



Hell or Richmond

Ralph Peters

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Between May 5 and June 3, 1864, the Union and Confederate armies suffered 88,000 casualties. Twenty-nine thousand were killed, wounded or captured in the first two days of combat. The savagery shocked a young, divided nation.

Against this backdrop of the birth of modern warfare and the painful rebirth of the United States, *New York Times* bestselling novelist Ralph Peters has created a breathtaking narrative that surpasses the drama and intensity of his recent critically acclaimed novel, *Cain at Gettysburg*.

In *Hell or Richmond*, thirty days of ceaseless carnage are seen through the eyes of a compelling cast, from the Union's Harvard-valedictorian "boy general," Francis Channing Barlow, to the brawling "dirty boots" Rebel colonel, William C. Oates. From Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee to a simple laborer destined to win the Medal of Honor, Peters brings to life an enthralling array of leaders and simple soldiers from both North and South, fleshing out history with stunning, knowledgeable realism.

From the horrific collision of armies in the Wilderness, where neither side wanted to fight, to the shocking slaughter of the grand charge at Cold Harbor, this epic novel delivers a compelling, authentic, and suspenseful portrait of Civil War combat.

Commemorating the approaching 150th anniversary of this grim encounter between valiant Americans, Ralph Peters brings to bear the lessons of his own military career, his lifelong study of this war and the men who fought it, and his skills as a bestselling, prize-winning novelist to portray horrific battles and sublime heroism as no other author has done.

Hell or Richmond Details

Date : Published May 7th 2013 by Forge Books

ISBN : 9780765330482

Author : Ralph Peters

Format : Hardcover 544 pages

Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, Military History, Civil War, Fiction, American History, American Civil War, North American Hi...

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From Reader Review Hell or Richmond for online ebook

Mark Luongo says

Awesome story of the Overland Campaign, Spring 1864 that covers the battles at the Wilderness, Spotsylvania and Cold Harbor. Peters magically weaves fact and fiction in a compelling account that features the likes of Hancock, Oates, Meade, Barlow, Lee, Rawlings, Gordon and Grant.

Peters draws on a wealth of resources to bring this story to life, he comments in his "Author's Note" that there is no need to embellish or exaggerate when you have the historical sources. He pleads for a coalition of historians and historical fiction writers at a time "when the education system has abandoned serious history instruction..." (556).

Marsha says

If you are going to read just one book about the Civil War, make this the one. Well written and kept my interest from the first page to the last.

A sign of a good book is wishing it wouldn't end. That is exactly what this book does.

I hate to add spoilers to a review so I will just say, you can't go wrong with this book. Way to go Ralph Peters!!

Don says

After tackling the story of Gettysburg with his last book, Cain at Gettysburg, Peters continues with the second of four planned books about the Civil War. This book begins where Grant assumed command of the Union armies and over one month's time beginning in early May 1864 tries to defeat Robert E. Lee in battle.

Peters does an excellent job with his research. I doubt a Civil War expert will find much to fault with his novelization of events. He used diaries, letters, and other source documents to build his story. Most of the characters are the brigade or division generals on both sides. Peters descriptions of the fighting is graphic without being overly gratuitous. Many of his characters are quite profane which you don't get the full flavor of when reading historical accounts.

Grant fares poorly in this book. He was no match for Lee on the battlefield. He thought nothing of ordering fruitless frontal assaults that resulted in the needless deaths of thousands. His predecessors would all retreat after losing to Lee, but not Grant. He just moved to a new ground to fight another day and fall short again. He decided to fight a bloody war of attrition knowing the North could replace troops that the South could not. Lee would win battles but lose the war. No wonder Mrs. Lincoln referred to Grant as "The Butcher."

One more than one occasion the South missed out on taking advantage of blunders by the North that could have resulted in disasters that may have forced Grant to retreat and maybe even lose his position.

Peters knows how to write period historical fiction. He does not try to transplant 21st century characters into the past, nor does he use the past to serve as a stage for a story of his own creation. I believe he succeeded in writing an engaging story as close to the truth of what happened in the bloody wilderness of Virginia 150 years ago.

happy says

In his author's note Mr. Peters writes "A historian may tell us that soldiers in wool uniforms marched twenty-two miles in 94 degree heat and many fell out by the roadside. Well executed historical fiction helps understand what it felt like to make that march." In this novel, I feel that Mr. Peters successfully met that goal. From the opening scene as he describes Gen Meade waiting for Gen Grant in the rain, to the final scenes where Lee and Grant are negotiating a truce to retrieve the Union wounded at Cold Harbor, Mr. Peters draws the reader into the 6 weeks of the Union spring offensive and the battles of The Wilderness, Spotsylvania Court House and Cold Harbor. The reader can almost feel the heat of the spring marches when it is not raining and the cold of the rain when it is, while the soldiers of both sides are maneuvering and fighting those terrible battles.

