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An illustration gallery follows page 141.
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Prologue

On May 24, 1861, Americans knew they faced civil war, but to many in the North and South, it seemed that the war would prove a quick one, with relatively little bloodshed. Even during the bombardment of Fort Sumter that had inaugurated the war, not a man in either the Federal garrison or the secessionists ringing Charleston Harbor had been killed or wounded. The weeks since had seen only a smattering of fighting, with both the US government and the rival Confederate government having just begun raising the armies that would march to battle in the coming summer. Little blood had been shed to arrest the attention of Americans at war with one another. All that would change on May 24. By the end of the day, North and South would have heroes to mourn and celebrate. Each would celebrate a man who had been killed and a man who had killed, the slain and the slayer. For the defenders of the Union, they would have two heroes to celebrate: a martyr and his avenger. For supporters of the Confederacy, their hero martyr would be one and the same.

The previous day, Virginia had formally ratified its articles of secession, so on May 24, President Lincoln ordered Federal troops in Washington to cross the Potomac and occupy the city of Alexandria. The force included men from the 11th New York Volunteer Infantry Regiment, known as the Fire Zouaves. Now their colonel, Elmer E. Ellsworth, accompanied by the regimental chaplain, a lieutenant, a newspaperman, and four enlisted men, entered the Marshall House hotel. A large Rebel flag flew defiantly from atop the hotel, large enough to be seen from the White House. Ellsworth
wanted the flag down. Not only did the impudent banner offend his patriotic soul but also the colonel feared that his Fire Zouaves, recruited from rowdy New York City firemen, might turn unruly and destructive at the sight of the flag.  

Inside the hotel, which was really a glorified tavern, Ellsworth and his party met a startled man in the hallway, dressed only in trousers and shirt-sleeves. “Who put that flag up?” Ellsworth snapped at him. “Are you the proprietor?” The colonel, at five feet six inches, stood at least half a foot shorter than the disheveled man, yet the commanding tone came easily, and not solely because he was backed up by Fire Zouaves with fixed bayonets. The twenty-four-year-old Elmer Ellsworth had studied law in Illinois, where in 1860 he met and befriended Abraham Lincoln. In addition to his legal studies, Ellsworth pursued his passion for all things military, eventually raising a crack militia outfit, the United States Zouave Cadets, with whom he had toured the East Coast, dazzling crowds with the Zouave Cadets’ flashy uniforms and highly acrobatic military drill.  

The civilian told Ellsworth he was only a boarder and knew nothing about the flag, and so the party continued their way upstairs. What the colonel did not know was that James W. Jackson, perhaps thirty-seven years old, did in fact own the Marshall House. Moreover, Jackson was an ardent secessionist and defender of slavery. In 1859, he had ridden off to Harpers Ferry to help put down John Brown’s raid, but he arrived too late to take part in the fighting. Moreover, the Stars and Bars that flew over his establishment was his pride and joy. Made for him by local seamstresses, he had them add a star to the blue field with each state that seceded.  

On the roof of the Marshall House, Ellsworth cut down the flag and, carrying the captured banner over his shoulder, headed downstairs with his seven companions. As they descended the stairs to the second-floor landing, with Private Francis E. Brownell in the lead, James Jackson stepped out of the shadows and aimed a double-barreled shotgun at Ellsworth. Seeing the threat, Brownell tried to deflect the shotgun with his rifle, but he lost his footing on the stairs. Jackson fired a blast into Ellsworth’s chest, the load also driving a medal he was wearing into his body. As Ellsworth tumbled to the floor, killed instantly, Jackson turned his attention to the soldier. Brownell, having regained his footing, parried the shotgun upward, the second shot passing safely over his head. The Fire Zouave leveled his rifle and shot Jackson square in the face, then, still fueled by adrenaline, stabbed the proprietor “through and through the body” with a twenty-two-inch saber bayonet before he could even fall to the floor.  

