

## INTRODUCTION

### A DIFFERENT KIND OF WAR

Few events in the history of the United States have captured the hearts and minds of the American people quite like the Civil War.

The four-year conflict threatened to render a republic still in its infancy, and pushed to the breaking point the strength and endurance of its people. In the end, as the smoke of the final battle cleared over the countryside, the North was the decided victor. But the cost of that victory was tremendous. The once-proud South lay in ruins, its lofty goals of self-government slowly beaten down by a war of battle and attrition that cost it almost everything it had in terms of manpower, industry and commerce. And while the North didn't suffer quite as much in terms of physical destruction, it too paid a heavenly price in lives lost and families torn asunder. Observed Confederate General Robert E. Lee during the battle of Fredericksburg: "It is well that war is so terrible, or we should grow too fond of it." At the close of the Civil War, there was no remaining fondness for war on either side.

The Civil War was unique in many ways. It was the first "modern" war in terms of weaponry (the breechloader and the magazine rifle were both introduced during the conflict) and it was the first major war to make full use of the telegraph (developed in 1837) to relay information to and from battlefields. The nation's burgeoning railway system -- more than 30,000 miles worth, all but about 9,000 miles of it in the North -- was also widely used for rapid troop and supply deployment.

Most importantly for historians today, the Civil War was also one of the first major military events to be widely chronicled by both sides as it happened. Newspaper and magazine journalists from the North and South, as well as overseas, covered every aspect of the conflict from beginning to end, often with vivid, at-the-scene descriptions of major battles. Photographers, most notably Mathew Brady, and sketch artists from the major magazines also brought the war to life with both brutal and touching images of its carnage and participants. A picture, they say, is worth a thousand words, and the work of Brady and others who covered the war from the front lines speak volumes.

The war was barely over before participants and observers raced to publish their thoughts and interpretations on the previous four years. Everyone, it seemed, from Jefferson Davis and Ulysses S. Grant on down to the lowliest battle-hardened private was eager to tell the world what they saw, felt and experienced as the war raged around them. Many soldiers wrote long letters home or detailed their day to day activities in diaries that managed to survive the ravages of time. The result is a remarkable record of how the war began, how its battles were planned and fought, how the governments of the North and South struggled to survive and carry on, and how the conflict affected the weary hearts and minds of the entire nation. Written in these time-worn pages are tales of remarkable bravery and craven cowardice in the face of overwhelming odds, of stunning military victories and devastating defeats, of heart-wrenching acts of kindness and revolting acts of butchery and violence. Every emotion from exultation to paralyzing fear was chronicled in the simple words of the men and women who experienced them, amazing annals that today help put a very human face on a war that to many is now nothing more than a long list of boring facts and figures.

Over the years there has been a strong tendency to idealize the Civil War. As each generation grows farther and farther from the conflict, its brutality and bloodshed is often glossed over with

a “Gone With The Wind” type romanticism. But the Civil War was far from romantic. For most participants, it was a horrifying nightmare of bloodshed and innocence lost. Men -- many in their teens -- died by the thousands in a single battle, and they often died horribly, body parts blown away at close range by metal balls the size of a man’s thumb. The lucky ones died instantly. Those who weren’t so lucky lie bleeding on the battlefield until their life ebbed away or, sometimes worse, were carried off to field hospitals where amputation (often without anesthesia) was the treatment of choice for most battle injuries.

Imagine for a moment that you’re a soldier in the thick of battle at Fredericksburg or Gettysburg or Chickamauga; it doesn’t matter what side you’re on, the feeling of dread and hopelessness is the same. Visualize the scream of enemy artillery, of mortars exploding around you, of bullets whizzing loudly past your head. Men who just months ago might have been your neighbors are shooting at you. They’re so close that you can see the panic and fear in their mud-stained faces, the same panic and fear that is no doubt reflected in your own. You shoot and reload, shoot and reload, praying to God that you get them before they get you. Without warning, your best friend is shot in the head by a dreaded Minie ball. It happens so quickly that he doesn’t even have time to cry out, his lifeless body simply falls at your feet. But you don’t have time to mourn the loss of your friend’s life -- you’re too busy fighting to preserve your own.

Such was the Civil War for hundreds of thousands of men.

This book is an overview of that conflict. Over the next nine chapters you’ll learn everything you need to know about the Civil War -- how it started, the men who fought it, the battles that cost so many lives. You’ll also learn about the two warring sides, their weapons, uniforms, camp life and more. And you’ll learn how the nation began the lengthy healing process once the war came to an end.

We won’t attempt to interpret or analyze the Civil War -- that’s a job for others. Instead, we’re offering a simple but comprehensive chronicle of the conflict from start to finish, derived from the diaries, books and recollections of the men and women who lived it -- and often died in it. It’s in their memories that this book is dedicated.