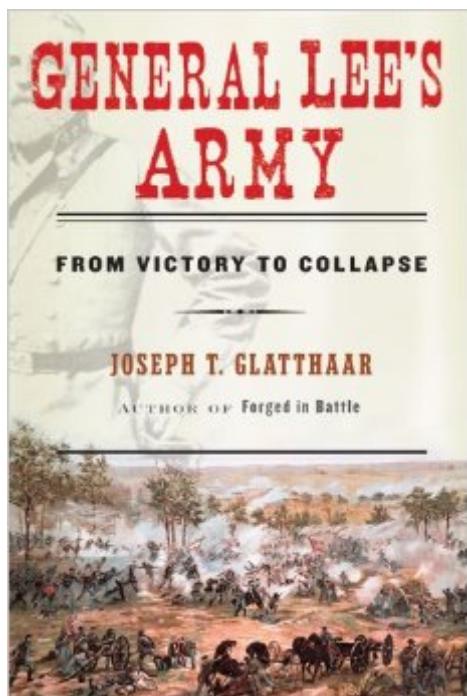


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General Lee's Army: From Victory To Collapse



Synopsis

"You would be surprised to see what men we have in the ranks," Virginia cavalryman Thomas Rowland informed his mother in May 1861, just after joining the Army of Northern Virginia. His army -- General Robert E. Lee's army -- was a surprise to almost everyone: With daring early victories and an invasion into the North, they nearly managed to convince the North to give up the fight. Even in 1865, facing certain defeat after the loss of 30,000 men, a Louisiana private fighting in Lee's army still had hope. "I must not despair," he scribbled in his diary. "Lee will bring order out of chaos, and with the help of our Heavenly Father, all will be well." Astonishingly, after 150 years of scholarship, there are still some major surprises about the Army of Northern Virginia. In General Lee's Army, renowned historian Joseph T. Glatthaar draws on an impressive range of sources assembled over two decades -- from letters and diaries, to official war records, to a new, definitive database of statistics -- to rewrite the history of the Civil War's most important army and, indeed, of the war itself. Glatthaar takes readers from the home front to the heart of the most famous battles of the war: Manassas, the Peninsula campaign, Antietam, Gettysburg, all the way to the final surrender at Appomattox. General Lee's Army penetrates headquarters tents and winter shanties, eliciting the officers' plans, wishes, and prayers; it portrays a world of life, death, healing, and hardship; it investigates the South's commitment to the war and its gradual erosion; and it depicts and analyzes Lee's men in triumph and defeat. The history of Lee's army is a powerful lens on the entire war. The fate of Lee's army explains why the South almost won -- and why it lost. The story of his men -- their reasons for fighting, their cohesion, mounting casualties, diseases, supply problems, and discipline problems -- tells it all. Glatthaar's definitive account settles many historical arguments. The Rebels were fighting above all to defend slavery. More than half of Lee's men were killed, wounded, or captured -- a staggering statistic. Their leader, Robert E. Lee, though far from perfect, held an exalted place in his men's eyes despite a number of mistakes and despite a range of problems among some of his key lieutenants. General Lee's Army is a masterpiece of scholarship and vivid storytelling, narrated as much as possible in the words of the enlisted men and their officers.

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Customer Reviews

Not a Book about Battles Dr Joseph T. Glatthaar's General Lee's Army is NOT a book about battles, although it does an adequate job of summarizing the basics of General Lee's major engagements. Rather, it is an in-depth socio-economic study of General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia: What it was, who the personnel were, what they did, and how the army basically functioned. There was more, so much more, to Lee's grand army than just fighting. What was the real morale like? How and what did the soldiers eat and do when not fighting or on "the march"? What happened in camp during those long periods of inactivity? In essence, how did the army function when it was not engaged in combat, and when it was fighting how did the front line soldiers react? Much has been written about civil war combat, strategies, and tactics, but little has been written about the mundane non-combat life of a civil war army. Dr Glatthaar does a superb job of analyzing, investigating, and documenting (over 108 pages of Notes and Bibliography) the everyday workings of Lee grand Army of Northern Virginia. Not a book if you are looking for the taste and feel of battle. But an excellent source for the "rest of the story" of Civil War army life. Dr. Glatthaar's writing style is easy and flows with an interesting chronological time line. He subtly points out how General Lee's army changed as the war progressed and more of the veteran leaders and soldiers were killed or became incapacitated. He highlights through personal quotes how many of the problems associated with any army also plagued Lee's Army. Not everything was chivalrous and honor. Thievery, desertion, skulking, straggling, lying, quibbling, cowardice, drunkenness, etc., all plagued General Lee's heroic

army.

I thought this was a good book that brought to life the "social" history of the Army of Northern Virginia. There are plenty of books tracing its rise and fall and detailing every battle, but few that delve into what it was like on a day-to-day basis. If the former is what you want, then I would recommend someone like Douglas S. Freeman or Clifford Dowdey. Glatthaar says time and time again that "the Civil War was fought over slavery." Pretty standard take, even though it tends to conflate the cause of secession with the cause of the war. His chapter, "Why They Enlisted," however, addresses the full constellation of reasons that Southerners fought - slavery for some, yes, but for others, the right to govern themselves independently, the protection of their loved ones from invasion, a deep sense of honor, and even a lust for adventure. All of these motives were every bit as powerful as slavery, if not more so. As Glatthaar says, "These five elements - a slaveholding ideology, patriotism, attachment to loved ones and home, perceptions of manhood, and hatred of the enemy - united prewar and wartime experiences to establish a Confederate culture." There's a real disconnect between the diversity of Confederate motives which Glatthaar exhaustively documents from letters, diaries, and speeches and his persistent insistence that it was all about slavery. And this is no "Neo-Confederate" or "Myth of the Lost Cause" (two stupid smears, in my mind) contention, either. No less of an illustrious, mainstream historian than James M. McPherson came to a similar conclusion in his two books on the subject of "what they fought for." "Do you know for what your Papa has left his family and his home and his office and his business? I will tell you.

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