

BOOK REVIEWS



Deserter Country; Civil War Opposition in the Pennsylvania Appalachians

By Robert Sandow

(New York: Fordham University Press, 2009)

234 pps., \$25.00 softcover, illustrations, maps

Reviewed by Ken Turner

Most Civil War books are about famous battles or leaders. But Robert Sandow, a Lock Haven University associate professor of history and Laurel Highlands native, went outside the norm with his study of opposition, violence, and desertion in North Central and North Western Pennsylvania. With the recent softcover release of *Deserter Country: Civil War Opposition in the Pennsylvania Appalachians*, readers get a second chance at an intriguing book they may have passed over when it was released as a much more costly hardcover.

The few prior books on resistance were confined to New York City's deadly draft riots. But this was Pennsylvania's mountainous lumbering region; Appalachia's poor farmers and lumbermen had close family ties and an isolated sense of community—a perfect haven for opposition, dissent, and desertion.

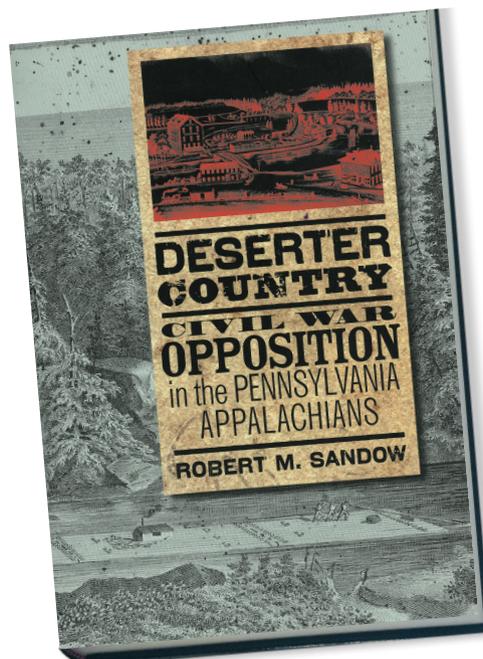
When the war began, there was already some opposition in Pennsylvania, mainly near the counties bordering the Mason Dixon line. But most people supported the Union, and even in far northern counties, young men joined regiments like the 1st PA Rifles, known as Bucktails for their penchant for wearing deer tails on their caps, or the “Wildcat” 105th PA regiment from Venango County's newly discovered oil regions. Men realized though

that they could make much more money than a soldier's \$13 per month wage by working in oil fields or lumbering.

The new Republican Lincoln administration demanded complete loyalty, passing sweeping radical measures like the 1863 Conscription Act that required all males 18 and older to register for the draft. The author notes that the Confederacy's draft, begun in 1862, was just as unpopular in the Southern Appalachian mountains of North Carolina.

Although most Democrats were “War Democrats,” there was also a peace wing, branded “Copperheads.” Safe havens like “Deserter Country” allowed them to practice the recently outlawed freedom of speech and press. They paid so that members could avoid the draft and stave off federal provost marshals searching for draftees. Women misled authorities, and some sent civilian clothes to new recruits as an incentive to desert.

Federal authorities in Pittsburgh and Harrisburg received complaints. The Provost Marshall in Pittsburgh, Colonel Richard Dodge, wrote, “I am informed there are 1,200-1,800 deserters in Clearfield County,” lumbermen who have committed “outrages and assaults.”



Sandow notes that many men, unable to pay substitutes, turned to violence and marshals were even murdered, although some claims were probably exaggerated. The mood in the wildcat oil region had reached near-anarchy, but the worst was in Clearfield County.

