



The Last Full Measure: The Life and Death of the First Minnesota Volunteers

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From Reader Review The Last Full Measure: The Life and Death of the First Minnesota Volunteers for online ebook

Colleen says

Interesting and well researched account of the daily grind and extraordinary heroics of the 1st Minnesota. A fascinating piece of history.

Bob MacNeal says

The Last Full Measure is a well-written book about the First Minnesota Volunteers and their extraordinary heroics battling the secessionists in the American Civil War from the battle of Bull Run to the momentous battle of Gettysburg.

I enjoyed the first-hand accounts transcribed by the author from the soldiers' correspondence and diaries (complete with amusing spelling errors and the interesting vernacular of the day).

A story that unfolds in the soldiers' voices is compelling in it's verisimilitude. The soldiers' letters home describe the range of emotions from the relaxed boredom of an extended encampment, to the perilous intensity of bayonet combat.

Erik says

A fascinating and stirring read that is a fitting tribute to the 1st Minnesota Volunteers, a regiment of men that served in the Union army during the American Civil War that truly distinguished themselves throughout their service with consistent demonstration of bravery, heroism and sacrifice. The history captured in this book is straight from the letters of the men themselves and makes it a special read. Recommended for those interested in history, war, and the American Civil War. The book ends with the words of the well-known Gettysburg address and after reading of the sacrifice and bravery of these men, Lincoln's words couldn't ring more true and cannot fail to move even the hardest of readers.

Rita says

Thoroughly enjoyed this book, which recounts the experiences of the first soldiers from Minnesota to volunteer. This gives historical background but is taken mostly from their diaries and letters, and gives insight into their daily lives and their battle experiences, and a different perspective on their daily lives.

Chris says

I picked this book up in the MSP airport. For years I have wanted to read about these unlikely heroes, farm boys and river workers from the small towns of Winona, Stillwater, Fairbeau, Wabasha, Red Wing, St. Paul

and St Anthony Falls. This is the story of the 1st Minnesota Regiment, from their enrollment at Fort Snelling to their incredible valor at Gettysburg as dusk settled into night on July 2, 1863. It is difficult to grasp what motivated these young men, supported by their families in MN, to travel a thousand miles and die in a suicidal attack in the farmlands of PA. Ostensibly it was for the "Union", but what could they know of that? This book makes clear what they knew and why they fought - the story is told often from the soldiers own beautifully expressive and devotional letters to "back home" and to their loved ones.

Brian says

The First Minnesota fought effectively throughout the Civil War and played a major starring role at Gettysburg. Moe pulls together an extensive, broad amount of primary source material from the regiment. One shortcoming of the book is that, in my view, Moe doesn't flow the quotes and narratives smoothly - I struggled to get comfortable with this book.

Another shortcoming is when Moe tries to tie the story of the 1st Minnesota to the broader Civil War. He has a number of misfires throughout. For instance, he claims that the Union and Confederate forces were roughly equal at Antietam, when McClellan had a roughly 2-1 superiority in numbers. Moe also notes that Hooker performance at Chancellorsville went from excellent to poor in a short span - failing to mention that Hooker was hit in the head by a shell fragment and was likely suffering a concussion. Some really good first person accounts from a remarkable Civil War regiment.

Richard says

Many Civil War histories claim to give the reader a taste of the war on the human scale, but few succeed, at least as accurately, as Richard Moe's "The Last Full Measure." Moe is a native Minnesotan, lawyer and historian. He has a strong feeling for the sacrifices made by the participants on both sides of the Civil War, which he admirably honored in his work of the last almost sixteen years as the head of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. During his tenure, he succeeded in many causes which were devoted to keeping economic development from destroying the soul of some of the country's Civil War heritage sites; this success was very much enabled by Moe's efforts in increasing the Trust's endowment while removing it from its previous dependence on government funding.

