



A Yankee Regiment in Confederate Louisiana: The 31st Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry in the Gulf South by Larry Lowenthal.

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If one wished to identify a representative Union Civil War regiment, one that served in various capacities far from its base of recruitment in both battles and skirmishes, the 31st Massachusetts would be an excellent choice. In *A Yankee Regiment in Confederate Louisiana*, Larry Lowenthal, a former National Park Service historian, has written a fascinating profile of the regiment based on a wealth of primary source materials. During its tour of duty (1862–65) in the Gulf South, the 31st functioned as infantry and both dismounted and traditional cavalry. It participated in sieges, campaigns, and both conventional and guerrilla combat. Its men served as an occupation force, performed guard duty, and made hard marches, all the while retaining an independence of thought and expression befitting their status as citizen-soldiers.

Besides the insights they provide into the lived experience of military service in their time, the New Englanders' record of their impressions of the Deep South serves as a fascinating artifact of cultural history. Their blend of curiosity and skepticism as they immersed themselves in a foreign society is reflected in their writings. As Lowenthal aptly puts it, they “exhibited an element of tourism in their daily existence” (167). Whether challenging or confirming their preconceived notions of the South, their evaluations of their exotic environment and all but alien countrymen are compelling in their own right. Remarkably, no history of this regiment has appeared in print until now. The astonishingly deep well of Civil War primary sources still appears to be inexhaustible.

In his preface, Lowenthal lays out the veritable trove of unpublished and unprocessed sources at his disposal¹ and his vision of a “modern Civil War regimental history” (xii). Numerous voices emerge from the diaries, manuscripts, and personal reminiscences he has consulted. Enlisted men like Luther Fairbank, a carpenter by trade, and James B.T. Tupper become familiar narrators over the course of the book. They sometimes provide moments of comic relief, for instance in their accounts of pitifully seasick recruits on the journey to the gulf. Fairbank explains the difficulty of transitioning from infantry to cavalry duty by joking that his “horse knew more than I did about the drill” (222). But they also make more serious observations. In particular, their musings on race relations shed light on the long-term issues that faced the nation regarding civil rights and the potential for a multiracial polity.

Partisan politics featured prominently in the 31st Massachusetts, as they did in many Union units. Benjamin F. Butler, an infamous, seemingly ubiquitous figure (and consummate political general) of the Civil War was largely responsible for the creation and recruitment of the 31st. His

1. Especially at the Lyman and Merrie Wood Museum of Springfield History. The author is also conversant with the relevant secondary literature on the Civil War.

feud with Massachusetts governor John A. Andrew shaped the regiment and its leadership from the very beginning.²

Lowenthal proceeds chronologically, beginning in late 1861 in western Massachusetts, the home of most of the 31st's recruits. He recounts in detail the process of enlistment, the boredom and cold of camp life; the drilling and drinking the men did before they sailed down to the Gulf (Feb. 1862), a 33-day journey fraught with difficulty and delays. The non-combat perils of soldiering quickly became evident. Though no one was wounded or died on the journey, soon after their arrival a regimental surgeon suffered a mental breakdown, five soldiers drowned while bathing, and three died when lightning struck their tent. All this before their military career had even begun in earnest.

In April, the men participated in the operation against New Orleans. After helping breach its brittle defenses, they earned the distinction of being the first Union regiment to enter the city. The men then began their tenure as occupiers, a period of relative inactivity when they performed light guard duty. Their principal foes were the insalubrious climate and an antagonistic local civilian populace. In a passage representative of Lowenthal's lucid prose, he describes the regiment's stint at nearby Fort Pike:

The fort held a considerable number of prisoners, leading secessionists as well as what Fairbank called "some of the robbers and cut throats" of New Orleans. Among them were two editors of the *Commercial Bulletin* whom Butler had arrested for treason. Captain Hopkins, however, found that many of the prisoners were "gentlemen of high respectability and gentlemanly behaviour." Luther Fairbank assumed that the alligators would protect the post from being stormed, so it must have been quite a surprise when three of the prisoners managed to slip past this toothy picket guard and escape. (93)

The alligators underscored the New Englanders' distance from Massachusetts. But they also enjoyed occasional humanizing encounters with locals, at times sharing meals and prayers; more than a few Louisianans were enlisted into their ranks to replace men lost to disease.