In this book Mr. Peters does not concentrate on one particular person, but brings most of the important people on both sides to life. This includes Grant, Meade, various Corps and Division Commanders of the Army of the Potomac as well as Lee and his various commanders in the Army of Northern Virginia. Unlike his previous book in this series, Cain and Gettysburg, the lower level people are based on actual soldiers of the two armies. Mr. Peters has chosen to follow C/50 PA INF and the 15th Alabama and their Col, William Oates.

The picture the author draws of Grant is not particularly flattering. He is shown as a man who has one goal in mind and does not mind spending blood to accomplish it. In many ways he brings to mind the World War One generals, just on more push and the enemy will break. His one tactic is the frontal assault. However, unlike the previous commanders of the Eastern armies, when his assaults don't work he just keeps on moving left to another bloody battle field rather than pulling back. He is portrayed as surprised when Lee doesn't crack. The tension Grants tactics and strategy create in the leadership of the Army of the Potomac is well done. Lee on the other hand is portrayed as man who is struggling with his health and finding replacement senior commanders. He is surprised that Grant doesn't retreat after the Wilderness and is caught wrong footed at Spotsylvania. After Longstreet is wounded, he is shown as not having complete faith in any of his Corps commanders, but still puts up a valiant fight in the three battles of May and June, 1864

In the story of the 15th Alabama and William Oates, the author explores the politics of the CSA Army and the struggle the Confederates had in just feeding the Army. The soldiers are shown as hungry, but fierce fighters that don't know when they are beaten. In Col Oates, Mr. Peters shows a man who has forgotten why is fighting, but continues because he "enjoys" it and is extremely good at it.

The 50th Pa shows the struggle the union with mid-level commanders. Their brigade commander is shown as incompetent at one point is relieved only to be reinstated and relieved again.

One word of warning – the language is rough in spots, the soldiers talk like soldiers talk and the talk about what soldiers talk about.

This is a fantastic read and every bit the equal of his first volume of this series. 5 stars

Glen Robinson says

This book is almost perfect. In fact, as I read it, I find it somewhat intimidating. In addition to years of research that have been put into this book, the author has captured a feel for life on both sides of combat in 1864 that most of us can't even conceive. He starts off with a list of characters that goes on for several pages, which is intimidating in itself. But because the book covers three months time and almost 550 pages, you find yourself identifying with all of the characters; Union and Confederate, private and general. As I read the notes he puts in the back he states that the only literary liberties he takes with the history is whether Lee was actually on a hilltop on a given day and the color of a colonel's hair. Well, I can live with that.

The other thing that I am impressed with is that this author can actually write, and write well. I found myself caught up in the story, eager to get to the end, but sad that the end was coming.

But I said almost perfect. If you like deep historical stories with incredible detail, this is the book for you. But if you are more focused on the action and don't want to spend pages reliving what Grant, Lee or Meade were thinking on a certain day, then you might want to consider a book a little less daunting.

Carol Storm says

Definitely a cut above the usual Civil War fare, this brutal account of the 1864 Wilderness Campaign combines sardonic humor, high-ranking intrigue, and military theory with an unforgettable portrait of soldiers in the field.

Few Civil War books give attention to the daily lives of the troops like this one does. The enlisted men in the Pennsylvania regiment of Sgt. Charles Brown (no relation to the hero of PEANUTS) are described as having fleas, lice, and constant issues with mud, filth, constipation, malnutrition, and a whole range of medical ailments related to dirt, disease, thirst and heat. And this is before the battles actually begin.

Another thing that made this book unique was the way the author describes the clash of personalities at Union Army headquarters. Most people remember George Meade as a pathetic loser, even though he actually won the Battle of Gettysburg. Meade in this book emerges as a complex, human, and surprisingly likable gentleman, even though it is also made clear that he lacks the brutality, practicality, and ruthlessness of Ulysses "Sam" Grant. The way Meade and his old-fashioned comrades clash with Grant and his Western entourage makes for fascinating reading, both in military and human terms.

