

The Common Soldier of the Civil War Webcast – Q&A Section Sponsored by American Military University and the Weider History Group

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Were there opportunities for wild game, nut, fruits and vegetables, or was it that everything that moved/grew on the land consumed?

All of these items, of course, were collected and consumed as available. Most often, however, on the march or preparing for combat, this was left to foraging groups assigned by the units. Bountiful supplies were usually obtained when armies moved into areas not previously ravaged (i.e., Lee's Gettysburg Campaign).

It is interesting that the South would fight to stop an intruding Federal Government, but Southern leadership adopted forced service into the army. Were their riots or demonstrations to that?

Very few organized riots took place in the South in protest to the draft. That is not to say there wasn't opposition. Many Southern draftees simply "skedaddled."

Was the economy of the US in the 1850's a factor, namely unemployed, a cause for heavy enlistment? Were convicts allowed to enlist in anyway?

Absolutely, the enlistments of many soldiers came about for the lure of financial security in the military. Convicts, for the most part, were excluded from the military but many enlisted after their jail time expired.

Why was formal military training more common for Southerners than Northerners? To clarify - the South had more formally trained commanders than the North, why is this?

Actually, the statistics disprove this assumption. Of the total of 821 West Point graduates who fought in the war, 184 (22%) resigned to join the Confederate Army. It is true, however, that many Southern officers received excellent military training (it is debatable whether this training was as "formal" as the Point) at military academies like Virginia Military Institute and the Citadel.

Prior to the Civil War the Union Army had a Navy. Was the Navy used during the Civil War for any reason?

The Union Navy was of paramount importance in the final success of the conflict for the North. From the blockade that gradually cut off foreign supplies to the South to the river flotillas that dominated the western waterways, the Yankee "web-feet" (as Lincoln called the sailors) were indispensable to the overall Union success in winning the war.

During the Battle of Manassas, why was the Confederacy successful in defeating the Union?

General Johnston's reinforcements from Harper's Ferry (the first tactical use of railroads in modern warfare) turned a tightly contested battle into a rout when retreating (in order) Union forces became blocked by a demolished bridge and intermingled with civilians beating a hasty retreat back to Washington.

Did the armies provide clothes and weapons for the soldiers? On average, how long was their military training?

In varying degrees. Many (especially militia) units had their own uniforms but the bulk of Union forces were supplied by the federal government. Confederate soldiers were issued clothing as it was available.

Both sides equipped their soldiers with arms and this evolved from irregular (at the beginning of the war) to general (as the war continued and supplies caught up to demand).

Did they have the option to go infantry or other different type units?

On both sides, there were options if they joined companies formed by local individuals (this was true more in the South than the North). These would be designated by the individual responsible for arming and training the individuals. These could be cavalry or artillery batteries.

Did they go through a regular basic training or was it a crash course quick training?

Early on, the training was very rudimentary (even to the extent that target practice was rarely implemented because of ordnance limitations) and became better as experienced veterans conducted the training exercises.

During the first section the claim was made that the motivation of Northern Black troops was Liberty, the end of slavery, and money. The poster presented proves the claim about money being a motivator. However, no evidence was presented on liberty or freedom. So what evidence do we have to substantiate this?

It is surprising how much information was known to (supposedly) illiterate slaves, ex-slaves, and free blacks. Many of them knew exactly what was going on after the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation and the prospects for a better life for them and their families.

Are there any basic benefits for the US Army derived from that war?

General Sherman was supposed to have remarked (during the Grand Review of Union troops at the end of the war) that he could take these armies (along with those of the defeated Confederacy) and "walk the miles of Europe with little or no interruption" (meaning it was the best military force in the world). The U.S. came out of the war with a new "birth of freedom" that would lead it to the heights history has shown us from then to now.

Would these volunteer regiments that were raised in local communities be paid by the state or town?

They were initially paid by the local areas in which they were mustered but only until they were large enough (usually of regimental size - 1,000 strong) at which point they were turned over to Federal authorities for equipping and training (paid for by the government).

Didn't the Corps send out quartermasters to buy beef and flour when they would move into a new town?

This was the "normal" progression to secure local foodstuffs to supplement what the armies carried with them. For the most part, when in friendly territory, this was done somewhat fairly (there was always haggling over "fair prices" for items). The problem came in an unfriendly countryside where the local populace didn't want to sell at any price (although Union Greenbacks were prized in the South). General Lee was remarkable in his sojourns into the North (1862 - Maryland and 1863 - Pennsylvania) by making sure that all goods were fairly bought by his commissioners (fairly bought, that is, with Confederate currency).

Is there information that indicates the soldiers enlisted or did not enlist due to religious convictions?

It is widely believed (mostly from writings of the participants) that both sides felt that God was on their side during the struggle. Whether or not they signed up for that reason is less clear.

How is blockading a nations own ports illegal?

According to international law in 1860, a warring country could only (legally) blockade the nation it was fighting. Lincoln would never, throughout the course of the war, admit that the Confederacy was a legal "government." To do so would legitimize Southern claims that the Union was not perpetual and secession was legal. In effect, Lincoln ordered the blockade to keep ships from entering his own country's ports. In that sense, the blockade was illegal.

