

**Linderman, Gerald F. – *Embattled Courage:
The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War***

Linderman, Gerald F. (1987). *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War*. New York: The Free Press.

1—“Every war begins as one war and becomes two, that watched by civilians and that fought by soldiers.”

8—“Many soldiers called combat the test of manhood. They often spoke of courage as the “manliest” of virtues. In corroboration, the 1861 edition of Noah Webster’s American Dictionary of the English Language identified as virtues “much valued” by Americans, “chastity in females” and “bravery in men.” A failure of courage in war was a failure of manhood. A Union staff officer warned that cowardice robbed the soldier of all his manhood.

9—“A Louisiana sergeant, Edwin Fay, the target of Federal balls that narrowly missed, did not “believe a bullet can go through a prayer,’ for faith is a much better shield than . . . steel armor.” The common understanding was that the more complete the soldier’s faith, the greater would be God’s care. Perfect faith seemed to offer the possibility of perfect safety.”

10—“Godliness bore not only on individual survival but on the outcome of battles. A conviction of wide currency was that God would ensure the victory of the army whose collective faith was sturdiest.

Indeed, soldiers on both sides professed confidence that the benefactions of godliness would manifest themselves on every social level—that the faithful soldier would survive combat; that the army of greatest faith would win the battle at hand; that the cause whose adherents possessed the faith indomitable would prevail in the war.

As courage and godliness were linked, so were cowardice and disbelief. the Catholic chaplain of the 14th Louisiana was convinced that none were more cowardly than those who failed to renew their faith and relieve themselves of mortal sin by taking the sacraments prior to battle.

In the mind of the soldier, godliness sustained courage and victory; doubt underwrote cowardice and defeat.”

12—“Perfect courage was thus the best guarantor of an honorable reputation. The linkage between honor and courage manifested itself in Civil War soldiers’ frequent referenced to the “honorable death”—inevitably the courageous death—and the “honorable wound”—inevitably suffered in the course of courageous action.

Wounded at Ball’s Bluff, Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., contemplated with joyful pride the prospect of dying a “soldier’s death.”

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21—“Reduced to tactical terms, courage was preeminently the charge—the boldest actions were assumed to be those of offensive warfare..”

In the first years of the war the rank-and-file held themselves to a strict standard that of fighting “man fashion.” They were expected to wait stoically through the tense and difficult period just prior to battle; to stand and receive enemy fire without replying to it (one of Lee’s soldiers called this “the most trying duty of the soldier”); and to resist all urges to quicken their pace under fire, to dodge or duck shells, or to seek cover.”

22-23—“Dame and his comrades were apprehensive far in advance of the test of battle, for they knew that mercilessness awaited failure. Seeing in battle a soldier so fearful that he was about to run, Rutherford B. Hayes threatened him with a pistol and vowed that “he would kill him on the spot” if he did not “go in and fight.” The man regained control, returned to the battle, and was immediately killed. Hayes was glad to have given the weakling the death of a hero rather than that of a coward.”

25—“Soldiers did not often challenge those harsh reactions to evidence of fear in battle, because they considered the results of the test decisive and unalterable. They thought of the test as if it were a litmus revealing their single essence, either courage or cowardice.”

29—“The nurses’ working proposition was the supremacy of the individual will as an extension of courage: Suffering was a refining and properly subduing influence to be borne cheerfully and quietly. No matter how severe the wound, the soldier possessed the spiritual power to triumph over pain.”

Pain expressed, however, was weakness revealed. “Our American man,” Whitman wrote, “. . . holds himself cool and unquestioned; master above all pains and bloody mutilations.” Thus wounds offered opportunities to demonstrate a courage transcending even that of the battlefield. Mary Livermore, a Sanitary Commission organizer and frequent traveler to battle sites and hospitals, thought that “it may be easy to face death on the battle-field, when the pulses are maddened by the superhuman desire for victory. . . . But to lay suffering in a hospital bed for months . . . requires more courage.” Hospital courage meant staying calm and not complaining, even to the point of death. “He made no display or talk; he met his fate like a man.” The coward, on the other hand, abject and groveling, gave voice to his pain.”

