

Volunteer Regiments typify

Civil War NCOs

By Dr. John Wands Sacca

Unlike the earlier Mexican War, the Civil War was largely fought and won by volunteers. Thus, Noncommissioned officers of the volunteer regiments best typified the NCO of this era.

By war's end, the ratio of volunteers to Army regulars would be almost 45-to-1. About 10 percent of these soldiers would see service as NCOs.

Though both regular and volunteer regiments had similar organizations (10 companies per regiment), there were major differences. Volunteers signed up for one to three years, regulars for five years. Most volunteers weren't fond of military life and some even deserted the Army when they tired of the blood and bullets.

Another difference between volunteers and regulars was the cash bounties (some as large as \$500) offered by the states to volunteers. The regular Army could never hope to match this type of payment to its soldiers. Soldiers of the volunteer companies sometimes chose their own officers and first sergeants.

Soldiers in volunteer units were typically a close-knit group since they were generally recruited from the same community. As a result, in the first years of the war, volunteer NCOs were often younger and more inexperienced than their regular Army counterparts.

1SG William Abbot, who served with Co G, 70th Illinois Volunteer Infantry, was one of these "babes in arms." At 16, he was the youngest NCO in his company when he was elected first sergeant by his comrades.

Many boys lied about their age to enlist. One such lad of 13 was made a sergeant on the Chickamauga battlefield in 1863 for conspicuous bravery.

As the first volunteer units disbanded and the NCOs mustered out, seasoned campaigners would often re-enlist in newly raised state regiments, forming a cadre of NCOs as experienced as those found in the regular Army.

The enlisted volunteers were proud and independent men who believed themselves the equal of any of their NCOs, most of whom were their hometown neighbors. NCOs found themselves in the uncomfortable position of being middlemen between commissioned officers and the privates. They

were frequently invited to strip off their chevrons and fight. "It is the meanest position in which a man can be placed, that of Noncommissioned officer," complained a corporal of the 11th Ohio Volunteer Cavalry in 1865. "In our company, every man is smarter, knows more and thinks himself a better man than those under whom he is placed."

Volunteers would not tolerate the stiff discipline of the Regular Army. NCOs who committed a breach of discipline were punished by being reduced to the ranks. Captains soon learned to place stripes on the sleeves of men who were respected by their soldiers, rather than feared by them.

Many officers offered to resign in the course of the war, some smitten with what was called "cannon fever." Countless others died in action or were discharged for disability. Into this void stepped the company sergeants as the authority of their officers settled, out of necessity, upon their shoulders. Many proven NCOs, especially first sergeants, received commissions in the last years of the war.

To learn their jobs, NCOs hit the books on Army tactics and regulations, especially GEN Silas Casey's *Infantry Tactics*, published in 1862. The NCO's instruction included endless drill in the school of the soldier.

The monotony of camp life was broken by picket duty. While it could be dangerous and often trying for the NCOs in charge, this duty was an essential part of their tactical education. Patrolling the pickets taught NCOs vigilance, independent judgment, prompt action in emergencies and strict discipline. If the enemy began to advance, NCOs would quickly transform the pickets into a skirmish line under their command.

Although railroads increased mobility and logistical support, and telegraph lines sped communication, Civil War field armies moved, communicated and fought much like armies in the Napoleonic wars more than 50 years earlier. Despite the introduction of the rifled musket and the use of field entrenchments, linear battle formations remained the tactical doctrine of the day. In battle, the four sergeants in each infantry company performed the tactical roles of line closer and guide.

Leading by example, they encouraged the men to hold their ranks rather than turn and run, as nature and good sense might dictate. A second sergeant recalled his duty as left general guide at Fredericksburg in 1863:



“ Our lieutenant colonel halted us, ordered the men to lie down and then called for guides on line. That meant that I and the other two guides, one on the right and one in the centre, were to stand up and take position by which the regiment could align itself. I sprang to my feet, soon caught the line from the others and there we stood while the regiment crawled up and dressed by us....The air was full of wild shrieks of grape[shot] and shrapnel; the ringing shells were bursting all about with maddening and stuning [sic] detonations. I remember, as I stood there for those few moments I seemed indeed to have lost all sense of fear, and yet I wondered whether I was actually myself and whether my head was really on or off my shoulders. ”

Sixteen African-American soldiers received the Medal of Honor during the Civil War, all but three of whom were NCOs. SGM Christian A. Fleetwood, a native of Baltimore serving with the 4th U.S. Colored Infantry, was inducted into the Union Army as a free citizen in 1861. Within two years, he was appointed sergeant major. At Chafins Farm, VA, dur-

ing the Petersburg Campaign in 1864, he seized the colors after two other bearers had been shot down, and carried them throughout the battle. For his valiant action, he was awarded the Medal of Honor.

