

The Equipment, Business and Agony of War

<http://civilwar150.longwood.edu>

The structure of life in both the Union and the Confederacy was dictated by the demands of the “Gods of War” from 1861 to 1865.

In the South, even in the military, class divisions were an important aspect of daily life. As Ken Burns observed:

“A well-to-do Georgia planter scorned poor white recruits as ‘not the men upon whom a brave leader would rely for energetic, heroic action, [but] they will answer food for powder and understand how to use the spade.’ And a South Carolina woman who nursed the wounded professed to see innate differences even in the hospital wards: ‘The better-born, that is, those born in purple, the gentry, were the better patients: *they* endured silence.’

“Wealthy soldiers found it easy to get passes to visit home from time to time. The poor were expected to stay at the front. ‘This damned ginral won’t give you a furlough or a discharge till you are dead ten days,’ a Georgia private complained, ‘and *then* you have to prove it.’

“Many men were driven to desert by bleak letters from home. ‘Our son is lying at death’s door,’ a woman known to history only as “Louisa” wrote her husband. ‘He cannot live long for the fix he is in. He is raving distracted. His earnest calls for Pa almost breaks my heart. John, come if you can. If they not let you off, I don’t know the reason.’

‘I saw a site today that made me feel mity Bad,’ an Alabama private wrote home. ‘I saw a man shot for deserting there was twenty fore Guns shot at him they shot him all to pease. . . he went home and thay Brote him Back and then he went home again and so they shot him for that

Martha, it was one site that I did hate to see it. But I could not help myself I had to do just as they sed for me to doo.’

“By the end of 1863, and despite the threat of such punishments, two-fifths of the southern army would be absent, with or without leave.

“But however few and ill-supplied Lee’s veterans might be, their heroism never wavered; and the smaller the army, the firmer the bonds which knit it together. Seeing his men brave heat, thirst, ravines, thickets, and murderous artillery fire to attack at Malvern Hill, Lee exclaimed: ‘No fighting on earth could surpass it.’ Yet again and again the Southern troops equaled that display of combined endurance and valor. They would advance unhesitatingly to certain death, as Hood’s men did in the cornfield at Antietam. Their very hardships, patiently shared, gave them a sense of fast comradeship. Building “merrimacks,” or improvised lean-tos, for night shelter; cooking dough by twisting it around a ramrod and holding it over the fire; eating calamus, green corn, bull frogs, and anything else remotely edible; charging with the rebel yell—through it all they took pride in the sense that they were making history. Some youths suffered from homesickness, and then became so attached to comrades, the camp mess, and the company file that when on leave they longed to get back, strange conflict between homesickness and campsickness raging in their breasts. The drafted men fought as bravely as anyone, though a certain stigma did attach the name “conscript.”

Allan Nevins, in War for the Union 1862-63 states:

“The individualism of the Confederate soldier excelled that of the Eastern troops in the Union Army. The men marched loosely, and though they might go into battle in good order, the first shots from enemy rifles scattered the ranks and set every man to fighting for himself. He might stand up, kneel, or lie down, he took shelter as he liked, and he spoke freely to his

comrades: ‘How many cartridges you got?’ ; ‘Looky here, Butler, mind how you shoot, that ball didn’t miss my head two inches’ ; ‘Cap’n, don’t you think we’d better move up a little, just along that knoll?’ Sometimes a quick-eyed private in the line would see an opportunity that must be seized without delay. He would spring up, shouting ‘Charge, boys, charge!’ and with a volley of shots and yells, the long, loose-jointed line would coil rapidly forward, while its slain and wounded dropped here and there.”

“Imagination sometimes seemed conspicuously lacking in the Northern war effort. The soldiers even in 1862 were asking for a portable regimental oven to bake fresh bread, which private firms could then supply but which the government never troubled to furnish in quantity. A British general, Hugh M. Rose, in a celebrated thousand-mile fighting march in burning heat during the Indian Mutiny, had demonstrated the value of khaki uniforms, and Britain shortly used them in her Abyssinian campaign (1868) ; but though its six-pound woolen uniform was too hot in summer, the North never experimented with a cool, dust-repellent cloth. The Prussian army had developed an excellent nine-ounce cooking tin in two fitted parts, large enough that one man might cook meat and vegetables for several while another boiled coffee; but Americans stuck to kettle and pan.

“The poor, ill-balanced, ill-prepared diet given the troops in the first months, nearly as serious a cause of sickness as camp filth, was less the fault of Joseph P. Taylor, the commissary-general, than of custom, haste, ignorance of nutrition, and bad distribution. The old army ration of salt pork or beef, hard bread or flour, coffee and dried beans or peas, was so obviously inadequate that Congress in the summer of 1861 took steps to have potatoes and fresh meat, whenever possible, added to the menu. Vinegar and molasses were also put on the ration list. Initially the quality of food was often inferior: the “sowbelly” was fat and stringy, the beef tough,

thehardtack so weevil that soldiers called it “worm castles.” And despite official prescription, vegetables were so hard to get at some seasons and so difficult to transport great distances that for long intervals the men seldom had a taste of fresh food.”

Even those in greatest need of support, the wounded, found the going could be very hard. The standard Federal ambulance was an expensive, “\$170 four-wheeled type, but productive of agony, grating bones, and loss of blood in their heavy jolting over uneven ground. After 1862, happily, the government bought no more. But still this was one of the areas in which the record was bad. Near the end of 1862 a trial was made of litters, fitted on the backs of mules, for carrying wounded. The wretched quality of many of the four-wheel ambulances excited frequent complaint. Their axles broke, their bolts slipped out, their bodies splintered, and their covers admitted the rain. Meigs, denying that the surgeon-general’s office could have done better than he, laid the blame for shortcomings on the pressure of war emergencies.”

In 1863 war on both sides was becoming more and more rationalized as well as more and more brutal.