Whitman recorded the testimony of a doctor who in six months among the wounded had seen none who had died “with a single tremor of unmanly fear,” and the poet’s own experience bore out the claim: Not one case of a soldier’s dying “with cowardly qualms of terror.” He thought that record was the “last-needed proof” of American democracy. Mary Livermore did encounter a dying soldier who told her, “I have lived an awful life, and I’m afraid to die. I shall go to

hell.” “Stop screaming,” she commanded. “Be quiet. . . .If you *must* die, die like a man, and not like a coward.”

31—“Thus the state of one’s courage remained until the end—and especially at the end—a matter of the most intense concern, both to the soldier and to those who surrounded him.

31-32—“A more accurate gauge of the weight with which courage’s war bore down on soldiers was to be found in their discussions of wounds as desirable, even valued, acquisitions. Rutherford Hayes “fiercely wished” a wound—and was rewarded with five. The colonel of the 9th New York complained to a wounded fellow officer: “You are a lucky man, Colonel. I’d give a thousand dollars if I had your wound. I am afraid my friends in New York will think me a coward because I never can get hit.”

32—“Searching for his wounded son on the field at Antietam, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., observed of the survivors that the “wounds they bore would be the medals they would show their children and grandchildren by and by. Who would not rather wear his decorations beneath his uniform than on it?” One of Louisa May Alcott’s patients, shot through the cheek, requested a mirror; his image worried him. “I vow to gosh, that’s too bad! I warn’t a bad looking chap before, and now I’m done for’ won’t there be a thunderin’ scar? and what on earth will Josephine Skinner say?” To Alcott the answer came easily: His fiancée would surely admire his “honorable scar,” “lasting proof that he had faced the enemy, for all women thought a wound the best decoration a brave soldier could wear.”

32-33—“As George Stevens of the 77th New York watched the ritual dismissal of a New Jersey officer caught in cowardice, he thought, “how much better it would have been to have fallen nobly on that field of battle, honored and lamented, than to live to be degraded and despised.” A Wisconsin private wrote home that he “would rather have been *under ground*, than to have been branded as a coward before the whole Reg’t.” An Indiana small-town soldier, Theodore F. Upson, told of his colonel’s confrontation with one of the regiments skulkers. “Get up . . .Cherry. Go to your Company and show yourself a man for once. You ought to be ashamed of yourself.” “I will go, Colonel, since you insist, but I am sure if I go up there I shall be killed” “You had better be killed than have the reputation of a coward.” Cherry went up on the line and was killed instantly by a shot from a Confederate battery.

36—“But in the Civil War indiscipline was chronic, and without the power of the ideal of courage both to impel and compel men to combat, neither the Union nor the Confederate government could have mounted so comprehensive an effort. In courage was the armies’ cohesiveness.”

62—“If the good did die, they died good deaths. The conviction early in the war, again reduced to the most direct terms of popular belief, was that the hero’s

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death was a happy death. As an infantryman in Lee's army, Hunter watched from the heights above Fredericksburg the charge of the Union's Irish Brigade. He and those about him were "filled with wonder and a pitying admiration for men who could rush with such unflinching valor, such mad recklessness into the jaws of destruction." Though that evening the Irish Brigade could count standing only 250 of the 1,400 who had charged, Hunter said of the fallen that because their behavior had been "superb," "none of the bitterness of death was theirs." "A brave man dies but once, a coward dies a thousand times."

"By applying that calculus, armies beaten in such battles as Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, and Gettysburg could ignore the outcome as measured by traditional indices—the comparative numbers of dead and wounded, the army forced from the field—and stress instead the triumph of comportment to the exclusion of results."

63—"Northerners' accounts of the Fredericksburg defeat carried the same message, if anything intensified. They acclaimed the courage of Union soldiers exactly as if that bravery had carried the day. A colonel of the 77th New York wrote: "None were ever more brave or more desirous to test their valor. The heroic deeds of those who did advance against the enemy will ever redound to the glory of our arms." Walt Whitman reported that "never did mortal man in an aggregate fight better than our troops at Fredericksburg. In the highest sense, it was no failure." Though the attackers could see before them strong Southern batteries and rifle pits, "Yet all the brigade went forward unflinchingly. . . [S]till the men advance with unsurpassed gallantry—and would have gone again further, if ordered." Currier and Ives pointed the same moral in their print of the battle: "This battle shows with what undaunted courage the Lion-Hearted Army of the Potomac always meets its foes."