Few Civil War authors work as hard as Peters does to humanize their fighting men. Overall I was very impressed with how each major character is given a past and beliefs that predate the war itself. One thing I did find annoying, however, was the way the author gives almost every major character an "adored" wife back home. Peters claims in his afterword to dislike modern "political correctness" but the very excessive way his men folk praise their distant, idealized woman-folk (not one man ever worries that there's cheating going on, let alone feels the temptation to cheat himself) suggests that Peters is covering up something sinister. Readers of *THE NAKED AND THE DEAD* by Norman Mailer (or anyone who has actually gone through boot camp) will know that soldiers don't always express themselves in terms of rapture where women are concerned.

Overall, however, this book was spectacular and the best Civil War novel I have read in many years. I can't wait to begin *VALLEY OF THE SHADOW*!

Rosemary says

Well written giving the brutal war and lives and deaths of these Americans.

Paul Ewing says

I'm on page 128 and so far it doesn't beat "Cain at Gettysburg" by the same author; yet I remain hopeful that it will meet or exceed my expectations. I do like the author's characterizations of Grant, Meade and Lee. And it seems Peters sticks very close to the facts of the actual battle. I find myself continually referring to the maps on pages 30 and 138 and that's a good thing.

Am near the end of the Battle of the Wilderness and the book is picking up speed. The dialogue is particularly convincing as it seems like real 'soldier talk' of the time. The author pulls no politically correct punches in that regard. In literature form this is about as close to the Battle of the Wilderness you can get. I will definitely finish this book. "You are there!"

Finished the stellar account of the Battle of the Wilderness by Peters. I discovered the reason for what I was missing from "Cain," a certain poignancy and irony involved in the development of two characters, a private and a non com. In the "Authors Note" Peters explains that all the characters, low or high, in "Hell or Richmond" are based on actual historical individuals. The aforementioned characters in "Cain" were fictional so the author could take more creative license with them. Don't get me wrong, reading these two novels gives you more history than it does fiction. You will come away from either book with detailed knowledge of the battles, the personalities and beliefs of the men, and the titanic struggle between two civilizations.

Keith says

As author Peters notes in his afterword to *Hell or Richmond* historical fiction remains popular because it can make the times come alive in a manner that is often more difficult for factual history. Nevertheless, Peters continues, if the historical foundations of the novel are weak then the reader is ill served. Peters, to his credit, delivers on his promise of what good historical fiction should do in *Hell or Richmond*. Peters has a background in the military, a long track record of writing accessible modern military thrillers and perhaps a Civil War apprenticeship with his series of Civil War mysteries written under the pseudonym Owen Parry. This is his second Civil War historical fiction, an earlier release is *Cane of Gettysburg*, a title I was unaware of until now. *Hell or Richmond* begins with Ulysses S. Grant's elevation to supreme command of the Union Armies, it follows the many battles that consumed so many lives in May and June 1864 - The Wilderness, Spotsylvania Court House, The North Anna River and finally, the charnel house that was Cold Harbor.

In this book Peters keeps his promise to make history come alive through fiction. The book is rooted both in fact and in the experiences of real people. In contrast to Michael Shaara's *The Killer Angels*, lodestar of Civil War fiction and the inspiration for the movie *Gettysburg*, *Hell or Richmond* is a more brutally realistic novel in both tone and description. I think this reflects a change in sensibility from 1975, when Shaara's book came out and today where movies, television and books have shone a more discerning light on the horrors of war, ancient or modern. Peters divides his focus between the common soldiers and their experiences and those of the generals who command them. As with any army, indeed any organization, there is much time spent whining, complaining and backbiting. Peters relates the relation between General Meade, commander of the

Army of the Potomac and Grant as Meade tries to convince Grant that these tactics won't work with Robert E. Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia. Meade urges caution and a slower approach but Grant knows the caution has deprived the Union of victory many times. So he attacks and when repulsed, unlike his predecessors, he attacks again and again. The slaughter is appalling, even Grant acknowledged it after the war, but in the end these tactics will give victory to the Union.

This change in style from Shaara to Peters is often more realistic but also often humorous and illuminating. General Charles Griffin, 1st Division Commander, V Corps, has three passages in the book, all relating to beans. This is one:

“Damn right,” Griffin barked. “Dig in deep, you sorry sonsofbitches. Those grayback cocksuckers are like to be along, and we’re going to let them do the charging this time. Then we’ll see who’s fucked for beans come supertime.”

These men were mean, hardened, and beautifully vengeful. Not about to run away for two shits and a whistle. They wanted their fair turn at doing the damage. “Well, stop playing with your willies and dig, goddamn it.”

