

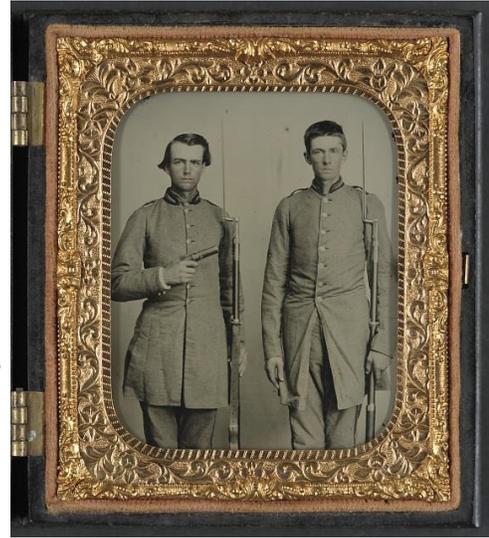
Over the course of the Civil War, approximately three million men (and a handful of women disguised as men) served in the armed forces. By comparison, before the war, the U.S. Army consisted of only about 16,000 soldiers. The mobilization that took place over the four years of the war touched almost every extended family North and South and affected the far reaches of the country that had split in two.

By war's end, approximately 620,000 men had died, an estimate that is currently undergoing scrutiny as historians question whether it is too low. As it is, this figure translates to a rate of death six times that experienced by Americans during World War II. The horrific, and largely unanticipated, number of casualties suffered by Northern and Southern soldiers during the Civil War devastated people throughout the country and influenced public life for years to come.

Most Civil War soldiers volunteered to fight, although some signed on as conscripts (the Confederacy began to draft men in April 1862; the Union in March 1863). North and South, men joined companies formed in their communities. Within their companies, they served beside relatives, friends, and neighbors. Within their regiments, which were formed from ten companies, soldiers served with men from their state. Despite these ties, desertion was an ongoing problem for both sides (about 200,000 Union men and about 100,000 Confederates abandoned their posts), though it had a greater effect on the smaller Confederate army.

On both sides during the Civil War, most soldiers were unmarried white men who had been born in the United States. Their average age was twenty-five. Most could read and write and attended a Protestant church. The majority farmed. In both sections of the country, wealthy men had the option of hiring a substitute if drafted and, in the South, men who owned twenty or more slaves were exempted from service to stay on the plantations, although just a small percentage of qualified slaveowners took advantage of this. These policies that favored the rich caused resentment within the ranks, North and South. There were also some differences between the Union and Confederate armies. The Union army was more ethnically diverse; recent immigrants from Ireland and Germany formed Union regiments, as did more than 180,000 African American men who joined up beginning in 1863.

Men enlisted for a variety of reasons, including friendship and peer pressure, as well as the desire for excitement and adventure. In addition, men joined up for ideological reasons. Among both Confederate and Union soldiers were men who fought to protect their liberty and preserve the right to self-government that their ancestors had gained in the Revolutionary War. For Union boys, protecting their liberty meant preserving the Union. At the beginning of the war, most Union soldiers did not fight to abolish slavery, but that was certainly a goal for the African American men given the opportunity to



[\[Two unidentified soldiers from Tennessee in Confederate uniforms with rifles and pepper-box pistol\]](#) [between 1861 and 1865]

enlist by President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. For Confederate soldiers, protecting their liberty meant defending their home soil and asserting their rights as residents of their states. Although most Confederate soldiers did not own slaves, many of them included the right to own slaves among the states' rights that they fought to maintain.



[Battle \[Drawing\]](#) [June, 1864?]

