

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

Billy Yank

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Any attempt to describe the men who made up the Union army and their experiences during the Civil War encounters two major difficulties. The first is the sheer number of the soldiers in blue. The peak number of men in the Union army at one time appears to have been 1,000,516 on May 1, 1865. Determining the total number of men who served in the Union army is quite difficult, with estimates for all men actually serving the nation (army and navy) ranging from 1,550,000 to 2,400,000. The wide disparity in numbers is caused by the fact that there is no way of knowing how many men enlisted multiple times and the effects of accounting techniques used in assigning credits to draft districts. A reasonable guess at the total number who served would be a little over 2 million. The second problem is the varied tasks and units in which men were employed. The army was divided into regular army and state volunteer units. While the regular army did expand during the war, the vast majority of men entered the service through state volunteer units. Unlike modern armies, the Union army did not have a “long tail” of noncombat, support personnel. The overwhelming majority of Union soldiers were combat troops. Some men fought as cavalry, while others manned the artillery, and still others worked in pioneer (engineer) units. Some officers and enlisted men served as staff officers, clerks, wagon drivers, doctors, musicians, or other tasks that might keep them out of battle, but most were in combat units. By far, the most common experience was to be an infantryman in a state volunteer unit.¹

This essay will attempt to describe the variety of experiences of the Billy Yanks, but it will put much of its emphasis on the state volunteer infantrymen who made up the large majority of the men in the Union army. It is arranged topically, starting with the motivations of recruits, then soldier and infantry company demographics, training, organization of the army, basic equipment and weapons, camp life, food, physical hardships, discipline, fatalism, the hardening process, vice and virtue, official and

¹ Geary suggests that there was a little over 2 million total men in the Union army, while McPherson contends about 2.1 million served in the army and navy combined, which deducting sailors would be about 2 million or a little over. Boatner uses the figure 2,128,948, of whom just 75,215 served in the regular army. James W. Geary, *We Need Men: The Union Draft in the Civil War* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1991), 78-86; James M. McPherson, *Ordeal by Fire*, vol. 2: *The Civil War*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1993), 179, 184, 356; Mark M. Boatner, *Cassell's Biographical Dictionary of the American Civil War, 1861-1865* (London: Cassell, 1959), 602; Russell F. Weigley, *History of the United States Army*, enlarged ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 197-262.

unofficial interactions with southern and northern civilians, and connections to the loved ones left behind on the home front.²

Men had a variety of motivations for joining the Union army. Different reasons might be more prevalent at some times during the war and less at others, and any given man might combine multiple motives for enlisting. One of the incentives most commonly mentioned by historians is the desire for adventure and excitement—being part of historical events, traveling to new places, and experiencing combat (“seeing the elephant”). Antebellum Americans were quite geographically mobile with most people moving between one census and the next. Young, single men in the prime military ages from the late teens to mid-twenties were by far the most mobile part of the population, with one study of young Midwestern farmhands showing that just 15% persisted in one place from one census to the next. These young, uprooted men were free of family commitments and often without a job or under or episodically employed. This excess male labor part of the society, footloose and eager for adventure, seems to have constituted a sizeable part of the pre-draft volunteers. Indeed, the most common (modal) age in the Union army was 18, and the median age was 23.5.³

Another major motive was a form of patriotism. As one would expect in a civil war, many soldiers were very conscious of their political motivations even if they had trouble expressing exactly what they were. Often men spoke of defending the Union, or upholding the Government (often spelled with a capital G), or defending republicanism, or saving liberty not only for Americans but for all mankind, or preserving what was bequeathed to them by the Founding Fathers. Historians often list these reasons without paying much attention to what they mean. Terms such as liberty, Union, and republicanism were contested terms in antebellum America that meant different things to different people. As James McPherson has shown, many Confederates contended that they fought for liberty and republicanism. The frequent mention of Founding Fathers is, perhaps, a key to understanding patriotism. Most Americans at the time viewed America as an experiment in democratic-republican government established by the Fathers. It was an experiment because it was widely believed that republics were unstable and could not last. If America could make its republic last, it not only meant the continued enjoyment of liberty by Americans, but also the possibility of freedom for other people in the world. The experiment could fail because of external invasion or internal subversion. Different political factions in America defined the experiment in different ways—including variant conceptions of key concepts such as democracy, liberty, and Union. Each faction saw its

² I am following Bell Wiley’s lead in using the term *Billy Yank* even though it appears to have come into use only after the war. Bell I. Wiley, *The Life of Billy Yank: The Common Soldier of the Union* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1952), 11-12. For a useful overview of the historiography of the study of the common soldier of the Civil War see Aaron Sheehan-Dean, “The Blue and the Gray in Black and White: Assessing the Scholarship on Civil War Soldiers,” in *The View from the Ground: Experiences of Civil War Soldiers*, ed. Aaron Sheehan-Dean (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 9-30.

³ Geary, *We Need Men*, 88; Wiley, *Billy Yank*, 303; Rebecca A. Shepherd, “Restless Americans: The Geographic Mobility of Farm Laborers in the Old Midwest, 1850-1860,” *Ohio History* 89 (Winter 1980):25-45.

version of the experiment as the true expression of republicanism and of the intentions of the Founders. And they commonly saw the versions of their opponents as subversive. The conflict between these differing versions of republicanism was generally contained within the political process, but in 1861 the contest between the Republicans and the planter class and their followers left the political arena for the battlefield. Thus it was that when Billy Yanks referred to the Founders, the Government, liberty, Union, or republicanism they were all making a statement about their patriotism, but exactly what was meant by each of these terms varied with the individual using it. Ideological divisions existed within the South as well as between the North and the South, which led to perhaps 100,000 white men from the Confederate states choosing to serve in the Union army.⁴

Duty was another major motivation for men to join the Union army. In antebellum America, only adult males (white males in most places) were full citizens (suffrage, jury duty, office holding, militia membership). While men were privileged, they also had special responsibilities. Willingness to fight for the nation was a duty of any male; when liberty was threatened they must show themselves worthy sons of the Fathers by displaying the republican virtue of their ancestors through putting their lives on the line for the nation. Most Americans in 1860 lived in rural or small town areas in which they were enmeshed in a network of kin and neighborhood mutual help relationships. To be part of such a network was to accept duties toward the others in the network and to show oneself responsible and dependable was to show oneself to be a man. Duty was a common thread connecting a man's responsibility to community and nation; localism and nationalism were thus mutually supportive concepts for most men.

⁴ With the exception of Florida, Wiley found men who were born in one or another of the Confederate states in his sample of 123 Union army companies. Wiley, *Billy Yank*, 307; William W. Freehling, *The South vs. the South: How Anti-Confederate Southerners Shaped the Course of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), esp. xii-xiii, 47-173. On patriotism, politics, and levels of soldier political awareness see Joseph Allan Frank, *With Ballots and Bayonet: The Political Socialization of American Civil War Soldiers* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 18-39, 192-7; Joseph Allan Frank and Barbara Duteau, "Measuring the Political Articulatness of the United States Civil War Soldier," *Journal of Military History* 64 (January 2000):53-77; James M. McPherson, *For Cause & Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); esp. 18-22, 27-8, 90-116, 172-6; Earl J. Hess, *Liberty, Virtue, and Progress: Northerners and Their War for the Union*, 2nd ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 56-80; Reid Mitchell, *Civil War Soldiers: Their Expectations and Their Experiences* (New York: Viking, 1988), esp. 1-23; Thomas E. Rodgers, "Saving the Republic: Turnout, Ideology, and Republicanism in the Election of 1860," in *The Election of 1860 Reconsidered*, ed. A. James Fuller (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2013), 165-192; idem, "Billy Yank and G.I. Joe: An Exploratory Essay on the Sociopolitical Dimensions of Soldier Motivation," *Journal of Military History* 69 (January 2005):93-121. Northern unity at the beginning of the war is so widely assumed that few have bothered to see if differing political ideologies led Republicans to be more likely to join than Democrats. For studies that suggest Republicans may have been more likely to join see Thomas E. Rodgers, "Republicans and Drifters: Political Affiliation and Union Army Volunteers in West-Central Indiana," *Indiana Magazine of History* 92 (December 1996):321-45; Robert M. Sandow, "The Limits of Northern Patriotism: Early Civil War Mobilization in Pennsylvania," *Pennsylvania History* (Spring 2003):175-203; Thomas R. Kemp, "Community and War: The Civil War Experience of Two New Hampshire Towns," in *Toward a Social History of the American Civil War: Exploratory Essays*, ed. Maris A. Vinovskis (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 31-77.

