

Battle Tactics of the American Civil War

reviewed by Paul Le Long

Back in November Mike Crane reviewed Paddy Griffith's *Battle in the Civil War* – I would agree with Mike that this book is a 'must-have' for anyone interested in the period. Here I'd like to review another book by the same author and another must-have. Indeed I think these two books are companion pieces.

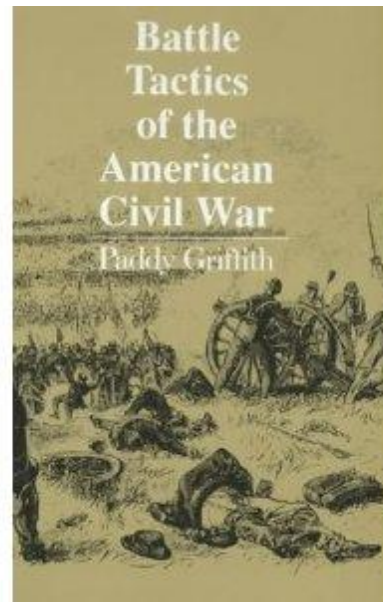
First of all, what do you get with *Battle Tactics*? Just over 200 pages with chapters dealing with drill, weaponry, training, cavalry, artillery, field fortification and the mechanics of battle at the tactical level. All well-written, accessible and at times provocative as you would expect from this author (and if you haven't read anything by Paddy Griffith then stop reading this review immediately and get down to your local library or bookshop and get hold of some of his books – you won't be sorry).

His central argument is that the American Civil War was not the first modern war as many authors contend, but rather the last Napoleonic one. Griffith dismisses the – to him – superficial similarities between the ACW and the First World War and concentrates instead on the similarities between the ACW and Napoleonic wars.

Along the way he explodes some tenacious myths. For example – the rifled musket and especially breech-loading rifles, revolutionised warfare and infantry enjoyed a higher rate of fire at increased range, which is why cavalry were ineffective against them and why most assaults failed. That's an old standard isn't it? A nice comfortable idea that we've all seen repeated many a time. The only problem with it is that, according to Griffith, it's wrong.



Griffith provides statistics showing that even by Gettysburg over 10% of US infantry battalions were armed wholly or partly with smoothbore muskets. 26% were armed with substandard rifles. Only about 3% carried a breechloader. He also provides statistics outlining the ranges at which infantry opened fire – all between 100-140 yards, no more. So why were cavalry useless and why did infantry assaults fail then if it wasn't the 'new' weaponry stopping them? Griffith says that poor training, ill-discipline, inexperienced officers and an amateurish approach to warfare were to blame mainly.



So there you have a taste of the book. Although originally published in 1987 it is still required reading in my opinion. I'm not sure I agreed whole-heartedly with the author's conclusions but the book makes for a stimulating read which may challenge your assumptions. Next time you are playing ACW and you want your men to open up at a range of 500 yards and pump volley after volley quick-fire into the hapless enemy, you might want to reconsider whether this is an accurate representation of warfare in America at this time.

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