"The Last Full Measure" is devoted to following the 1st Minnesota Volunteer Infantry Regiment. It was organized as part of President Abraham Lincoln's original call for volunteer regiments after the start of the war, and was formally mustered after training at Fort Snelling, Minnesota in May, 1861. It arrived in the East just in time to experience the reality of war during the First Bull Run battle. The regiment would experience casualties on this occasion second only to their future experience at Gettysburg; almost immediately, the regiment set an example for cohesiveness and reliability while in chaotic conditions. True to the practice of the times, regiments in this war would become smaller and smaller as they became bloodied in successive battles; the original muster of soldiers would stay intact, minus battle casualties, for the entire three-year period of the regiment's enlistment, since replacements would not usually be made available to make up for the numbers of soldiers lost due to attrition. Reading this book, you have to wonder what it was like for those who survived succeeding conflicts, not knowing if they would ever see the end of their enlistments alive.

Moe tracks many of the regiment's men as they endure hardship and risk through many of the war's notable battles, including The Peninsula, Antietam, Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville. His method is to let the soldiers do the talking as much as possible, through his extensive research of letters, diaries and written descriptions of battle survivors. As Moe states, the most accurate account of historical events derives from

contemporary writings of the witnesses. Reading the book, you become familiar with a number of the 1st Minnesota's participants and keep focused on the human side of the war. Two battlefield writers, the brothers Henry and Isaac Taylor, provided a lot of the descriptions of life in the regiment.

The regiment's greatest trial by fire came at Gettysburg. The second day of the three-day battle, July 2, 1863, was when the Union forces, massed on a line along Cemetery Ridge, had to try to hold fast from several terrific assaults by Confederate forces led by Robert E. Lee's lieutenant, General James Longstreet. One of the key Federal units assigned to hold this line was the Third Corps, led by Major General Dan Sickles. The general's impulsive, insubordinate decision to maneuver his Corps into a position endangering the entire Army of the Potomac's position would cost many lives, and almost wipe out the 1st Minnesota in the process. Interestingly, Sickles would not be punished for his actions; indeed, he would emerge from the Gettysburg conflict as a hero. Decades after the war, he would even be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for his actions.

Although the book is not Sickles' biography, no one exposed to Civil War history can resist being fascinated by this guy. He was a Tammany Hall politician prior to the war, meaning that he was an accomplished player in the most crooked political machine of the nineteenth century. Indeed, his powerful political connections and his success in organizing four army regiments led him to a colonel's commission as head of a regiment after the war began. (An interesting aside concerns his pre-war behavior, when he murdered his wife's lover. He became the first person to be acquitted of a crime by reason of temporary insanity in the United States). Anyway, he was a Major General when Gettysburg occurred. On July second, he ignored orders for his command's disposition on the defensive line and moved his Corps far forward of the Union line, thus endangering his entire command to Confederate envelopment and risking the loss of the entire battle for the Union. The II Corps was also part of the defensive line, led by General Winfield Scott Hancock. Although Sickles' equal in rank, he actually had been tasked by the Commanding General, George Meade, with the job of maintaining the positions of all of the Federal units along the ridge. He was busy ordering the movement of units here and there as needed, when he discovered Sickles' Corps where it was in immediate danger of being attacked by Confederate General McLaws. Hancock needed to do something immediately to avoid disaster, and he ordered the first unit available to almost risk suicide by rushing to meet the advancing Confederates and stop them in their tracks or die trying. This was the 1st Minnesota. They were literally thrown into a fight against heavy odds, with no time to think about how to proceed. It is no exaggeration to say this unit saved the day for the Federal army that day (yes, I know the 20th Maine also performed superhuman service further down the line on the same day. This is why Gettysburg is considered to be such an important event.) Moe states seventy percent of the regiment's manpower fell as wounded or dead casualties during the second and third of July, the highest casualty rate of any Federal unit at Gettysburg.