Duty was a frequently expressed emotion. For example, Pennsylvanian Daniel Chisholm wrote in his diary: “. . . I have made up my mind to go to the army. I did not feel that I was doing my duty to stay at home when nearly all my comrades and friends was leaving for the seat of war.” A Rhode Island soldier put it this way in his diary, “I am young and in good health, and I feel that I owe a duty to my country.” James McPherson has suggested that Victorian values may have reinforced the sense of duty for a number of Union soldiers, but the impetus to duty was much broader than Victorianism and ingrained in the day-to-day social relationships of most northern men.⁵

As the war progressed, money became a motivation for some men who joined the Union army. Some 118,010 individuals joined the army as paid substitutes for men who were drafted. Tyler Anbinder’s examination of substitutes found that when the commutation fee (\$300 to get out of the federal draft) was still in effect, pay for most substitutes ranged from \$200 to \$250, which, of course, was in addition to their army salary. After the fee option was ended, substitute pay soared to anywhere from \$500 to \$1,800. At a time when an average young farm laborer might earn \$200 to \$400 a year, depending on the labor supply, substitute pay was a significant sum of money. In addition to paid substitutes, federal, state, and local governments began to offer bounties to volunteers. Federal bounties were initially \$100 for three-year recruits, but at the end of 1863 jumped to \$300 for new recruits and \$400 for veterans who reenlisted. Deerfield, Massachusetts, began paying a bounty at the very beginning of the war, but many state and local bounties began later as enlistments waned and a draft was instituted. Only 46,347 men entered the Union army under the federal draft begun in 1863. The draft’s main impact was to stimulate recruiting efforts of states and localities, including ever increasing bounties. The New Hampshire town of Claremont, for instance, authorized a \$50 bounty, but then had to double that figure because nearby towns were offering \$100 to \$150 bounties. Indeed, men did shop for the highest payment. Illinois recruit Olney Andrus saw his enlistment bounty and army pay as a way to better provide for his family: “. . . I have been accused of being unsteady, and by those pretty near related to me too. Well as it is I am making money & in 3 years I shall have, if nothing happens, quite a little sum of money and with it we can begin to live.” He could have made more if he had joined later in the war. By early 1865 a three-year volunteer in DuPage County, Illinois, received about \$1,000 in federal, state, and local bounties.⁶

⁵ W. Springer Menge and J. August Shimrak, eds., *The Civil War Notebook of Daniel Chisholm: A Chronicle of Daily Life in the Union Army 1864-1865* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989), 3; Robert Hunt Rhodes, ed., *All for the Union: The Civil War Diary and Letters of Elisha Hunt Rhodes* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 127; Ricardo A. Herrera, “Self-Government and the American Citizen as Soldier, 1775-1861,” *Journal of Military History*, 65 (January 2001):21-52; McPherson, *For Cause & Comrades*, 22-3; Rodgers, “Billy Yank and G.I. Joe,” 94-107.

⁶ Some states also provided money to soldiers with dependents in addition to their bounties and federal pay. Tyler Anbinder, “Which Poor Man’s Fight? Immigrants and the Federal Conscription of 1863,” *Civil War History* 52 (December 2006):344-72; Emily J. Harris, “Sons and Soldiers: Deerfield, Massachusetts and the Civil War,” *idem* 30 (June 1984):157-171; Kemp, “Community and War,” 46; Joan E. Marshall, “Aid for Union Soldiers’ Families: A Comfortable Entitlement or a Pauper’s Pittance? Indiana, 1861-1865,” *Social Science Review* 78 (June 2004):207-42; Fred A. Shannon, ed., *The Civil War Letters of Sergeant Olney Andrus, Illinois Studies in the Social Sciences*, vol. 28 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1947), 48;

In 1820, then Secretary of War John Caldwell Calhoun banned African-American men from serving in the U.S. army. (Blacks could serve in the Navy.) This ban was still in effect when the war began, and was not lifted until July 1862. Even when lifted, black Billy Yanks served in segregated units that were usually commanded by white officers. Some served in state volunteer regiments, such as the famous 54th Massachusetts, while others served in United States Colored Troops units. Most black troops appear to have been former slaves recruited in the South, but a number were northern freemen. Black units tended to be recruited over a broader area than white units. For instance, the 54th Massachusetts included men recruited from across the North. While black soldier motivations were often similar to those of whites, African-Americans were also conscious of the fact that by fighting for the nation they were asserting a claim to full male citizenship. Northern Democrats opposed blacks in the military because they understood this claim and its potential impact on social relationships in the North.⁷

Most white men entered the army through state volunteer regiments. The companies that made up a regiment were generally recruited from one local area. Early in the war community war meetings were common events in which patriotic speeches were made and young men present were urged by their neighbors to join. Another typical way to create a regiment was for an often prominent individual in the community to announce he was raising a company and then to seek out men to join it. Such a company organizer was often elected by the men of the company as the captain of the unit once it was fully formed (minimum 83 men, maximum 101 men). Eventually, some cities had recruiting centers and newspaper advertising was used. Ten companies (designated by a letter—A through K—J was omitted because it looked like I), often from the same congressional district would be gathered into a regiment. Local fairgrounds often became mustering sites for companies and similar facilities at regional cities the place of assembling for many regiments. The regiments once organized often went to a rendezvous site at the state capital where they would be sworn into federal service and sent to one of the war fronts. Before leaving for the capital, it was common for the community to host a farewell that often included special foods for the troops, cheering crowds, and a flag ceremony. The regimental flag presented at such ceremonies was usually handmade by local patriotic ladies who presented their creation to the regimental commander. The ceremony included patriotic speeches in which the commander pledged

Stephen J. Buck, “‘A contest in which blood must flow like water’: Du Page County and the Civil War,” *Illinois Historical Journal* 87 (Spring 1994):6-8; Geary, *We Need Men*, 12-18, 78-86; Fred A. Shannon, “The Mercenary Factor in the Creation of the Union Army,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 12 (March 1926):523-49. Weigley contends that “Bounties cost as much as the whole pay of the Army for the war, more than the quartermaster services, and five times the cost of ordnance.” *History of the United States Army*, 211.

⁷ Weigley, *History of the United States Army*, 211-213; McPherson, *Ordeal by Fire*, 2:346-53; Brian Taylor, “A Politics of Service: Black Northerners’ Debates over Enlistment in the American Civil War,” *Civil War History* 58 (December 2012):451-80; John Whiteclay Chambers II, ed., *The Oxford Companion to American Military History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 99; Joseph T. Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle: The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990).

to never let the flag know dishonor. Such speeches might, at first, seem quite florid and even bombastic to modern ears, but the extreme importance given to flags in battle and the extraordinary bravery of the color bearers make even the most effusive patriotic utterances at flag ceremonies seem like understatement.⁸

In World War II a company was constituted of men who were strangers to each other and largely similar in age. The G.I.s were given standard haircuts, their individuality downplayed, their connections to the civilian world be minimized, and an attempt was made to instill unit cohesion in them. A Union army company was quite different from its twentieth-century counterpart. Standardized grooming appears to have been all but non-existent, and early in the war uniforms were not standardized, which famously caused confusion as to which troops were on which side at the First Battle of Bull Run. Because company recruitment was based on a given area, it was common for the company to contain many men who were long-time friends, fellow members of civilian organizations, or even relatives. Iowan Cyrus Boyd, for instance, joined a unit along with a number of fellow members of a political marching club he had been part of during the 1860 election. For the purposes of food preparation and eating, men of a company were divided into messes. Food was sometimes prepared for an entire company, but most of the time it was a done within the mess whose members took turns doing the cooking for the group. Typically, a soldier's messmates were those to whom he was closest and often included those with whom he had been friendly in civilian life. Given the remarkable geographical mobility of young men, all units could not help but contain some strangers, with urban units seeming to have a greater proportion of outsiders than those companies from rural areas. For example, of 143 privates who enlisted in two companies raised in the county containing the city of Terre Haute, Indiana, in 1861, just 29.3% could be found in the census taken less than one year earlier. By contrast, in another company raised in the nearby rural county of Sullivan, Indiana, in 1861, some 57.5% of the privates appeared in the 1860 census.⁹

⁸ Election of officers was common early in the war, but was rare in 1863 and after. McPherson, *Ordeal by Fire*, 2:174-6; Harris, "Sons and Soldiers"; Kemp, "Community and War"; Ward Baker, "Mishawaka and Its Volunteers, Fort Sumter through 1861," *Indiana Magazine of History* 56 (June 1960):123-52; Weigley, *History of the United States Army*, 199-211; Mitchell, *Civil War Soldiers*, 18-20; Wiley, *Billy Yank*, 17-44, 319; John D. Billings, *Hardtack & Coffee: The Unwritten Story of Army Life* (1887; reprint ed., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 34-46, 198-202; Russell L. Johnson, "'Volunteer While You May': Manpower Mobilization in Dubuque, Iowa," in *Union Soldiers and the Northern Home Front: Wartime Experiences, Postwar Adjustments*, ed. Paul A. Cimbal and Randall M. Miller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 30-68; J. Matthew Gallman, *Mastering Wartime: A Social History of Philadelphia during the Civil War* (1990; reprint ed., Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 11-34; James I. Robertson, Jr., *Soldiers Blue and Gray* (1988; reprint ed., New York, Warner Books, 1991), 21, 223; Boatner, *Biographical Dictionary*, 612.