Ellsworth’s death made him the first Union officer killed in the Civil
War. Already one of the most famous military figures in the United States, he was mourned and commemorated across the North as a national martyr, memorialized in prose, verse, artwork, and music. One song honored him as “our gallant Zouave; / Who tore down the banner of Treason, / And perished our Union to save.” Northern print media condemned the killing of Ellsworth by Jackson, a civilian, as “murder” and “assassination.” E. H. House, the New York Tribune reporter who had accompanied Ellsworth and witnessed the shooting, wrote that Jackson’s face, mangled by Brownell’s bullet, still bore “the most revolting expression of rage and hatred I ever saw.” Northerners also celebrated their still living hero, Francis Brownell, who in killing Jackson had provided “instantaneous” retribution for his fallen colonel. He posed for several photographs, including a full-length portrait in which he stood with rifle and bayonet, one foot atop the captured Rebel flag. Numerous patriotic envelopes and stationery depicted the deadly encounter, usually prominently featuring Brownell shooting or stabbing the assassin. Beneath one such image, in which Jackson bled copious red ink from his wounds, the envelope featured Brownell’s message home: “Father—Col. Ellsworth was shot dead this morning. I killed his murderer. Frank.” A poem in one newspaper suggested that the best way to honor Ellsworth was to follow Brownell’s example, exhorting readers, “Don’t shed a tear for him! / Mourn him in blood. / Quick-dropping bullets / Shall work him most good.”

Just as partisan political differences divided North and South, Union partisans hailed Ellsworth and Brownell as heroes and condemned Jackson as the villain, while Confederate partisans recast the narrative with James Jackson as a Southern hero. In a short biography of the Virginian, copies of which were sold to benefit his family, the title page hailed Jackson as “the slayer of Ellsworth” and “the first martyr in the cause of Southern Independence.” The biographer lauded him as a passionate Confederate patriot devoted to his country and flag, both of which he defended with “terrible determination.” Whether the innkeeper had encountered Ellsworth when the soldiers first entered the Marshall House, the biographer professed uncertainty. What Confederate sympathizers did know was that Jackson had awakened to find his home “overrun by insolent trespassers,” led by a glory hound of a colonel. The Alexandrian had manfully defended his home and flag and bravely lost his life in the process. Like Ellsworth’s admirers in the North, Southerners commemorated their own hero in verse as well as prose. A poem from South Carolina celebrated Jackson as both slayer and martyr, boasting that the innkeeper had exacted an “Ellsworth” from the Yankees before he died. The last stanza declared:
“Down with your flag!” the spoilers cry.
Oh, how his brave pulsations bound!
Did he obey? His shots reply—
He brings his foeman to the ground.
But he fell too. For country’s sake,
He on her altar bleeding lies.

While the North found two heroes in the Marshall House incident, the martyr and his avenger, Southern Rebels found in James W. Jackson a hero who embodied both roles.6

The altercation in Alexandria offered an allegory for the political stakes over which Americans North and South were preparing to fight. Ellsworth and Jackson had died over more than simply a flag. Their deaths centered on the question of which flag would fly over not just the Marshall House but over all Virginia and the other secessionist states: the Stars and Stripes for which Elmer Ellsworth fought, or James Jackson’s Stars and Bars. Would the United States be preserved as one nation, or would the new Confederate States manage to tear themselves away to begin their own rival American republic? Similarly, the altercation reflected the military means that would decide those questions. Just as Abraham Lincoln had vowed to put down the rebellion with Federal troops and state volunteers, he ordered those forces to occupy Alexandria, and Colonel Ellsworth had on a still smaller scale entered the Marshall House to haul down a flag symbolizing that rebellion. Had Ellsworth acted the patriot, dying to quash an unlawful rebellion and remove a treasonous banner? Or had Jackson acted justly, defending his city, home, and property from an oppressive invader? The central question of slavery had not played a direct role in the incident (excepting that Jackson owned slaves and zealously defended the institution), yet nevertheless the killings spoke directly to some of the most immediate political concerns of white Northerners and Southerners in the opening months of the Civil War.