The 1st Minnesota survived Gettysburg, barely. It was assigned for a few weeks guarding New York City, where anti-draft riots had occurred previously, and was shipped down to Virginia to fight against Robert E. Lee's army again before the end of the year. Early in 1864, the remnant's of the regiment were transported back to Minnesota for mustering-out. They retraced their original journey of three years previous, in reverse, except winter weather prevented travel home by steamboat. Moe paints a bittersweet picture of the survivors, about 325 out of over a thousand frontiersmen, farmers and schoolteachers who had originally volunteered, finishing their final leg after the end of the railroad, as they traveled over the Mississippi River ice wearing buffalo robes while riding in horse-drawn sleighs. Some would accept the offer of reenlisting, with promotions for their outstanding service. A number of privates in the regiment's early days continued serving in the war as commissioned officers. However, only 135 of the original 1st Minnesota stayed in service, finally eliminating the unit's ability to survive intact. Most of these seasoned 135 veterans, however, served as the nucleus of the leadership for the newly formed First Battalion Minnesota Infantry Volunteers, and would continue to serve with distinction until the end of the war.

Moe ends the book by reprinting the text of the address delivered by Abraham Lincoln on November 19, 1863, on a platform a few feet away from the final resting places of Isaac Taylor and 55 fellow Minnesotans.

Did you ever have to memorize and recite the Gettysburg Address in school? I did, I think in 8th grade. As it says, in part: "... that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion ..."

Jeff says

As the Ken Burns quote on the backcover says, this book is about the PEOPLE! The reader gets to really know individuals in the Regiment.

This isn't a book that tries to do too much - you merely experience the war along with the First Minnesotans. It isn't about generals or politicians or who did what when.

Richard Moe does a fabulous job.. as he states in his intro, he merely takes all the letters and testimonials and puts them together in a readable and exciting text. You will be amazed by the bravery of this regiment too.

There are some very entertaining characters and stories along the way. One problem I have is that the most interesting soldier, Thomas Pressnell kind of disappears before Gettysburg and isn't mentioned much in the epilogue. This guy climbed trees, escaped a Rebel Prison Guard, and even met Abraham Lincoln! Two of the main characters, Issac and Henry Taylor (featured on the cover photograph) are very real, likeable, honest guys.

This book shows that the Civil War is about much more than Generals and Politicians bickering back and

forth- there are REAL humans who experienced the war, and you can certainly relate to them.

Michael Donohue says

Focuses on individual soldiers, not particularly well written. good first hand accounts of action at Gettysburg

Julie says

A good slow read. I was impressed with our soldiers from my state :)

Dave says

Very, very good. I was reading a general book about the Civil War (don't remember which one) and it mentioned what occurred during the battle of Gettysburg when Gen. Hancock essentially sacrificed a Minnesota regiment to buy his line some time to be reinforced. The book didn't go into much detail, but I was interested to learn some more, so I did some research and found this book.

It was fascinating to follow a single regiment from its inception through the first 3 years of the Civil War. And having the writings of such soldiers as the Henry brothers to chronicle the three years really brought the whole experience a whole new level of depth. I found the diary entries of just day-to-day soldiering, especially those of Isaac Henry, to be the most interesting and surprisingly sophisticated. It really helped to bring home the confusion, isolation, thrill, and tragedy of what it must have been like to be a single, common soldier in the overwhelming events of the Civil War. A great read for Civil War buffs.

Matt says

Since I've left Minnesota for the corn-studded paradise known to Nebraskans as Nebraska, and to the rest of America as that place somewhere in the middle where everyone wears red and cares too much about college football, I have come to have a great appreciation for my home state and its rich past.

Sure, Nebraska has a fine history, if you care to poke around. At the far western end, there is Fort Robinson, where the last free bands of free Indians surrendered what remained of their broken cultures; in the middle, there is the Kearney Arch, near the remains of Old Fort Kearny, an early outpost along the Oregon Trail (but don't confuse it with the more famous Fort Phil Kearny in Wyoming, location of the Fetterman Massacre); and on the eastern border, along the muddy Missouri, there is Omaha, onetime hotbed of the emo music scene, and still the home of Warren Buffet and the College World Series. Really, it's great. Just great.

Oh, who am I kidding?