⁹ In looking at all recruits throughout the war in two New Hampshire towns, Kemp found 57.4% in the 1860 census in one town and 66.8% in the other. Kemp, "Community and War," 59; Rodgers, "Republicans and Drifters," 324-328; idem, "Billy Yank and G.I. Joe"; Reid Mitchell, *The Vacant Chair: The Northern Soldier Leaves Home* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 21-37; Mildred Throne, ed., *The Civil War Diary of Cyrus F. Boyd, Fifteenth Iowa Infantry, 1861-1863* (1953; reprint ed., Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), 6; Wiley, *Billy Yank*, 27, 128. One of the few accounts of being required to have a haircut I have found is in Lance Herdegen and Sherry Murphy, eds., *Four Years*

Typically, a company contained a wide range of ages, as Indiana recruit Theodore Upson noted in a letter “We have got all ages in our Company—from sixteen to forty-three.” Both young and old men lied to get around the 18 to 45 limit on service. Wisconsin native Elisha Stockwell was 15, but was let in as an eighteen-year old, while Hial Comstock, a New Hampshire man, claimed to be 44 even though census records indicate he was pushing 60. In looking at the ages of soldiers it should be kept in mind that the median age of men in the 1860 census was 19.8 as opposed to 35.8 in 2010. About 98% of the soldiers in a survey of one million volunteers were 18-45; however, most soldiers were in the lower half of that range: midway through the war about 75% were under 30 and most were under 24. The relatively small proportion of older men (the oldest recruit was 80) raised the average age to 25.1 in July 1862 and 26.32 in May 1865. A few of the older men in a company might be Mexican War veterans or former members of the regular army who brought useful experiences to the unit. Officers, however, were often men without experience or knowledge of military affairs who owed their position to an election among the men. Despite being amateurs it appears that in a number of cases the initial company officers had the authority that came with their officer’s rank reinforced by their prestige in the civilian social structure from which many of the men in the company came, just as unit cohesion was enhanced by prewar relationships among many of the men. In addition, it was typical for men to provide in their letters home information about neighbors and kin in the same unit; therefore, exposing one’s courage, cowardice, or other behavior to one’s civilian peers and putting added pressure on men to perform well.¹⁰

The large influx of immigrants from the mid-1840s to the eve of the war left the North with about 30% of its men of military age as foreign-born individuals. Immigrants were scattered through various regiments, but the two largest immigrant groups (Irish and Germans) sometimes put together regiments overwhelmingly consisting of men from their group. The Irish Brigade, which was made up of largely Irish regiments from the Northeast, became one of the most famous units in the Union army. The proportion of English-Americans who volunteered was greater than that of any other ethnic group, but they receive little attention compared to the Germans and Irish who fielded entire regiments. Despite the notoriety of some of the immigrant units, the foreign born, as a whole, were actually less likely to join than native-born men. Overall, immigrants made up about 25% of the Union forces. Interestingly, some studies suggest that the Germans

with the Iron Brigade: The Civil War Journals of William R. Ray, Co. F., Seventh Wisconsin Infantry (Cambridge, Mass.: Da Capo Press, 2002), 9.

¹⁰ In 1860, males 10-29 constituted 40.4% of the entire male population and 56.4% of all males 10 and above. The comparable figures for 2010 are 28.7% and 33.2%. Census information is from figures 5-1 and 5-2, <http://www.demographicchartbook.com>; Oscar O. Winther, ed., *With Sherman to the Sea: The Civil War Letters, Diaries & Reminiscences of Theodore F. Upson* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1943), 24; Byron R. Abernethy, ed., *Private Elisha Stockwell, Jr., Sees the Civil War* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1958), 6; Kemp, “Community and War,” 61; Wiley, *Billy Yank*, 303; Rodgers, “Billy Yank and G.I. Joe,” 110-11. Mitchell has noted the effects of the community on officers and the general behavior of men noted here, but he also thinks familiarity between officers and men could cause some problems. *Vacant Chair*, 21-37.

and Irish who have received so much attention did not necessarily join in large numbers. For example, Steven Buck's examination of an Illinois county, found that the Germans made up 35.1% of men of military age and 7.1% of the volunteers, while the figures for the Irish were 7.1% and 3.1%, and for the English 5.4% and 5.5%. The native-born constituted 46.6% of the county's military aged men and 80.4% of its recruits. Irish-American patriotism seems to have been mitigated by residual strong loyalties to their homeland. As one Irishman put it: "When we are fighting for America we are fighting in the interest of Irland [sic]" The Irish seem to have become much less inclined to serve after the large Irish-American loss of life at the Battle of Fredericksburg. In addition, some studies have found that Catholic immigrant enclaves were among the areas most likely to exhibit substantial resistance to the draft. Finally, a recent study has shown that a very disproportionately large number of the tens of thousands of men who entered the army as paid substitutes rather than as volunteers were immigrants.¹¹

Once assembled, companies and regiments began their training. By far the most important aspect of training was drill. Accounts of drilling are ubiquitous in the letters, diaries, and memoirs of the Billy Yanks. The ability of men to move effectively as a group (articulation) on the battlefield was enormously important. Men needed to know how to properly deploy from a marching formation into lines of battle and then be able to move in unison, shoulder-to-shoulder, in combat formation across a field of battle. They also needed to know how to form a hollow square, a formation created by men with bayonets fixed forming into a square with each man facing outward to guard against cavalry attacks. In addition, large-scale reviews of marching masses of men in camp were thought by their sheer size to encourage morale and a sense of the invincibility of one's field army. Closely associated with drill was bayonet practice. Being able to take and give a bayonet charge was an essential part of the tactics of the day. Target practice appears to have been part of training for some, but not for others. Accounts or even mentions of target shooting in the writings of soldiers are relatively rare. In addition, many accounts suggest a number of soldiers did not engage in it. For example, when ammunition was distributed to his Rhode Island regiment in preparation for a possible fight with mobs in Baltimore in 1861, Elisha Rhodes noted that it was "the first warlike

¹¹ Another ethnic group that served in the Union army was the American Indians. One Wisconsin soldier who served with Indians recalled "The Indians were good skirmishers, but didn't like the open country or pitched battles." On Indians see Wiley, *Billy Yank*, 316-19; Abernethy, ed., *Private Elisha Stockwell*, quotation 75. Lawrence F. Kohl and Margaret C. Richard, eds., *Irish Green and Union Blue: The Civil War Letters of Peter Welsh* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), quotation 102; William L. Burton, *Melting Pot Soldiers: The Union's Ethnic Regiments* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998); idem, "'Title Deed to America': Union Ethnic Regiments in the Civil War," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 124 (17 December 1980):455-63; Susannah Ural Bruce, "'Remember Your Country and Keep up Its Credit': Irish Volunteers and the Union Army, 1861-1865," *Journal of Military History* 69 (April 2005):331-359; Buck, "Contest in which blood must flow," 12-13. James Geary has some caveats about Levine's findings on Catholic immigrants and draft resistance. Geary, *We Need Men*, 89, 98-101; Peter Levine, "Draft Evasion in the North during the Civil War, 1863-1865," *Journal of American History* 67 (March 1981):816-34. Geary uses 25% for the proportion of Union soldiers who were foreign born, while McPherson gives 26% in one of his works and 24% in another and Wiley contends "more than three-fourths" of Union soldiers were native born. Wiley, *Billy Yank*, 307; McPherson, *Ordeal by Fire*, 2:356-357; idem, *For Cause & Comrades*, ix.

ammunition I had ever seen.” Louis Bir’s Indiana regiment was deployed near Louisville to repel an anticipated rebel attack in 1862 armed with clubs because they had not yet been issued guns despite having been through training and put in a potential war zone.¹²

In history, what is not found can be important. Union army training left out a number of things that are deemed essential in twentieth-century armies. Beyond drilling, physical training such as calisthenics and long-distance running, were rarely, if ever, employed. Beyond bayonet drills, there seems to have been no training in hand-to-hand combat. Bell Wiley contends that live fire exercises appear to have been nonexistent and that training exercises with units larger than a regiment were unusual. While some units might contain a few veterans among the enlisted or officer ranks, not all did. Early in the war, many of the officers had no special training, and basically read manuals at night before trying to conduct drills the following day. “Our officers are as green as we are,” an 1862 recruit recalled. “Realy some of the men know more about the drill than thier officers.” As alluded to earlier, the psychological conditioning to create the kind of unit cohesion that is today seen as essential for men to perform in combat was largely absent from the training and indoctrination of Billy Yank. Elisha Stockwell’s experience illustrates how little preparation a soldier might receive before being sent into battle. He joined his unit a bit later than others on February 25, 1862, and was put in the awkward squad to train separately with other late joiners. Less than six weeks later he was in the Battle of Shiloh without ever having drilled with the full company as well as all the other non-training noted above. How could teenaged Stockwell and tens of thousands of other inadequately prepared Billy Yanks perform amid the horrors and chaos of battle without adequate training? One study suggests that the same high levels of patriotism and sense of duty that motivated men to join also allowed them to perform in battle, while others have emphasized Christian fatalism and other factors. This is a subject that needs more research.¹³

The roughly one-thousand-man regiment was the basic building block of the army. Two to six regiments would be grouped into a brigade typically commanded by a colonel or a brigadier general. The number of regiments varied because most regiments

¹² Rhodes, ed., *All for the Union*, quotation 12; Wiley, *Billy Yank*, 25-7, 49-55; Robertson, *Soldiers*, 47-58; Emil Rosenblatt and Ruth Rosenblatt, eds., *Hard Marching Every Day: The Civil War Letters of Private Wilbur Fisk, 1861-1865* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1992), 59-60 account of the emotional impact of reviews on soldiers. On practicing the hollow square with cavalry see Winther, ed., *With Sherman to the Sea*, 31; Bir provides an example of target shooting, but his unit did not get rifles with which to practice shooting until after the club incident. Louis Bir, “Remencence of My Army Life,” ed. George P. Clark, *Indiana Magazine of History* 101 (March 2005):18-19. Similarly, Rhodes notes target practice by his unit in 1864, years after the incident in the text and the unit being in battle. Rhodes, ed., *All for the Union*, 134.

