

Battle Breaks

by Ed Williamson

In the 1860s during the War Between the States, the Federal or Confederate Government would send a Call for Troops to a state. The state governor would then send out to the larger cities a draft to fill that Call for Troops. If you were an influential able-bodied leader, you would contact your friends, relatives and other people that were known to you and try to form a company. If you succeeded, then you would be named captain of the company and you would pick your lieutenants to serve with you. The other members of the company would be given sergeant and corporal stripes and the rest would be privates depending on their prior military experience.

The companies would then be formed up to create battalions, and brigades would be created to manage them. The brigades would be managed and commanded by their commanding general. The general(s) would be commanded by the governor of the state. The Governor would then cede his authority and his troops to the federal government and the secretary of war who would send the troops off to the conflict where they were needed. Depending on the level of training the troops had received during their early lives, they would be drilled on marching, use of muskets and rifles, close in combat with sabers and bayonets, care of equipment, and sanitary practices. Anytime there was a break in the action, smart Sergeants would form up the Soldiers for training and drill them until suppertime.

Only a tiny fraction of any soldier's time was spent in front line combat. Instead, the vast majority of his existence revolved around the monotonous routines of camp life, which presented its own set of struggles and hardships. Once in the ranks, military life turned out to be far different than what the majority of Civil War soldiers had expected. On average, for every day spend fighting, there were 50 days where Soldiers were in camp.

Patriotic zeal blinded most of these volunteers to the realities and hardships they were signing up to experience. The passage of several generations had muted the country's memory of the deprivations of the American Revolution. Few had participated in the War with Mexico that ended in 1848, which left a popular legacy of glorious victory. Most Northern leaders believed that the war would be over in three months. Because of this, a lot of Northern soldiers signed up for three months in April 1861 (the original 90-day wonders!) and got to go home at the end of July after the Battles of Philippi and Bull Run (Manassas) were completed. The next volunteers were signed up for three years.

In the Northern Camps, Reveille woke Union soldiers every morning at five o'clock (six in the winter). After roll call and breakfast, the soldiers spent the rest of the day drilling and marching. The daily drills were designed to break resistance to military authority and to make soldiers work as a cohesive unit. The Northern enlisted men hated it. "The first thing in the morning is drill, then drill, then drill again," wrote one frustrated bluecoat. "Then drill, a little more drill...Between drills, we drill and sometimes stop to eat a little and have roll call."

The troops polished boots and brass buckles and mended clothing in order to pass inspection and move on to supper call. By summer 1862, the Union army had standardized the Northern uniform. Each soldier wore a blue cap with black visor; a long, dark blue dress coat with stand-up collar; light blue trousers; and rough black shoes. The uniforms were made of wool and worn year-round. The blue coats and trousers were trimmed with stripes to signify a particular combat branch: blue for infantry, scarlet for artillery, and yellow for cavalry. Brass insignia sewn into caps also designated branch: a bugle for infantry, crossed sabers for cavalry and crossed cannons for artillery. Unlike their Confederate counterparts, Federal uniforms were of high quality; long campaigns, rather than shortage in stock, led to brief instances of raggedness.

For the most part, Confederate camp life mirrored the Union routine. Unlike his Northern counterpart, the Southern soldier usually did not receive a full supper ration. Poor distribution, lack of salt and preservatives, and limited access to transportation facilities restricted the Southern diet to cornbread and beef.

Men under the age of 25 also dominated Confederate ranks, and they turned to songs, hunting, gambling, and alcohol as diversions from the war. To avoid using ammunition, the soldiers often hunted with clubs and competed with each other for extra rations. In addition to a lack of food, the Southern army lacked consistency in its uniforms. Although the standard issue was gray coat and trousers, many units did not have enough uniforms in stock, and a homespun, ragged appearance became rampant in the ranks. Moreover, the Union naval blockade forced the Confederate army to use homemade dye to color uniforms. The dye was made from copperas (a green sulfate) and walnut shells which gave the Confederate uniform a yellowish-brown color that soldiers called "butternut." As both armies standardized their uniforms by 1862, Northern soldiers were commonly called "bluecoats" while Southern soldiers were labeled "butternuts."