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Brent Nosworthy, *Roll Call to Destiny: The Soldier's Eye View of Civil War Battles*. New York: Basic Books, 2008. Pp. viii, 342. ISBN 978-0-7867-1747-7.

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The literature of the American Civil War is so vast that it would be easy to believe there is nothing new to be written about the fighting, especially when dealing with such battles as First Bull Run or Gettysburg. But military historian Brent Nosworthy does have something new to say in an excellent book that combines eight microhistories of individual engagements with observations on tactics, weapons, sources, and even historiography. Good writing and editing combine to produce a book in which even doctrine can be discussed without losing a casual reader.

In his long introduction, Nosworthy explains some of the themes that recur in the vignettes that form the bulk of the text: for example, the Americans' need to learn to use their new rifle muskets, and to adapt to tactics developed in Europe over the preceding fifty years. He quotes from publications, ranging from *Scientific American* to daily newspapers, that offered information and advice, but notes that officers generally acquired knowledge about the new ways of war from translations of French books on tactics.<sup>1</sup> No amount of reading—or drill, for the troops—could, however, prepare these armies for battle. The shock of combat is the dominant motif of the first vignette, on the performance of Col. Ambrose Burnside's brigade at the First Battle of Bull Run. Nosworthy has gone to great trouble to read and cross-check such primary sources as soldiers' letters home, memoirs, and regimental histories, and this fifty-page section attempts to describe exactly what happened to each regiment as it struggled to reach the battlefield and then fight over Matthews Hill. In the "Tactical Observation" appended to this vignette, he explains why so few soldiers in fact died, though thousands of rounds were fired from rifle muskets, guns supposedly much more effective than the smoothbores they replaced. Rifle muskets, he points out, had a huge drawback: their muzzle velocity was about 1115 feet per second, compared to 1500 fps for the older smoothbores that most Confederates still carried at Bull Run. This meant the cylindro-conoidal Minié ("Minnie") bullets they fired had "rainbow" trajectories, and that most men could not hit anything beyond short range. Throughout *Roll Call*, in fact, most of the thousands of bullets fired seem to knock leaves and twigs off branches high above targeted enemy soldiers.

After Bull Run, Nosworthy ranges from the Arkansas River and Chattanooga in the West to Gettysburg and Fredericksburg in the East, but keeps to a chronological order. He describes two assaults on forts, two infantry charges up high ground, and two cavalry battles. As the war progresses, soldiers get better at lying down under fire—something rarely

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<sup>1</sup> Nosworthy's previous books deal with the same or similar issues. See *With Musket, Cannon And Sword: Battle Tactics of Napoleon and His Enemies* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Pr, 1996); *The Anatomy of Victory: Battle Tactics 1689-1763* (NY: Hippocrene Books, 1989); and *The Bloody Crucible of Courage: Fighting Methods and Combat Experience of the Civil War* (NY: Carroll & Graf, 2003).

depicted in illustrations of battles—and at digging trenches and other field fortifications, often on a daily basis. Most of the vignettes impart a single salient lesson. In “The Attack Against Arkansas Post,” Nosworthy seeks to correct history: Admiral David Porter, who commanded the Union gunboats in the attack, had a successful career during the war (even more so afterward) and his story of the attack—starring his ships—emerged as the standard account. Nosworthy, however, discovers that in fact a single land battery of Parrott guns (muzzle-loading rifled artillery pieces) knocked out the Confederate fort’s cannon, while the gunboats’ fire was ineffective. The chapter on the Battle of Fair Oaks explains why bayonet charges often succeeded, even though very few soldiers died from edged-weapon wounds. Both chapters on cavalry battles discuss the controversy, never settled, over whether sabers were superior to carbines and pistols. Barbed wire was not invented until just after the war ended, but Nosworthy shows how telegraph wire was strung from stump to stump in the defenses of Fort Sanders, outside of Knoxville, to trip the Confederates charging up the slope.

Since Nosworthy is only interested in portraying the fighting from the soldiers’ perspective, many other aspects of the war are ignored. Slavery and African-Americans are barely mentioned, and the same is true for religion and politics. Neither the impact of battles on civilians nor the plight of prisoners and the wounded gets much attention. The tight focus on a few units during a few hours or days will frustrate some readers.

The bibliography of *Roll Call* is problematic: though meticulous and comprehensive, it will be useless—in terms of following-up—to all but Civil War specialists. Not even a large research library will have the unit histories or old newspaper accounts that Nosworthy mines so well. His book would have better served readers by providing, for each vignette, citations of modern books on the relevant battle. This is actually done for the “East Cavalry Field” fight at Gettysburg, but nowhere else.

A more serious problem is the choice and quality of maps and illustrations. The book contains fourteen maps, eight lithographs, and three photos, all from the 1860s. The maps, however, are very difficult to use because of their small size and the paper they are printed on, a real problem when readers must navigate passages like this:

So far, the burden of stymieing the Union flank attack had fallen exclusively on Evan’s small command. But now the first of General Bee’s Regiments finally arrived. Colonel E. J. Jones’s Fourth Alabama had just entered the small woods when Wheat’s battalion had opened fire, and reached the far side that faced the Matthews House just as the Louisianans were running back down the hill. They found themselves a little distance to the left of the Fourth South Carolina. The fleeing Louisianan battalion entered the wood between these two regiments ... (62).

Fortunately, modern maps, clear and simple, providing only the units and landmarks mentioned in the text can often be found online.<sup>2</sup>

Overall, *Roll Call to Destiny* is a good addition to the military history library. It is consistently thought-provoking and devoid of sentimentality or hero-worship. Thanks to the

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<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., the maps featured in the *Wikipedia* article on the “First Battle of Bull Run” <[www.miwsr.com/rd/0907.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/0907.htm)>.

stand-alone chapter format, it may be read in twenty-minute stints without detracting from its value or the reader's enjoyment.