The custodians of the regimental and national flags were the color sergeants, usually the most respected NCOs in each regiment. These NCOs often did not fare much better than the battle-stained flags they carried. Shot through until they resembled sieves, the standards were the visible heart and soul of each regiment.

Carrying the colors was critical in battle because it was often the only way in which a commander could tell where his unit was on the field. Scores of color sergeants and corporals of the color guards were killed or maimed as they placed themselves and their standards to the fore in battle.

Not all Civil War NCOs were men. SGT Kady Brownell served with her husband, an orderly (first) sergeant, in both the 1st and 5th Rhode Island Infantry. She was a color bearer on the march and a nurse in the field. In one action, she saved her comrades from friendly fire by running to their front with her colors.

The coolness of such NCOs was equal to their courage. A sergeant of the 6th Maine was once surrounded inside a redoubt and called out that he was surrendering. But upon seeing men of his command tumble over the parapet, he yelled, “I take it back!” and grabbed the company colors and joined the fight.

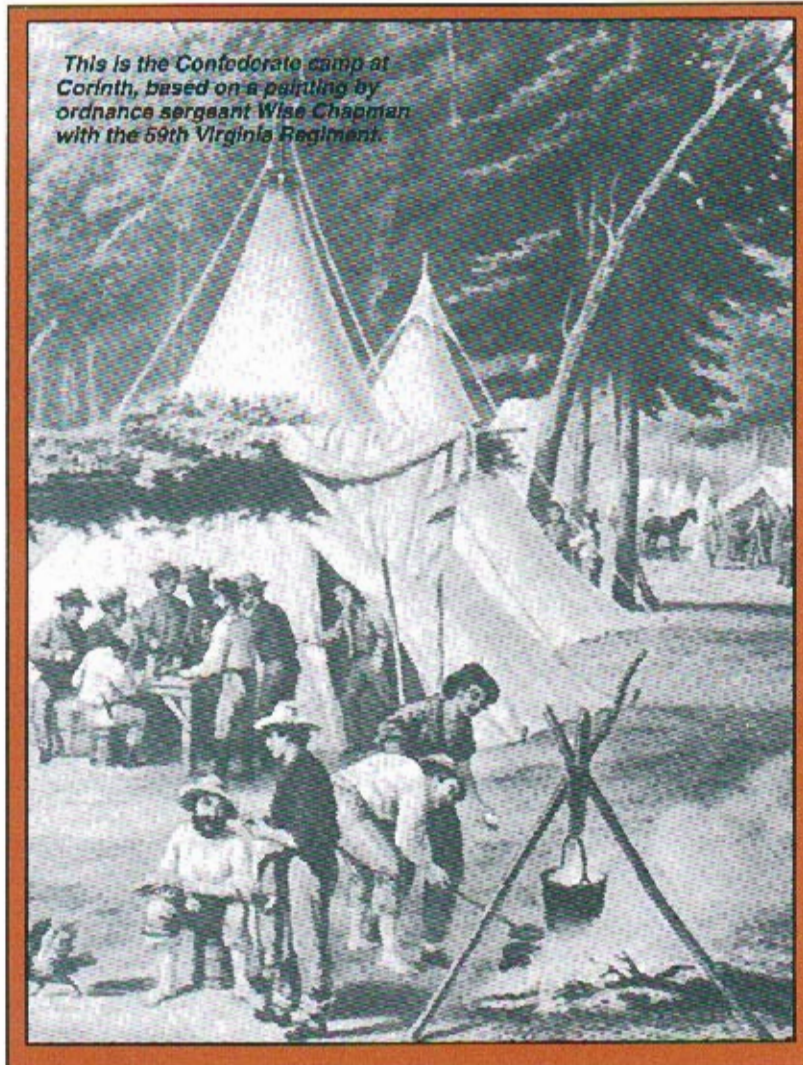
GEN William T. Sherman once wrote, “We have good corporals and sergeants...and these are far more important than good generals.”

With the war's end, the Army lost many of its veteran NCOs. Yet it would be the country's gain for those same leaders would help rebuild the nation. 1SG Consider Heath Willet, 44th New York Infantry, exemplified their strength of character. He wrote home during a lull in the Battle of Fredericksburg: “I remain as true and firm in battle as I hope to be in the battle of life.” ■

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A Union Army sergeant and his officer lead the way after a river crossing.



This is the Confederate camp at Corinth, based on a painting by ordnance sergeant Wise Chapman with the 59th Virginia Regiment.