In January 1863, Maj. Gen. Nathaniel P. Banks replaced Butler in command of the Department of the Gulf, and the 31st geared up for more rigorous campaigning. The goal of reducing Port Hudson placed heavy demands on the regiment, including a great deal of marching: at one point it covered eighty-five miles in four days in the punishing Louisiana heat. Lowenthal observes that "military service offered only a choice between different forms of misery, no doubt requiring great efforts of imagination to recall whatever feelings of patriotism or adventure had motivated the men while in faraway Massachusetts" (142-43). On June 14, the men executed a frontal assault on a well entrenched Confederate position and suffered a violent repulse and many casualties.

Following the fall of Port Hudson in July, however, the men of the 31st again found themselves with little to do. At this point (and elsewhere in the book), Lowenthal describes how the men dealt with the spells of boredom so common in soldiers' lives. They harassed the resident sutler, for example, for allegedly charging exorbitant prices. Some devised games to amuse themselves, often at the expense of the recently emancipated African Americans who congregated in camp. Others seized the opportunity to become officers in newly formed US Colored Troops units, a decision that many in the regiment frowned upon and which caused tension in the ranks. Most of

2. Strangely, Lowenthal seems unfamiliar with Michael D. Pierson's indispensable work on Butler, both in Massachusetts politics and in wartime New Orleans: e.g., "He Helped the Poor and Snubbed the Rich': Benjamin F. Butler and Class Politics in Lowell and New Orleans," *Mass. Hist. Rev.* 7 (2005) 36-68, and *Mutiny at Fort Jackson: The Untold Story of the Fall of New Orleans* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina Pr, 2008), esp. chap. 6.

the men of the 31st Massachusetts identified as Democrats, disapproved of abolition, and espoused more conservative racial views than their Republican counterparts. Indeed, a straw poll taken before the presidential election of 1864 indicated a preference for George B. McClellan over the incumbent Lincoln, a thing unusual for soldiers in the field.

In December 1863, Union brass decided to convert the 31st Massachusetts to cavalry, which the men took to with varying aptitude and enthusiasm. They then participated in General Banks's ill-fated Red River Campaign, acquitting themselves well at the Battle of Mansfield (Sabine Crossroads), a damaging Union defeat. Lowenthal makes a convincing case for the underappreciated significance of the Battle of Yellow Tavern, where the 31st played a notable role. He also elucidates the effects of political jousting in the upper echelons of command on the rank and file in the fall-out of the disastrous campaign.

In the closing stages of the war, Union leaders deployed the 31st as an anti-guerrilla force. In this capacity, the New Englanders managed to capture the notorious rebel Samuel King, who been a thorn in the side of federal authority for several years. One of them commented with pleasure that "we have been treading on air ever since" (255). They had certainly earned the right to feel proud of their record after proving themselves to be fine soldiers in a number of situations and capacities. They earned a formal commendation for their efforts in early 1865. As a final contribution, the 31st participated in the campaign against the city of Mobile, Alabama before the war concluded that spring.

The regiment mustered out in September 1865 and most of the men were back home in Massachusetts by early October. Though he mentions that some members of the 31st chose to stay in the South and become "carpetbaggers," Lowenthal does not extend his analysis into the postwar period. He does, however, offer some final statistics: over its three-plus years of service, the regiment lost fifty-eight men to combat, eighty-eight to disease, and fifty to other causes.

More than merely a profile of a single regiment, *A Yankee Regiment in Confederate Louisiana* is a fine introduction to the nature of Civil War soldiery in camp and on campaign; its purview extends from guerrilla combat and large-scale battles to the effects of sickness and boredom, childish mischief, political conflicts, race relations, and personal squabbles. It deserves a place on the bookshelf and in the hands of every Civil War history enthusiast.