¹³ Examination of officers by the Union army to weed out incompetence began in July 1861, but Upson’s 1862 quote in the text suggests these examinations may have been somewhat lacking. McPherson, *Ordeal by Fire*, 2:174-6; Abernethy, ed., *Private Elisha Stockwell*, 4-23; Winther, ed., *With Sherman to the Sea*, quotation 28; Wiley, *Billy Yank*, 25-7, 49-55; Roberson, *Soldiers*, 47-53; Rodgers, “Billy Yank and G.I. Joe”; McPherson, *For Cause & Comrades*; Earl J. Hess, *The Union Soldier in Battle: Enduring the Ordeal of Combat* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997).

lost around half of their men within a year of their creation due to death or disability from battle, disease, accidents, or other factors. In addition, widespread problems with disease meant that substantial numbers of men in a regiment would be too sick to fight on any given day. Two or more brigades were grouped into a division, which was usually commanded by a brigadier or major general. Divisions were organized into corps, which were commanded by a major general and were designated by a roman numeral. A corps was a virtually self-contained army that was combined with other corps into a field army, such as the Army of the Potomac. Starting in 1863, men wore a distinctive corps badge on their uniforms. Over the course of time, enlisted men might become officers, and company and regimental officers might rise to command or serve on the staffs of commanders of brigades, divisions, corps, or armies. Company and regimental officers might also be transferred to other similar units or assigned to command segregated black companies and regiments. Indeed, over time the overall quality of officers improved as the incompetent were weeded out and talented officers and some enlisted men rose in the ranks. Elisha Rhodes, for example, went from being a private to being the commanding officer of his Rhode Island regiment, and in the army that marched with Sherman to the sea more than 90% of the lieutenants and nearly 50% of the captains had risen from the enlisted ranks.¹⁴

The basic equipment of the Union soldier started with a uniform, which eventually was a standardized blue in color. Government issued clothing included a cap or hat, pants, blouse, underwear, socks, shoes, and in many cases a dress coat. Concerning drawers, one Indiana soldier noted “some did not know what they were for and some of the old soldiers . . . told them they were for an extra uniform to be worn on parade and they half believed it.” Men often received socks (government socks were notoriously bad), shirts, and other items to wear under uniforms from wives or mothers. Each soldier also would be issued two packs: a haversack used to carry food items; and a knapsack in which to carry extra clothing and various personal items such as writing materials, books, letters from home, playing cards, candles, cooking and eating utensils, a mending kit (“housewife”), and razors. Men would also be issued a canteen for water, an overcoat for cold weather, a wool blanket, a rubberized blanket, and a half of a dog tent. The dog tent and the rubberized blanket were the most common shelter for armies on the move.

In more permanent camps, including some initial rendezvous ones, the large, conically shaped Sibley tents might be used. In cold weather, soldiers improvised all kinds of combinations of tent and building materials to make warmer quarters (“shebangs”) that typically included a stove or makeshift fireplace. Troops on the march frequently jettisoned any item that was not deemed essential. One soldier recalled: “We marched out of Memphis in the morning It soon got pretty warm. . . . It was not

¹⁴ Boatner, *Biographical Dictionary*, 610-13; Robertson, *Soldiers*, 21-24; Wiley, *Billy Yank*, 133-140; Rhodes, ed., *All for the Union*; McPherson, *Ordeal by Fire*, 2:172-6; Joseph T. Glatthaar, *The March to the Sea and Beyond: Sherman's Troops in the Savannah and Carolinas Campaigns* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 21.

long till they began to throw away things and there were blankets books overcoats and underwear scattered all along.”¹⁵

Weapons issued by the army changed over time and some men brought weapons from home to supplement what the army provided. Smooth bore muskets gave way to rifled, muzzle-loaded muskets, such as the Springfield and Enfield models, that became the most commonly used infantry weapons in the Union army. The men using such weapons carried a cartridge box containing forty rounds and a box for percussion caps. A round was made of paper and contained a conically shaped minié ball and a pre-measured amount of powder. The soldier would grasp the paper cartridge, tear open the bottom of it with his teeth, then pour the powder down the barrel, followed by the paper and ball. A ramrod was then used to tightly pack the inserted materials at the base of the barrel. A percussion cap was then positioned on a “nipple” leading to an aperture to the powder charge in the barrel. Pulling the trigger set off a hammer that hit the percussion cap that in turn created a spark that traveled through the nipple to set off the powder charge. The explosion expanded the concave base of the minié ball so that it would engage the grooves (rifling) on the inside of the barrel, which in turn gave the ball a spinning motion that allowed it to travel a longer distance with more accuracy than it would have without the spinning. The rifled muskets could be fitted with socket bayonets that projected beyond the end of the rifle without impeding the shooting of the weapon. Bayonets do not appear to have been used in combat very often since less than 1% of Civil War wounds were made by them.¹⁶

Officers often carried pistols of various types and a sword into battle. It was not uncommon for the men of a company to pool their money and purchase a sword for their commanding officer. Over the course of the war a variety of breech-loading and repeating rifles were introduced. The most frequently used of these new weapons were the single-shot, breech-loading Sharps and the seven-shot Spencer. The Spencer rifle used metallic cartridges that were fed into the chamber from a magazine in its stock. A member of Wilder’s Brigade, which famously used the Spencer, sang its praises in his memoir: “The gun was so perfect that fighting could be done just as well in a heavy shower of rain as in the clearest of weather. The powder could not get wet. The gun could be loaded and thrown into a stream of water . . . and it could be taken out and it would blaze away. . . . They were the most effective and deadly weapon in the service.” Despite such praise, the muzzle-loading rifled muskets continued to be the most used firearm. James Ripley, head of ordnance, felt the new weapons would waste ammunition

¹⁵ Winther, ed., *With Sherman to the Sea*, quotation one 26, quotation two 36; Wiley, *Billy Yank*, 56-65; Robertson, *Soldiers*, 15, 42-5; Glatthaar, *March to the Sea*, 83-4. Information on uniforms, equipment, housing, and much more can be found in Billings, *Hardtack & Coffee* and Fred A. Shannon, “The Life of the Common Soldier in the Union Army, 1861-1865,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 13 (March 1927):465-82. John King’s diary provides nice descriptions of equipment (esp. 20), housing, and much more: Claire E. Swedberg, ed., *Three Years with the 92d Illinois: The Civil War Diary of John M. King* (Mechanicsburg, Penn.: Stackpole Books, 1999).

¹⁶ Robertson, *Soldiers*, 54-8; McPherson, *Ordeal by Fire*, 2:196-8; Herman Hattaway, *Shades of Blue and Gray: An Introductory Military History of the Civil War* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997), 2-3, 37-9.

and had not been sufficiently tested, while an early version of the machine gun, the rotating, six-barreled Gatling gun, was little used because officers could not figure out how to fit it into existing tactics.¹⁷

Life in infantry regiments, which made up about 80% of the Union army, was the most typical experience for the Billy Yanks. Cavalry and artillery units had different equipment, uniforms, and organization than the infantry units, but many of their experiences of army life were similar. Cavalry regiments typically had twelve troops (the term troop was used for company in the cavalry) rather than ten. Cavalry carried out many tasks, including reconnaissance, stopping enemy scouting, and raiding. They were generally not involved in the main fighting of major battles, and were often deployed in the rear to prevent infantry from unauthorized departures from the field of battle. Artillery units were organized into batteries consisting of four to six cannon with their accompanying limber and caisson in which ammunition was stored. Four to six horses were needed to pull each cannon and its attached limber and caisson. Each cannon was manned by about sixteen men and, thus, a battery had about the same number of men as an infantry company. Cannon fired solid shot and explosive shells, and could also be turned into a kind of giant shotgun with canister or grape shot rounds. Because cavalry and artillery used horses, they had short jackets rather than long coats, pants reinforced in areas in which riding created extra wearing, and boots rather than shoes. Their uniforms were the standard blue, but had different colors of trimming (cavalry yellow, artillery scarlet). Cavalry weapons consisted of sabers, pistols, and, most importantly, breech-loading carbines, which were a shortened version of a rifle. As the war progressed, cavalry were more likely than infantry to use repeating weapons; especially a seven-shot carbine. Some regiments might also be assigned to be engineers (pioneers). The Fiftieth New York Regiment, for instance, was organized as an infantry unit, but was converted to engineering. Such units built corduroy roads, constructed fortifications, set up pontoon bridges, and much more. New Yorker Thomas Owen found being an engineer could be quite dangerous; especially when handling pontoon boats while the enemy was firing from the far bank of a river.¹⁸

Before 1864, there were typically long periods between battles in which men were in camps, and in the Upper South armies typically spent the winter months in long-term camps called winter quarters. If men were to be in a camp for a long time, they began constructing the more permanent shelters described above and might build chapels or

¹⁷ Swedberg, ed., *Three Years with the 92d Illinois*, example of buying a sword for an officer 11, quotation 141; Ian Drury and Tony Gibbons, *The U.S. Civil War Military Machine: Weapons and Tactics of the Union and Confederate Armed Forces* (Limpsfield, England: Dragon's World, 1993), 58-65; McPherson, *Ordeal by Fire*, 2:198-200; Hattaway, *Shades of Blue and Gray*, 39-40.

