

Civil War Soldier:
The Experience of a Union Infantry Soldier

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"Scholars of soldiers," writes Aaron Sheehan-Dean, "share a methodology that builds from the experience of common people to explain larger patterns of historical change."¹ By illuminating the individual citizen soldier of the Union army, this public history project endeavors to provide insight into how they endured and won the Civil War. Historians often focus on the broad political and military actions and those who led those actions but individual

¹ Aaron Sheehan-Dean, *The View From the Ground: Experiences of Civil War Soldiers* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky, 2006), 2, accessed April 19, 2021, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/apus/detail.action?docID=792188>.

experiences "could lead to a heightened appreciation of the country's collective experience."² No political action could have succeeded without their support. No military action could have been successful without them. Examining details of their experience can provide greater insight into the success or failure of battles and the war.

Transcript of **Civil War Soldier: The Experience of a Union Infantry Soldier**

The secretiveness which a man suddenly developed when he found himself *inhabited* for the first time was very entertaining. He would cuddle all knowledge of it as closely as the old Forty-Niners did the hiding-place of their bag of gold-dust. Perhaps he would find only *one* of the vermin... Alas, vain delusion! In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred this solitary *pediculus* would prove to be the advance guard of generations yet to come...³

Welcome to Experience US History! I am American Historian Al Watts.

John Davis Billings, in his book, *Hardtack and Coffee*, was talking about a common affliction citizen soldiers faced in the U.S. Civil War - lice. My head itches just thinking about it.

In the Civil War, "the real load," Bruce Catton wrote, "was carried from first to last by the ordinary soldier."⁴ No brilliant strategy by a general could be successful if his soldiers were sick or hungry. The closer we can come to experiencing the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touch of the citizen soldiers, the more we can understand how and why battles were won and

² Robert E. Bonner, *The Soldier's Pen: Firsthand Impressions of the Civil War*, 1st ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 6.

³ John Davis Billings, *Hardtack and Coffee, or, The Unwritten Story of Army Life*, Collector's Library of the Civil War (Alexandria, VA: Time Life Books, 1982), 80.

⁴ Bruce Catton, *The Civil War* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2005), 143.

lost. So I invite you to come along with me to discover the experience of a Union infantry soldier in the Civil War.

This is Experience US History!⁵

Thanks Cookie for the, uh, coffee?

Hey there! I'm Private Al Watts with the Seventh Missouri U.S. Volunteers. I'm over one year into my three year enlistment. So, you want can I tell about my experience as a Union infantry soldier? Well, we practice a lot for battle which we call drill. Our officers, well, they take roll-call several times a day just to make sure nobody has wondered off or anything like that. On a regular day we have, uh, you know, we have to collect wood for our fire, and we always got to have water to drink, and sometimes we have to dig holes, uh, for our toilets which we call the sinks.⁶

Well, sounds like we might get a chance to meet ol' Johnny Reb today! I better get going so I don't have to dig any sinks again.⁷

The minstrel boy to the war is gone,
In the ranks of death you will find him.
His father's sword he hath girded on,
And his wild harp slung behind him.
Land of song...⁸

Voice Over: Company, halt!

⁵ Matt Glaser and Jacqueline Schwab, "Battle Hymn of the Republic," track 15 on *The Civil War*, 1990, CD.

⁶ Ben Watts, "The Long Roll: Call to Battle," Voice Memo app, recorded May 21, 2021.

⁷ John Williams, composer, "Call to Muster and Battle Cry of Freedom," track 7 on *Lincoln Soundtrack*, Motion Picture Artwork, Photos, 2012, Spotify.

⁸ Thomas Moore, "The Minstrel Boy," vocals by Al Watts, composed 1798, recorded May 16, 2021.

VO: Right Face!

VO: Order Arms!

VO: We'll camp here tonight boys. Company dismissed!

Three cheers for the Captain: Hip, hip, huzzah! Hip, hip, huzzah! Hip, hip, huzzah!

