gillis of the 77th New York Infantry, who was court-martialed following the Battle of Gettysburg but returned to duty later in the war and fought with distinction. Gillis joined the Grand Army of the Republic when Post 92 was established in Saratoga Springs in 1877, and became the post’s Junior Vice-Commander. As an officer of the GAR, it would now be his responsibility to preside over court-martials of members, as the GAR

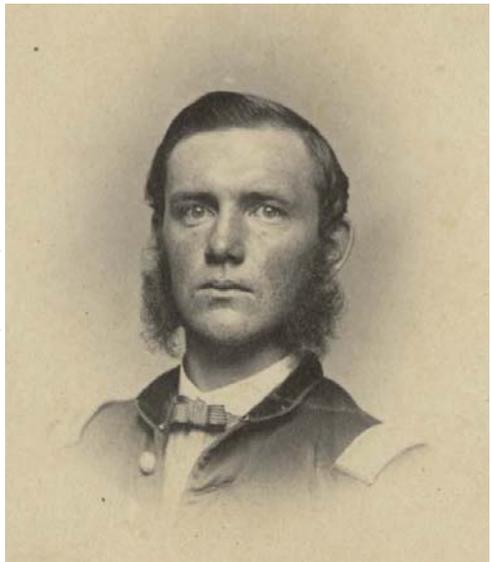


Figure 1 George H. Gillis, United States Army, New York Infantry Regiment, 77th. Original located in L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University. Image cropped.

aimed to establish military order to its ranks. This was a remarkable shift in fortune for a man who had been conspicuously absent for so much of his term of service that he had landed in front of a court himself and been convicted.¹⁵ In a case like Gillis’s, one can see the potential redemptive power of the Grand Army of the Republic in veterans affairs; however, this does not entirely discount the tragic picture painted in numbers by Costa and Kahn – of soldiers who deserted and never

returned home, logically because of the social shame to which they were subjected. This variation of results constitute a part of the Civil War soldier experience, and complicate the task of defining societal expectations and reactions.

Publicly accepted and commended by the veteran community, the worst results of Gillis's wartime experiences were felt internally. His physical problems were clear – as physical problems typically are. A wound from the Battle of Winchester and the lingering effects of an attack of sunstroke limited him for the rest of his life. As his wife wrote following his death in 1892, “He always had to be very careful about exposure and exercise.” To a critic of his frequent absences from his company, what a wonderful statement that would have been. He had avoided exposure to combat for much of the war, and dropped out of the strenuous exercise of the forced march to Gettysburg. One can only wonder if these failings were on his mind as he took up the habit of heavy drinking for much of his life following the war (according to medical reports in his pension file), despite the professed commitment of the Grand Army of the Republic to temperance. Universalizing the soldier experiences of history is dangerous, but a depressed veteran taking to drink is certainly nothing new in society, and has almost become a cliché in the post-Vietnam world. In fact, this generalization of Civil War soldiers as victims became a popular historiographical trend during the Vietnam era. Alcohol was not mentioned at all in Gillis's court-martial in 1863, suggesting that it was indeed a vice he picked up afterward. Alcohol and intoxication can be used for many purposes, but one of those is certainly to drown out shame. If Gillis had taken to the bottle due to feelings stemming from his failures in the first half of the war – with the war having acted as the method of maturation into manhood for most young men like him – he would not have been alone in this course. At least he could do it in the comfort of his hometown, though. Unlike those found guilty of cowardice, punished severely, and cast out for it, Gillis was back in his community, and whatever demons or self-stigmatization he carried with him, he “lived a life of comparative leisure,” according to his pension record.¹⁶

This is the danger of micro-history as a method of historical inquiry, as Richard D. Brown once addressed. One could delve deep into the story of Lieutenant George Gillis and come away with a fairly optimistic picture of the aftermath of Civil War court-martial cases concerning the failure of courage. Brown warned against the fashionable mystique of micro-history and case studies, which relied upon “thick description” and “local knowledge” to establish truth

beyond dispute.¹⁷ While micro-history holds value in shifting the historiographical focus to a bottom-up orientation, it lends itself to over-reaching conclusions. “Microhistory can serve to illuminate events in political and intellectual, as well as social and cultural history,” Brown wrote. “Though we cannot propound definitive truths, our empirical research into ‘a landscape cluttered with the detritus of past living,’ makes our truth claims persuasive.”¹⁸ Gillis’s experience as a soldier with an inconsistent record of bravery is *a* soldier’s experience, but cannot be proclaimed to be *the* soldier experience.

