



# A Soldier's Life

## Joining the Army

The median age of the soldiers in the Civil War was 24 years old. Half of the soldiers were younger and half older. Soldiers in the Union army were supposed to be 18 years old, but many young men lied about their age and entered the army at 16 or 17. A few were even younger. Many men over the age of 45 also enlisted. As the war dragged on, the South began to have many soldiers who were older.

In the first few weeks of the war, Union troops were volunteers who joined state regiments. Southern volunteers also flocked to their local and state militias. After the first burst of patriotism, volunteers were fewer, and the Union offered cash bonuses to men who signed up.

As the war dragged on and casualties mounted, both sides resorted to *conscription*, drafting men to fight. In both the South and North, however, men with some occupations were exempted from the draft. In addition, Southerners who owned 20 slaves or more were exempt from the draft, although some volunteered anyway.

The wealthy were able to avoid the draft, too. In the North, a man could avoid military service by paying money to the government, and in both the North and South, a man who was drafted could hire a substitute to go in his place.

## Drummer Boys

Musicians did not have to meet the minimum age requirement because they were technically noncombatants. These drummer boys and buglers were often only 12 or 13 years old. The drum beats and bugle calls were the methods used to tell soldiers when to attack during a battle. The drummers also beat time during marches and drills.

Drummer boys performed other nonmusical services. They served as water boys, barbers, cooks, and stretcher bearers. They often assisted surgeons during amputations and carried piles of legs and arms away from the surgeons' operating tables. Sometimes they helped close wounds and put on bandages. Many drummer boys were wounded or killed during the war since bullets and cannon fire did not distinguish between ages or rank.



## A Soldier's Life *(cont.)*

### Foreign Soldiers

Both armies had foreign volunteers. Some were officers and even generals. About nine percent of the Confederate troops were foreigners. About 25 percent of the Northern troops were foreigners, usually immigrants from European countries. There were dozens of all-German regiments in the North, and the Irish made up the majority of at least 20 regiments. Some units were a blend of many nationalities. One New York regiment included Hungarian, Spanish, French, English, and German recruits. Some foreigners joined to fight for the causes they believed in. Others joined for adventure, steady wages, or because they had no better opportunity.

### Native and African-American Soldiers

Native Americans fought in large numbers on both sides of the war. The Cherokee nation was openly allied with the South, which they thought would give them better treatment after the war.

At first the Union government refused to enlist black soldiers. However, the number of casualties in 1862, the demands of abolitionists and famous black leader Frederick Douglass, and the passage of the Emancipation Proclamation led to the formation of regiments of black soldiers who fought in many battles. By the end of the war, at least 180,000 black soldiers

served in the Union cause. Tens of thousands of freed blacks also helped build defenses and worked in Union army camps.

### Camp Life

Although many Northern troops came from larger cities like New York, Boston, or Philadelphia, most soldiers were farm boys because the United States was still a nation of farmers. Hard work at home had prepared many of the men for the difficult life of a soldier, but some things were different. The crowded life of an army camp was new to most of the men, and they were not used to the terrible food, drills, marching, and long periods of boredom.

New recruits usually lived in army tents when they were available, but more permanent log cabins were often built for winter quarters by groups of four soldiers. These cabins were extremely crude huts, but they did lessen the cold bite of winter.



## A Soldier's Life *(cont.)*

### Passing Time

In the military there was less training in the winter, especially during bad weather, so the men played chess, wrote letters, wrestled, sang songs, and tried to improve the quality of their food by cooking. Men also played cards and gambled on just about anything. The soldiers bet on wrestling matches, head lice races (head lice were everywhere), baseball games, and just about anything else.

### Food

The food on both sides ranged from tasteless to disgusting. Southern soldiers were often short of rations, and supplies were always irregular. This lack of basic provisions was a major reason for the Confederates' surrender at Appomattox. Southern agriculture produced food, but it did not get equally distributed to either the soldiers or people in the cities.