For a person who rates geographic locations in terms of historical sites (and yes, I am the life of every party), Nebraska does not compare to Minnesota. You can paddle a canoe along the routes of the voyageurs; you can climb old lighthouses and descend abandoned iron-ore mines; you can visit the site of one of the deadliest fires in US history, or stop by the Metrodome to witness firsthand the disasters befalling the

Vikings; you can eat rock candy and watch old-timey blacksmiths at Fort Snelling; and you can spend a day following the trail of the Sioux Uprising of 1862, from the Upper Sioux Agency to Fort Ridgely to New Ulm.

In terms of Minnesota's legacy, though, one event has always stood out, above all others, and it didn't even take place within her borders. Rather, it occurred along a creek bed in Pennsylvania, near the college town of Gettysburg.

On July 2, 1862, on the second day of the greatest battle ever fought on the American continent, the Union Army was positioned along a line of hills and ridges, which formed the shape of a fishhook. On the left flank, along a low ridge, a political general named Dan Sickles found himself unable to leave well enough alone. Seeing higher ground in front of him, he led his corps forward from their position in the line. This placed Sickles' men way out in front of the rest of the Union Army. This movement, undertaken without orders or foresight, caused a salient, or bulge, in the Union lines, and left both Sickles' flanks dangerously exposed.

The Confederates, seeing this, pressed their attack on Sickles, and sent his men fleeing. A gap opened up in the Union line. Seeing this, General Winfield Scott Hancock plugged the hole with the only available material at hand: 262 men of the First Minnesota Regiment of Volunteers.

Hancock ordered the First Minnesota to undertake a bayonet charge, right into the teeth of an oncoming Confederate brigade. The intent was to slow the Rebel advance, and buy a few minutes for Hancock to stitch his lines back together. So, 262 men ran down a gently-sloping ridge, took cover along Plum Run, and stalled the attack; only about 30% of those men were able to walk away.

This valiant charge is memorialized by a painting that hangs in the State Capitol, as well as by a striking monument on the fields of Gettysburg, that shows a soldier running towards an imaginary enemy, a bayonet poised at the tip of his charged rifle. Despite the contemporary fame of that charge, however, its memory has faded. No one visits the State Capitol, and the Minnesota monument at Gettysburg gets lost among a thousand other statues. When the Regiment's story is told, it usually only garners a paragraph or two (if only Michael Shaara had chosen to write about the First Minnesota, instead of the Twentieth Maine...). Time has leeched the immediacy, the poignancy, of their sacrifice.

If you want to know the story in full, however, there is Richard Moe's *The Last Full Measure: The Life and Death of the First Minnesota Volunteers*. It is a regimental history, that begins with its mustering-in at Fort Snelling, shortly after the Confederates shelled Fort Sumter, and ends with its mustering-out at Fort Snelling, shortly after it was mauled at Gettysburg. Twelve hundred men went off to war; 325 came home unhurt. Two hundred men of the Regiment were killed outright; some 500 were wounded.

Before its rendezvous with destiny in the shadow of Cemetery Ridge, the First Minnesota proved to be one of the crack regiments in the Army of the Potomac. It fought extremely well at Bull Run and during the Peninsula Campaign, and was fortuitously spared disaster at Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville. It gained a measure of immortality at Gettysburg for its gallant rush, but also played an important role on July 3 in helping to repel Pickett's Charge.

The Last Full Measure is a soldier's-eye view of the Civil War. There is very little space devoted to the broader context of the war. The maps that are included are next to worthless, and show only the general position of the Regiment on the field of battle. This is a notable shortcoming, yet in a way, somewhat appropriate; you know as much about what's going on as the soldiers in the Regiment knew.

As an author, Moe never establishes much of a voice. The great bulk of this book is comprised of the writings of the soldiers themselves: letters, diaries, and articles written for hometown newspapers (the

Regiment included several talented warrior-correspondents). Thankfully for the reader, these men had abundant literary talents, to go along with their courage. They wrote with a keen eye for detail, and often commented on their present circumstances with a mordant wit. Some of the most enjoyable portions of the book took place far away from the fields of battle, where you read about the life of a soldier in camp: their battles with boredom; their various shenanigans; and their utter ingenuity in matters of keeping warm, cooking food, and procuring liquor.