Due to the complex nature of Civil War soldier studies, historians have disagreed on the proper course to pursue in future literature. Jason Phillips of Mississippi State University proposed that historians “could emphasize soldiers’ individuality and not just their agency; they could study influential soldiers instead of searching for typical ones; and they could write narratives instead of monographs.”¹⁹ Aaron Sheehan-Dean believed that the future potential of the field lay in gender studies, with openings for “social and cultural historians to explore the relationship among masculinity, femininity, and the war.”²⁰ As Sheehan-Dean pointed out in his volume on the soldier experience, “The broad and complex perspectives on the Civil War generated by scholars and soldiers suggest that perhaps the subject has been adequately covered. But like most important experiences in American history, new generations of Civil War scholars will find new questions to ask and previously overlooked areas on which to focus.”²¹ One of those open questions is the experience of lost courage. Bonds between the soldiers and the home front – as well as strains in those relationships – are critical to understanding the true lives of soldiers, and the strains have only received secondary treatment in the historiography. A valuable new trend to develop, as Phillips hinted at, would be to restore the individuality of each soldier and understand them as both actors in and subjects of the world in which they lived.

The long-standing historiography of Civil War soldiers – dating back to personal accounts and receiving academic credibility with the publication of Bell Irvin Wiley’s influential *The Life of Billy Yank* – has painted an image of the purely courageous soldier being the norm. Derivatively, one must reach the conclusion that soldiers whose courage failed them for even a moment were rare and therefore safely ignored in historical memory and scholarship. This would be a remarkable conclusion to reach if true, as Civil War armies were consistently engaged in combat more than any others in history prior to 1861. Keegan expressed the

popular perception that Civil War soldiers “overcame their fear by sensing the greater fear of being thought a coward. . . . It is exactly true that of the Civil War soldier, as of most soldiers in most wars, his greatest fear was of fear itself.”²² For many, this was undoubtedly true. Fear of the stigma associated with the charge of cowardice kept men in the ranks during tremendous stress. Yet, “By common computation, about 10,000 battles, large and small, were fought in the United States between 1861 and 1865. This enormous number of battles, seven for every day the war lasted, provides the principal key to the nature of the war.”²³ In such a conflict, no man could be expected to never have a slip of courage. It would almost assuredly be beyond the realm of human ability.

Accepting Keegan’s assertion that men were most afraid of fear itself does not necessarily dismiss the legitimacy of failed courage as a line of inquiry into the Civil War. Even pre-meditated malingering took a degree of courage in the offending soldier, as “Each observer, from messmate to surgeon had to believe the false symptoms were genuine.”²⁴ But even committed and truly genuine soldiers could suffer collapses of courage. Veterans of the conflict recognized this, and expressed it freely in recollections prior to the sanitization of memory which occurred as the nineteenth century progressed and the themes of the Lost Cause and Reconciliation took hold. For example, Horace Porter, a notable member of Ulysses S. Grant’s staff during the war, wrote a piece for *Century* magazine concerning “The Philosophy of Courage.” In it, he confirmed the validity of Keegan’s argument, stating, “It is something higher than physical courage, it is a species of moral courage, which recognizes the danger and yet overmasters the sense of fear.”²⁵ However, he expressed a terrific level of understanding for those whose courage failed in different situations. “Courage, like everything else, wears out. Troops used to go into action during our late war displaying a coolness and steadfastness the first day . . . After fighting a couple of days, their nerves gradually lost their tension, they buoyancy of spirits gave way, and dangers they would have laughed at the first day often sent them panic-stricken to the rear on the third.”²⁶ Porter was far from judgmental of these soldiers whose nerves could not withstand the incredible consistency of stress they faced. He proclaimed, “Every soldier understands why ‘two o’clock in the morning’ courage is recognized as courage in its highest form,” and “As one’s physical condition is affected by circumstances of health and sickness, so does one’s courage vary under different surroundings.”²⁷ In fact, Porter even related a case very reminiscent of that of George Gillis, discussed

earlier. After pleading for “one more chance to redeem himself from disgrace ... He fulfilled his pledges most religiously. Wherever there was danger he was seen in the midst of it; his conduct in every subsequent fight was that of a hero ... He had effaced the blot from his escutcheon.” Then Porter made his clearest point: “The man was no coward at heart; he had for the moment, in army parlance, ‘lost his grip’ under that murderous fire.”²⁸ Soldiers themselves recognized the complexities of courage issues – and yet these complexities ultimately became erased in the studies of those soldiers.

