

from

Reflections on
the Civil War

Bruce Catton

In the Civil War, the common soldiers of both sides were the same sort of people: untrained and untaught young men, mostly from the country. There weren't many cities then, and they weren't very large, so the average soldier generally came either from a farm or from some very small town or rural area. He had never been anywhere; he was completely **unsophisticated**. He joined up because he wanted to, because his **patriotism** had been **aroused**. The bands were playing, the **recruiting** officers were making speeches, so he got stirred up and enlisted.¹ Sometimes, he was not altogether dry behind the ears.²

unsophisticated
simple; unrefined

patriotism
devotion
to country;
nationalism;

aroused
stirred up;
awakened

recruiting
enrolling or
signing up

¹ **enlisted**: joined the armed services

² **dry behind the ears**: grown-up

When the boy joined the army, he would, of course, be issued clothing. He would get his uniform—pants, coat, shoes, and underwear. In the frontier regions, the quartermasters³ discovered that quite a lot of these young men picked up the underwear and looked at it and said, “What is this?” They had never seen any before. They hadn’t worn it back home. Well, they caught on.

They were fresh out of the backwoods, most of them.

The boys from the country and the very small towns seemed to have made better soldiers than the boys from the cities. In the North, for instance, the boys from the rural areas, and especially from the Middle West, which they then called the Northwest, were a little tougher than the boys from the big

cities. They could stand more; they were more **self-reliant**; perhaps they were more used to handling weapons. In any case, they made very good soldiers. On the Southern side, the same was true—even more so. A larger percentage of the men came from rural areas because there were fewer cities in the South. A number of them didn’t even bother with shoes, but they were very, very bad boys to get into a fight with.

The war was greeted in its first few weeks almost as a festival. Everybody seemed relieved. People went out and celebrated, both in the North and in the South. There were parades, bands playing, flags flying; people seemed almost happy. Large numbers of troops were enlisted; as a matter of fact, again in both the North and the South, more men offered themselves than could be handled. Neither the Union nor the Confederate government had the weapons, uniforms, or anything else to equip all of the men who tried to enlist.

Both armies contained a number of very **ardent** teenagers who had lied about their age in order to get into the army in the first place. Legal age, of course, was eighteen. It turned out that, in the North at least, a very common

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self-reliant
independent;
self-sufficient

ardent
enthusiastic;
passionate

³ quartermaster: military officer in charge of supplies



little gag had been developed. A boy who was under eighteen and wanted to enlist would take a piece of paper and scribble the figure eighteen on it. Then he would take off his shoe, placing the piece of paper into the sole of his shoe, put it back on and tie it up. He would go to the recruiting station, and since he would obviously be looking rather young, sooner or later the recruiting officer would look at him and say, "How old are you, son?" Then the boy, in perfect honesty, could say, "I am over eighteen."

The point about that is not so much that young men were lying about their age in order to get into the army but that they would go to the trouble of working out a gag like that. A man simply wouldn't dream of taking an oath that he was eighteen when he wasn't. Lying to the government was a little beyond him, but he would work out a thing like this and could say honestly, "I'm over eighteen," and that made it quite all right.

A set of statistics were compiled about the average Northern soldier that are rather interesting. They apply pretty much to the South as well. An average soldier was 5 feet 8¼ inches tall; he weighed just over 143 pounds. Forty-eight percent were farmers, 24 percent were mechanics, 15 percent were laborers, 5 percent were businessmen, and 3 percent were professional men. That was really a kind of cross-section of the population of the United States at that time: about one-half farmers, about 40 percent working men, and 10 percent businessmen or professionals.

When a man joined the Union army, he was given shoes that must have been a little bit of a trial to wear. In a great many cases, army contractors simply made the right and left shoes identical. They were squared off at the toe, and it didn't matter which one you put on which foot; they were supposed to work either way. They must have been very uncomfortable, and I imagine they account for a great many of the cases of footsore soldiers who fell out on the march and stumbled into camp long after everybody else had gone to bed.

