The Common Soldier

After Fort Sumter fell on April 14, 1861, thousands of men in both the North and South volunteered for service. Personal reasons such as patriotism, political beliefs, and the defense of ones rights and property prompted men to enlist. However, the greatest incentive for enlistment was a desire for adventure. For the isolated farmer or factory worker, joining the army meant pay, a chance to travel, and the opportunity to take part in what one newspaper editor termed "the great event in all our lives."

The majority of men who enlisted were white, native-born Protestants between the ages of 18 and 30. They were for the most part farmers coming from rural areas. However, it is important to take a closer look and explore the diversity of ages, occupations, ethnic groups, and races that enriched both armies.

The common soldiers of the Civil War ranged in age from "beardless boys to venerable graybeards." The youngest known Confederate enlistee was Charles Hay who joined an Alabama regiment at age 11; but 9-year-old Edward Black, who joined the 21st Indiana as a musician, became the youngest Union solder. These youths were not alone. Although the minimum age for enlistment at the beginning of the war was 18, would-be soldiers often found ways to circumvent this requirement. One way was for an enlistee to write the number 18 on a piece of paper and place it in his shoe. Thus, he could truthfully swear that he was "over 18." A compilation of statistics for just over one million Union volunteers showed that 10,233 were under the age of 18. At the opposite end of the spectrum were the old men. Both armies had their share of "graybeards," but 80-year-old Curtis King serving in the 37th Iowa was the oldest man in either army.

Occupations varied in both armies. Even though one-half of Confederate soldiers and two-thirds of Union soldiers were farmers, occupations listed on recruitment rosters included: carpenters, clerks, laborers, students, mechanics, merchants, blacksmiths, doctors, painters, teachers, and shoemakers. There were even a few "gentlemen" listed. In all, there were over 300 different occupations represented in the Union Army and around 100 occupations represented in the Confederate Army.

Although 95 percent of Confederate soldiers and 75 percent of Union soldiers were born in the United States, foreign-born soldiers were present in both armies. The largest foreign groups in the Union Army were Germans (200,000) followed by the Irish (150,000), English (50,000), and Canadians (50,000). The Irish were the most numerous group of foreigners in the Confederate Army with between 15,000 and 20,000 of them joining the ranks of the gray. Other nationalities represented were Germans, English, French, and Italians. However, no group won greater respect than the Irish. At Fredericksburg, the

Confederates found themselves cheering their opponents as the Irish Brigade (composed of the 9th, 63rd, and 88th New York) made a daring assault upon their heavily fortified position at the base of Marye's Heights.

In addition to immigrants, American Indians fought for both North and South in the Western Campaigns during the war. Confederate and Federal authorities negotiated treaties of alliance with several tribal leaders who then furnished troops. The Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw and Seminole nations sent brigades to aid the Confederate cause while a single brigade of Native Americans (mostly Creeks) fought for the Federal Army. Cherokee leader Stand Watie rose to the rank of brigadier general in the Confederate Army and did not surrender his troops until a full month after Appomattox. Unfortunately, both governments took advantage of these allies. Food, clothing, and weapons intended for their use were often diverted to other troops.

In 1862, the Federal Army authorized the enlistment of African-Americans as laborers, but it was not until the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, that United States Colored Troops (USCTs) were organized. Concerning the importance of this decision, Frederick Douglass spoke, "Once let the black man get upon his person the brass letters 'U. S.,' let him get an eagle on his button, and a musket on his shoulder and bullets in his pocket, and there is no power on earth which can deny that he has earned the right to citizenship in the United States."

Acceptance did not come easily for African-American soldiers. Like American Indians, they were subject to constant discrimination. They were segregated from white soldiers, were paid less, and were given the most menial and laborious tasks such as constructing fortifications, building roads, and collecting firewood. Commanded by white officers, these soldiers were treated like laborers and suffered the prejudice of Northern white soldiers, but as the USCTs gained more combat experience, white troops began to respect their bravery and valor. In all, approximately 180,000 African-Americans served as Union soldiers, making up ten percent of the Federal forces. They fought in 39 major engagements and over 400 minor ones. The Medal of Honor was awarded to 16 African-American soldiers and another 8 African-American sailors for their service during the war.

In the South, free blacks and impressed slaves were used to dig entrenchments, build fortifications, and work in hospitals and factories. Officers brought slaves along with them to work as body servants in camp and sometimes several soldiers would "chip in" together to hire a servant of their own. On rare occasions, slaves performed picket duty; some even took up arms in the heat of battle. Overall, the idea of arming African-Americans was disputed by Southerners. Georgia politician Howell Cobb argued, "The day you make soldiers of them is the beginning of the end of the revolution. If slaves will make good soldiers, our whole theory of slavery is wrong." Only as a last ditch survival effort in March of 1865, did the Confederate Congress, under the urging of Jefferson Davis and Robert E. Lee, vote by a slim margin to authorize the organization of black units. Slaves who enlisted would be granted their freedom in exchange for their service. Although one unit was paraded in Richmond, the war ended before they had the chance to engage in combat.

In the end, whether old or young, black or white, driven by political beliefs or the desire for adventure, the common soldier had an experience in common with his fellow warriors. Beset by boredom, disease, and wounds, he endured the monotonous routine of camp life and faced the horrors of war. Over 618,000 soldiers lost their lives—more men than the total number of American dead in all American wars through Vietnam combined. Today, battlefields, monuments, and cemeteries, affirm the courage and sacrifice of the common soldier; while, surviving letters and photographs, remind us of his humanity.

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