

Union Command Failure in the Shenandoah, Major General Franz Sigle and the War in the Valley of Virginia, May 1864, by David A. Powell, El Dorado Hills: Savas Beatie LLC, 2019, a Tennessee Valley Civil War Round Table review by Emil Posey.

The Shenandoah Valley was critical terrain for both sides in the Eastern Theater. Best known for Confederate Maj. General Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson’s Valley Campaign of April-June 1862 in which he fought against odds and successfully tied down numerous Union soldiers that could have been better used against Richmond during the Peninsula Campaign, it was also an invasion corridor to the North (used as such by General Robert E. Lee in the Gettysburg Campaign of 1863 and by Lt. General Jubal Anderson Early in the Valley Campaign of 1864). As described by military historian Albert A. Nofi, “The northeastern end of the Valley is a backdoor to the North. An army debouching from the Valley at this point is closer to Washington, Baltimore, or even Philadelphia than it is to Richmond, and is actually behind anyone trying to defend Washington against attack from Virginia.” Even in mid-1864, it was an area still rich in agriculture and livestock critical to supply of armies. All of this made control of the Valley an ongoing concern of the Union Army throughout 1862-1864.

Control of the Valley prompted Union Lt. General Ulysses S. Grant in April 1864 to order Maj. General Franz Sigel’s army of 10,000 to the secure the Valley and threaten the western flank of General Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia defending Richmond. Sigel’s advance led him to engage Confederate Maj. General John C. Breckinridge’s men at New Market, Virginia on May 15, 1864. The battle was a victory for Breckinridge. Sigel withdrew his forces and subsequently was replaced. The campaign in the Valley went on, back and forth, into October of the year, ultimately resulting in the Union reestablishing control. The Battle of New Market was the peak of Sigel’s career as well as the source of lasting fame for the cadets of the Virginia Military Institute (VMI) who figure prominently in the battle’s lore.

As pointed out by the author, David A. Powell, several books on the battle have been written, but this one with focuses on the Union forces and, in particular, Sigel. Franz Sigel was a German immigrant. He was a graduate of the Karlsruhe Military Academy, receiving a commission in the Baden Army, and gained military experience during the German revolutions of 1848-1849. That did not work out well for him, and he immigrated to the US in 1852, as did many other Germans that fled after the revolutions failed – the so called Forty-Eighters. In the US, he was influential among German communities. This attracted President Lincoln’s attention – Sigel’s ability to recruit Germans into the Union Army – but he never blended well with senior officers. Though popular with ethnic Germans in the Union ranks, he performed mediocre combat service in the Union Army, and even that effectively ended with his defeat at New Market. He spent the rest of the war without an active command.

Powell takes a somewhat sympathetic approach to Sigel's command abilities. There is no denying that he made mistakes, but Powell contends that Sigel had positive attributes, certainly with substantive contributions prior to the battle at New Market. How well he supports that thesis you can judge for yourself.

This is a substantive yet concise read – Powell at his finest. His experience and training as a historian and writer shines through with his attention to detail, grasp of the battle and its context, and the high quality of his narration. It is a fun, easy read, and provides a needed perspective to a small, yet not inconsequential engagement in the third year of the war. Enjoy!

Mr. Powell, himself a graduate of VMI, is a Civil War historian and a prolific writer. Many are familiar with his previous works, such as The Maps of Chickamauga, his Chickamauga trilogy, and Battle Above the Clouds. His work is well respected and deservedly so. This book adds to his pantheon.

Your reviewer is Emil L. Posey, former Vice President of the TVCWRT, now continuing to support by being part of the Stage Crew. His work history spans almost 45 years of military and civilian service to our country. He retired from NASA/George C. Marshall Space Flight Center on December 27, 2014. He has a BA in Political Science from Hood College, Frederick, Maryland; is a former president of the Huntsville chapter of the National Contract Management Association; and is a life member of the Special Forces Association. He is also a member of Elks Lodge 1648 (Huntsville, AL) and the Tennessee Valley Genealogical Society. He is a dedicated bibliophile, and is a (very) armchair political analyst and military enthusiast.