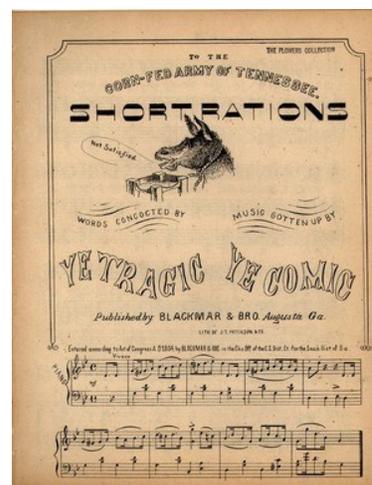
Men from the divided state of Tennessee fought on both sides of the conflict. According to federal records, more than 51,000 men joined the Union army, including more than 20,000 African American soldiers. At least twice as many Tennesseans fought for the Confederacy, with estimates ranging from 120,000 to close to 190,000. What is more, the war was close at hand for Tennessee soldiers and civilians as the state was second only to Virginia in the number of combat incidents on its soil.

Before soldiers departed for training camps with their companies, they often had a formal send-off attended by their families and local officials. Female relatives frequently presented companies with hand-sewn flags to carry into battle. In 1861, most men and their relatives believed that the volunteers would only be away for a short time before the war ended.

After they arrived at their camps of instruction, the newly minted soldiers soon found more monotony than excitement. New recruits had to try to learn more than ninety commands. Most soldiers found drilling dull and onerous. In addition to drilling, soldiers' other duties included taking care of livestock, serving on picket (guard) duty, and gathering and cutting wood. If they wanted to leave camp, soldiers had to get a pass; this rankled many of the men, who were used to being independent.

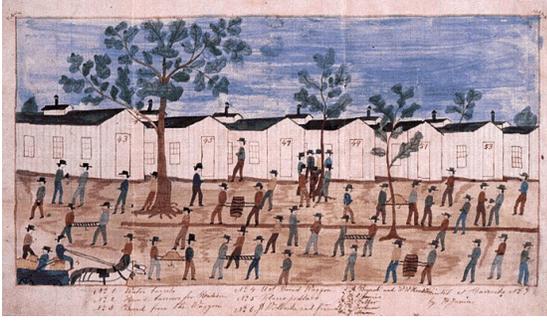
Of course, camp life was not all work. During their usually plentiful free time, soldiers sang, played sports such as baseball and games such as dominoes, wrote letters home, and attended church services and revivals. They also indulged in less wholesome pastimes, such as gambling, drinking, and taking up with prostitutes. Soldiers also used their free time to forage for food to supplement their diets. Camp food was not appealing. Northern soldiers received bacon, hardtack (heavy crackers), and coffee; southern soldiers relied on pickled beef and cornbread. Confederate soldiers found their standard ration reduced twice over the course of the war due to the failure of the Confederacy's supply lines after Union incursions into the region.

Staying healthy was by far the greatest challenge of camp life. Poor sanitation and poor diets combined to create unhealthy environments. Within the close quarters of camp, diseases became rampant. Epidemics of mumps, measles, and chicken pox raced through Civil War training camps. Deadly diseases such as dysentery, malaria, and typhoid fever took a heavy toll. Before their men had even set foot on the battlefield, many companies had lost as many as one-third to disease. Throughout the Civil War, disease claimed more lives than combat.



[Short rations. 1864](#)

Camps grew busy before battles, most of which took place in the heat of summer. Extra rations were prepared, and ammunition was distributed (each soldier typically received 40-60 rounds—a round was made up of a bullet and the powder needed to fire it). Most soldiers carried rifled muskets or, increasingly, rifles, both of which had far better range and accuracy than the basic musket used in previous



[“Letter with colored sketch, James W. Duke to an unidentified cousin, written from a Union prison camp, 31 August 1864”](#)

wars on American soil. Before going off to battle, soldiers were inspected by their officers and urged to stay calm and aim low. As they marched to meet the enemy, soldiers faced several challenges, including making their way along poor roads that were either muddy or dusty, painful feet from shoes or boots that did not fit right, discomfort from the heavy loads they carried (many men ditched provisions along the way and would later regret it), and the threat of sunstroke or frostbite.

