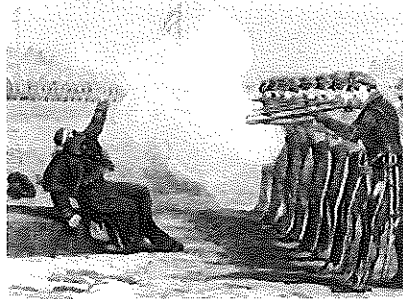


Civil War Deserters: Cowards or Heroes?



Desertion, while enlisted in the military, has always been considered the ultimate disgrace. Deserters are typically looked at as being cowards, traitors, or emotionally weak. During the American Civil War Era, there was no difference in this opinion. Although it was a fairly common occurrence, desertion was despised and had severe penalties associated with it. On the other hand, perhaps there were times during this conflict when desertion from the military was justifiable. A change of conscience, mistreatment, illness and injury, loss of leadership, and other factors could have persuaded a soldier to switch their allegiance. Was this disloyalty, cowardice, or heroism?

During the Civil War, desertion was quite a problem. Estimates vary but most agree that there were at least two hundred thousand deserters from the Union Army and one hundred four thousand soldiers from the Confederate side.² One article reported by the end of the Civil War, one in five soldiers had deserted from the North. In the South, the rate was as many as one in three. Some historians claim that the high rate of desertion was one of the factors that caused the South to lose. Others claim that desertion rates on both sides prolonged the war unnecessarily.³

There are many contributing reasons as to why so many soldiers deserted during the Civil War. Heat, hunger, thirst, homesickness, fear of battle, lack of pay, lack of leadership, and illness are a just a few of the reasons. As the war progressed and soldiers died, men were drafted

into the Confederate Army beginning in 1862 and the Union Army in 1863. These soldiers did not care so much about the fight for slavery or succession. They were more concerned with their families and farms. Actual letters from this time support these statements. Isaac Lefevers wrote a letter to his wife in 1862 stating, "I want you to have as much plowing done as you can but not plant now till I come home or rite again." ⁴ Therefore, when many soldiers got the opportunity to flee, they did so.

During the Civil War, both sides used desertion as a way to diminish the number of soldiers in the opposing side. The North promised deserting Confederate soldiers a pardon if they would promise allegiance and go home. If they could not return home, the Union would give them transportation to the North. They would also buy all of their arms and equipment. To induce Union soldiers to desert, the Confederacy offered sanctuary in the South, civilian jobs, and in some cases land.

Although the death penalty was well-known as a punishment for desertion, it was rarely carried out. Only 147 Union soldiers were executed for desertion.⁵ It was just not practical to kill that many soldiers. Also, each side needed all the men they could get. Sometimes, deserters were punished in other ways, like being branded with a "D" on their hip.⁶

There is an example of Civil War desertion in my own family. William Galbraith Cobb is my third great grandfather. He was born on July 26th, 1839 in Salem, Ohio. When he was seventeen years old, he took some college courses and taught school. He went on to Illinois, but times were hard. No one had money to pay him for his work. He joined the Confederate Army on March 28, 1860 in St. Louis, Missouri. The enlistment record says when he was 21 years old, he had gray eyes. His hair was light brown in color. They described his complexion as "fresh".

His height was five feet and ten point five inches.⁷ This was pretty tall considering that the average man during this time was about five feet and six inches.⁸

He was enlisted in the 2nd US Infantry Regiment, Company B, United States Army. William was in three big battles in Missouri, one being the first Battle of Springfield. Their company had large casualties. After the third destructive battle, his general was killed. This event occurred in August of 1861.⁹ William, defeated, leaderless, and injured, deserted from the Confederate Army with a few fellow soldiers.¹⁰ The next piece of information on William is a record from October 1, 1861. This is when William Galbraith Cobb changed his name to be Gustavis Carr. This record was noted from Johnson, Illinois.¹¹ Illinois was a Union state. He had family there, and re-enlisted in the Union Army. He served three years under this name and his family kept the last name of Carr to the present day.

My grandfather, Lamont Carr, has told me the family story as to why this happened is that William Galbraith Cobb did not agree with the Confederate political stance. He did not want to fight for that side. However, he was already enlisted before the war began and really had no choice. So, during the Civil War, when he lost his leader, William decided to flee. He fled to the North and changed his name. At that time, if you were a soldier and you deserted, then there was a severe punishment. You could actually be killed for deserting. He changed his name to help hide himself.

Another interesting fact is that according to the 1920 United States Census, most Carrs lived in the northeastern states. However, the same census shows that most Cobbs lived in the southern states.¹² So, Gustavis picked a popular name for the region he moved to. This helped him to disguise himself better. There is no record as to if he was caught in his flight. In this case, I think his desertion was just. No man should be made to fight against his beliefs.

Not all desertion was virtuous. In the case of Charles Williams, however, desertion was an act of selfishness. According to a letter which described his execution, Charles enlisted and deserted four or five times. He signed up to get the enlisting money, then he would leave. He did this many times and eventually had to pay for it with his life. The Chaplain, R.J. Jewell summed up the feelings of the soldiers after Charles Williams execution, "We will now let him alone; he fills an ignominious grave. If he has relatives, a loving wife, with a high sense of honor, we pray God to comfort them. It is a matter of great regret that one who could meet death so firmly, should prove himself so unworthy to live, and live to so little purpose, and die so ignobly."¹³

So was desertion cowardice or ultimate bravery? During this troubled time of the Civil War, it is difficult to say. The conditions of the Civil War were extremely difficult. Desertion was so prevalent that it was fairly common. There are examples that justify both opinions. One would have to know the inner thoughts and motivations of the soldier. That is just impossible to do.

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