63-64—"Even who acknowledged defeat often found palliation in courage. Chamberlain of the 20th Maine spent the night following the battle in "a ghastly bivouac among the dead," building breastworks of bodies stripped of clothing. Still, their valor had been "splendid" if unavailing and their ghosts were "glorious." Colonel George B. Sanford of the Regular Army's 2nd Dragoons was remorseless in his description of the battle: "[T]he most desperate piece of fighting in the war, as from the first men realized the utter futility of the attempt. It was simply to go up and be killed without even the hope that finally the position would be taken." Nevertheless, courage offered some redemption: "It was a horrible battle, relieved only by the wonderful gallantry of the men and officers." Such distinctions between battlefield conduct and battlefield verdict carried Unionists through the long months between mid-1861 and mid-1863 as Federal forces suffered heavy defeats at the hands of Confederate armies in the East.

64—"Courage also helped to insulate the soldier against the trauma of combat. Its code ordained that the soldier react to the sights of the battlefield with *sang froid*, the ability to remain unmoved by the horrors of war. Consider the manner in

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which John Esten Cooke chose to establish the bravery of John Pelham, the Confederate artilleryist: “He saw guns shattered. . . or men torn to pieces, without exhibiting any signs of emotion. . . the ghastliest spectacle of blood and death left his soul unmoved—his stern will unbent. Similarly, when a Northern volley struck at head level a line of Mississippians and they lay eyes open, faces bleached by “a sickly summer rain” and foreheads “stained with ooze and trickle of blood,” Stonewall Jackson passed by, looking long, but did not shudder. “Not a muscle quivered,” Stiles admiringly reported. “He was the ideal of concentration—imperturbable, resistless.” To tremble might signal horror, and to feel horror was to yield to despicable effeminacy.”

65—“Given particularly the kinship of courage and godliness, courage could hardly be exercised by evil men or incorporated in an evil cause. If courage was a universal virtue of constant quality—and all soldiers thought it was—it became difficult to deny that demonstrations of courage were proofs of an ennobling purpose. Should the foe then prove courageous, a basis for mutual respect and sympathy would be created.”

75—“Those who assaulted Missionary Ridge were described as “completely and frantically drunk with excitement.” It was likened to a dream state. Poague recalled that in his first battle, actually a Shenandoah Valley skirmish, a “curious mental exaltation seized us; an inward questioning as to whether it was all a dream.” At times both dream and intoxication entered the description. When Ripley charged Confederate guns in Peninsula fighting during the fall of 1864, “it was a dream, so great was the intoxication of the excitement.” Some felt it as a state of physical abnormality: seized by “the fever of the rush”; “gone wild with battle fever”; “wild with uncontrollable delirium”; delirious with . . . wild excitement.” It became even a species of dementia, a temporary insanity: the charge raising “one mad desire” to trample down everything.

88-89—“Women promised rewards to the willing, ordinarily less mixed than those offered in this Southern poem:

And now, young man, a word to you:
If you would win the fair
Go to the field where Honor calls
And win your lady there;
Remember that our brightest smiles
Are for the true and brave,
And that our tears are all for those
Who fill a soldier’s grave,”

91—“Another appeal from “The Women of the South” appeared during the summer of 1863: “It is impossible for us to respect a coward and every true woman who has husband, father, brother, or lover . . . had rather see him prostrate before her with death’s signet on his noble brow that has never been branded by

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cowardice or dishonor, than have him forfeit his good name and disgrace his manhood by refusing to do his duty to his country,”

115—“So rampant was disease in the Civil War that Paul Steiner has called it “natural biological warfare.” Union battle deaths—those killed in combat or mortally wounded—numbered 110,000, but twice as many, 224,580, died of disease, and in the Confederate forces the ratio must also have approximated two to one.”