Except during some long marches and battles, Northern troops were well supplied, but the food was usually spoiled or of poor quality. Beef and pork were often preserved in so much salt that it had to be soaked in water for hours so that it could even be eaten.

The soldiers did their own cooking and often cooked the meat in gobs of grease, which caused numerous stomach problems. Northern troops were supplied with dehydrated vegetables, which were supposed to be dried beans, turnips,

onions, carrots, and beets, but which also contained leaves, roots, and stalks. Even soaked in hot water, they were unappetizing.

### "Teeth Dullers"

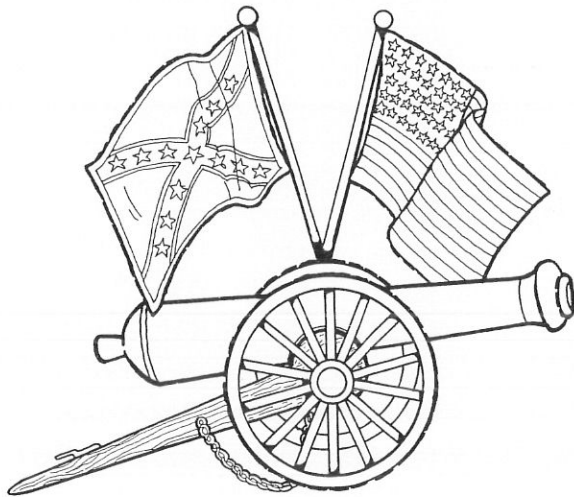
The Union troops made a flour and water biscuit called *hardtack*, which was so tough it was called "teeth dullers" and "sheet-iron crackers." The flour often contained weevils and other insects. Soldiers soaked this biscuit in coffee and skimmed off the insects which floated out of the bread. The Confederate troops had cornbread, which was hard and often moldy.



## A Soldier's Life *(cont.)*

### Weapons

Most soldiers used rifled muskets, which were loaded from the muzzle. The grooves inside the barrel helped the bullets travel farther and more accurately than the muskets used in earlier wars.



Skilled soldiers could fire three bullets a minute, but training was inconsistent, and many soldiers were poor marksmen. Soldiers behind fortified positions—using ditches, rocks, trees, and fences for protection—had a distinct advantage firing at attacking troops.

### Artillery

Cannons played a major role in battles, too. Exploding cannon shells helped break up attacks by charging troops or blasted defensive positions. Cannon and gun smoke also created a thick haze, which made the battles even more chaotic and often led to soldiers being accidentally shot by their own troops.

As the war entered its final year, improvements in weaponry resulted in some Northern troops having repeating rifles that fired seven shots before reloading and breech-loading rifles that were much more accurate. The Gatling machine gun was put into use just as the war was winding down.

### Left on the Field

Ambulance workers often carried soldiers to the surgeons' tents only after a battle was over, which meant that many soldiers spent the entire day lying helpless on the field. In the early years of the war, there was no system for removing the wounded, and some soldiers spent days and nights on the battlefield. Clara Barton and other volunteers gradually helped establish a system for removing soldiers from the battlefield. She and other volunteers worked while the battle itself was raging.



Reading  
Passages

## A Soldier's Life *(cont.)*

### Illness

For every soldier killed in battle, four died of sickness or disease. Tens of thousands of soldiers were sickened by poor food and infection.

Most soldiers were generally unaware of the dangers caused by contagious diseases, bacteria, or illnesses carried by insects. Soldiers often had no source of clean water, especially in combat, and did not realize that drinking dirty water was likely to cause diseases such as typhoid fever or cholera.

### Contagious Diseases

Many of the farm boys had never been exposed to measles, mumps, or chicken pox. These and other contagious diseases spread rapidly. The filth from so many men living in cramped quarters spread even more illnesses. Garbage, human waste, animal manure, and bloody bandages littered the camps. In addition, many soldiers never bathed.