Welcome back. I'm glad you were able to make it all this way. Uh...wait right there. Uh, Sergeant, this looks like the same campsite we were at before - like we just marched twenty miles in a circle! No, no, no. I don't want to be tied up by my thumbs. That's okay.

When I go into battle this is what I would be wearing. It's called "light marching order."⁹ Of course, I would carry my musket. Without that, I can't shoot Johnny Reb. Now, mine is an Enfield. This musket would have been imported from England.¹⁰ The other musket that Union soldiers used to take was called a Springfield that was manufactured in Springfield, Massachusetts.¹¹

To fire the musket, I need two things, two basic things. First is a cartridge, like this - a paper tube with gun powder and a bullet in there.¹² The other thing that I need is called a percussion cap which would be right here. And these are what I would need to fire the weapon. If Johnny Reb dares to get too close to our ranks, I can pull out my bayonet for that nasty business. But, since Johnny Reb rarely wants to get close to our ranks, mostly what I use this for is a candle holder.

⁹ Billings, *Hardtack and Coffee*, 317.

¹⁰ Time-Life Books, ed., *Arms and Equipment of the Union*, Echoes of Glory (Alexandria, VA: Time-Life Books, 1991), 38.

¹¹ Image: William C. Davis, *The Civil War Reenactors' Encyclopedia*, 1st ed. (Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, 2002), 91.

¹² Time-Life Books, ed., *Arms and Equipment of the Union*, 194.

Now this, this is, this is my canteen which of course I fill with water. It's made of cotton or in this case, wool, so I doesn't make that much noise when I'm walking around. This is my haversack or "bread bag." In my haversack I might have things like a diary or some utensils.¹³ But mostly what I have in here is my food, my rations, which comes with three-quarters of a pound of salt pork, some coffee, sugar, and salt (that's supposed to last me up to three days) and the staple thing which is hardtack.¹⁴ Now this is a hard bread or a cracker that is made of just flour, salt and a little bit of water that's baked 'til it's rock hard - so hard it can break your teeth. Sometimes, though, these were infested with weevils.¹⁵ So what you have to do is break up your cracker in your coffee and then they float to the top so you can just skim them out.¹⁶

My uniform is made out of wool since the Rebs had all the cotton. On cold nights it's nice to have the wool but most of the time it's hot, and scratchy, and uncomfortable. My dark blue jacket, here, helps me to be identified as a Union soldier but we call it a sack coat. We soldiers like to add a little bit of individuality to our uniform which is why I have a shamrock, here, signifying my Irish heritage.¹⁷ Underneath this itchy, heavy, wool jacket is an equally scratchy wool flannel shirt. You can also see that I have light blue pants which are held up by my suspenders.¹⁸ On my feet are shoes. They're called brogans. There's no left or right to them and

¹³ Time-Life Books, ed., *Arms and Equipment of the Union*, 195.

¹⁴ Billings, *Hardtack and Coffee*, 112, 141-142.

¹⁵ Image: "Pantry Pests," Life Cycle Pest Control, accessed May 21, 2021, <https://www.lifecyclepest.com/pantry-pests/>.

¹⁶ Billings, *Hardtack and Coffee*, 116.

¹⁷ David Kincaid, "Kelly's Irish Brigade," track 2 on *The Irish-American's Song: Songs of the Union and Confederate Irish Soldiers, 1861-1865*, 2003, iTunes.

¹⁸ Bell I. Wiley, *The Life of Billy Yank*, Essential Classics of the Civil War (New York: Book -of-the-Month Club, 1994), 59. See also Time-Life Books, *Arms and Equipment of the Union*, 88-90.

they're really hard to make fit. And, they smell really bad! There are three main types of headgear Union soldiers would wear. Mine is called a Hardee hat. It has a wide brim that goes all the way around. The other types of hat were a forage cap,¹⁹ like this, or a kepi,²⁰ like this. Since these are considered my underclothes, I best put my jacket back on.

I need to set up my shelter and, uh, I carry half of it while my pard, here, carries the other half. Wait! You're not going to help set up the shelter? Sick? You seemed just fine pushing your way to the front for rations earlier.

