

Invincible in Defeat

"The Battle for Bunker Hill," by **Richard M. Ketchum** (Doubleday, 232 pp. \$4.50), distills the best from earlier accounts and adds new facts on a crucial episode in our history. William C. Kiessel often comments on books having to do with the American Revolution.

By WILLIAM C. KIESEL

THERE is magic in certain names—Guadalcanal, Gettysburg, the Alamo, Bunker Hill—names that make one proud to be an American. And Bunker Hill, especially, is more than just a name; it is an emotion.

The first planned clash between British Regulars and Colonial Provincials, called by contemporaries the Battle of Charlestown, is known today as the Battle of Bunker Hill. Yet, as every schoolboy is smugly aware, the conflict was actually fought on nearby Breed's Hill, a reckless change in plans that still puzzles military strategists. There on Charlestown peninsula, situated a third of a mile across open water from besieged Boston, British troops on that stifling hot Saturday afternoon of June 17, 1775, suffered the greatest number of casualties of any single conflict between Braddock's defeat in 1755 to the Battle of New Orleans in 1815.

Despite this terrific loss, contemporaries considered the Battle for Bunker Hill a British victory, because the defending Provincials, after exhausting their limited ammunition, were forced to club their way off the field in semi-orderly retreat. For decades this battle was mentioned only in embarrassed tones, and it was slighted in early accounts of the Revolution. Not until the Bunker Hill Centennial were specific histories carefully researched and issued, by Adams, Drake, Ellis, and Wheildon. Subsequently, additional documented studies were published by Frothingham, French, Murdock, and Fleming.

Richard M. Ketchum, editor of "The American Heritage Book of the Revolution," has distilled the best from these earlier versions, and has added facts and subtracted fiction to produce an exceptionally smooth narrative that will not only hold the most reluctant reader but satisfy the avid historian. In addition, the book is enhanced by maps, illus-

trations, an index, and a bibliography.

However, just as there were flaws in the plans of the Provincials in fortifying Breed's Hill, such as failing to extend the redoubt flanking defenses to the water's edge, so are there minor weaknesses in Ketchum's over-all planning. He does not consistently give the sources of his numerous quotations. Joseph Warren's participation is minimized, neglecting information made available in a recent biography. Also, after a well-chosen opening, the narration bogs down in what appears to be extraneous ramblings on the preliminaries that led to the decision to challenge the British Army by occupying Charlestown peninsula. And the concluding chapter is anticlimactic.

But in his sanguinary battle descriptions Ketchum is vivid. He tells of a

messenger dispatched three and one-half miles on foot for immediate reinforcements; of the lack of foresight in providing an escape route; of how only several hundred Provincials actually fought at Breed's Hill while 1,000 reserves milled aimlessly on Bunker Hill 600 yards to the rear; of going into battle with insufficient artillery, ammunition, food, and water, and with inadequate staff organization. Of cowardice there was some; of bravery there was much.

This is a dramatic retelling of a dramatic incident. Had those inexperienced farmers and craftsmen on Breed's Hill failed, the fight for freedom and independence might very well have collapsed two brief months after the spontaneous outbreak at Lexington and Concord. However, nine months after the Pyrrhic British victory, which proved that the Continentals could stand up to the disciplined Regulars, with clubs and rocks when necessary, the British Army evacuated Boston.

"The Battle for Bunker Hill" can be read in a single sitting—and probably will be.

Decision on Cemetery Hill

"Soldiers' Battle: Gettysburg," by **James Warner Bellah** (McKay, 204 pp. \$3.95), recapitulates an event in U.S. history that has come to epitomize belief in the American ideal. Books by the noted Civil War historian Earl Schenck Miers include "Robert E. Lee."

By EARL SCHENCK MIERS

IT IS a risky conjecture, but one we are willing to gamble on, that each year more Americans visit the battlefield at Gettysburg than any other historic site in the United States. Why? A variety of answers is possible: the fact that the North won here; the fact that in invading Pennsylvania rather than in helping his beleaguered nation at Vicksburg, Lee triumphed as a Virginian but failed as a Confederate; or, which is more likely, the fact that Mr. Lincoln, in dedicating a national cemetery here some months after the battle, succeeded almost as eloquently as the Founding Fathers in defining the American ideal. So, in retrospect, we remember Gettysburg as the place where we were to experience "a new

birth of freedom." We remember Gettysburg as the place where, through Lincoln, we pledged to the world that government of, for, and by the people would not perish from the earth.