Several of the men began to cheer him.

“You sorry sonsofbitches,” Griffin told them. “What the Hell are you cheering for? Get back to work, you buggers.”

His boys. God bless them.”

Andrew says

Another brilliant Civil War novel from Ralph Peters, focusing on the opening clashes between Lee's Army of Northern Virginia and the Union forces under Ulysses S. Grant, who has just come east to command, replacing George Meade. 'Hell or Richmond' is many things: brutal, hard, unflinching and, above all else, brilliant. Highly recommended.

John Nellis says

A very good historical novel, about the overland campaign of 1864. I found this book to be better than Peters' earlier book about Gettysburg. Peter's brings to life many Civil War figures from both sides not covered in many other historical novels. Yes, Grant, Lee, and Meade are here, but so is Barlow, John B. Gordon, and even lower ranks to name a few. This book tries to give you an idea of what it was like for the participants of this campaign. From accurate descriptions of Civil War combat, to the tactics, and how the battles unfolded. It is very good historical fiction, on a campaign I enjoy reading about. The time comes alive in these pages.

I'm looking forward to his proposed next book on the Petersburg campaign.

John says

Prior to reading this book, Ralph Peters was an unknown to me. By the end, I had transformed into a rabid fan. Very difficult to put down, Hell or Richmond stabbed me in the face with a bayonet of raw, brutal, and unholy realism. Simply incredible and highly recommended.

S. Stoner says

Outstanding! A Profane and Unvarnished Portrait of the Horror of War

To Hell or Richmond is a fictionalized version of very real battles on Grant's drive to break Lee's forces and destroy the mystique of one of the most admired military leaders in the annals of American military history. The tale is peopled with historical figures who led men into battles that took a terrible toll on soldiers of both the Federals and Confederates. From the impetuosity of the Chief General of the Army, Gen. U.S. Grant, to intellectual commander of the Army of the Potomac, Gen. George Meade to the fiery zealotry of Col. Emory Upton, and even to the earthy soldiers from Pennsylvania's canal district, the portrait of men at war is stripped of glory and gentility. Lee is portrayed in a more human than iconic manner, plagued with self doubts, infirmities, and at times confusion; Ewell as overly cautious, but competent; while Johnston, Cullen, Ramseur are resolute, but reactive; and yet J.E.B. Stuart maintains his image as the dashing southern cavalier, just the way he would have wanted it. All are caught in the fog of war, making and recovering from strategic and tactical errors, all the while inflicting enormous casualties on one another in the most brutal fashion imaginable. But that is the nature of war and in this realistic narrative, details of its horror are not spared.

From the griping of privates to the acrimony and strategic disagreements among the generals, this story rings true in a way that romanticized versions of Civil War campaigns fail to achieve. To be sure, individual acts of bravery and cowardice, tactical genius and stupidity, politics, and just plain human foibles all are woven skillfully in the telling, adding to the brilliance of this tale. Whether languishing in the commanders' tents as they discuss grand strategies, or slogging through the mud with the men of II Corps, or behind the abatis and earthworks of the North Carolinians and Alabamans, it all just feels real... slaughter punctuated by spates of humor, malaise, boredom, and just plain exhaustion. Through it all, one comes to appreciate that sheer industrial might and numbers will wear down even the most brilliant strategist and devoted army. From the Wilderness to Spotsylvania, to N. Anna's Creek, to Cold Harbor, and on to Petersburg, Hell or Richmond is a book no Civil War buff will want to miss.

Roger Randolph says

Fast pace with in depth characters

A lot of ground is covered in this book. Some of the battles end a little too quickly for me. It does move fast.

Anna says

Most of it is very well-written. There was only one line that really stood out as something that probably should have been rewritten (Something about a dead body being as dead as a dead mule).

I'm not very familiar with the details of the Civil War so I can't say much about historical accuracy. It seems pretty right though.

It is very long and it's basically one continuous battle which is a bit tiring by the end. It feels a bit like a part two of a trilogy...there isn't much of a traditional plot (beginning, middle, and end).

The point of view changes every chapter. I had to keep turning to the list of characters at the beginning of the book because there were just so many characters that I couldn't keep them all straight.

But definitely an interesting read.

4/22/2014 I had to come back and edit my rating. For whatever reason, this book has stuck with me. Perhaps I was a bit unfair with my original rating. Some books stick with you because of how bad they were. Some stick with you because of how good they were. This book was not bad. It was thought-provoking. And if I wasn't already reading several books right now, I just might pick it up again to give it another read.