¹⁸ McPherson, *Ordeal by Fire*, 2:172-4, 193-6; Edward G. Longacre, *Lincoln's Cavalrymen: A History of the Mounted Forces of the Army of the Potomac* (Mechanicsburg, Penn.: Stackpole Books, 2000), 28-52; John W. Rowell, *Yankee Artillerymen: Through the Civil War with Eli Lilly's Indiana Battery* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1975), 25-32; Billings, *Hardtack & Coffee*, 316; Wiley, *Billy Yank*, 59-60; Dale E. Floyd, ed., "*Dear Friends at Home . . .*": *The Letters and Diary of Thomas James Owen, Fiftieth New York Volunteer Engineer Regiment, during the Civil War* (Washington: Historical Division, Office of the Chief of Engineers, 1985), esp. xi-xiii, 9-11.

other structures. Various fatigue duties (building latrines, etc.), the inevitable drilling and dress parades, mending and washing clothing, repairing equipment, cooking, removing lice (“graybacks”) from apparel and blankets (“skirmishing”), foraging parties, and service on court martial courts and paperwork for officers took up a lot of time. The nineteenth century was a time of strong gender divisions of labor, and some soldiers seem to have been surprised that men were actually capable of doing what was seen as women’s work. “You would have thought I was some old maid washing away there all alone,” a Wisconsin soldier wrote to a female friend. “I can wash, cook, sew, do anything as well as any of the girls.” Units would also take turns being on picket duty, which consisted of guarding the perimeter of the camp and warning of any approaching enemy forces. There were also leisure activities such as reading, writing letters, playing checkers or baseball, gossip and storytelling, singing, and playing practical jokes on unsuspecting fellow soldiers. A surprising number of soldiers in the Western Theater wrote accounts of spending some of their spare time exploring southern caves. One of the most disruptive as well as common forms of entertainment was gambling. Popular forms of gambling included various card games, such as poker and euchre, dice games, such as chuck-a-luck, and betting on such things as cock fights. Substantial amounts of money could be lost with predictable hard feelings and accusations of cheating.¹⁹

Food was normally most plentiful when armies were in stationary camps. The large quantities of food and other necessities of a large field army could be efficiently moved by railroad or steamship, but other types of transportation were problematic. An army on the march was supplied by wagons, which could number a few thousand for a large army. Huge numbers of wagons on narrow dirt roads that rain could turn into quagmires meant delays and possibly days without food except what was carried by the soldier in his haversack. A stationary army might enjoy the full official rations, which were larger than that of any major European army, and included such items as salt pork, pickled beef, and fresh beef from army herds, and rice, beans, peas, onions, occasionally potatoes, soft and hard bread, coffee, and the ubiquitous hardtack. Hardtack was a flour cracker about three inches square that was, as the name suggests, quite hard. In addition to simply eating these “teeth dullers,” some men soaked them, crumbled them into a liquid, or fried them in grease. In addition to what was provided by the army, sutlers set up their makeshift stores near long-term camps to sell food as well as various other items to the Billy Yanks.²⁰

The vast majority of Billy Yanks came from rural areas and small towns. Despite the development of a market economy, most people still produced much of what they ate and still harvested food (game, berries, nuts, etc.) from nature. Thus, when Union soldiers began foraging for food in the South to supplement what the army was or was

¹⁹ Margaret B. Roth, ed., *Well Mary: Civil War Letters of a Wisconsin Volunteer* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1960), quotation 54; Billings, *Hardtack & Coffee*, 62-72; Robertson, *Soldiers*, 41-59, 74-8, 81-101; Wiley, *Billy Yank*, 152-91, 249-51; Glatthaar, *March to the Sea*, 81-99; Swedberg, ed., *Three Years with the 92d Illinois*, spelunking, 112, gambling and disruptions it caused, 101-2, 146-7; Abernethy, ed., *Private Elisha Stockwell*, 75-6 spelunking.

²⁰ Billings, *Coffee & Hardtack*, 108-42, 224-30; Wiley, *Billy Yank*, 224-46; Robertson, *Soldiers*, 19, 64-74.

not providing, they knew how to kill, pluck, and cook a chicken they stole, and how to properly slaughter a purloined hog. Most of them also knew how to take advantage of nature. For instance, the number of references to picking wild blackberries in soldier letters and diaries is just remarkable. Soldiers also learned how to take advantage of wild things they did not have at home, as is illustrated by Union soldiers stationed on the coast of the Gulf of Mexico harvesting oysters from the sea. Soldiers might even forage the officers mess, as happened on one transport ship when soldiers lowered a porpoise hook on a string through a skylight to lift unguarded chickens, hams, and boxes of cigars right off the officers' dinner table. They were caught only after enjoying their ill-gotten gains.²¹

Courage and endurance are qualities one might think of when soldiers go into battle, but they were also often required when an army was on the march. While troops might be moved by steamboat or railroad to and from the fighting fronts, once there much of the movement of the army was on foot. Long marches in heat and dust left numerous exhausted stragglers by the road and sunstroke victims put into ambulances. The wagon trains that carried much of the equipment, food, and supplies of the army could often not keep up with the movement of the troops, and the men saw their rations reduced to salt pork, coffee, and hardtack, and, at times, just the hardtack, that they had in their haversacks. They might also not have access to tents and other things in the wagons lagging somewhere far behind that they needed for protection from the elements. One day a soldier could be choking on the dust raised by thousands of feet on a dirt road and the next sinking in the mud of the same road that sucked against his legs as he attempted to move them. If all of this was not bad enough, forced marches could deprive men of needed sleep. Additionally, these exhausted men all too often were also suffering from debilitating camp diseases such as diarrhea. It is no wonder the Billy Yanks filled their letters, diaries, and memoirs with accounts of arduous marches, ailments, food shortages, exposure to rain storms, and various other woes. The same type of patriotism, sense of duty, and courage that allowed Billy Yank to stand his ground in the heat of battle was needed to keep him going in the face of a myriad of problems, trials, and deprivations with which a soldier's life was filled.²²

²¹ Wiley, *Billy Yank*, 233-6; Billings, *Hardtack & Coffee*, 231-49 on foraging; Throne, ed., *Civil War Diary of Cyrus F. Boyd*, 56 blackberries; John Beatty, *The Citizen-Soldier: The Memoirs of a Civil War Volunteer* (1879; reprint ed., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 37, 41-2, 47-8 raspberries, blackberries, huckleberries, fox-grapes; Rosenblatt and Rosenblatt, eds., *Hard Marching*, 123 blackberries; Swedberg, ed., *Three Years with the 92d Illinois*, 99-100, 219 blackberries, 221 trading with civilians for blackberries; Otto F. Bond, ed., *Under the Flag of the Nation: Diaries and Letters of Owen Johnston Hopkins, a Yankee Volunteer in the Civil War* (Columbus: Ohio State University, 1998), 71 Ohio soldier shelled by Confederates while trying to pick blackberries; Rhodes, ed., *All for the Union*, 16, 18 blackberries; Abernethy, ed., *Private Elisha Stockwell*, 158-9 oysters, 177 mulberries; Bir, "Remembrance of My Army Life," 52 oysters; Winther, ed., *With Sherman to the Sea*, 146-147 stealing from officers with string and hook. For a wonderfully evocative description of rural life before the Civil War see Logan Esarey, *The Indiana Home* (1953; reprint ed., Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976).