125—“Father Sheeran visited the field of Second Manassas: “[T]hose scattered throughout the woods and over the fields presented a shocking spectacle. Some with their brains oozing out; some with the face shot off: others with their bowels protruding: others with shattered limbs. But to him it was Chancellorsville that was “perhaps . . .the most revolting scene I had ever witnessed.” “Our line of battle extended over some eight miles and for that distance you see the dead bodies of the enemy lying in every direction, some with their heads shot off, some with their brains oozing out, some pierced through the head with musket balls, some with their noses shot away, some with their mouths smashed, some wounded in the neck, some with broken arms or legs, some shot through the breast and some cut in two with shells.”

“No one would even comprehend the war’s 623,026 deaths or 1,084,453 casualties, but soldiers were still stunned by the scale perceptible to them.”

127—“Some soldiers, it was true, seemed untouched by their encounters with the dead. Writing home, Francis Amass Walker put the rhetorical question, “Shall I tell you how they (Union soldiers) die?” and then described a wounded Massachusetts boy—knee joints blown out; hands torn off; leg broken; the side of the body punctured—who, Walker wrote without apparent pain or perplexity, died in the cause, “the holy name of freedom, country, law” and fell “under the bright, beautiful banner of freedom.”

129—“Wilson thought the experience of listening to wounded soldiers “crying piteously” for aid “horrible beyond description” and was convinced that if everyone could see and hear as he had, “war would cease, and there would never be another battle.”

130—“William Smaller Owen of the Washington Artillery of New Orleans remarked:

The sorriest sights . . . are in those dreadful field-hospitals, established in barns, under large tents, and in houses. The screams and groans of the poor fellows undergoing amputation are sometimes dreadful, --and then the sight of arms and legs surrounding these places, as they are through into great piles, is something one that has seen the results of battle can never forget.”

137—“Sherman, moreover, appears to have felt less than others a visceral resistance to the prospect of meeting battle on the defensive and to have resisted better than others the impulse to demonstrate courage in the charge; he was thus prepared to apply that lesson.”

137—“Sherman’s willingness to accept a defensive posture—“undoubtedly precipitated the ruin of the Confederate cause.” Sherman never broke the connection between courage and the charge. He continued to cite “the courage and spirit” of those Southern attackers who, repulsed again and again, renewed the charge a half-dozen times. But he saw more clearly than others that the charge had become defeat.”

158—“A related casualty was the conviction that courageous behavior imparted battlefield protection. Experience taught the opposite: The cowards wither remained at home or found ways to avoid battle; the bravest “went farthest and stand longest under fire”; the best died. In January 1863 General Frank Paxton of the Stonewall Brigade complained: “Out of the fifteen field officers elected last spring, five have been killed and six wounded. . . . In those losses are many whom we were always accustomed to regard as our best men.” “Three months later he again found it “sad, indeed, to think how many good men we have lost. Those upon whom we all looked as distinguished for purity of character as men, and for gallantry as soldiers, seem to have been the first victims.” After thirty days of Wilderness combat, Colonel Theodore Lyman of Meade’s staff deplored Grant’s strategy; “[T]here has been too much assaulting, this campaign! . . . The best officers and men are liable, by their greater gallantry, to be first disabled.”

Those in the ranks noted the phenomenon principally by its result: a decline in the quality of their leadership. John Haskell, an artillery commander in Lee’s army, was bitter that those who took such care to protect their own lives, “the dodgers,” by virtue of their seniority had been promoted to replace dead or disabled officers who had “taken no pains” to preserve their lives. By such routes soldiers moved far from their original conceptions of ostentatious courage as protection and assurance of victory to the realization that it was instead an invitation to death. A few might attempt to find a new virtue in that reality—Charles Russell Lowell, contemplating the death in battle of Robert Gould Shaw, decided that the best colonel of the best black regiment *had to die*, for “it was a sacrifice we owed”—but most simply felt its demoralization.”

159—“As convictions about the potency and protectiveness of courage yielded the suspicion that special courage had become the mark of death, another of the war’s original precepts—that the courageous death was the good death; that it had about it some nobler quality reflected, for example, in the smiles of courageous dead and withheld from frowning cowardly dead—also failed the test of observation.”