VO: Here he goes now as he tries to set up the tent all on his own. Buttoning the two halves together, staking down the four corners, putting up the ridge pole, oh!²¹ Tries again, no luck. Again, and I think, I think he has it!

So this is supposed to fit two grown men but it's really only comfortable for "a dog, and a small one at that"²² which is why we call it a dog tent.

Here's my knapsack where I carry most of my belongings. My favorite piece of equipment is right here - it's called a gum blanket. It has, uh, rubber on one side and canvas on the other. It's great for a ground cover to keep you dry when you're sleeping at night. But it's also got a nice little hole in it which is handy for when it's raining, you can wear it as a poncho. I always bring my housewife with me every time. My housewife is actually a sewing kit to sew on

¹⁹ Image of an original: Neil Kagan and Stephen G. Hyslop, *Smithsonian Civil War: Inside the National Collection* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2013), 138.

²⁰ Image of an original: Time-Life Books, ed., *Arms and Equipment of the Union*, 178.

²¹ Elisha Hunt Rhodes and Robert Hunt Rhode, *All for the Union: The Civil War Diary and Letters of Elisha Hunt Rhodes*, 1st Vintage Civil War Library ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 68.

²² Billings, *Hardtack and Coffee*, 52.

buttons or darn socks.²³ I also have some tools here to clean my musket with.²⁴ Of course, got to have more socks; you can never have enough socks. I have a tin plate, uh, candles, and another candle-holder which is nice to have. And also once in a while we have a little extra time to play, and we've got this new game called "baseball" from the boys out east teaching us to play, I've got one of those.²⁵ And finally, I've got my tin cup which I mostly use for my coffee but sometimes when we're lucky we get a stew and can put that in there.

In all of these things of course is included half my tent and some tent stakes altogether weighs between forty and fifty pounds.²⁶ Now, a lot of soldiers after marching for a bit would decide that they didn't want to carry all that stuff so they'd get rid of as much as they could. A lot of them would just toss the knapsack aside entirely and roll their things up in a blanket and wear it on as a sling.²⁷ The great thing about the Union army is that we always were getting resupplied so if you needed an extra blanket because you tossed yours aside, you could usually get one in a couple days.²⁸

Well, I better head out to that creek we crossed a little while ago and fill my canteen up with water. It's been a pleasure sharing with you my experience living as a Union soldier. I want you all to stay safe our there. And keep an eye out for Johnny Reb!

²³ Image of an original: Time-Life Books, *Arms and Equipment of the Union*, 222.

²⁴ Image: "Musket Accessories," Blockade Runner Publishing, accessed May 23, 2021, <http://blockaderunnerinc.com/Catalog/catpg2.htm>.

²⁵ Image: "Antique 1860's Baseball, Civil War Era, Gusset or Belt, Regulation Size, Vintage," WorthPoint, accessed May 21, 2021, <https://www.worthpoint.com/worthopedia/antique-1860s-baseball-civil-war-era-1863238111>.

²⁶ Wiley, *The Life of Billy Yank*, 64.

²⁷ Time-Life Books, *Arms and Equipment of the Union*, 195.

²⁸ Wiley, *The Life of Billy Yank*, 62.

I hope you enjoyed observing the experience of a Union soldier in the Civil War. For further study, I recommend primary source *Hardtack and Coffee* by John Davis Billings²⁹ and for a secondary source, I recommend *The Life of Johnny Reb and The Life of Billy Yank* by Bell I. Wiley.³⁰ I'm American Historian Al Watts. Thank you for watching!

²⁹ John Davis Billings, *Hardtack and Coffee, or, The Unwritten Story of Army Life*, Collector's Library of the Civil War (Alexandria, VA: Time-Life Books, 1982).

³⁰ Bell I. Wiley, *The Life of Johnny Reb and The Life of Billy Yank*, Essential Classics of the Civil War (New York: Book-of-the-Month Club, 1994).

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