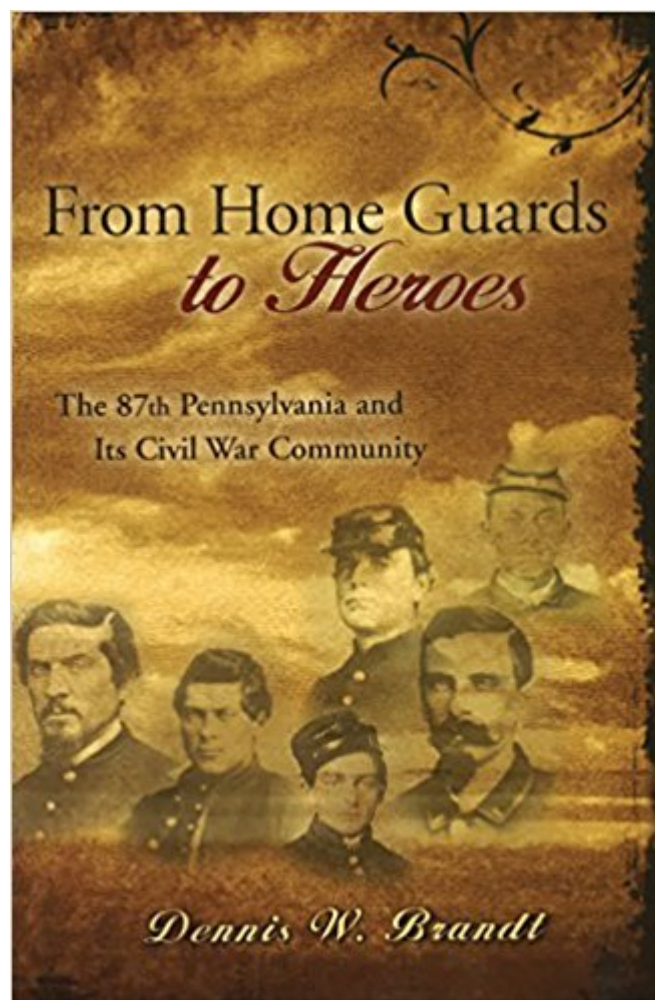




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From Home Guards To Heroes: The 87th Pennsylvania And Its Civil War Community (Shades Of Blue And Gray)



Synopsis

The soldiers of the 87th Pennsylvania Infantry fought in the Overland campaign under Grant and in the Shenandoah valley under Sheridan, notably at the Battle of Monocacy. But as Dennis Brandt reveals in *From Home Guards to Heroes*, their real story takes place beyond the battlefield. The 87th drew its men from the Scotch-Irish and German populations of York and Adams counties in south-central Pennsylvania—a region with closer ties to Baltimore than to Philadelphia—where some citizens shared Marylanders' southern views on race while others aided the Underground Railroad. Brandt's unique regimental history investigates why these "boys from York" enlisted and why some deserted, the ways in which soldiers reflected their home communities, and the area's attitudes toward the war both before and after hostilities broke out. Brandt takes a humanistic approach to the Civil War, revealing the more personal aspects of the struggle in a book that focuses on the soldiers themselves. Using their own words to describe action both on and off the battlefield, he sheds light on the lives of ordinary men: the comparative values of farm and city boys, their motives and concerns, the effect of battle on soldiers and their families, and the suffering that veterans took to the grave. Brandt also looks at soldiers' racial views, illuminating their deepest worries about the war, and at community politics and problems of discipline surrounding this ideologically divided unit. Grounded in more than a decade of research into nearly two thousand military records, this is one of the few regimental histories based on more than one thousand pension records for the entire regiment, plus nearly eight hundred additional record sets for other area soldiers. Brandt tapped regional newspapers and a cache of unpublished letters and diaries—some from private collections not previously known—to provide an invaluable account of Civil War sensibilities in a northern area bordering a slave state. *From Home Guards to Heroes* is a book about war in which humanity rather than troop movement takes center stage. Engagingly written for a wide audience and meticulously researched, it offers a distinctive image of a community and the intimate lives of the men it sent off to fight—and a story that will intrigue any Civil War aficionado.

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Customer Reviews

Dennis W. Brandt is an independent researcher who lives in Red Lion, Pennsylvania.