The uncontested stars of *The Last Full Measure* are the brothers Isaac and Henry Taylor. While some of the diarists and letter writers slip in and out of the story, the Taylors provide a consistent presence, and become the only characters that we get to know with any true depth. Their odyssey, including their palpable affection for each other, provides the human thread that ties the First Minnesota's story together.

The dramatic peak of the First Minnesota's story is, of course, its Gettysburg apotheosis. Bull Run and Antietam and camp life are all well and good, but it is all buildup to those shattering few minutes on July 2:

With bayonets fixed, officers and men were running downhill in a line extending nearly one hundred yards from end to end, although to call the incline a hill would be to exaggerate. It was an ever so gradual slope extending two hundred yards across two fields to the swale at the bottom, now heavy with smoke from Confederate firing. "In a moment," according to Lochren, the regiment was "sweeping down the slope directly upon the enemy's centre." The full force of Gen. Cadmus Wilcox's brigade of nearly 1,600 Alabamans was now focused on the 262 advancing Minnesotans, and artillery shelling combined with accurate musketry to deadly effect. "Bullets whistled past us," Carpenter said, "shells screeched over us; canister and grape fell about us; comrade after comrade dropped from the ranks; but on the line went. No one took a second look at his fallen companion. We had no time to weep."

In an epilogue, Moe follows the postwar lives of the First Minnesota survivors. Most of them lived solid, unremarkable lives, forever shadowed by those freighted moments when, in the words of Oliver Wendell Holmes, their "hearts were touched with fire." For obvious reasons, nothing they did later could ever hope to equal their charge into Wilcox's Brigade. While they lived, they were exalted, and it is gratifying to know that these guys never had to buy themselves another drink.

When I was a kid, I used to believe that the First Minnesota had saved the world. If it wasn't for them, I thought, the Confederates would have smashed the Union lines; rolled up both flanks; marched on Washington; won the Civil War; destroyed the Union; and allowed Adolf Hitler free reign in Europe.

Obviously, none of that is likely. Wilcox's assault on Cemetery Ridge took place as night was falling. Even had he pierced Hancock's lines, it is doubtful he would have had the time or support to properly press his advantage. Though the First Minnesota was once loftily eulogized by generals, politicians, and presidents, it is probably more accurate to remember them as an elite group of fighting men who stepped into a breach and helped secure an important Union victory. It should not diminish their accomplishment to acknowledge that the fate of the known world did not rest on their shoulders.

The men of the First Minnesota have earned their immortality for the reason that, when called upon to march into certain death, they not only went, but they ran.

LNH says

The book makes extensive use of the diaries and letters home written by the soldiers--which was something I really liked. Reading their experiences in their own words conveyed the war, in all its mundanity, irrational, courageous, dejecting nature, in a way that no standard expository history could. However, I think had the author done a few simple things, the book would have been much better. It followed so many of the soldiers that I found it hard to keep track of who was who and get a deep sense of who the soldier was--I never got invested in any of them. And while this is a non-fiction book, I think it still has to present its subject in a way that invests the reader in that character. The history is also very one-sided, and relies almost exclusively on these excerpts. I would have liked to have read about the confederate experiences of the battles with the First Minnesota--how did they think the regiment fought? How did they feel they were treated when taken prisoner? When the Union and "Secesh" soldiers traded news and jokes across the river while on sentry duty, what did the "Secesh" soldiers think of those interactions? I have to imagine those accounts exist, and I'm not sure why the author didn't seek them out and include them here and there just to add some more context.

Jeffrey Williams says

I was really disappointed with this book, especially having read John Quinn Imholte's, "The First Volunteers" which was published by Ross & Haines in 1963. What Moe essentially did was steal all of Imholte's sources and rewrote the material. There was very little in the way of new sources and in certain areas he didn't go into depth enough like Imholte did.

Furthermore, the Minnesota Historical Society holds collections from other 1st Minnesota soldiers who shed further light to the day-to-day activities and battles of the regiment, and none of these additional sources were explored.

If I were a college teacher and read Imholte's book, I would give Moe an "F" for plagiarism.

Dave Cheeney says

Yeah Minnesota! What a regiment!