²² Billings, *Hardtack & Coffee*, 342-349. For a vivid primary description of a forced march see John W. De Forest, *A Volunteer's Adventures: A Union Captain's Record of the Civil War*, ed. James H. Croushore (1946; reprint ed., n.p.: Archon Books, 1970), 85-102. James McPherson describes the importance of

Young men tend to be naturally rowdy, but the extensive difficulties of maintaining discipline in the Union army requires more of an explanation. Army discipline and traditions were inundated with a tidal wave of enlisted men and elected officers who often served in units based on a core of people from the same community. In the Navy, which was much smaller and tended to be joined by individuals rather than a community based group, discipline and traditions were much better maintained. Many historians have also emphasized American customs of individualism and manliness to explain the obstreperous behavior of Billy Yanks. As one Illinois soldier expressed it: “Every particle of individuality is locked up and must be smothered in his own bosom until his time of enlistment has expired, and he once more becomes a free man. The private soldier is a volunteer slave during his term of enlistment.” Another factor undermining discipline was that the men who entered the great bureaucratic entity that was the Union army had a different world view than that of most modern Americans. Herbert Gutman’s seminal article “Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America” reminds us of how the industrial revolution of the late nineteenth century created a world regimented by the clock and bureaucratic structures. While a few may have begun to experience the early manifestations of these changes in some areas of the Northeast, the vast majority of Union soldiers had been socialized in a very different world in which face-to-face relationships predominated rather than the depersonalization and regimentation of the modern world. Reid Mitchell uncovered a manifestation of this difference by comparing how Billy Yank and G.I. Joe referred to their superiors. Civil War soldiers often personalized their superiors with nicknames (often familial or paternalistic in nature), such as Father Abraham, Pap Thomas, and Uncle Billy Sherman. The bureaucratized men of W.W. II did not do anything similar with nicknames. This absence of a regimented, bureaucratic mentality among the enlisted men put a lot of pressure on officers who could not simply depend on their men having been socialized in a way that would cause them to respect the power of their positions. The impression left by the letters and diaries of enlisted men is that if an officer wanted the obedience and respect of his men he would have to earn it by his ability, courage, and charisma; it was not bestowed simply because one held an office in the bureaucratic structure. Officers were expected to lead their men into battle, knowing that the enemy would target them first and that their distinctive weapons and clothing would make them easy to spot.²³

sustaining as well as initial and combat motivation in *For Cause and Comrades*. On illness see Wiley, *Billy Yank*, 124-51.

²³ Swedberg, ed., *Three Years with the 92d Illinois*, 58 quotation ; Winther, ed., *With Sherman to the Sea*, 97 Upson on army nicknames; McPherson, *For Cause & Comrades*, 46-61; Steven J. Ramold, *Baring the Iron Hand: Discipline in the Union Army* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010), esp. 43-218; Reid Mitchell, “The GI in Europe and the American Military Tradition,” in *A Time to Kill: The Soldier’s Experience of War in the West, 1939-1945*, ed. Paul Addison and Angus Calder (London: Pimlico, 1997), 308; idem, *Civil War Soldiers*, 56-9; idem, *Vacant Chair*, 3-69; William C. Davis, *Lincoln’s Men: How President Lincoln became Father to an Army and a Nation* (New York: The Free Press, 1999); Herbert G. Gutman’s article was reprinted in *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America* (1966; reprint ed., New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 3-78. For background on sailors and discipline see Michael J. Bennett, *Union Jacks: Yankee Sailors in the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

Another important aspect of the mental makeup of the men who entered the Union army was fatalism: most Billy Yanks simply assumed that much of what happened was beyond their control. For many, this fatalism was of a Christian variety in which God determined the course of their lives and they must endeavor to accept His decisions. Much has been made of the impact of fatalism on how men performed in battle, but another way in which fatalism was manifested was the reaction of soldiers to accidents. Any wide reading of the writings of soldiers reveals a broad array of men hurt, crippled, or killed in accidents. Accidents could take many forms, from drownings to trees falling on men in their tents to malfunctioning or misused guns. Some accidents were just silly things that were easily avoidable. For instance, the first man to be lost in James Grimsley's unit died instantly when his head hit a bridge while he was sitting on top of a train car rolling under the span. Elisha Rhodes wrote about the death of a man who found an unexploded shell and attempted to determine if it still contained powder by apparently putting a lighted match to the fuse hole so he could better see inside. Some accidents were bizarre. Theodore Upson described how a man swimming in the Yazoo River was dragged under and killed by a giant garfish, while Elisha Stockwell recalled how a fellow soldier going for a swim in the Gulf of Mexico had one of his legs bitten off by a shark. Whether odd or common, the men describing the accidents rarely if ever saw them as a stimulus to institute safety rules or precautions, or as a reason to blame officers for negligence, or as an occasion to criticize improper training or other procedures of the army. If one believes an incident is foreordained, there is nothing that can be done to stop it. This is an attitude alien to a modern world filled with endless safety testing and regulations rooted in an underlying confidence in man's ability to shape and control events.²⁴

If the fatalism of Billy Yank was consistent throughout the war, other soldier beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors did change. It is common for new soldiers to overreact to events taken in stride by veterans. For instance, diving to the ground at the sound of a shell that lands nowhere nearby is a classic indicator of the neophyte soldier. How does one change from the jittery new guy to a composed veteran? Consider how a mature driver checks rearview mirrors without consciously thinking about what he or she is doing, while a new driver has to consciously remember to do so. Much of what the human mind does is done at the level of the adaptive unconscious. The mind is constantly monitoring the world for sounds, sights, movements, and smells that might, based on experience, indicate danger. Over time, the new soldier's unconscious conditions itself to the new environment just as the young driver adjusts to driving procedures and dangers. The veteran's adaptive unconscious identifies dangerous shell

²⁴ James Grimsley to Anna Grimsley, 5 August 1861, James Grimsley Papers, M 121, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis; Rhodes, ed., *All for the Union*, 51; Abernethy, ed., *Private Elisha Stockwell*, 188-9; Winther, ed., *With Sherman to the Sea*, 59-60; Rosenblatt and Rosenblatt, eds., *Hard Marching*, 9 tree falling on men in a tent, 40 drowning, 158 musket discharge accident; Bir, "'Remencence of My Army Life,'" 19 malfunctioning musket. On fatalism and battle see McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades*, 62-7; Gerald F. Linderman, *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War* (New York: The Free Press, 1987), 102-10.

sounds and ignores those that are not immediately and automatically—thus the veteran does not engage in needless diving on the ground.²⁵

The adaptive unconscious also communicates to the conscious mind through feelings and hunches that are based on analysis of a situation in the context of past experiences. This is why, as Earl Hess has shown, veteran troops knew how to essentially read a battlefield situation. Through their adaptive unconscious they intuitively felt or just intuitively knew when an attack or defense was hopeless and retreated. They did not run for their lives (“skedaddle”) like green troops, but simply withdrew a safe distance and reformed their battle lines. By effectively processing so much information at both the unconscious and conscious levels veterans could perform much more effectively than novices who basically processed information with the conscious mind alone. Herman Hattaway and Archer Jones estimate that on a Civil War battlefield a veteran soldier was the equivalent of two new recruits. In fact, as the war progressed the Confederate army tended to contain a larger proportion of veterans and this off-set the fact that Union armies were significantly larger in most battles.²⁶

Another change the average Billy Yank went through was a hardening process. On entering battle for the first time on the second day of the Battle of Shiloh, Elisha Stockwell of Wisconsin described his first encounter with a man killed in battle: “He was leaning back against a big tree as if asleep, but his intestines were all over his legs and several times their natural size. I didn’t look at him the second time as it made me deathly sick.” Most of the men entering the Union army were much more intimately familiar with death than the average American today. Many of the same diseases that ravaged army camps killed people back home. The seriously ill and dying remained in the home instead of being isolated in a hospital, and the family usually prepared bodies for burial rather than an undertaker. Still, the mass death and hideously mangled bodies of the battlefield were new and horrifying experiences. Interestingly, Stockwell like many others did not describe having intense reactions to subsequent experiences with dead soldiers. Men shut down their sensitivities. Cyrus Boyd described a burial party in which “Some of the men joke and laugh while they are laying out the dead and seem to think nothing of it.” Elisha Rhodes described a burial in his camp and how no one seemed to care: “death is so common that little sentiment is wasted. It is not like death at home.” He realized that of necessity he, too, had become hardened and stated “I shall be glad when the war is over and I can be civilized again. I do not like so much death and destruction.” Boyd came to a similar conclusion when he noted that “War . . . benumbs all the tender feelings of men.”²⁷

²⁵ For an accessible account of the adaptive unconscious see Timothy D. Wilson, *Strangers to Ourselves: Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2002).

²⁶ Herman Hattaway and Archer Jones, *How the North Won: A Military History of the Civil War* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 728; Hess, *Union Soldier in Battle*, 82-93, 146-57.

²⁷ Rhodes, ed., *All for the Union*, 76, 100; Throne, ed., *Civil War Diary of Cyrus F. Boyd*, 42, 52; Abernethy, ed., *Private Elisha Stockwell*, 16.

