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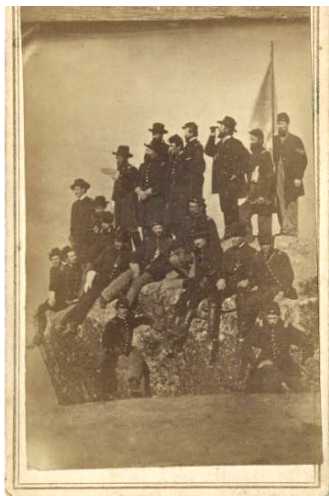
# Union Soldiers in the Civil War

## Introduction

Though few generalities can be made of such a diverse group, the “average soldier” in the Civil War was a native-born, white, unmarried farmer between the ages of 18 and 29. Other groups also fought in the war: roughly 180,000 Black troops, 543,000 immigrant troops, over 400 women posing as male soldiers, and boys as young as twelve served as cavalry buglers or drummer boys. Soldiers had varying levels of schooling ranging from university degrees to men that could neither read nor write. While they fought to save the Union, not all Northern soldiers supported ideas about abolition.



No matter their purpose for fighting, soldiers faced hardships every day, and while no two soldiers had the same experience there are commonalities. The harsh reality of war weighed heavy on all. Soldiers became homesick, and many combated it with letter-writing and diary-keeping. They also suffered inadequate



equipment, food, clean water, and shelter. Inclement weather, unhygienic conditions, grueling marches, and a lack of privacy caused disillusionment among the ranks. One in ten Union soldiers deserted.

Disease and improper medical care led to abundant deaths. Two soldiers died of disease for each one killed in battle. The three most common killers were dysentery, typhoid, and malaria. The hospitals in the Civil War lacked sanitization because the idea that germs cause disease was just developing. Field doctors were often inexperienced. That paired with the high number of amputations, meant many soldiers died of infection.

Soldiers also dealt with the possibility of being captured and sent to prison camps. Of the 200,000 Union soldiers captured throughout the war, 30,000 died in Southern prison camps. The camps were filthy and overcrowded—soldiers died from disease, exposure, starvation, dehydration, and abuse.

The hallmarks of soldier life were adaptability, endurance, and fortitude. At the end of the war, as troops returned to Washington, D.C., they were met with a banner that read, “The only national debt we never can repay is the debt we owe to the victorious soldiers.”



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# Union Soldiers in the Civil War

## Becoming a Soldier

During the Civil War there were several avenues to becoming a soldier: voluntary enlistment, the draft, coercion, substitution, or by signing up in exchange for a bounty. About 2 to 4 percent of soldiers drafted and another 6 to 9 percent were substitutes paid by draftees who sought to avoid service.



The Conscription Act of 1863 was the first wartime draft in U.S. history and required all male citizens between the ages of 20 and 45 to register. To evade conscription a draftee could pay \$300 to be exempted and find a substitute to take his place. Many common men couldn't afford to pay for a substitute, dubbing the war as the "poor man's fight."

Beginning in July 1861, bounty men were rewarded with \$100 to \$400 for enlistment, which was paid in installments along with their standard compensation for service. Bounties, or bonuses, were a recruitment tool which effectively encouraged men of lower socioeconomic means to enlist.

## Camp Life

Soldiers spent most of their time in camp—more than they did on marches or in battle. With their significant downtime, soldiers drilled, completed duties in camp, stood guard, and found diversions.

A soldier's day began at 5 a.m. They assembled before turning to their duties of the day, and drills were necessary for the many untrained soldiers. They practiced marching, battle maneuvers, and gun training. Soldiers completed duties within the camps, including picket duty, caring for horses, making pathways, setting up shelter, digging latrine pits and trenches, cooking, and gathering food and water.



Soldiers had time for distractions, too. Many wrote letters home, read newspapers and books, and looked forward to the arrival of the postmaster. They played games, joined hobby clubs, enjoyed pranks and athletics, and told stories. Music was incredibly popular. There were issues of discipline as well, such as insubordination, drinking to excess, and desertion.

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# Union Soldiers in the Civil War

## Battle

Nearly 2.8 million soldiers served in the Civil War, most of whom were unfamiliar with the harsh realities of war. They came from all different walks of life; on Union muster rolls over 300 different occupations were represented.

Before going into battle soldiers were given food, ammunition, and a pep talk. Then they would march to the battleground, often through thick mud or overwhelming dust. Once on the battlefield, soldiers faced thick smoke and the taste of gunpowder. They were met with the sounds of gun and cannon fire and the screams of men both fighting and dying.

After the battle, a soldier's job was to bury fallen comrades. If time did not allow for a proper burial soldiers were buried in mass graves. Because of this, 46% of Civil War soldiers are still considered missing in action. Soldiers taken prisoner were held in prison camps. Roughly 200,000 Union soldiers were captured and held in Southern prison camps, where over 30,000 of them died. Soldiers endured starvation, maltreatment, overcrowding, disease, and exposure while imprisoned.