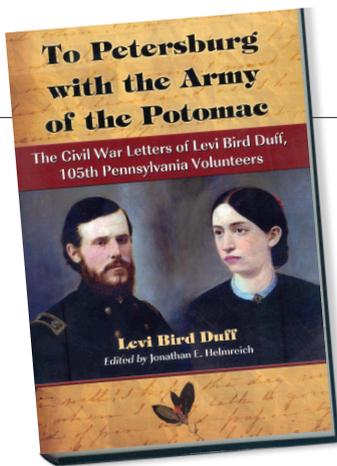
After the 1864 election, the government sent out companies of the 16th Veteran Reserve Corps—the Invalid Corps—mainly disabled, injured veterans. The roads were impassable in winter of 1864, and only 25 men at a time could travel by sled into the rough northern Pennsylvania forests.

The adventure culminated in the “Bloody Knox Massacre,” which really was not a massacre at all, and not particularly bloody. Twenty-five men from the Veteran Reserves surrounded the home of a ringleader, Tom Adams, who had served a short stint in the 149th PA Bucktails before deserting. Adams tried to escape, then went to the second floor window and fired on the soldiers, killing one. He jumped from the window and was shot and killed.

The book's true message is that the war was about loyalty, and what constitutes loyalty can be especially problematic in a democracy. Sandow also corrects the myth of the heavily urban and industrialized North, showing that portions, like Pennsylvania's Deserter Country, were rural, mountainous, and populated by poor, nonconformist farmers, much like their Southern Appalachian Mountain counterparts.

We still debate the balance, in a free society, between a nation's right to preserve itself and the freedom of individual rights. In that sense, the book is timeless, and well worth your time.

Ken Turner is co-author of *The Civil War In Pennsylvania: A Photographic History*, to be published this fall by the Heinz History Center.



To Petersburg with the Army of the Potomac: The Civil War Letters of Levi Bird Duff, 105th Pennsylvania Volunteers

Edited by Jonathan E. Helmreich
 (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2009)
 232 pps., \$45.00 softcover
 Reviewed by Art Louderback

Jonathan Helmreich, a professor emeritus in history at Allegheny College, uncovered a treasure trove of insightful letters in the archives of the college’s Peltier Library. Alumnus Levi Bird Duff graduated from Allegheny College in 1857 and went to Pittsburgh to start his career. He passed the bar on his second try and had modest success until he enlisted for the Civil War. While in Pittsburgh, he met his future wife, Harriet Nixon, who lived in Allegheny City. They married in 1862 while he was on convalescent leave after being shot in the lung. The majority of the letters in this collection are written to Harriet but there are also letters to Duff from Harriet, his father, and others.

Professor Helmreich has judiciously edited Duff’s letters, most of which begin with love notes, then descriptions of events and people, followed by a closing of more love notes. Little is mentioned in the letters about his rise in rank but it is an important aside. Helmreich often employs just the descriptions

of events and people, and only occasionally puts in a full letter to give readers a sense of Duff’s devotion for Harriet.

Duff entered service as a private in the Ninth Reserve and was immediately made corporal. After the Battle of Dranesville, Virginia, late in 1861, he was promoted to captain and took command of Company D of the 105th Pennsylvania Volunteer Regiment, known as the Wild Cat Regiment because of the rural areas of Pennsylvania from which the men came. (Most of the men in the regiment were from Clarion, Jefferson, Clearfield, Indiana, and Westmoreland counties; Company D was recruited in Clearfield and Jefferson counties.) The 105th eventually numbered 2,040 troops. Battles such as Bull Run, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, and Petersburg left 164 dead and 714 wounded, more than half of the original muster.

Duff was promoted to major after the Battle of Chancellorsville and his promotion to lieutenant colonel was being sent to him when he lost his leg at the Siege of Petersburg. After his discharge, Duff became a successful lawyer in Pittsburgh and served as district attorney of Allegheny County for three years.

The letters show a remarkable, well-educated man describing terrible events with clarity. The careful editing brings out the flavor of the letters and the people. An introduction recalls the events that led to the marriage of Levi and Harriet. The book ends by tying up the threads of Levi Duff’s life after the war, letting readers see his life in perspective. ☀

Art Louderback is the chief librarian at the Heinz History Center.

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