The actions of Ellsworth, Jackson, and Brownell, as well as the attitudes of their supporters, reflected not only the conflict between Americans in 1861 but also realities about the nature of war itself. Americans loyal to the Union honored both the fallen leader and the soldier who avenged Ellsworth’s death by dispatching his killer. Those siding with the Confederacy hailed the man who had slain his foe but had lost his own life in so doing. Americans on each side found heroes in both the slain and the slayer. They recognized and affirmed that war could mean both dying and killing for a country and for a cause.
Introduction

“War means fighting, and fighting means killing,” Confederate cavalry commander Nathan Bedford Forrest famously declared. At its core, the Civil War involved Americans killing Americans. Regardless of the moral lens through which one views the conflict, that truth remains. If we emphasize the tragedy of the hundreds of thousands of lives lost, that tragedy is further emphasized by the fact that the combat deaths resulted from Americans slaying one another, Federals and Confederates engaging in a kind of national fratricide. If we emphasize the good that the war achieved—preservation of the American experiment in constitutional self-government and destruction of chattel slavery in the United States—then killing on the battlefield provided one of the primary means to that end. Despite that reality, Americans tend to gloss over that truth in remembering the Civil War. We speak plainly about Union and Confederate soldiers dying for their cause and country, but we more euphemistically describe them as fighting for those things. The dying resulted from Americans fighting one another. Plainly stated, Billy Yanks and Johnny Rebs killed one another.

That we are sometimes reticent about this truth is hardly surprising, for the nature of killing in war is a sensitive subject. In interviews and question-and-answer sessions with veterans, members of the public are often enjoined to avoid bluntly asking, “Did you kill anybody?” We advise against the question not only because it may prove painful or embarrassing to the veteran but also because the question is so common, especially among children and young adults, because it is a question many of us deeply want to ask. For nonveterans, especially Americans living in the peace and
security amid twenty-first-century prosperity, war—and killing in war—poses a great mystery.

Historical novelist Bernard Cornwell, speaking of mankind’s fascination with war throughout history, helps explain why the violence in war enrthalls us:

War, at its sharp end, is a place where the rules that govern human behavior cease to exist. We lead our ordinary lives surrounded by rules. Thou shall not kill, steal, covet, or kidnap, and our society has constructed a framework of police, courts, and laws to enforce those rules which serve to make our lives tolerably safe. Yet in war we are encouraged to kill, to plunder the enemy, and to capture his territory, families, and wealth. I suspect that many of us are fascinated by this reversal of normality and wonder how we would behave in a world where the rules that govern our safety have been abandoned.

For others, killing in war repels rather than captivates. The controversy over the 2014 film *American Sniper*, depicting the life of US Navy SEAL Chris Kyle, America’s deadliest sniper, illustrates the conflicting attitudes toward killing in war. The film’s release and popularity prompted some public figures, generally outspoken opponents of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, to criticize Kyle and his military service, describing him as a coward, mass murderer, and “American psycho.” Ironically, many antiwar leaders and movements of the post-9/11 world have been praised for generally focusing on criticizing political and military policy while still vocally supporting the troops themselves, partly a lesson learned from the pain and public backlash stirred by the more vociferous antimilitary sentiments voiced by some opponents of the Vietnam War. However, the popular celebration of Chris Kyle and his deadly sniping skills seemed to touch a nerve among those who preferred to think of members of the military as victims of war rather than effective, unapologetic warriors skilled at killing the enemy.

This study examines Union and Confederates at the “sharp end” of the Civil War. It explores their attitudes to and experiences of killing in combat. One of my goals was to document the spectrum of these attitudes and experiences as recorded by the soldiers. As many as three million men combined served under arms for the United States and the Confederacy, and, as one historian reminds us, “enormous diversity . . . prevailed within Civil War America and the armies that it raised.”