From Home Guards to Heroes is a thoroughly researched, creative, and engaging history of the 87th Pennsylvania Infantry and the primary location from which its members came, Adams and York Counties, Pennsylvania. (Reviewer's disclosure: my great-great-great uncle, Daniel P. Reigle, was a member of Company F of the 87th, leading to my personal interest in this unit.) The foundation of this book is Brandt's extensive research: U.S. census records, nearly 2000 Compiled Military Service Records, and over 1000 pension files for 87th Pennsylvania members, in addition to those records for over 800 men from the Adams/York areas who enlisted in other units in 1861. This study yields descriptive data on the 87th and comparative data relative to men in other units on factors such as their professions, age, physical characteristics, age at death, life expectancy, American-born and foreign-born, and their personal worth in personal property and real estate at the time they enlisted. The data on 1861 enlistments (both 87th and other units) is presented with the 1860 Lincoln vote for each of the fifty-five townships and boroughs in the two counties. The quantitative research is complemented by extensive use of newspapers, including not only major city newspapers, but the local newspapers in the Gettysburg, York, and Hanover, important for understanding the political landscape and personalities in the area. For example, in addition to the rich contemporary information yielded by those newspapers, this research also yielded the valuable recollections by Michael Heiman in the York Gazette in 1891-1892. Further, Brandt has made use of any available manuscript sources, such as the George Blotcher papers at the excellent library of the York County Historical Trust, the Thomas Cowl papers at the U.S. Army Military History Institute and Penn State University libraries, and other materials provided by 87th descendants. He uses this

information to create "sketches" of each company in the 87th, and the primary officers who were instrumental in its formation and its four years of service. I have seen many of these names "on paper" in years of reading about the 87th, but I found Brandt's sketches to provide an entirely new level of perspective on the men themselves. This is a "real people" approach to the regiment's people and history, and it does not hesitate to share information that is delicate or uncomplimentary. For example, in the unit's rush to organize, there was no attempt to make any pre-enlistment physical examination of the potential enlistees. Brandt presents data to show that this resulted in more than 11% of the 1861 enlistees leaving the service for illness or injury; by comparison, the 7th PA Reserves' Company H, recruited in the same area, conducted full physical exams and experienced less than half that level of attrition. At another level that paints a less-than-heroic picture of some of the 87th's men, the unit was chartered and recruited primarily to provide security on the important Northern Central Railroad between Harrisburg and Baltimore. Although this was critically important to the Union effort in the first year of the war, such duty was not expected to involve major combat, long marches, or significant hardships at great distances from home. As a result, there was significant consternation among some parts of the 87th when their mission changed to becoming a fighting unit in the Union Army. Brandt examines the subject of desertions in detail, both real and on paper only, especially those occurring in the aftermath of the 87th's loss of 293 men captured at 2nd Winchester during the prelude to Gettysburg in June 1863. Drawing on Ella Lonn's classic *Desertion During the Civil War* for perspective, he provides many details on the individual cases of some men who intended to desert and did so, but also includes cases that illustrate how men could be tagged as "deserters" unfairly due to cumbersome administrative processes,. Finally, the chapter on "South-Central Pennsylvania and Race" will undoubtedly leave readers with roots in the 87th's home territory with a better understanding of the complex views of the community on race, slavery, emancipation, and the meaning of citizenship, but also with some embarrassment in accepting in our 21st Century the opinions of our ancestors in the 19th Century. These are difficult subjects to tackle objectively and fairly, and I commend the author for doing so. It provides additional perspective for the 87th's solid performance as part of the VI Corps in 1864 and 1865. A difficult choice for the author of any regimental history is how much detail to include on the battles in which the unit participated. Brandt made the choice to not attempt to relate in detail the battles at 2nd Winchester, Wilderness, Spotsylvania, Cold Harbor, 3rd Winchester, Fisher's Hill, Cedar Creek, the Petersburg Campaign including the Breakthrough on 2nd April 1865, and the Appomattox Campaign. He does include a more extensive analysis of Monocacy because of the 87th's pivotal role there in slowing down Early's advance on Washington D.C. This is clearly the

right choice, in my opinion, because it enables Brandt to use the space of his book to focus on the 87th, while the reader interested in more depth on the 87th at the major battles can readily turn to other excellent studies. This book will be of value to anyone studying the genealogy or local history of the York/Adams County area. However, I also believe this book to be of significant value to anyone interested in an indepth understanding and history of a Union infantry regiment. Although the 87th was, of course, a set of specific individuals and events, the themes, dynamics, and patterns likely have a high degree of similarity in other units. I will not only be re-reading this book more than once, but will use it as a valuable reference in my own Civil War genealogy and history research.

If you are looking for a Civil War story that is new and different this is the book for you. I was held captive from start to finish. Dennis Brandt tells, after 10 years of research, the story only he can tell. The story of the 87th Pennsylvania. It is a story about the lives of the boys from York and Adams county. Yes, Gettysburg is in Adams County but this is not another tired tale of that great story. It is instead about how the boys started their Army life rather dull, guarding railroads ect. as many battles raged on in other parts of the U.S.A. But our boys get taken captive, they escape, they die and in the end we ponder over whether The Grand Old Flag would still fly over those states south of Mason-Dixon if not for these HEROS.

To the author: I can't tell you how fantastic I think it is that all of your hard work on this book really paid off. To me, it wasn't merely a history book; it was an opportunity to stand beside the men you described and to watch them be who they are. I could see the wear and tear on their clothes and almost smell the baked-in odors of days and months without baths.

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