160—“Lieutenant William Wood of the 19th Virginia was one of the 15,000 who made Pickett’s charge. Prior to the attack he and his men were ordered to lie

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down, exposed both to a boiling sun and to fire of Federal artillery batteries. (A Napoleon cannon could hurl a 12-pound ball a mile.” When they were brought to attention to begin the attack, some of the men immediately dropped of “seeming sunstroke,” but for the charge itself Wood had only praise. It was a “splendid array” and a “beautiful line of battle.” But it failed: “Down! Down! go the boys,” A he reached that spot of ground beyond which no Confederate could go, he suffered a sense of personal shame: “Stopping at the fence, I looked to the right and left and felt we were disgraced.” the assault’s failure bluntly told him that he and his comrades had not done enough, and yet he knew that they had done everything they had earlier been sure would carry the victory. The result was a paralyzing disbelief: “With one single exception I witnessed no cowardice, and yet we had not a skirmish line [still standing]. Courage should have conquered!”

160-161—“And then the charge: To Dooley it became simply that which opened the “work of death.” “Volley after volley of crashing musket balls sweep through the line and mow us down like wheat before the scythe.” Only thirty-five of his regiment’s 155 men escaped bullets and shells, and Dooley, with his shattered thighs, was not one of them. “I tell you, there is no romance in making one of these charges,” he concluded; “the enthusiasm of ardent breasts in many cases *ain’t there*” He realized that the spirit of heroism no longer possessed the men; he mildly regretted its departure, but he had lost confidence that its presence would have reversed the outcome.”

177—“by the spring of 1864 he had become convinced that “[p]eople must learn that war is a thing of life or death: if a man won’t go to the front he must be shot.”

178—“General, General, my wife is dying. I must see her.” “Man, man, do you love your wife more than country? George Picket chided him for treating wounds and illness as symptomatic of a lack of efficiency, patriotism, or courage: “He places no value on human life, caring for nothing so much as fighting, unless it be praying.” To a subordinated who had protested that a certain attack would be “madness: my regiment would be exterminated, “Jackson was said to have replied, “Colonel, do your duty. I have made every arrangement to care for the wounded and bury the dead.”

Caption to photograph “The stance and expression of an Ohio soldier convey the youthfulness, hopefulness, and determination that marked those who marched to war in 1861. In both Union and Confederate armies, eighteen-year-olds constituted the largest single age-group during the first year of the war.”

211—“As experience upended assumptions about the nature of war, Sherman too seemed to draw power from the sense of powerlessness conveyed by his civilian failures. “Generally,” he said, “war is destruction and nothing else.” “War is cruelty and you cannot refine it.” “You might as well appeal against the thunderstorm as against these terrible hardships of war.” Accordingly, against such a force, one no more subjected to man’s control than natural phenomena,

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individuals were powerless save to conform. “I have made war vindictively; war is war, and you can make nothing else of it.” But that was simply a logician’s sleight-of-hand. By subordinating himself, by presenting himself to wage war in just those ways that made it what he said it was. Sherman said war was hell, and the last years of the Civil War were hellish because he and others made them so.”

214—“Still by 1864 most soldiers were inextricably bound to the dynamic of war and echoed almost all aspects of Sherman’s position. Watching Atlanta burn, Michael Fitch agreed that war “is made up of cruelty and destruction.” Robert Burdette of the 47th Illinois saw inevitably in the demolition of Southern homes, fences, and railroads: “That’s war. Destruction of innocent and useful things. Destruction of everything.”

214—“Like Sherman, the Illinois officer James Connolly promised to bring down an apocalypse premised on a wildly exaggerated threat of civilian resistance to Federal soldiers: “Everything must be destroyed . . .all considerations of mercy and humanity must bow before the inexorable demands of self-preservation.”

219—“Just before the Atlanta campaign, an angry James Connolly was dragooned into yet another colors presentation: “I’d rather listen to Bragg’s cannonade than to a citizen urging soldiers to stand by their flag.” He had not become cynical about Union war aims; to the contrary, the separation of the soldier from civilian attitudes about the war sometimes resuscitated and even sharpened his sense of The Cause. Connolly’s devotion to Union expanded as his faith in civilian society’s ability to embody that patriotism shrank. He wrote in mid-1863:

You at home cannot feel the glow of triumph as we do in the field; those of us who looked to the future with high hopes, staked life, reputation, honor, everything in this contest—taking our lives in our hands we went out for what? for money? no; for power? no; for fame? no; only for an idea, for the idea of Union, Freedom, an intangible something always sought for by mankind . . .”