General James F. Rusling—who, as a Union general, wasn't much of a hero—tells a story about Lincoln and Gettysburg that may just possibly be true. The occasion was in Washington shortly after the battle, when the President called on Dan Sickles, that Tammany politician turned general who through his own stupidity lost a leg on the second day at Gettysburg and came close to losing the Northern cause along with it. Hadn't Mr. Lincoln feared for the result at Gettysburg, the incredible Dan inquired; and, according to the almost incredible Rusling, the President replied:

"In the very pinch of the campaign there [Gettysburg], I went to my room one day and got down on my knees and prayed Almighty God for victory at Gettysburg. I told Him that this was His country, and the war was His war, but that we really couldn't stand another Fredericksburg or Chancellorsville. And then and there I made a solemn vow with my Maker, that if He would stand by you boys at Gettysburg, I would stand by Him."

Since the North prevailed, Lincoln



—Bettmann Archive.

Pickett's charge at Gettysburg—"the soldiers speak for themselves."

apparently knew how to make the right sporting proposition to Heaven, which may be the reason why he endures as our most appealing President. And if, accepting General Rusling's story, you can believe that Mr. Lincoln uttered these remarks "almost as Moses might have spoken when he came down from Sinai," who can doubt that Gettysburg occupies a unique place in our history? Can its familiar story be retold too often? We think not, and for that reason this new book by James Warner Bellah is eminently justified.

Mr. Bellah, trained in magazine work, is known as a "slick writer," which means that he is easy to read and easy to forget. His prose is fast-paced; he emotes, but, happily, he also quotes, and it is in those sections where he lets the soldiers speak for themselves that this work approaches greatness, for a man willing to face death for his principles acquires an undeniable nobility.

There are controversies about Gettysburg that will still be debated a century hence. Mr. Bellah takes a few in stride, and, we believe, does as well as anyone in putting Robert E. Lee and George G. Meade in perspective. Lee was sick with dysentery; Meade was steady and not too imaginative, and so carried the campaign. If you've never read a book about Gettysburg, you may find immense enjoyment in this one. Civil War buffs should be permitted to skip long, well-known passages.

ADMIRALS OF THE INLAND WATER:

Four new volumes have been published for the Civil War Christmas trade interested in the water side of the great conflict a century ago. Virgil Carrington Jones completes his definitive his-

tory of naval operation, "The Civil War at Sea," with a splendid third volume, "The Final Effort" (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, \$6.50), a job that greatly needed doing in depth for both the scholar and general reader of Civil War history. Then there is Robert MacBride's new book on the low-in-the-water "Civil War Ironclads" (Chilton, \$7.50), which complements the more general studies of the war on river and ocean and is, to the true Centennial *aficionado*, equally valuable in its wealth of detail about the dawn of naval armor. Here are the Stevens brothers and their fantastic but uncompleted ironclad which lay a-rusting on the ways at Hoboken as war opened; John Ericsson's armored cheesebox on a raft (of questionable seaworthiness); the great inland ironclads, gunboats mostly but dreadfully destructive upriver; the tinclads; and

the mortar-carrying monsters that had a way of exploding in the face of the loader. Good sound work here, highly technical but readable for a layman.

A pictorial history of the Confederate navy has also seen publication through the diligent researches of Philip Van Doren Stern, the highly educated Civil War buff. Published by Doubleday at \$7.95 (\$6.95 if you order the book before Christmas), "The Confederate Navy" is an outsize volume, profusely illustrated, and completely ingratiating in format. If any phase of the war at sea (and on river) from the Southern side has been omitted here, these old eyes have been reading Civil War stuff for thirty years for nothing. Probably the best Christmas present you could give to the Centennial fan who "has everything."

Bern Anderson's engaging one-volume résumé of Civil War naval actions, "By Sea and by River" (Knopf, \$5.95), tells the familiar stories of Forts Henry and Donelson, of the USS *Monitor* against the CSS *Virginia* (née *Merri-mack*), of Farragut's daring capture of the forts guarding New Orleans and Mobile Bay, and of the reduction of Vicksburg. But, more important still, he gives the general reader possibly his first balanced knowledge of the sum of operations in the inland Western rivers, the Union naval blockade that may have been crucial to the war's outcome, the important Virginia and Carolina waters actions, and the *Trent* affair, which might in less competent hands have brought England into the war on the side of the South. The Confederate Navy is by no means slighted, moreover, as befits the facts, for the rebel ironclads and river rams, blockade runners and raiders made life pretty miserable for the victors until the very hour of surrender.

—RICHARD L. TOBIN.

Your Literary I. Q.

Conducted by John T. Winterich

B'S FORE AND AFT

Not many words in the English language both begin *and* end with the letter *b*, but Gertrude Germond of Chautauqua, New York, has found ten of them and asks you to fill in the required letters. Answers on page 64.

1. A root or an electric light.
2. To smear.
3. The prince of demons.
4. A weapon.
5. An African tree.
6. Is found on a fish hook.
7. A child wears one when eating
8. A haircut.
9. A big drop of paint.
10. To chatter unwisely.

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