It was understandable and logically expected for soldiers to lose their grip from time to time. Whereas some recent social historians such as R. Gregory Lande and Eric Dean have presented their subjects as extraordinary and thus fairly unique, the fact is that the field of soldier studies would benefit from stripping away that sense of uniqueness. A soldier could be brave and dutiful for days, months, or even years without a serious issue. But the strain of Civil War combat and the hardships of camp life (a subject that was examined in depth by Earl Hess in *Union Soldier in Battle* and by Gerald Linderman in *Embattled Courage*) naturally wore down the nerves of courageous men. Understanding the reasons for and effects of this erosion process does not detract from the narrative of Civil War soldier life. Rather, it humanizes the men of the past. As history became sanitized for the sake of national unity and confidence, the most accurate presentations of soldier life may have come from war veteran and fiction writer Ambrose Bierce. Bierce took an approach that criticized all “high talk” and had “a marked respect for naked, disinterested courage.” He fully accepted the successes and failures of courage, while “his criticisms of erring humanity were seldom relieved by pity or compassion.”²⁹ There was no need for judgment or sympathy to those who experienced failures of courage; that was simply a part of life in the armies of the Civil War. It was the memory of those beyond the Civil War generation that began to ignore this element of the soldier experience. The early twentieth century poet Stephen Vincent Benet captured the faulty sense of his contemporaries. Writing of the absurdness he saw in tourism of battlefields such as Gettysburg, he wrote, “No men had fought there, but enormous, monumental men who bled neat streams of uncorrupting bronze ... And the wind blows on the bronze book [and] on the bronze men ... And the wind says ‘Long ago Long ago.’”³⁰ In these uncorrupted bronze men of the past, there could be no fault, and the national historical memory wiped clean the common record of failed courage. To fully recover the Civil War

soldier experience, scholarship must recover that common feature of human nature which affected the soldiers. The Civil War was the transformative event of American history, endured and shaped by average men. To ignore their human instincts and mistakes is to ascribe whole-heartedly to a pre-ordained special status of the United States rather than comprehend the struggles of the nation which set it on its course.

Notes

1. Gary Gallagher, *Causes Won, Lost, and Forgotten* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Caroline E. Janney, *Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

2. Aaron Sheehan-Dean, *The View from the Ground: Experiences of Civil War Soldiers* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 9.

3. An in-depth analysis of the American homefront and its ideals can be found in Louise L. Stevenson, *The Victorian Homefront: American Thought and Culture 1860-1880* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1991); also Paul Cimbala and Randall M. Miller, eds. *Union Soldiers and the Northern Homefront* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002).

4. Earl J. Hess, *The Union Soldier in Battle: Enduring the Ordeal of Combat* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005).

5. Gerald Linderman, *Embattled Courage: the Experience of Combat in the American Civil War* (New York: Free Press, 1987); James M. McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); James M. McPherson, *What They Fought For, 1861-1865* (New York: Random House, 1995).

6. Lorien Foote, *The Gentlemen and the Roughs: Violence, Honor, and Manhood in the Union Army* (New York: NYU Press, 2010).

7. Dora L. Costa and Matthew E. Kahn, *Heroes and Cowards: the Social Face of War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), xviii.

8. John Keegan, *The Face of Battle: a Study of Agincourt, Waterloo, and the Somme* (New York: Penguin, 1978), 32.

9. *Ibid.*, 29.

10. John Keegan, *The American Civil War: a Military History* (New York: Knopf, 2009), 363.

11. *Ibid.*, 364.

12. *Ibid.*, 365.

13. Stuart McConnell, *Glorious Contentment: the Grand Army of the Republic, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 114.

14. *Ibid.*, 232.

15. Nathaniel Bartlett Sylvester, *History of Saratoga County, New York* (Saratoga Springs, 1878); Certificate No. 509.088, George H. Gillis, Approved Pension Applications, RG 15; National Archives Building, Washington, DC; McConnell, *Glorious Contentment*, 40-43.

16. Certificate No. 509.088, George H. Gillis, Approved Pension Applications, RG 15; National Archives Building, Washington, DC.; McConnell, *Glorious Contentment*, 42. The alcoholism of some Civil War veterans is also covered in Eric T. Dean, *Shook over Hell: Post-traumatic Stress, Vietnam, and the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); Mark Edward Lender and James Kirby Martin, *Drinking in America* (New York: Free Press, 1987); or Stuart Walton, *Out of It: a Cultural History of Intoxication* (New York: Harmony Books, 2001); both of these offer analysis of the history and culture of Americans and alcohol, including motivations for drinking. For a discussion of how the war served as a maturation process for young men, see Reid Mitchell, *The Vacant Chair: the Northern Soldier Leaves Home* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 12-18.

17. Richard D. Brown, "Microhistory and the Post-Modern Challenge," *Journal of the Early Republic* 23, no. 1 (Spring 2003), 1.

18. Brown, 20.

19. Jason Phillips, "Battling Stereotypes: a Taxonomy of Common Soldiers in Civil War History," *History Compass* 6, no. 6 (2008), 1407.

20. Sheehan-Dean, 25.

21. Ibid.

22. Keegan, *American Civil War*, 355.

23. Ibid, 362.

24. R. Gregory Lande, *Madness, Malingering, and Malfeasance: the Transformation of Psychiatry and the Law in the Civil War Era* (Washington: Potomac Books, 2005), 131.

25. Horace Porter, "The Philosophy of Courage," *Century* 36 (June 1888), 248.

26. Ibid, 247.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid, 250.

29. William McCann, ed. *Ambrose Bierce's Civil War* (New York: Random House, 1996), viii.

30. Stephen Vincent Benet, *John Brown's Body* (Chicago: Elephant, 1990), 260-261.

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