Another change for some Union soldiers was a descent into vices, such as profanity, illicit sex, drunkenness, and gambling. Accounts and complaints about “cussing” are ubiquitous in soldier letters, memoirs, and diaries. The preoccupation with soldier profanity has roots in the Revolution, in which controlling one’s mouth was related to patriotism. Charles Royster found that George Washington and others in the Continental army considered cussing to be an indication that one lacked the kind of self-control necessary for a person to have republican virtue—the quality required of citizens if America’s experiment in democratic-republican government was to be a success. This patriotic imperative to avoid profanity was doubtless reinforced in the Civil War by the emphasis on the connections between self-control and true liberty in Victorianism and in Republican Party ideology and by the Republican portrayal of southerners as men who betrayed the Fathers after they had given into their wild, uncontrolled passions. In America, fighting the enemy on the battlefield was not enough; one must also fight one’s inner faults that could lead one to abandon republican virtue.²⁸

Drinking, gambling, and cavorting with prostitutes was not new to all of the men who entered the Union army. As noted above, large numbers of young men were on the move before the war, and where they concentrated in cities vice flourished. Even in smaller cities, young transient males created a subculture centered on bowling alleys and saloons that emphasized promiscuous sex, gambling, and drinking. This subculture simply seems to have been transferred into the camps when young, urban dwellers joined the army looking for adventure. How extensive such vice was is hard to establish. The numerous instances in which substantial problems were caused by drunken officers and men, the thousands of prostitutes in military centers such as Washington and Nashville, and the thousands of cases of sexually transmitted disease among the soldiers suggest that vice was substantial, but did those condemning it exaggerate its influence? Although a number of soldier writings contain complaints about vice by those not involved, there are very few things written by those actually engaged in vice. A rare glimpse into the bad boy life is provided by a letter written by H. B. Cord to a fellow soldier. After using the f-word, he stated that “we have sent the most of them [prostitutes] off to get new bushing for they are all wore out and by the way some of their Asses is hotter than hell it’s self. But I have not had my Sigar lit by them yet.” One Hoosier veteran complained that the widespread licentious reputation of soldiers made local girls “afraid to go a slayriding with a soldier[.] here they think if they get 10 ft away in the dark with a fellow thats been a soldier they will be screwed before they would knowit”²⁹

²⁸ Charles Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character, 1775-1783* (1979; paperback ed., New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1981); Rosenblatt and Rosenblatt, eds., *Hard Marching*, 156-7 account of cussing; Kenneth P. McCutchen, ed., *Dearest Lizzie: The Civil War Letters of Lt. Col. James Maynard Shanklin, of Southwest Indiana’s Own 42nd Infantry Regiment* (Evansville: Friends of Willard Library Press, 1988), 123 “offensive” “vulgarity”; Beatty, *Citizen-Soldier*, 35 swearing. On Republican ideology see Thomas E. Rodgers, “Northern Political Ideologies in the Civil War Era: West-Central Indiana, 1860-1866 (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1991), 269-377.

²⁹ H. B. Cord to Rufus Dooley, 5 May 1863 and Bart Dooley to Rufus Dooley, 6 March 1865, M 383, Rufus Dooley Papers, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis. For background on soldiers and vice see Wiley, *Billy Yank*, 247-74; Thomas P. Lowry, *The Story the Soldiers Wouldn’t Tell: Sex in the Civil War* (Mechanicsburg, Penn.: Stackpole Books, 1994). For background on young men and urban vice see

Not everyone gave into vice. At the end of serving for more than four years in the Union army Elisha Rhodes wrote: "I have tried to keep myself from evil ways and believe that I have never forgotten that I am a Christian. Thank God no spirituous liquors have ever passed my lips as a beverage, and I feel that I can go home to my family as pure as when I left them as a boy of 19 years." Some gave into vice for a while, but then returned to the straight and narrow. Rufus Dooley became a drinker and had naughty friends such as H. B. Cord. However, the moral entreaties of his mother brought him out of vice. In fact, he founded a temperance society in his unit of the army, which was praised by his home town newspaper. Many men not only participated in services held by chaplains, but also organized Bible studies and other religious activities. Piety in the ranks was also encouraged by the United States Christian Commission, a voluntary organization that distributed hundreds of thousands of Bibles and millions of pages of religious literature to Union soldiers. A remarkable range of religious and moral comments can be found in the writings of the Billy Yanks, and anyone who has had to decipher the random spelling and punctuation of their manuscripts knows these religious passages were not solely the writings of a well-educated elite. In addition, while profanity was widespread, it had its limits. "Profanity is not deep or vicious," wrote one soldier. "Let a Chaplin come along who the men respect and the most of them will be guarded in thier [sic] talk."³⁰

After expressing approbation of a fellow soldier reading his Testament and kneeling in prayer, Theodore Upson described the men in his company this way: "Some of the boys are afully profane and some drink a good deal more than is good for them, but I believe there are a lot of good boys in the Company and they are the ones I want to tie to. I don't like smut and profanity and as for drinking I have too much pride to make a fool of myself." This description could be applied to the entire army. However, if the Billy Yanks displayed both virtue and vice, what stands out is the former rather than the latter. Profanity, womanizing, gambling, and other vices are what one expects to find in modern armies; the proportion of men who did not do such things or who returned to righteousness after a flirtation with sin is what makes the Union army as a whole significantly different than most others.³¹

Rodgers, "Northern Political Ideologies," 116-19, 551-3; Michael Kaplan, "New York City Tavern Violence and the Creation of a Working-Class Male Identity," *Journal of the Early Republic* 15 (Winter 1995):591-617.

³⁰ Rhodes, ed., *All for the Union*, 238; Winther, ed., *With Sherman to the Sea*, 104 quotation; Rosenblatt and Rosenblatt, eds., *Hard Marching*, 200-1 good account of religious activities; Sarah A. Dooley to Rufus Dooley, 6 June 1862, 9 May 1863, 3 June 1864, and B[arton] W. Dooley to Rufus Dooley, 14 June 1864, and Rufus Dooley to Sarah A. Dooley, 28 May 1864, Dooley Papers; Parke County *Republican*, 1 June 1864; Roberson, *Soldiers*, 170-89. On the influence of home front women on soldiers see Linderman, *Embattled Courage*, 83-98.

³¹ Winther, ed., *With Sherman to the Sea*, 23. Wilbur Fisk of Vermont wrote a passage remarkably similar to that of the Hoosier Upson. Rosenblatt and Rosenblatt, eds., *Hard Marching*, 5. Wiley contends that vice was predominant in Union camps, while Robertson and McPherson portray a much greater religious influence among the Billy Yanks and assert that it was an important factor in soldier morale and ability to

In dealing with southern civilians, did Billy Yank act out of the hardening process he had undergone or out of Christian charity? This is a broad and contested issue. In recent years, increasing emphasis has been put on a “hard war” concept in which Union soldiers acted increasingly harshly toward southern civilians as the war progressed. Mark Neely has countered this trend somewhat by pointing out even harsher behavior by American soldiers in other conflicts in the nineteenth century. It is beyond the scope of a brief descriptive essay to answer this difficult question, but a fruitful approach might be as follows. On the one hand, as many have noted, soldiers saw southerners as traitors. They were guilty and thus deserving of the hardships inflicted through property destruction. On the other hand, they were not dehumanized, as were Indians; therefore, the restraints of Christian civilization on violating women and murder were still in effect. Thus Union soldiers exercised a kind of limited harshness against the whites of the South in which there was extensive destruction of property, but rarely the rape of women or wanton murder of civilians that happened in Indian wars and the Mexican War.³²

Because so much focus is normally placed on the North-South conflict and the slavery issue, historians tend to understate the profound ideological battle that took place within the North during the Civil War. In many ways, Republicans were fighting a two front war and Billy Yank found himself embroiled on both fronts. His involvement within the North took a number of forms, including official actions as government agents, semi-official measures, and voluntary deeds. Official actions included such things as enforcing federal laws and guarding against internal subversion. Soldiers were brought from Gettysburg to put down anti-draft riots in New York City. Soldiers and artillery were deployed to surround the 1863 Indiana state Democratic convention because of fears its delegates would try to overthrow the state government. Other actions included putting down organized draft resistance in the Midwest, officers serving on military courts that tried civilians, military operated espionage on political dissidents, and use of soldiers in the Veteran Reserve Corps and regular troops to catch deserters.³³

The army also semi-officially attempted to insert itself into politics. A common political practice of the time was for the citizens of a local area to hold a convention to

cope with the horrors of war. Wiley, *Billy Yank*, 247-274; Robertson, *Soldiers*, 170-89; McPherson, *For Cause & Comrades*, 62-76.

³² Mark E. Neely, Jr., *The Civil War and the Limits of Destruction* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007); Mark Grimsley, “Conciliation and Its Failure, 1861-1862,” *Civil War History* 39 (December 1993):317-35; Charles Royster, *The Destructive War: William Tecumseh Sherman, Stonewall Jackson, and the Americans* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991); Mitchell, *Vacant Chair*, 89-113; Glatthaar, *March to the Sea*, 66-80, 134-55.

