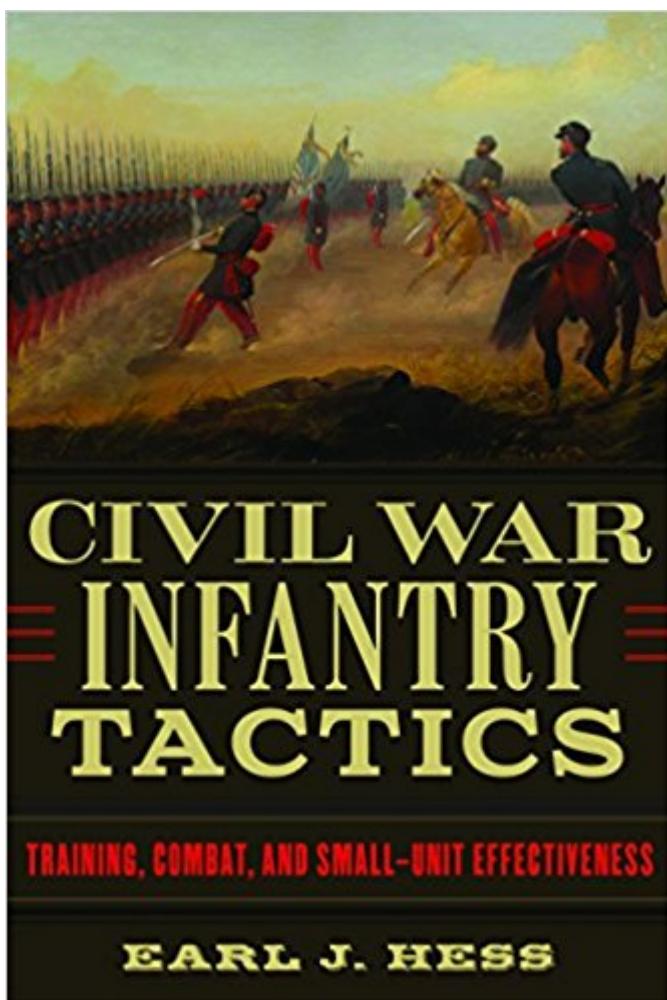


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Civil War Infantry Tactics: Training, Combat, And Small-Unit Effectiveness



Synopsis

For decades, military historians have argued that the introduction of the rifle musket-with a range five times longer than that of the smoothbore musket-made the shoulder-to-shoulder formations of linear tactics obsolete. Author Earl J. Hess challenges this deeply entrenched assumption. He contends that long-range rifle fire did not dominate Civil War battlefields or dramatically alter the course of the conflict because soldiers had neither the training nor the desire to take advantage of the musket rifle's increased range. Drawing on the drill manuals available to officers and a close reading of battle reports, *Civil War Infantry Tactics* demonstrates that linear tactics provided the best formations and maneuvers to use with the single-shot musket, whether rifle or smoothbore. The linear system was far from an outdated relic that led to higher casualties and prolonged the war. Indeed, regimental officers on both sides of the conflict found the formations and maneuvers in use since the era of the French Revolution to be indispensable to the survival of their units on the battlefield. The training soldiers received in this system, combined with their extensive experience in combat, allowed small units a high level of articulation and effectiveness. Unlike much military history that focuses on grand strategies, Hess zeroes in on formations and maneuvers (or primary tactics), describing their purpose and usefulness in regimental case studies, and pinpointing which of them were favorites of unit commanders in the field. The Civil War was the last conflict in North America to see widespread use of the linear tactical system, and Hess convincingly argues that the war also saw the most effective tactical performance yet in America's short history.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"A work that all Civil War military historians should read. . . . Hess has provided a solid examination of Civil War tactics that will be extremely helpful to all students of the Civil War, whether professional, buff, or re-enactor."--Register of the Kentucky Historical Society

"The strengths of this work are substantial and I will only highlight a few key points that I found most impressive. In addition to being a well-researched and thoroughly engaging read, Hess provides his reader with an excellent introduction to the historiography of Civil War tactics that is well worth reading on its own. His discussion of tactical developments after the Civil War was particularly enlightening as well. . . . An excellent work of military history."--Civil War Book Review

"Hess has once again crafted a well-argued, thorough, and at many points, engaging work that successfully pushes back against generations of accepted dogma. Furthermore, Civil War Infantry Tactics provides an important starting point for future debates over the effectiveness of small-unit infantry tactics--a debate that historians have hitherto considered settled."--North Carolina Historical Review

"For Civil War historians and readers alike, Earl J. Hess has once again presented a must-read book that provides arguments that shift our thinking about the nature of combat on the conventional field of battle during America's bloodiest war." --Journal of Military History

EARL J. HESS is Stewart W. McClelland Chair in History at Lincoln Memorial University and the author of fifteen books on the Civil War, including Kennesaw Mountain: Sherman, Johnston, and the Atlanta Campaign; The Knoxville Campaign: Burnside and Longstreet in East Tennessee; and The Civil War in the West: Victory and Defeat from the Appalachians to the Mississippi.