Drawing conclusions about the mind-set of three million individuals—and as American citizen-soldiers, Federals and Confederates most certainly saw themselves as individuals—
would seem daunting for a subject as complex and personal as killing in battle. However, merely documenting what soldiers wrote would offer only reportage, and it would detract from the value of my project if I withheld my analysis and conclusions as a historian. On the basis of the evidence, I contend that the majority of Union and Confederate soldiers positively affirmed and accepted killing the enemy as part of their military duty and a necessity for their respective causes to prevail. Conversely, a significant minority harbored doubts about or outright objected to killing in war, but even among the ambivalent combatants, most tended to fight just as purposefully (and potentially lethally) as their more bellicose comrades.

The nature of killing in the Civil War was not a simple dichotomy between killing and not killing. Rather, soldiers’ attitudes and behavior fell along a spectrum of readiness, willingness, and enthusiasm, from the most prolific killers to reluctant killers to those who actively tried not to kill in battle. From the soldiers’ accounts, most Civil War fighting men fell somewhere along the spectrum in which they found themselves able to fight against the enemy as effectively as they could. Perhaps most remarkably, Union and Confederate soldiers in prolonged contact with one another often alternated with surprising ease and fluidity between peaceful coexistence and actively trying to kill.

A number of factors enabled the Civil War soldier to kill, or try to kill, willingly in battle. The system of command and control exercised on the soldiers and the tactics in which they were trained may or may not have brought success on the battlefield, but it worked remarkably effectively in enforcing their combat roles and increased the likelihood that they would fight as lethally as possible. The nature of Civil War battlefields often shielded Federals and Confederates from the potential trauma of killing in combat. Poor visibility in battle, especially as a result of the smoke produced by black powder weaponry, diminished soldiers’ abilities to know whether they personally had killed anyone. Evidence also suggests that a substantial majority of Civil War soldiers were strongly motivated by political ideology, which gave purpose and meaning to killing on the battlefield. Furthermore, the society that produced them and for which they fought strongly affirmed and legitimized killing the enemy—even an enemy who was a fellow American.

These fundamental conclusions diverge in key ways from those advanced in the previous historical literature. After World War II, US Army combat historian S. L. A. Marshall controversially suggested that only 15 to 25 percent of American combat infantrymen during the conflict had fired their weapons in battle. Less controversial than Marshall’s actual findings was his
explanation for this behavior; he noted, “The average and normally healthy individual—the man who can endure the mental and physical stresses of combat—still has such an inner and usually unrealized resistance toward killing a fellow man that he will not of his own volition take life if it is possible to turn away from the responsibility.” Dave Grossman, a retired army officer and West Point psychology professor, accepts Marshall’s findings and affirms his rationale in On Killing, perhaps the most influential book for establishing killing in combat as a subject for serious scholarly scrutiny. He posits that the prospect of killing in battle acts as great a stressor for men in battle as does fear of being killed. Grossman’s book directly motivated my decision to undertake a “killology,” as Grossman terms the field, of the American Civil War, as well as incorporate much of his scholarly framework and many of his arguments. Nevertheless, while I do not necessarily dispute Grossman’s central argument as it pertains to twentieth-century soldiers, from whom he derives his most direct findings, I do challenge how accurately his conclusions describe the experiences of Civil War soldiers. From my own research, I contend that Federal and Confederate combat forces displayed greater willingness in their attitudes and behavior to kill in battle than previously supposed.

This work represents the first monograph treatment of the nature of killing in Civil War combat. It also represents a continuation of the study of the lives of Civil War soldiers, a field pioneered by Bell I. Wiley in the 1940s and 1950s and enriched in recent memory in works by Reid Mitchell, James M. McPherson, Earl J. Hess, and Drew Gilpin Faust. Each of these historians’ contributions addresses the subject of killing as part of Civil War soldiers’ experience of battle. Their findings and the sources they uncovered provided an intellectual foundation and stimulus to undertake a study focused entirely on killing in the Civil War as its subject. This project has undeniably benefited from standing on the scholastic shoulders of these giants among Civil War historians.