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## Writing Home

Soldiers faced disillusionment while in service. Severe homesickness, inclement weather, unhygienic conditions, and a lack of privacy caused discouragement among the ranks. Writing letters to loved ones helped to raise their spirits.

Once in the service, men suffered poor food rations and lack of clean water. Hardtack, a dry cracker made with flour and water, was sometimes old and riddled with maggots. They occasionally got one pound of bread and highly salted pork or beef. Rations also included beans, rice, peas, sugar, and coffee, which was the most popular.

In response to poor rations, many wrote home to ask for fresh produce such as lemons, oranges, and onions. The citrus helped combat scurvy, a common illness.

Servicemen were grossly underpaid and were often paid late, leading their families back home to suffer. Homesickness broke the will of numerous troops and some turned to their religion to cope with the conditions of war. Soldiers worried about how their families would perceive them after the way the ordeals of war changed them.



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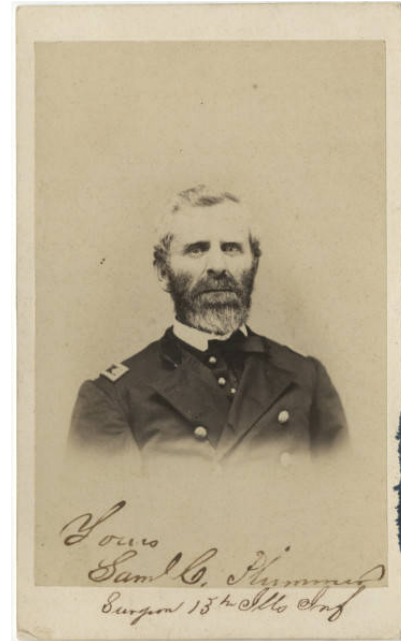
## Medical Care

Throughout the Civil War medicine improved at a rapid pace. At the beginning of the war, it was believed that bad air caused illness and disease, and doctors used various means to counteract it.

Over the course of the war this belief was replaced with the knowledge that germs cause illness and disease. That realization led to the establishment of cleaner, more sanitary hospitals.

Amputations were commonplace and often conducted by untrained doctors. Bullets were large enough to shatter bones, while unmitigated dirt and debris caused infection. Without antibiotics, amputation was often the quickest way to save a severely wounded soldier's life, one-quarter of whom died of infection.

Twice as many soldiers died of disease as were killed and mortally wounded in combat—disease was the greater threat to their lives over weaponry. The three principal killer diseases were dysentery, typhoid, and malaria.

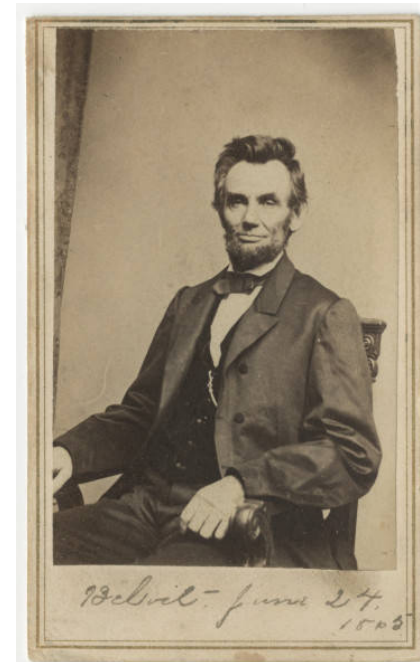


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## Lincoln, Commander-in-Chief

Following the attack and surrender of Fort Sumter in April 1861, Lincoln raised a call to arms for 75,000 militiamen to serve for 90 days. Northerners were enthusiastic and many joined the fight to help aid the preservation of the Union. Lincoln began studying military strategy and consulting military professionals to gain the knowledge to effectively lead as commander-in-chief.

Lincoln remained attentive to the war effort, promoting soldiers through the ranks, responding to letters from civilians, and visiting hospitals and camps in the field to meet with soldiers. He personally saw to numerous appointments of generals, some of which were politically motivated, and signed endorsements approving appointments of wide-ranging positions.



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# Union Soldiers in the Civil War

Directions: Use the reading to choose the **best** answer.

1) What was the Conscription Act of 1863?

- A The first wartime draft
- B The first wartime draft in U.S. history, which required all men ages 20-45 to register
- C A draft



2) During the Civil War, what did President Lincoln **not** do to help with the war effort?

- A Had meetings with generals
- B Stayed in the White House
- C Visited soldiers in the hospital and in the field

3) What percentage of soldiers are still considered to be missing in action?

- A 54%
- B 46%
- C 75%

4) Which was **not** an activity soldiers did while in camp?

- A Picket duty
- B Played games
- C Made phone calls home



5) At the beginning of the Civil War it was believed that \_\_\_\_\_ caused illness; this belief was replaced with the knowledge that \_\_\_\_\_ can cause illness.

- A bad air, germs
- B germs, bad air
- C bad air, bad food

