

## A Soldier's View

*"I believe it to be the duty of everyone to unite in the restoration of the country and the reestablishment of peace and harmony."* -Robert Edward Lee, 1865. With these powerful words the country was at long last bound after four years of rebellion uprising and bloody conflict. Though fighting was ceased and the country was quiet once more, not a soul could forget what happened as the Union army and the southern Confederates bashed heads. The statistics were staggering: six hundred and twenty thousand dead, an untold amount of families ripped apart, and a severely crippled economy. The driving forces of the war were the four and a half million soldiers and their inspiring courage and heart. To survive the war though, the soldiers had to do more than be brave. I took craftiness and adaptability to be a successful soldier. Each and every soldier went through extremely difficult times and desperate places.

Perhaps no place showed nearly as much desperation as in a prisoner of war camp. Being sent to a Civil War prison camp was similar to being put on death row. Little could keep you from the inevitable ravages of crowded conditions and the unforgiving elements. Disease swarmed the camps as well as the putrid smells of human waste and death. The Confederate Camp Sumter, led by Heinrich Wirz, near Andersonville, Georgia was perhaps the most awful of all Civil War penitentiary camps [spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk, Feb 4 2012, para.4 & 5]. Wirz was the only person who acted in the Civil War to have been tried and killed for war crimes as he gave such harsh treatment to all those who were incarcerated. The charges however, are arguable as Heinrich Wirz had few supplies and little time to plan for the prisoners that came in at such a rapid rate. In the middle of the expansive camp was a murky creek with several shallow branches extending from it. For the unfortunate prisoners, this was both the sole drinking source and a common latrine system. Temperatures around ninety degrees were common in the summer and allowed for rapid bacteria reproduction. Undoubtedly this opaque creek only further spread the common and lethal illnesses.

Given the terrible conditions, this and many other camps caused countless men to careen far over the rail of sanity. Grown men would talk endlessly to themselves-perhaps longing for a family member, a meal. Some of the imprisoned stooped as low as to snatch rats, mice, and bugs to feed their mortally malnourished bodies. One of the subsequent consequences of consuming rats or mice could have meant either a slight bit more protein or more likely, additional disease. Eating vermin though was at least another chance to possibly have extended life as food rations were slashed ever more. The prisoners had to come to terms with the conditions as there were absolutely no ways out. Around the very beginning of the war an exceedingly complex parole system had been hatched to release prisoners to their respective army. The system however had many strings attached and therefore dissolved after a short time. The Union felt it was not in the least way fair to send out a somewhat healthy Confederate soldier for a skeleton like prisoner from one of the confederate's horrendous prisons. In addition, the released soldier had to wait for several months to return to their army (hence the word parole), and this all important rule was often blatantly disobeyed. The Confederacy also turned down trades for black soldiers from the Federal army. After the end of paroling, the imprisoned men had no chance of freedom.

Another element of The Civil War that made it difficult to be a soldier was the overwhelming shortage of supplies. Soldiers who were on the front lines may not have eaten very well as nobody could move food rations into their area efficiently. The food given to the soldiers was malodorous at best as it was rife with maggots and weevils. To have been afoot for the gist of your day and return to camp just to eat meager scraps of foul salt pork, dry beans, rancid beef jerky, and rock like cornmeal crackers (or "hardtack" as they were known) was

absurd [ us-civilwar.com, Jan 12, 2012,]. Luckily for the common soldier, pillaging for food was an option. Chicken eggs, vegetables, the rare piece of fruit or two, livestock, even cooking utensils were stolen without remorse. The degree to which soldiers stole food in the Civil War was indisputably rueful, though this was commonplace all throughout the war. Miscellaneous goods were also stolen with regularity. Both armies saw dramatic depletions of general supplies and extreme measures had to be taken or else. In Sherman's march to the sea, General Sherman implemented his destructive plan of total war. With his men practically wearing rags on their backs, the destruction of towns as they endlessly marched was just as much of a plan to pummel the south as it was a desperate plan to put shoes on his men's aching feet and shirts on their backs [Whitley, Albert, 1865]. In fact, even the so called "noble and brave" General Robert E. Lee was no better. Lee moved his troops to the east in search of a stockpile of Union shoes in which he aspired to capture. The consequence for Lee's plan of thievery was an unintended run in with the Union army and thus the battle at Gettysburg was initialized. Strangely though, doing such a contemptible act as to steal shoes, Lee has never been depicted as a thief in our textbooks but indeed he was one. It is safe to say that most if not all soldiers of the era took to larceny in their dire struggles to stay adequately fed and clothed. There were no other ways to stay well equipped in such a difficult time as this. "... *The enemy totally routed, we captured five car loads of coffee, all of their commissary stores, and also their artillery. What I have stated as to this fight is true, for the man I am staying with saw them with his own eyes, as they came with them from Richmond. Since that time, they have captured 4000, including 1000 cavalymen, horses and all...*" [Soldier Thomas D. Newton, in a letter to home in 1862]

Stealing was not the only device however to stay fed. Many starved soldiers would pick berries and mushrooms, hunt game, and eat wild herbs as tea and acorns or chickaree as a coffee substitute. Surprisingly, some of the coffee substitutes were actually very pleasing and were enjoyed by soldiers. In addition, some private vendors called sulters actually sold overpriced luxury items like canned fruit, cakes, alcoholic beverages (which were banned) or other treats in northern areas. In the south though, nobody sold such luxury items to the soldiers as supplies there were even more limited. Southern soldiers had to take generous donations from farmers or citizens instead. With what soldiers found or were given, they could make a variety of somewhat filling dishes and could avoid hunger. Though sometimes time consuming or difficult, foraging was a prime option to keep the stomach full and the mind sharp.