This work enters the historiographic discourse in the tradition of the genre of new military history. While the older school of military history focuses on the course and conduct of war in military, political, and diplomatic terms, new military history emphasizes subjects such as the psychology of military personnel and their relationship to the cultures and societies from which they emerge, both subjects with which this work deals directly. Nevertheless, this project does not represent a rejection of “old” military history. Instead, it stands as an example of bridging the two camps. For one, study of soldier life in the Civil War predates the rise of the new school, not only in terms of Wiley’s midcentury work but also in treatments by
the veterans themselves written to document soldier life. Furthermore, in my research I have availed myself of traditional battle studies and original tactical manuals, sources theoretically pertaining to the old school, which I believe have invaluably strengthened my attempts to reconstruct the human experience of combat in the Civil War.

As with other studies of soldier life in the Civil War, my work relies heavily on the wartime letters and diaries and the postwar reminiscences of the soldiers and veterans. When first undertaking this project, I was unsure how descriptive and forthcoming soldier accounts would be in providing the kind of details I sought. Although to date I have not found a Civil War combatant who devoted an entire letter or article to discoursing in depth on the subject of killing, a handful did episodically offer insightful glimpses into their mind-sets. Moreover, a great many of the sources I consulted provided key bits of information that contributed to the larger picture. Rarely did a particular resource, especially the longest and most complete diaries, letter collections, and memoirs, fail to provide any useful insights.

Certain factors limited the extent to which soldiers wrote about killing. Some men, for instance, wrote more deeply than others. Civil War accounts offer a rich treasure trove because many participants wrote eloquently and thoughtfully, but some men contented themselves with recording events and reporting on the health and welfare of themselves and their comrades. I am convinced that most Civil War soldiers focused far more attention on their own lives, health, and safety, as well as that of their comrades, than they did on damage they did to the enemy, especially in writing for the benefit of family and friends at home. Some men chose to omit or merely hint at the most graphic and disturbing aspects of battle, especially when writing for a female audience, and for some the experience of killing fell into this delicate area. However, the fact that so many Federals and Confederates wrote candidly about battle, even killing, and in missives that female readers would see, strongly suggests the extent to which both soldiers and their civilian supporters affirmed killing as part of their war.

I suggest another reason why Civil War soldiers did not write more extensively about killing, especially as deeply as historians would wish, is that they did not explore their psyches in writing in the same fashion as individuals in our own age do. That is not to say Civil War soldiers did not think or write introspectively—far from it. Americans in the Civil War era could discourse deeply and feelingly, with great emotion and passion. Their introspection, however, tended to work within their own familiar framework, usually expressed in terms of character, morality, and their relationship with God. Separated as we are from the generation that fought the Civil
War not only by 150 years but also by the rise of psychology as a discipline, I suspect that today we are inclined to psychoanalyze ourselves in ways that would be unfamiliar to our ancestors. Americans in the Civil War thought and felt as deeply (or as shallowly) about themselves as we do, but they did not frame those thoughts using the tools or language we now use.

With these obstacles in mind, I cast my research net as wide as possible. I did not limit my search to soldiers from one state, army, theater, or side in the conflict. Both Union and Confederate voices receive representation here. In terms of their basic attitudes and experiences of killing, I found no discernible differences among these rival forces of American citizen-soldiers. In keeping with that conclusion, when citing evidence of a particular behavior or mind-set, I often deliberately pair or group together examples from Federals and Confederates in my discussion. In terms of killing, only two major differences separated the blue and the gray. First, the sense of their homeland being invaded by enemy armies and the fighting motivation it provided disproportionately applied to Confederate soldiers. Second, the Confederacy’s soldiers, who were products and defenders of a slave society, bore tremendous racial hostility toward black Union soldiers and often killed those opponents with a vengeance, even to the point of outright atrocities. Many white Federals thought of African Americans in unabashedly racist terms, and some harbored their own propensity for cruelty toward their enemies, yet little in their experience of combat could compare to the vicious conflict that played out between black soldiers in Union blue and white Southerners in Confederate gray.