Earl Hess has written an excellent narrative history that provides a solid review of how both the Union and Confederate armies fought in the American Civil War. Having said that, this is the kind of book that the tactics or Civil War aficionado will appreciate; it is not for a casual reader of the Civil War. The author presents a very logical approach to the subject. Hess's first two chapters review the tactical heritage inherited by those who fought the Civil War, both European and early American. The author then reviews the three primary manuals available to the two antagonists and how the officers and men trained for battle. Hess then gets into the meat of the book with six chapters reviewing specific, actual tactical situations as they were fought on the battlefield based on first person accounts by soldiers of both sides. He reviews moving forward and skirmishing, multiple lines, changing front, columns, multiple maneuvers, and large formations each with their own chapter. Although a bit dry at times the author really gets into these tactics as they were actually

executed vice what the drill manuals said or where they used formations as designed. At the same time he demonstrates that, as the war went on, how the efficiency of the soldiers and their commanders steadily improved, as they were able to execute more complex tactical maneuvers even under fire. Chapter 11 then provides an overview of how tactics evolved after the Civil War. He makes the point that what really changed was not the range of rifled muskets, but the volume of fire especially as the century continued, and how tacticians changed their tactics and formations to deal with the increased lethality of the battlefield, all of which had to be balanced against the need for command and control of the troops to achieve their objectives. He also argues that the range and lethality of the battlefield really didn't change even as the volume of fire increased, if for no other reason than human factors such as the difficulty a man has of discerning a man-size target after 300 yards. My only issue with the book, and I consider it a small one, is that Chapter 11, "Tactical Developments After the Civil War," is not really related to the book as a whole. In other words, the first ten chapters do not support the thesis he presents in Chapter 11. And, although I found Chapter 11 very interesting, his argument requires more than a single chapter to support his conclusions. All in all a very good book, and I definitely recommend it for those who are interested in the formations and the issue of command and control on the Civil War battlefield.

When you move beyond reading about battles and leaders, you quickly discover Earl J. Hess. Chances are you will have read some of his battle histories but are now ready for his how and why books. This author is one of the few authors to look at how and why the war worked as it did. In doing so, he helps us understand some of the "silly decisions" and/or question some of the standard assumptions. These books give us an understanding of the environment the officers and men fought in and the reasons for their decisions. The American Civil War saw the transition from the smooth bore to the rifled muzzleloader. Rifling and bullet design resulted in a weapon that was lethal way beyond a smooth bore. However, battlefield conditions, the ability to communicate and human abilities worked to keep combat at about 100 yards. The author looks at how liner tactics were an efficient way to fight during the war. Additionally, the book looks at formation for regiments to corps on and off the battlefield. The training of both officers and men is well documented with a good discussion of the books available and how they differed. Last is a section looking at how the training, theory and formations worked during battle with examples drawn from reports. This could make for a sleep inducing book except for the author's skill as a writer. The author grabs and holds attention with excellent intelligent writing that is easy and

fun to read. Well placed and easy to understand illustrations support the text. This is a scholarly history with endnotes organized by page numbers at the top of the page. A full index, bibliography and glossary of terms complete the book. This handsome well-made book is a pleasure to hold and to read.

The author presents some very interesting ideas as to how and why Civil War infantry tactics did not actually change much from Napoleonic or even earlier concepts of infantry movement. I'm not sure if I completely agree with his belief that the rifle musket had little impact in how commanders moved their troops on the battlefield. While I agree that most Civil War infantry combat was at close range, I still feel that the increased lethality of the new rifled musket ball with its comparatively higher velocity is one of the biggest reasons late war battlefields began to resemble WWI France. I do agree that the linear formations that were used at the time were still the best way to bring fire on the opposing troops when both sides were armed with muzzle loading shoulder arms.

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