

A NATION DIVIDED

The American Civil War

COMMON SOLDIERS

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Most Civil War soldiers were young white men in their late teens or early 20's. Almost none of them had military experience. Above, Private Edwin Jenison was killed in action at Malvern Hill in 1862. Although his age is unknown, he appeared to be in his early teens.

The events of the Civil War created heroes and villains while elevating some to legendary status. For every Grant and Lee, however, there were thousands of men whose names have been forgotten. It was these common soldiers who fought the battles of America's deadliest war.

The common Civil War soldiers shared many similarities, regardless of whether they fought for the Union or the Confederacy. The pre-war army of the United States was only a few thousand strong, so the new recruits of the Union and Confederate armies had little concept of military discipline. Their lack of experience was evident in early battles when both armies were disorganized and inefficient.

The first waves of soldiers were volunteers who answered the call for patriotism sweeping through the North and the South. There were other reasons to join the war as well. Northerners fought to preserve the Union while Southerners fought to defend their homes and way of life. Men from all regions felt an obligation to their country and feared shame if they stayed home. Some came for the pay, which averaged \$11

to \$16 a month. Abolitionists fought to end slavery.

Even with all of these reasons to fight, the number of volunteers was inadequate and both armies began to practice conscription – forced service. The draft laws of the Union and the Confederacy favored the rich. Several classes of Southerners, including those who owned more than 20 slaves, were exempt, and Northerners could hire a substitute for \$300.

Most soldiers served in the infantry, the foot soldiers of the army. They were divided into regiments of around 1,000 men named for their home state, and further divided into companies of around 100 men. A company tended to include men from the same location who knew each other. The common bonds of war strengthened their relationships. Many men who had tired of the war refused to desert simply because they felt a strong obligation to the men with whom they served. Other soldiers served in cavalry units which were used for scouting enemy positions and troop numbers, or artillery units which dealt with heavy cannons and usually had lower casualty rates.

Both sides used similar equipment. Soldiers wore wool uniforms, blue for the North and gray for the South. The long weeks on the march didn't allow much time for cleanliness and soap was in short supply. Therefore, uniforms quickly became caked with dirt and sweat. The men also had to carry large amounts of equipment. Haversacks were used for rations such as meat, coffee, bread and hardtack. Canteens, blankets and tents added to the load, with Union soldiers usually better supplied than their Confederate counterparts. Each soldier had to carry and care for his rifled musket which weighed 8 to 9 pounds – more when the bayonet was attached. Knapsacks were used for personal items and ammunition, with Bibles, pens, paper, ink, and photos commonly carried. Supplies for writing to loved ones were essential as receiving mail from home was the highlight for many soldiers.

Camp life was hard for Civil War troops. Besides the boredom between battles, disease was a constant threat. With no understanding of how germs spread, soldiers were vulnerable to outbreaks of typhoid, malaria, dysentery,

smallpox, tuberculosis and other diseases.

Medical care was primitive by today's standards. If a soldier was wounded in battle, amputation was common. Those who rejected it were more likely to die of infection; in fact, more troops died of disease than from battle wounds during the war.

An estimated 3,000,000 soldiers served in the Civil War. More than 620,000 died. The experiences of these soldiers reveal a great contradiction. In a war fought for differences, the lives of these soldiers demonstrate how much they had in common.



Hardtack is a hard biscuit that was often used for army rations during the Civil War. It was easy to carry when on the march, but its lack of flavor and hard texture was not popular with the troops.

Both the Union and Confederacy

made it in large quantities because it was cheap and easy to produce. It can be cooked from simple household ingredients. Try the website below for recipes for hardtack and johnnie cake, another food enjoyed by Confederate soldiers.

www.nps.gov/archive/gett/gettkidz/hardtack.htm



TIMELINE OF EVENTS

1854

The Kansas-Nebraska Act leads to the "Bleeding Kansas" border war and the formation of the Republican Party.

1859

John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry increases tensions between the North and the South.

1860

Abraham Lincoln is elected President. South Carolina secedes from the Union.

1861

The Confederate States of America is formed. Fort Sumter is captured and the Civil War begins.

1862

Missouri is successfully defended by the Union at Pea Ridge, Ark. Union victory at Antietam leads Lincoln to issue the Emancipation Proclamation.

1863

Victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg turn the war in favor of the Union.

1865

Lee surrenders at Appomattox. Lincoln is assassinated at Ford's Theater.

1867

Radical Reconstruction begins in the South.

1877

The Compromise of 1877 ends Reconstruction. Without military support, Reconstruction governments collapse in the South.

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