220—“Both Union and Confederate soldiers grew angry at men who remained home, initially at those who dodged the military service, subsequently at all who continued to engage in ordinary business activity. Federals, in addition, found even more intolerable the activities of Northern peace advocates.”

221—“Here the New York City draft riots of July 13-16, 1863, proved a critical episode: Federal soldiers united in their vindictiveness toward the rioters. “We are mad with rage,” Walter Carter of the 22nd Massachusetts wrote. Weld hoped that the Washington government would put down the riots with a strong hand, and not stop until they have shot or hung every one of the rioters. It is disgraceful, and I only wish that I could be in New York to help kill some of the rascals.” Bellard and his comrades were equally impatient and sanguinary: String up the draft rioters and be done with it.”

222—“When Charles Lynch and his friends of the 18th Connecticut received supplies from a captured Confederate wagon train, they discovered coffee packaged in their home town by, they sure profit-hungry businessmen. Carter’s characterization of such people, “those ignoble sons who have remained at the rear and reaped the home harvest.”

222—“Those whom Federal soldiers execrated most vigorously were Northern peace advocates. Like others who stayed at home, they were thought to be afraid—“cowardly skunks,” James Miller of the 11th Pennsylvania called them. Indeed, privates simply assumed that men at home had joined them, as they sometimes did businessmen, for aiding the enemy, but here they moved on the charge that peace advocacy actually killed soldiers. Beatty was convinced that civilian criticism of the Administration encouraged the rebels, and he argued that only after peace returned should citizens quarrel about the way the war was fought. But whereas Lynch had said of those errant coffee-sellers that those who prolonged the war to enhance profit “should remember that every battle kills a soldier,” Beatty indicted the peace party with the utmost directness. On it rested “the blood of many thousand soldiers.” That reproach was widely shared in the ranks. Walt Whitman said that in his experience Union soldiers never spoke of Copperheads without a curse and would rather shoot them than rebel soldiers.”

223—“James Newton insisted that if only the Copperheads of the North were given whippings, “soon after, we would have peace.” Union soldiers also showed a tendency, appearing as well in Confederate ranks, more and more to characterize their society by its evaders, profiteers, and nonsupporters of the war. Connolly became convinced that “everybody” at home we “scrambling for wealth or for office.”

223—“The ultimate fantasy, appearing with surprising frequency in late 1864, was to have the Union Army itself carry the war to the North. John Brobst said, “We would like to go back and fight northern cowards and traitors [better] than to fight rebels.” Such civilians were “the miserablest of all God’s creatures, “whom Brobst could shoot as easily as he would fire on wolves. Were his father one, he would kill him.”

282—“[I]n the midst of doubt, in the collapse of creeds, there is one thing I do not doubt . . . and that is that the faith is true and adorable which leads a soldier to throw away his life in obedience to a blindly accepted duty, in a cause which he little understands, in a plan of campaign of which he has no notion, under tactics of which he does not see the use.” Man’s destiny was battle, and his faith would trample under foot, “the cynic force with which the thoughts of common-sense will assail [him].”

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282—“For high and dangerous action teaches us to believe as right beyond dispute things for which our doubting minds are slow to find words of proof. Out of heroism grows faith in the worth of heroism.”

292—“Peace, said Sumner, was at times self-seeking: “Men sometimes go into raptures about the blessings of peace when peace is selfishness, when men look with indifference upon wickedness and injustice so long as it does not touch themselves . . . They sigh over war when war only proves that there is a cause or an idea for which men are ready to die, and that they have a deeper horror of falsehood than of bloodshed.”

292—“Henry Adams also approved of it:

If war made men brutal, at least it made them strong: it called out the qualities best fitted to survive in the struggle for existence. To risk for one’s country was no mean act even when done for selfish motives; and to die that others might more happily live was the highest act of self-sacrifice to be reached by man. War, with all its horrors could purify as well as debase; it dealt with high motives and vast interests; taught courage, discipline, and a stern sense of duty.”