The Civil War soldier, on the Northern side at least, got a great deal to eat; the trouble was that most of it was not very good. The Union army enlisted no cooks or bakers during the entire war. Originally, each man was supposed to cook for himself. It happened, of course, practically immediately that company

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abominably
horribly;
dreadfully

kitchens were established. Men were detailed from the ranks⁴ to act as cooks; some of them cooked fairly well, and some of them, of course, cooked abominably. But whatever they cooked, the boys ate.

The basic ration⁵ for the Civil War soldier, particularly on the march, where it was not possible to carry along vegetables, was salt pork or bacon and hardtack. The hardtack was a big soda cracker, quite thick and, as the name implies, very tough—made tough so that it wouldn't fall into pieces while it was joggling about in a man's haversack.⁶ When the hardtack was fresh, it was apparently quite good to eat. The trouble is that it was very rarely fresh. Boxes of hardtack would sit on the railroad platforms or sidetracked in front of warehouses for weeks and months at a time, and by the time the soldier got them, they were often infested and not very good.

infested
overrun with
insects; bug-
ridden

Every soldier carried some sort of a tin can in which he could boil coffee. Coffee was issued in the whole bean, for when the government issued ground coffee, they could never quite trust the contractors not to adulterate⁷ it. When the soldier made coffee, he would put a handful of beans in a bucket and grind them with the butt of his musket. In the morning, in camp, you could tell when the boys were getting up by the rhythmic clinking, grinding noise that came up from in front of every tent.

The soldier also had sugar to go with his coffee, and he would boil his coffee in his little tin can and then dump in some sugar. He would usually have a skillet in which to fry his bacon. Sometimes he would crumble up hardtack and drop the crumbs in the sizzling bacon fat and make a rather indescribable mess—I guess a healthy young man who got a good deal of exercise could digest it without too much difficulty.

In the Civil War, which lasted four years, about 600,000 young Americans,

4 detailed . . . ranks: selected from the enlisted troops

5 ration: food for one day

6 haversack: an over-the-shoulder bag for carrying supplies and personal items

7 adulterate: spoil; contaminate

North and South together, lost their lives. That is not the total casualty⁸ list; it is the number that actually went under the sod.⁹ The wounded, the missing, the prisoners, were in another list. Six hundred thousand is the number of lives that were actually lost.

If you want to understand what a terrible drain that was on the country, reflect that the total population in the United States in the 1860s was about an eighth or a ninth of what it is today. The number of men killed in that war, if you interpret it in today's terms, would come to something between four and four and one-half million. In other words, a perfectly frightful toll of American lives was taken.

There are a good many reasons why the toll was so high. More than *one-half* of the men who died were not killed in action; they simply died of camp diseases: typhoid fever, pneumonia, dysentery, and childhood diseases like measles and chicken pox.

To begin with, medical science then was woefully inadequate. Doctors simply did not know what caused such **devastating** camp diseases as typhoid fever, which accounted for about one-fourth of all deaths in army hospitals. Malaria, a plague of the Virginia swamp country, was attributed to "miasmatic vapors" arising from **stagnant** waters and not to the pestiferous¹⁰ mosquitoes bred therein. (The vapors were also largely blamed for typhoid and dysentery.) Nothing was known about how and why wounds became infected, and so nothing much was done to prevent infection; surgeons talked **soberly** about "laudable pus" which was expected to appear a few days after an operation or a gunshot wound, its laudable character arising because it showed that the body was **discharging** poisons.

Six hundred thousand is the number of lives that were actually lost.

devastating
destructive

stagnant
unmoving;
moving slowly

soberly
seriously;
solemnly

laudable
worthy of
praise

discharging
letting go of

8 casualty: injured person; victim

9 went under the sod: died and were buried ("were laid under the grass")

10 pestiferous: disease-carrying

appalling
terrible;
horrifying

The number of men who simply got sick and died, or who got a minor scratch or cut and then could do nothing to check the infection, was **appalling**. Just to be in the army in the 1860s was much more dangerous than anything we know about today, even though many a man in the army never got into action. It was a very common thing—in fact, almost a rule—for a Civil War regiment¹¹

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on either side to lose about half of its strength in men who either became sick and died or became so ill they had to get medical discharges before the regiment ever saw action. Whereas a Civil War regiment, on paper, contained about one thousand men, in actual fact, a regiment that went into battle with as many as five hundred men was quite fortunate.

