



Hardtack and Hardship

The Lives of Union Soldiers

Background

The Civil War was a brutal four-year battle between two parts of the United States. The northern states, known as the Union, fought against the southern states, known as the Confederacy. The North and the South disagreed about many important issues, but first among those was slavery. This key issue led to war as the South tried to form its own country to preserve slavery, while the North fought to keep the nation together.

At the heart of this conflict were countless ordinary men who answered their nation's call. Both Union and Confederate soldiers endured unimaginable hardships. For soldiers, the war often meant leaving behind loved ones and enduring the harshness of camp life. Despite facing overwhelming challenges, the remarkable **resilience** of the Northern soldiers, along with their superior resources, ultimately led to a victory for the Union.

Becoming a Soldier

How did these men become soldiers? Some volunteered because they loved their country and wanted to fight, while others were drafted by the government and forced to serve. A lucky few could afford to pay someone else to fight in their place. Bounty men were soldiers who were paid a bonus for signing up. No matter how they arrived in the army, these soldiers' lives were about to change forever.



Union Soldiers Pose for the Camera

The President's Playful Soldier

Tad Lincoln, President Abraham Lincoln's spunky son, loved stories of brave soldiers fighting for their country. Imagine his excitement when he got a real soldier's uniform!

But Tad was still a little kid. He didn't look like a mighty warrior. So, he hatched a brilliant plan. With a swish of an ink pen, he gave himself a fake mustache and beard! Now he looked like a fearless soldier, ready to conquer anything!





Camp Life

Far from the battlefield, most Union soldiers spent their days in a demanding routine of drills, chores, and endless waiting. Their days began early, often at 5 a.m.! Many had never even fired a gun before joining the army, and therefore they spent long hours learning to march, shoot, and fight. Camp life was hard work. Soldiers had to chop wood, cook meals, dig **latrine** ditches, and stand guard. This difficult experience took everyday men and transformed them into soldiers.

The harsh routine of camp was made even more difficult by the terrible living conditions that soldiers had to endure. Their shelters were flimsy tents that offered little protection from the biting cold or pouring rain. With so many men crowded together, it was hard to find a quiet moment. The camps were dirty, smelly places, and disease spread quickly.



A Union Camp

Glossary:

Resilience: the ability to overcome challenges

Latrine: a simple toilet, often just a hole dug in the ground

Amputation: a surgery that involves cutting off a person's limb, like a hand or a leg, because it is diseased

Grueling: extremely tiring and difficult

Food was scarce, and sometimes it was even rotting. Soldiers were hungry most of the time, and what they did eat was usually hardtack, a tough and tasteless biscuit. If they were lucky, they might get some salty meat, bread, rice, peas, sugar, or coffee. Their stomachs were often empty and rumbling.

And of course, the constant threat of battle cast a dark shadow over the soldiers' lives. The horrors of combat were unimaginable. Men witnessed the deaths of their friends and were forced to take lives themselves. When soldiers were wounded, even minor injuries could become life-threatening, as doctors struggled with a lack of supplies and knowledge. Soldiers were terrified of **amputations**, which doctors often performed to prevent infection after a soldier was shot in the arm or leg. These major surgeries could even take place without any kind of pain medication or anesthesia. Diseases spread like wildfire through the camps, claiming more lives than bullets. Survival depended as much on luck as on courage.



Resilience

Indeed, life in camp was incredibly tough, but soldiers found ways to cope. Sharing the same struggles created strong bonds between them. They turned to each other for comfort, support, and a sense of belonging. Whether it was playing a game, sharing a joke, or simply listening to a friend, these connections helped ease the loneliness and fear. To escape the harsh realities of war, soldiers often formed clubs or bands, finding peace in music and shared hobbies. These shared experiences provided a much-needed escape from the horrors of war.

These experiences that soldiers shared were not always enough to provide comfort for soldiers, who longed for home and news of their loved ones. Letters from friends and family were like lifelines, offering glimpses of the world they left behind. The arrival of the mail was a joyous occasion, filled with hope and anticipation. Even the silliest bit of news from a friend would lift the spirits of the soldiers and ease their loneliness.

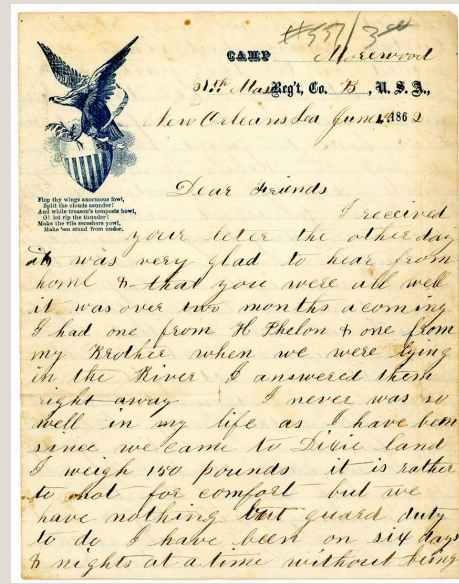
Conclusion

The lives of Union soldiers were marked by unimaginable hardship and sacrifice. From the **grueling** conditions in camp to the constant threat of battle, their resilience is inspiring. While their days were filled with challenges, friendship and the hope raised by letters from home surely contributed to the resilience of these brave men.

Real Life Soldiers

Can you imagine being far away from home, scared and lonely? Soldiers were just like us, with feelings and worries. In the letter pictured below, a soldier sends a message to his friends back home.

He talks about missing yummy food like pies and cakes, and how tired he is from always watching out for danger. He also tells about a huge storm that ripped through their camp, knocking down tents with its powerful winds. One of the tents was even struck by lightning, terrifying the entire camp. It's interesting to think about what might have happened to this soldier after the war.



Union Camp Band