³³ For background on the events described in this paragraph see Jennifer L. Weber, *Copperheads: The Rise and Fall of Lincoln’s Opponents in the North* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 103-33; Frank, *With Ballot and Bayonet*, 165-86; Paul A. Cimbal, “Soldiering on the Home Front: The Veteran Reserve Corps and the Northern People,” in *Union Soldiers and the Northern Home Front: Wartime Experiences, Postwar Adjustments*, ed. Paul A. Cimbal and Randall M. Miller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 182-218; G. R. Tredway, *Democratic Opposition to the Lincoln Administration in Indiana*, *Indiana Historical Collections*, vol. 48 (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau, 1973).

pass resolutions on major issues before a state or the national government. This type of convention was designed to express the views of the people involved, but was also meant to influence the larger public debate. During the war northern Republican newspapers printed numerous resolutions passed by regiments expressing support for Lincoln and emancipation or other Republican officials and policies or against Republican opponents. They also published straw polls of various units of the Union army showing overwhelming support for Lincoln in the 1864 elections. How these resolutions came about and how the opinions of the soldiers were formed has received little attention. Many historians have suggested that *Billy Yank* came to support Lincoln and emancipation as a logical reaction to their experiences in fighting for the Union and encountering the reality of slavery. Much more, though, seems to have been involved. For instance, John King described how a resolution against the Knights of the Golden Circle came about in the 92nd Illinois regiment. First, the resolutions were written by the officers and presented to each company. Then the commanding colonel “presented them to the regiment, while on dress parade, for an expression there To put such questions or resolutions before a regiment of men, read them aloud, and call for a vote without further consideration or debate, when nearly every private soldier did not feel at liberty to vote against it if he wanted to, was simply a farce.” This account supports a study of Wisconsin troops showing that a relatively small proportion of officers and enlisted men possessed extensive political knowledge and commitments, and that this small group dramatically influenced other less informed and less politically zealous soldiers. Jacob Ritner, an abolitionist officer of the 25th Iowa regiment, described how the entire division of which his regiment was a part was formed into a giant hollow square to hear their general and officers from every regiment speak in favor of emancipation. “I never saw more enthusiasm and unanimity in any meeting, or heard more eloquent and patriotic speeches.” In the face of such institutional and peer pressure, it is not surprising Ritner could find no one who would openly speak against emancipation.³⁴

Anyone who has read extensively among the letters and diaries of Union soldiers is aware that they often expressed, if anything, even more hostility toward northern Copperheads than they did toward Confederates. In a 1988 work, Reid Mitchell contended that despite the fury of their remarks, soldiers “almost never” actually did

³⁴ Swedberg, ed., *Three Years with the 92d Illinois*, 61 first quotation; Charles F. Latimer, ed., *Love and Valor: Intimate Civil War Letters between Captain Jacob and Emeline Ritner* (Western Springs, Ill.: Sigourney Press, 2000), 159-60 second quotation; Frank and Duteau, “Measuring the Political Articulatensess”; Rodgers, “Northern Political Ideologies,” 537-8, 563-72; Frank, *With Ballot and Bayonet*; Mark E. Neely, Jr., *The Union Divided: Party Conflict in the Civil War North* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 42-7. For books that portray soldiers changed by their experiences rather than manipulation see Chandra Manning, *What This Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007); Weber, *Copperheads*; Glatthaar, *March to the Sea*, esp. 39-51. There are at least two basic problems with studies that portray a large shift (experience or manipulation caused) in soldier attitudes toward emancipation and the Republicans. First, it is widely assumed soldiers represented a cross-section of the northern male population, but this has never been conclusively demonstrated or even received much study. Second, at a time when only men voted, how could such a large shift among soldiers not be reflected in overall voting patterns, which were remarkably stable during the Civil War?

anything to northern Democrats who opposed the administration. Recent research, however, casts doubt on this assertion. For instance, in October 1861, a time when there was supposedly a great deal of political unity in the North, soldiers of the 43rd Indiana regiment marched from a rendezvous camp near Terre Haute into that city where they destroyed the offices of the local Democratic newspaper. Soldiers were subsequently involved in attacks on ten more Hoosier Democratic papers by the end of the war as well as on Democratic papers in Ohio, Iowa, and Illinois. At the 1863 Indiana Democratic convention described above, soldier harassment of Democratic delegates became ever more intense, culminating with a group of soldiers making a bayonet charge on a speaker's stand whose occupants included a United States senator. There were also myriad cases of soldiers getting into fights of varying severity with Copperhead civilians. Billy Yank sided with the Republicans so often, both officially and unofficially, that some intemperate Democrats began calling soldiers "Lincoln dogs," indicating that they saw them as subservient minions of the president and his party. Just as Union soldiers meted out justice to traitors in the South, with or without orders, they also took action against those they saw as traitors in the North.³⁵

If Billy Yank was usually agitated by northern Copperheads, great comfort was afforded by the friends and family he left behind in the North with whom he remained in frequent contact through the mail and express systems. In 1855 postal rates were dropped to 3 cents per ounce for letters going less than 3000 miles, and prepayment of postage (stamps were introduced in 1847) was required. Low postal rates combined with the fact that more than 90% of white Union soldiers were literate to create a fantastic amount of mail going to and from the various field armies and garrison posts. At one point in the war, some 45,000 soldier letters to the home folks went through Washington on a typical day, and about double that number were routed through Louisville. The fact that the army did not censor the mail of their men allowed a free flow of political and military views as well as more personal information to be carried in the letters. As one would expect, the letters contained extensive descriptions of battles, foraging, camp life, sufferings from lack of food, shelter, or sleep, and political comments. But they also contained much more. Many soldiers were still, in essence, virtually engaged in their communities through the mail. Husbands sent extensive instructions to wives concerning crops, livestock, hiring of labor, major purchases or sales, and much else. Wealthier men were in contact with their bankers or business partners, sending requests and giving instructions on business matters or funds for the wife and children left behind. Sons gave instructions to fathers concerning paying or collecting on their debts and loans to neighbors or on the sale of a horse or other possession. Fathers sent parenting advice to wives and admonitions for good behavior to their children. Expressions of love, some

³⁵ A study of Springfield, Illinois, found that soldiers were involved in random destruction of property as well as harassment of Copperheads. Camilla A. Quinn, "Soldiers on Our Streets: The Effects of a Civil War Military Camp on the Springfield Community," *Illinois Historical Journal* 86 (Winter 1993):245-56; Stephen E. Towne, "Works of Indiscretion: Violence against the Democratic Press in Indiana during the Civil War," *Journalism History* 31 (Fall 2005):138-149; Frank, *With Ballots and Bayonets*, esp. 180-1; Tredway, *Democratic Opposition*, 27-30, 100-7; Rodgers, "Northern Political Ideologies," 583-4; McPherson, *For Cause & Comrades*, 142-7.

bordering on the sublime, were common in letters between husbands and wives, but overt and even covert sensuality was rare. There were also some cross words, as soldiers complained of not receiving more letters and women complained of neglect, such as the Hoosier wife who asserted that her husband loved his army drum more than her. Many civilians sent patriotic encouragements, while a few Democratic families sent entreaties to sons and husbands to get out of the army and the abolition war. Remarkable numbers of local newspapers were sent from home to keep the soldiers informed of major events back home. Soldiers sent home numerous requests for clothing items, foodstuffs, stamps, and other items. Families responded by sending boxes of requested materials through the various express companies of the time. In a period more accustomed to families and voluntary associations taking action than bureaucratic institutions, the people of the North greatly supplemented the supplies provided by the military through packages from family and from voluntary organizations such as the United States Christian Commission and the United States Sanitary Commission.³⁶

Billy Yank experienced the horrors of war and the hardening it evoked. He suffered through heat and cold, rain and dust, lack of food and sleep, camp diseases, and exposure to the elements. He faced bewildering difficulties in distinguishing Unionists from non-Unionists in the South, and friend from foe in the political upheaval of the North. He faced the temptations of the vices associated with a soldier's life, and in significant numbers resisted them. He was both an agent of the government as a soldier, and a ruler of that same government as a citizen-soldier who often voted, passed resolutions, and took part in other political activities. He was both a localist with ties to the people and culture of a given place and a nationalist fighting to preserve the legacy bestowed by the Founding Fathers. Some 359,528 men died while in the service, and thousands more died of the war's effects within a few years of leaving the army. Nevertheless, despite all the adversities he faced, Billy Yank accomplished his task of putting down rebellion and preserving the Union.³⁷

³⁶ George R. Taylor, *The Transportation Revolution, 1815-1860* (White Plains, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 1951), 140, 150; Alfred D. Chandler, *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1977), 127-8, 195-6; Billings, *Hardtack & Coffee*, 217-23; Robertson, *Soldiers*, 104-10, 169, 184-5; Mitchell, *Vacant Chair*, 25-30; McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades*, 11; Ezra Bowles to Susan Bowles, 14 June 1862 (drum), SC 114, Ezra Bowles Papers (Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis); Thomas E. Rodgers, "Civil War Letters as Historical Sources," *Indiana Magazine of History* 93 (June 1997):105-10.

³⁷ Boatner, *Biographical Dictionary*, 602. J. David Hacker contends that a number of men died shortly after leaving the army and that the deaths caused by the war were about 20% higher than those generally cited by historians in the past and used in the text. Unfortunately, his approach cannot provide an estimate for extra Union dead, but instead only for both sides combined, "A Census-Based Count of the Civil War Dead," *Civil War History* 57 (December 2011):307-48.