“Overwhelming” best describes the experience of battle for Civil War soldiers. Many men could not—or would not—go into details about the fighting afterward

with their families or other civilians. The noise and smoke of battle overpowered soldiers’ senses. Amidst the smoke, trees, and other vegetation (most battles were fought in or near forests), men could barely see. At the same time, they were besieged by loud and disturbing noises, including the boom of artillery, the whirring of bullets, the beating of drums, the Rebel yell, and the screams of the wounded. Trained to try to ignore the injured and dying men around them, soldiers tried to continue to advance, but this was difficult even for veteran soldiers. After a battle, most soldiers were physically exhausted and emotionally distraught. Survivors from the winning side usually buried the dead with the help of local residents.

Wounded soldiers suffered considerably. Although military doctors and administrators made progress over the course of the war in the areas of sanitation and organization, medical care remained rudimentary in the mid-nineteenth century. The germ theory was unknown; there were no blood transfusions; and antibiotics had not yet been invented. What is more, there were never enough doctors to care for the wounded, especially in the Confederacy. To prevent infection and gangrene (the death of body tissue that can set in after infection), doctors tried to amputate wounded legs or arms within twenty-four hours. Patients often underwent amputations without any anesthesia. Soldiers with wounds to the torso had less chance to survive than did men with bloody limbs.

Both wounded and unwounded soldiers sometimes found themselves taken as prisoners of war during battles. On each side, approximately 200,000 soldiers became prisoners over the course of the war. Prisoners did not fare well; both North and South, they experienced unsanitary conditions and terrible food. In addition, overcrowding in military prisons became a real problem when there was a suspension of prisoner exchanges from mid-1863 to late in 1864, prompted by the Confederate government’s declaration that it would not treat black Union soldiers or their officers as prisoners of war but as property or criminals, respectively. The worst overcrowding took place at the Confederate prison at Andersonville, Georgia, where almost thirty percent of Union prisoners died.



[\[Unknown location. 12-pdr. Napoleon \(model 1857?\)\]](#) [Between 1860 and 1865]

When their military service ended after the war, most men had undergone a life-changing experience. Most of them sought, however, to get on with their lives, reuniting with their families, returning to the land to farm, or seeking other occupations. North and South, many former soldiers eventually became involved with veterans’ organizations.

Suggested Resources

- Blanton, DeAnne. [“Women Soldiers of the Civil War, Part 3.”](#) *Prologue Magazine* 25 (Spring 1993).
- Letters Home: Two Perspectives (Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area). <http://www.sitemason.com/files/bTyETK/Letters%20Home%20Activity%202.pdf>
- McPherson, James M. *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (1997). See also his "Citizen Soldiers of the Civil War: Why They Fought," http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online_books/rthg/chap4.htm
- Reid, Mitchell. *Civil War Soldiers* (1988). [Want-a substitute, By George P. Holt.](#)
- Sacher, John M. “A Soldier’s Life is a Hard One at Best’: Soldiers in the American Civil War,” in Lisa Tendrich Frank, ed., *Civil War: People and Perspectives* (2009).
- Soldier Activities (Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area). <http://www.sitemason.com/files/kOETwA/Soldier%20Activities.pdf>
- Tennessee4Me: Civil War and Reconstruction: Soldiers Life. http://www.tn4me.org/minor_cat.cfm/minor_id/3/major_id/5/era_id/5
- The American Civil War Center at Historic Tredegar Digital Dispatches for Kids: Life of the Common Soldier (short video). http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/civilwar/podcasts/kids/index.php?video=L2_12_TheLife_of_the_CommonSoldier
- Watkins, Samuel R. [1861 vs. 1882. “Co. Aytch,” Maury grays, First Tennessee regiment; Or, A side show of the show](#) (1882).
- Wiley, Bell Irvin. *The Life of Johnny Reb: The Common Soldier of the Confederacy* (1943, 1994).
- Wiley, Bell Irvin. *The Life of Billy Yank: The Common Soldier of the Union* (1952, 1994).