Swamps had millions of mosquitoes carrying malaria and other disease-carrying insects. Lice and fleas were everywhere in most army camps, and almost every soldier was infested with them. In some units, dysentery and diarrhea affected 995 out of every 1,000

men. All these illnesses weakened soldiers, reduced their ability to fight, and made them more likely to catch other diseases. Soldiers would have suffered in even greater numbers if both the North and the South had not had voluntary sanitation committees, often led by determined women who insisted on bringing supplies, order, and cleanliness to the army camps.

### Medicine

Both armies suffered from severe shortages of doctors, nurses, medicine, and hospitals. Most doctors only had two years of very simple medical training. They lacked medical knowledge and still believed in bleeding patients with pneumonia and some other diseases, a practice that had no positive effects and only weakened the patients more. The correlation between dirt and disease was little understood, which led to infection, amputation, and even death.



## A Soldier's Life *(cont.)*

### Amputation

The standard weapon used by soldiers during the Civil War was a rifle musket. The Minie bullet fired from these muskets destroyed so much tissue and bone when a soldier was hit that amputation was often the only chance for survival.

Cannon fire often tore off arms and legs and ripped jagged holes in the soldiers. To prevent death from blood poisoning and gangrene, surgeons used saws and meat cleavers to cut off arms and legs. Gruesome piles of limbs were stacked near a surgeon's headquarters after every battle.

No effort at cleanliness was attempted. Knives and saws were not even cleaned after each patient. Wounds and amputated stumps were rarely disinfected, and sometimes bandages were in such short supply that they were reused if a soldier died. Doctors were in such a hurry that they probed for bullets with their fingers, and wounds sometimes had cloth and filth caught in them.

### Prisoners of War

Neither government expected the huge number of captured and wounded enemy prisoners. Neither the North nor South had any system in place for holding captured prisoners. They converted any available space into prisons—factories, warehouses, jails, schools, and abandoned forts. Prisoners, often weakened already by wounds, were often mistreated by guards. Food supplies were irregular and even more disgusting than regular army food.

About 56,000 soldiers in both armies died from the brutal conditions of these overcrowded, makeshift prisons. In the Southern prison at Andersonville, Georgia, at least 13,000 Union prisoners died from starvation, disease, and mistreatment. Prisoners had no clean water, were poorly clothed, and packed so closely together that they could barely move. Soldiers watched their friends suffer and die every day in this prison.



# A Soldier's Life Quiz

**Directions:** Read pages 24–29 about soldiers' lives during the Civil War. Answer each question below by circling the correct answer.

1. What was the median age of soldiers in the Civil War?
  - a. 18
  - b. 24
  - c. 3
  - d. 45
2. How many soldiers died in prisoner of war camps?
  - a. 13,000
  - b. 25,000
  - c. 56,000
  - d. 1,000
3. What did the Union soldiers call “teeth dullers” and “sheet-iron crackers”?
  - a. hardtack biscuits
  - b. beans
  - c. dried beef
  - d. cornbread
4. How many black soldiers served in the union army?
  - a. 56,000
  - b. 180,000
  - c. 13,000
  - d. 1,000
5. Which group of soldiers often worked as water boys, barbers, cooks, and surgeon's assistants?
  - a. Native Americans
  - b. farm boys
  - c. drummer boys
  - d. prisoners of war
6. How could wealthy Northern men avoid the draft?
  - a. own 20 slaves
  - b. pay a substitute
  - c. own a farm
  - d. go to college
7. What percent of the Northern troops were born in foreign countries?
  - a. 50 percent
  - b. 9 percent
  - c. 18 percent
  - d. 25 percent
8. What did sanitation committees do?
  - a. fix rifles
  - b. provide cleanliness and supplies
  - c. help surgeons operate
  - d. drill soldiers
9. Which of these is not a disease which affected Civil War soldiers?
  - a. lice
  - b. typhoid
  - c. chicken pox
  - d. cholera
10. Which of these was not a reason so many arms and legs were amputated during the Civil War?
  - a. rifled muskets
  - b. cannon fire
  - c. Minie bullets
  - d. land mines