Now of course one had to keep the mind sharp for battle as that is the ultimate goal of war: winning battles. But you may never have considered how some soldiers left their respective regiments to be freed of the war's hardships. These recreant men were labeled deserters by their superiors and had to be stopped. Often times these men were not ready to take on the opposition or simply too traumatized by previous experience. Today we know these issues as mental disorders, and the troubled soldier is discharged from his or her army, but going back in the Civil War era, little was truly known of the human psyche and you had to continue to serve no matter the circumstances. In addition, ghastly punishment could await a deserter as some traitors were barbarically hung by their own regiment. Other examples of punishment were imprisonment, branding, beating, or even death by shooting squad [civilwaracademy.com]. Undoubtedly this extreme type of punishment was used to keep others from deserting because soldiers were few and battles were many. Although it was not generally a wise choice to desert the regiment, some felt they had to do it to save themselves from the oppressive war and the toll it took on them. If mental and physical anguish was eating at you, desertion was the lone choice in this chaotic time.

Though cowardly in thought, this was an appealing option to many who served for both the Union and Confederate armies.

Even as the war raged on, much down time was still had by soldiers in their camps. The camps usually were just a cluster of musty tents tattered from the elements in a clearing in the woods [civilwarhome.com]. These structures were anything but luxurious as too many people were often crammed into each shelter. For the highest ranking officials there were sometimes larger tents and or wood cabins to dwell in. At the camps would be several fire pits for the messes of soldiers who attempted to diffuse the stench and taste of the acrid meat by cooking it. What a soldier had in their haversack would be prepared at one time if a battle was looming or just some of what they had if battle was not yet in the picture. Sometimes, as before mentioned, food that was collected could be prepared as an additional option to the hungry soldier. In slow times, the soldiers would play games, gamble away money, and even steal from each other. Some downtime must have been used solely for complaining as the conditions in some camps was utterly terrible. Often times the ground was nothing more than one immense mud puddle. As it rained, the tent roofs would leak water onto the inhabitants, causing much discomfort. If a waterway such as a creek overflowed into the camp, waste that soldiers had previously dumped into it would come in contact with soldiers and thus spread many diseases like dysentery, diphtheria, or the much feared measles [rootsweb.ancestry.com]. Soldiers must have been in constant fear of disease as it could land you in a heap of unforeseen trouble. Having kept your soldiers in a camp away from filthy conditions was a large prerogative for a regiment to make. Another factor that had to be considered was that the camp was near a food distribution center so that food could be delivered quickly to the soldiers and so that it would not rot by the time it reached them. To choose a proper campsite must have been an exceedingly difficult test to the camp's superiors as so many factors had to be weighed in their consideration.

If the act of choosing a proper campsite was enough to get a soldier in a tizzy, surgery would have seemed like sheer torture: and it was. If you were on a surgeon's table, there was no possible way out. The next thing that you knew, you would have been pumped with chloroform or whiskey and would have been operated on. Of all operations, the most common one was the amputation of an arm or leg [totalgettysburg.com]. The reason that so many amputations were needed was the minie ball. This was a revolutionary new bullet that could easily rip through flesh and pulverize bones to complete destruction [murfreesboropost.com]. If shot on the arm or leg, the limb was quickly and roughly removed with a bloody saw. Sanitation was not second nature to doctors and surgeons as it is to medical professionals of today. In fact, tools like saws, knives, or even the operating tables were washed only when fresh water was available. This "fresh water" though, was often teeming with dangerous micro-organisms and waste. For some time doctors and scientists knew about the correlation between cleanliness and the decreased spread of crippling disease and infection. Desperate yet again comes to mind as so many operations went on with the same bloody instruments day in day out even though it was known that sanitation could save lives. Since no time or consideration was had to clean the fetid instruments, disease hung over the field hospitals like moths around a shimmering light bulb. Nobody got any real attention in the field hospitals and many did not survive their pain stricken stay there. In haste all decisions were made, not with care, and thus innumerable amounts of people died from preventable disease and infection within or after being at a field hospital. Men with a stomach or head wound were almost never expected to survive and were left to die in great pain and agony. When a soldier with a treatable wound was done being operated on, they waited in a holding area usually just outside of the hospital with many other patients that potentially carried dangerous

diseases or parasites like lice or fleas. Clearly nobody in the right mind wanted to be in such a god forsaken place as a Civil War field hospital whether it was a Confederate or Union one.

Clearly the war was a difficult time to have been a soldier, and glory was not what soldiers found. Instead there was hardship, pain, mental anguish, terror and substantial loss of life. This all took men through such a roller coaster of emotions and fearsome situations. Men took desperate measures when the situation called upon it, and many such situations arose. In the end, a staggering 620,000 plus men lost their lives to the war. About a third of these men died in battle or from a wound and the rest were blindsided by the epidemics of disease that spread so easily amongst the vast crowds of soldiers [pbs.org]. To have lived through the chaotic chapter in which we know as the Civil War as a soldier, was to have climbed the highest mountain, and to have flown with the birds. The chances of breaking through the obstacles of war were strongly against every soldier but somehow many pulled through it. To have fought and survived the long and painful American Civil War was nothing short of a miracle.

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