Not long after the war began, whenever a Northern army and a Southern army were camped fairly close to each other, the men on the picket lines¹² would get acquainted with one another and would call little informal truces.¹³ The Northern soldiers would bring in coffee to trade. Along the Rappahannock River, they made quite a thing of constructing little toy boats out of planks. A boat would be maybe two feet long, with a mast and a sail. Loaded with coffee, it would be sent out into the stream, pointed south, and when it would get across the river, the Confederate soldiers would unload the coffee, stock it with tobacco, and send it back.

This led to some rather odd happenings, since men who are stopping to trade with each other are apt to get a little friendly along the way. There was one rather famous occasion, again along the Rappahannock River, when in a building not far behind the Confederate lines back of the outposts,¹⁴ there

11 **regiment**: military troop or division

12 **picket lines**: guards posted around the edge of military encampments

13 **truces**: ceasefires; agreements to stop fighting

14 **outposts**: outlying settlements or stations of troops

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was going to be a dance one evening, and the Confederate pickets invited their Yankee friends to come over and go to the dance.

Half a dozen Yankee soldiers, leaving their guns behind them, crossed the river in the darkness, went to the dance, and had a very good time—until a Confederate officer appeared just when festivities were at their height. He was, of course, horrified and ordered the Yankee soldiers arrested and thrown into prison, at which point the Confederates begged him not to do this. They said they had given the Yankees their word that everything would be all right if they came to the dance, and asked that the officer let them go.

Well, the officer saw some point to that appeal. He couldn't violate or cause his men to violate their honor, so after giving all hands a don't-let-it-happen-again lecture, he released the Yankee prisoners, and they went home with a good long dance under their belts.

Along the Rapidan River during the winter of 1863 and 1864, the armies for a number of miles had outposts that were drawn up very close to each other. In fact, in one or two places, they actually overlapped. The Yankees had a way of advancing their picket lines in the night and pulling them back in the daytime. The Confederates did it just the other way around; their picket lines were a little farther forward by day than by night. Pretty soon it turned out that there was a picket post, with a log cabin and a fireplace, that was used at night by the Yankees and in the daytime by the Confederates. The boys worked out a deal: Each party would leave a stack of firewood on hand and be sure to get out before the other one got there. They kept on that way quite pleasantly for some months.

At the great Battle of Fredericksburg, down at the far end of the line where the fighting was not very heavy, there was a woodland stretch held by the Confederates on one side and the Yankees on the other. The pickets, again, were quite close together, and the skirmish lines¹⁵ not much farther apart. The men got to catcalling¹⁶ and jeering at each other and making insulting remarks. This went on for quite a while in much the same way that a couple of high school

15 skirmish lines: lines of troops attacking each other

16 catcalling: harsh sounds expressing disapproval

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football cheering sections might yell back and forth at each other. Finally, a couple of soldiers, a Confederate and a Yankee, got really angry. They got so angry that they had to have a fight. So all along the line in this particular section of the woodland, the soldiers called an informal truce, and the riled-up Yankee and Southerner got out and had a very fine, soul-satisfying fistfight. I don't know who came out on top, but at last the fight ended, as all such fights do, and the men went to a nearby stream and washed the blood off their faces and shook hands. Then both sides went back, picked up their weapons, and started shooting at each other again.

It was that kind of war—rather informal, and fought between men who, when left alone, got along together beautifully. You've often heard it spoken of as the War Between Brothers. Actually, it really was that.

The siege¹⁷ of Vicksburg was another case where the picket lines were so close together that on one occasion the Southerners and the Northerners had a little meeting and came to an agreement as to just where the picket lines ought to go, so they wouldn't trespass on each other's territory.

During this siege, one of the Confederates out on the picket line asked if there were any Missouri regiments in the army immediately opposing his section. He was a Missourian himself and was looking for his brother. The Yankees made inquiry, and pretty soon they came forward with the Confederate soldier's brother—both boys from Missouri, one of them in Confederate gray and the other in Federal blue. The Confederate had a roll of bills in his hand and gave them to his brother to send to their mother, who was peaceably at home in Missouri. He couldn't get things out from Vicksburg through the Union lines, Vicksburg being completely surrounded, so he asked his brother to send them to her, and the brother did. There was no shooting while these arrangements were made, then the brothers shook hands and retired to their individual lines, and the shooting started up again.