What were the POW conditions? Did many captured soldiers see home again?

Conditions in POW camps were pretty squalid in both North and South. Early in the war they really weren't necessary as prisoners were paroled and, later, exchanged. When Grant became General-in-Chief in 1864, he persuaded Lincoln to rescind all exchanging of prisoners. When this took effect, both sides had to hastily prepare areas to house, feed, and guard thousands of prisoners. Naturally, at the bottom of the "food chain", there wasn't much left for these unfortunate individuals and many were doomed to perish in the unhealthy conditions.

What would you say was the difference in the way African-American soldiers were treated in comparison to his fellow white soldier?

African-American soldiers were kept together in all-Black units although they maintained white officers. They had a tough time from their fellow (white Union) troops and you can imagine how they were received when encountered by Southern soldiers. Initially they were paid less than white soldiers but this was corrected as the war came to a close.

Interesting to note that the Confederate Congress passed a bill in March 1865 authorizing the states to raise and equip 300,000 slaves for military service in the Confederate Army. Surrender came before any could be mustered and it was simply a case of “too little, too late.”

I recently read Jefferson Davis' farewell address to Congress, and have always believed in the logic and justice of secession, based on the Declaration of Independence. Why do you think Lincoln chose war to resolve the question?

Lincoln made no pretense about what he believed and why he felt the Union is perpetual and cannot be broken up by the states. His famous letter to Horace Greely stated (in part and paraphrased): “If I can save the Union and free no slaves, I will do it; if I can save it by freeing all the slaves, I will do that too. I do what I do to save the Union.”

What is one of the good recent books that has come out on Civil War soldiers?

Bell Wiley pioneered the study of the common soldier of the Civil War. His works are somewhat dated but should still be referenced as classics in the field. There are a number of excellent recent books that a good web search can unearth. Please check the bibliography provided as a follow-up of the webcast.

I have done research into camps of instruction in Illinois and plan to return to this subject in a couple years when I finish my Ph.D. I feel that understanding this training is essential to understanding the common soldier. What are your thoughts on this subject, and, where do you feel the scholarship on Civil War soldiers is heading?

As we approach the 140th anniversary of Fort Sumter, millions of words have been written about the conflict we call the Civil War. The strategies, the campaigns, the battles, and the units engaged have been fought back and forth many times over. The area of the common soldier is still a neophyte in this regard. What makes it so are the thousands of letters, diaries, and journals that the soldiers, themselves wrote. Even today, new works are discovered and give new information in this exciting field.

Considering the poll result on states' rights versus slavery. This has always seemed pretty simplistic. Is it fair to say that it was really a matter of the states' rights to have slavery (or any other institution)?

Lincoln, in his Second Inaugural Address (shortly before his untimely assassination), plainly stated that the war was caused by those who insisted that “slavery be extended into the territories.” Of course, it is more complicated than that but the general belief was that slavery would die off of its own accord if not allowed to spread into the new territories opening up in the West.

You said the South gained a number of volunteers from the west, how much participation was there from the western territories or did the majority of those people participate in the western campaigns?

Don't forget, there were states “out west” at this time and each (to some extent) sent soldiers to fight for both sides.

Did the Union and Confederate armies have standard uniforms or did each unit have a unique uniform?

Both. There were (mostly) militia units that had distinctive uniforms apart from the typical apparel. This became less and less as units were combined and decimated by combat. By the end of the war, most Union troops had common uniforms and the Confederacy made do with whatever soldiers could appropriate.

Some states were admitted with the agreement that they could withdraw from the Union. One of the New England states considered withdrawing earlier.

The “Nullification Crisis” of the 1830's was the most serious challenge to the Federal government on the topic of secession but Andrew Jackson ended the crisis by threatening to send Federal troops to take over the tariff houses in South Carolina much to the dislike of John C. Calhoun.

Did the Confederacy have any units based on ethnicity (like Irish or German units)?

Not at all like their Union counterparts. There were quite a few Irish and German troops in the Confederate armies but they were (for the most part) integrated in the units as a whole.

What can you tell us about the Grand Army of the Republic?

The Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) was the largest of the post-war organizations of veterans. Membership was open to any who had served in the Union Army during the war.

Can you talk a bit about the soldier vote in 1864? Is it true that the Congressional elections were in October but the presidential election was in November?

In July of 1864, 4 months prior to the presidential elections of that year, Lincoln firmly believed that he would be defeated in his re-election bid and, "beaten badly." Three important events took place during that time period that changed everything. On August 5th, Admiral Farragut steamed into Mobile Bay ("Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead!") and closed the last gulf port open to the Confederacy. On September 2, Sherman's troops occupied Atlanta and, "fairly won", delivered the city to President Lincoln. Finally, on October 19th Phil Sheridan routed General Jubal Early at Cedar Creek and closed the Shenandoah Valley "once and for all" for Confederate usage.

Lincoln saw to it that his veteran soldiers were given furloughs that enabled them to go back to their homes and vote in the election. The military vote was overwhelmingly in favor of re-election.

View the entire webcast online at: <https://www.amu.apus.edu/lp/webcast/history/civil-war-soldier>.