

Historian's Corner



- Part 1 -

DOTMLPF ARTILLERY INSIGHTS FROM THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR: INTRODUCTION

An eight-part series by Dr. John Grenier, the FA Branch Historian

Over the next several weeks, we'll offer you some doctrine, organization, training, matériel, personnel and facilities (DOTMLPF) insights into the Field Artillery (FA) during the American Civil War (ACW), which lasted from 1861 to 1865. This week's posting is an introduction; in those that follow, we'll cover ACW FA vis-à-vis one of the DOTMLPF areas. At the risk of drawing tenuous parallels, we hope that you'll recognize the similarities as much as the differences between ACW Redlegs' experiences and yours, which might help you better appreciate why and how the Army organizes, trains and equips (OTE) the FA branch in the ways it does today.

The ACW may seem like ancient history to you, but its history remains a foundational piece of curricula across all the services' professional military education (PME) programs. The ACW stands, with the American War for Independence (1775–1781) and World War II (1941–1945), among the Republic's defining experiences. The American War for Independence birthed the Republic, the ACW saved the Republic, and World War II made the Republic a superpower. The ACW also was Americans' "first modern war," especially in terms of technology, numbers of troops and noncombatants engaged and national-level outcomes/significance. From a professional military education perspective, the ACW offers a platform from which to expose military professionals to Antoine Jomini's principles of war that ACW commanders—both federal and confederate, including those formally educated at the United States Military Academy (USMA) and those who learned their craft in the crucible of battle—used to conceptualize tactics, operations and strategy. Jomini's principles are far from anachronistic: they undergird Army doctrine to this day, and the military-academic-industrial complex (MAIC) debates not their relevance but their various applications.

Traditionally, FA's role has received little attention in either battle narratives or operational analyses of the war. The ACW was very much an Infantry Soldier's war: rifle-fire caused upwards of 90% of battlefield casualties during it, and operational-level movements (i.e.: at the division and corps levels) of Infantry units most often decided battles' outcomes. General Robert E. Lee's May 1863 "masterpiece" at Chancellorsville, for example, has long offered the model of the Jominian battle of maneuver (the mixture of movement with fires) that illuminated the norm, if not the ideal, ACW battle in which Infantry vice FA dominated. We might also want to consider that the ACW occurred within the same general period of Western military development as the Wars of German Unification (GWU, 1864–1871).

Most often, the GWU—not the ACW—offer historians the starting point for examinations of

how warfare changed between the middle of the nineteenth century and World War I.¹ Perhaps, the changes marked a revolution in military affairs (RMA), or maybe they signified “only” a military-technical revolution (MTR). The MAIC debates the significance of the ACW compared to the GWU in terms of changes in the “operational art” because Soldiers must be sure they know what we are dealing with as they prepare for future war, and history provides useful contextualizing data and information. That said, FA professionals, in turn, generally focus on World War I as the first modern war, no doubt because FA caused 90% of the battlefield casualties on the Western Front. For what it’s worth, the Eastern Front—much of it in the Polish-Lithuanian and Ukrainian “borderlands”—generally remained a war of maneuver and annihilation, profoundly different than the sedentary war of attrition in the west. (Speaking of context, the name “Ukraine” literally derives from the word “frontier.” Thus, throughout the Cold War, the United States/North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics referred to Ukraine as “The Ukraine.”) We ask the right questions before we wander off point to look for “lessons learned.” As a branch, we generally do not investigate the nineteenth century, and if we do, we devolve mostly to identifying cannons’ shell weight and the metallurgy used in their construction. This gives one an advantage in heated games of Trivial Pursuit, but it offers little for understanding the impacts of contingency, continuity and change over time and space in the branch’s history. The following week’s offerings, we hope, will allow us to refocus our studies on the American vice European mid-nineteenth century experience.

Professional and amateur military historians recently have produced several works focused specifically on FA in the ACW, and from those works, we can gain insights into larger themes in the branch’s long-term development. Most strikingly, it’s clear that ACW-era Redlegs grappled with many of the same issues that U.S. FA professionals face today: their role as fire supporters in maneuver warfare; the interplay and trade-offs involved in finding the proper mix of massed and precision fires; questions about force structure; the leadership benefits that long-service professionals vice short-term volunteers can offer; and identifying the best Soldiers to become artillerymen. The concerns of Redlegs in the ACW were not, of course, exactly the same as today’s artillerymen, but they certainly were analogous.

The doyen of ACW operational historians, Dr. Earl Hess, offered his *Civil War Field Artillery: Promise and Performance on the Battlefield* in early 2023. Professor Hess’s work, while it is top-shelf military history and of abiding interest to academicians who study the war, is not something that the FA Commandant expects hundreds (or even a handful) of Soldiers to flock to Amazon.com to purchase. We, however, have read it, and we’ll offer you summaries in terms that we hope can benefit you as a Redleg. We have reduced Hess’s macro-level argument and chosen select points—in a 396-page book, there are too many to mention other than a handful—along DOTMLPF lines. Perhaps, this will inspire insights and, more importantly, questions about how we, as a branch, can use the past to inform our present and future. Maybe a few of you might pick up the book and read it; you never know.

To be continued...

¹ The foundational book on the GWU is Dennis Showalter’s *Railroads and Rifles: Soldiers, Technology and the Unification of Germany*. Note, the title is not *Railroads and Artillery*, which tells us something about the comparative importance of railroads, rifles and artillery.