During the fighting at Crampton's Gap in Maryland in the fall of 1862, the Confederates were slowly withdrawing. They were fighting a rear-guard

¹⁷ siege: the act of cutting off a city from water, food, and supplies

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action rather than a regular battle. One Yankee soldier got a little too far forward, slipped, and accidentally slid down the side of the steep hill on which he had been posted, winding up at the bottom of the hill in a thicket.¹⁸ There he confronted a Confederate soldier who wasn't ready to retreat yet. The two men grabbed their guns. But eventually they figured there was no point in shooting each other here, off in a quiet corner where there wasn't much going on, so they laid down their weapons and made an agreement. They would stay where they were with no shooting. At the end of the day if the Confederates had advanced, the Yankee would be the Confederate soldier's prisoner. If the Yankees had advanced, then the Confederate would be the Yankee's prisoner. Meanwhile, there wasn't any sense in getting shot. The Confederates eventually withdrew, and the Yankee soldier found he had taken a prisoner.

The two men grabbed their guns. But eventually they figured there was no point in shooting each other . . .

One of the most touching stories I know involving this acquaintanceship—friendship, really—between the rival soldiers took place at Fredericksburg, Virginia, along the Rappahannock, a couple of months after the big battle there. The Rappahannock River is not very wide, and the men on the northern bank could easily talk with the men on the southern bank if they raised their voices a little. One winter afternoon when nothing much was going on, a number of the Federal army bands were massed on the hillside overlooking the river valley to give a little informal concert. They played all of the Northern patriotic songs, and the Northern soldiers crowded around to listen. On the opposite shore, the Confederate soldiers gathered to enjoy the concert.

After a while, the band had pretty well run through its repertoire,¹⁹ and there was a pause, whereupon some of the Confederates shouted, "Now play some of ours." So the band began to play Southern tunes. They played "Dixie"

¹⁸ *thicket*: a small, thick patch of bushes

¹⁹ *repertoire*: list of selections

and "Bonnie Blue Flag" and "Yellow Rose of Texas" and I don't know what all. They played Southern tunes while the Southern and Northern armies sat in the quiet and listened.

It was getting on toward dusk by this time, so the band, to signal the end of the concert, went into "Home, Sweet Home." Both armies together tried to sing it, and it was rather a sentimental occasion. After all, these boys were a long way from home. They knew perfectly well that a great many of them were never going to see home again; as soon as the warm weather came, they would be fighting each other. The song got to be a little too much for them, and pretty soon they choked up and couldn't sing, and the band finished the music all by itself.

A couple of months later, the troops faced each other in the terrible Battle of Chancellorsville.

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Reviewing

from *Reflections on the Civil War*

Discussing the Selection

1. From this account, draw some conclusions about what the average Civil War soldier was like.
2. "The war was greeted in its first few weeks almost as a festival. Everybody seemed relieved." Why might people have had this reaction?
3. Describe some of the hardships the enlisted men endured. How do you think this contributes, if at all, to their feelings about each other?
4. Does the author show any favoritism for one side or the other, Union or Confederacy? Support your answer with evidence from the essay.

Writing an Informative Report

Find out more about the Civil War by choosing one of the details mentioned in this selection and writing a short report on what you learn. Make sure that the topic you choose is limited enough to be covered in just a few paragraphs. Some examples might be hardtack, uniforms, songs of the North or South, and so forth.

About Bruce Catton (1899–1978)

Born in Michigan to a Congregationalist minister and his family, Bruce Catton became one of America's most respected and popular Civil War historians. Catton's books are not just "doorstops" thick with facts and footnotes, but solid storytelling filled with details about real people's lives. Catton's writing has been described as having "a near-magic power of imagination." As a young man, Catton served in the navy during World War I, afterwards writing for a variety of news services. His book about the final military campaign in the Civil War, *A Stillness at Appomattox*, received two of America's most celebrated writing prizes: a Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. In 1954 Catton helped found *American Heritage* magazine.