Inclusive as I tried to make my approach, there are some exceptions. The navies of the United States and Confederacy played critical roles in the Civil War, but as this study examines soldiers, sailors and marines make only the most fleeting appearances. Soldiers from the eastern and western theaters receive ample representation, but those fighting in the trans-Mississippi theater appear much less often. Infantry from the two sides dominates this study, a circumstance that reflects that infantrymen made up 75 to 80 percent of Civil War armies and that the infantry, as the queen of battle, did much of the fighting, dying, and killing in the Civil War. Nevertheless, soldiers in the cavalry and artillery are hardly absent; they come on the scene in their own right, especially in cases where the nature of their service differentiated their experience of battle from other soldiers. I also confined my study largely to soldiers fighting in a regular, rather than irregular, capacity. Bands of irregulars, often not wearing uniforms and rarely accountable to any authority higher than themselves, fought their own vicious and bloody war. While irregular guerrillas feature in the chapter dealing with atrocities,
otherwise this work focuses solely on the soldiers who fought the Civil War and experienced battle in the conventional sense.

In reconstructing Civil War soldiers’ experiences of combat, this work incorporates both wartime and postwar accounts. Similar projects have confined themselves to only wartime accounts. Perhaps most notably, James McPherson in *For Cause and Comrades* relied primarily on wartime sources to explore soldier motivations, seeking to avoid later accounts potentially affected by hindsight, faulty memory, and intentionally writing for a public audience. As sound as his rationale is, and as important as it is to bear these factors in mind when reading postwar writings, my own work does not follow that model. To not include certain published accounts would have meant leaving out a great number of remarkable and incisive details regarding killing and other aspects of Civil War soldiering. Moreover, the inclusion of postwar remembrances contributes to the principal argument of the book. That many Civil War veterans could write candidly and unashamedly about killing offers further evidence of soldiers who affirmed or accepted killing in combat, as well as suggesting a confidence that they could express such attitudes without fearing censure by their society at large.

In presenting the words of Civil War soldiers, I have followed the convention of quoting them with as little editing or alteration as possible. Their writings appear as originally written, sometimes with great creativity in spelling, punctuation, and grammar. I have only added corrections in brackets in cases where that creativity with the English language might confuse the reader.

This study deals with its subject thematically, and the chapters are organized on that basis. Chapter 1 examines the cultural and societal factors that influenced soldiers’ attitudes toward killing before and during the war. I examine the various ways soldiers experienced killing in battle in Chapter 2, especially focusing on the infantry firefight. In Chapter 3, I address killing in hand-to-hand combat, one of the rarer but most dramatic and challenging scenarios in which Civil War soldiers experienced killing. Chapter 4 explores the language of killing—the terms and turns of phrase that soldiers used to describe killing in combat. Chapter 5 deals with sharpshooters and killing, including how they and other soldiers perceived this particular form of warfare. In Chapter 6, I discuss what I describe as the extremes of killing, specifically killing that transgressed the laws of war as well as actions by which soldiers withheld from killing. I consider in Chapter 7 the impact of race and racial attitudes on killing in the Civil War. Finally, the Epilogue addresses themes dealing with the war’s end and aftermath, as well as offering concluding remarks.
I trust that this project can genuinely appeal to and benefit both fellow scholars and general readers. Most directly it seeks to contribute to scholarship in Civil War and military history by helping expand the depth and authenticity of our understanding of the lives of Civil War soldiers and the nature of war. The ideas and stories in this work are in their own way timeless as well. Americans today have arguably never before been as concerned with and committed to the health and well-being of past and current members of the military, and the complex nature of killing in battle represents a key element in these matters. The study of men at war, especially the complex and enigmatic subject of killing, speaks not only to American and military history but also to fundamental aspects of the human condition. In addition to the timeless value of the subject, killing in the Civil War speaks directly to one of the most pivotal moments in American history. The Civil War represents an American Iliad and an American tragedy, and many readers, both academic and popular, still try to understand the how and why of the United States’ bloodiest of all wars, in which Americans killed Americans. By exploring this key element of soldiers’ experience of the Civil War, I hope my findings will help expand our understanding of such momentous subjects.