



Here are the Scots, the Swedes and Germans, Irish and French, along with the Yankee and the man of many blends from the mid-West and the North woods. These are not the machine-made soldiers of Europe, but products of the time and hour.

During the 1800s...Immigrants Flood The Army

By L. R. Arms

In 1802 the United States restricted the enlistment of foreigners in the Army. As the years passed, recruiters often ignored the restrictions. In times of peril, such as the War of 1812, the restrictions were ignored altogether.

The Army offered little appeal to American citizens in times of peace and prosperity. On the frontier, soldiers lived an isolated life full of hardships and ordeals. Hard-pressed recruiters often turned to immigrants and ignored the restrictions on recruiting them.

Before 1825, non-native enlistees made up approximately 27 percent of the Army. In the mid 1800s, thousands fled hard times in Europe and the proportion of foreign troops in the regular Army rose to 47 percent. Half were Irish, with most of the rest being Germans.

Many immigrants saw the Army as a way of bettering themselves. Others used the Army as a means of traveling to the western frontiers in search of adventure and opportunity. Still others sought the security a career in the Army offered because they weren't always welcome as civilians.

When the Civil War erupted and many officers resigned their commissions, it was the NCO who proved to be the stalwarts of the Army. Because many of these NCOs were of foreign birth, they remained loyal to the Union Army. They had no stake in the slavery issue.

How did these foreigners view themselves in their Union uniforms? SGT Fergus Elliott said, "I do not forget that I am a true born Englishman...but while I am in America I will

fight for America, and if England was to interfere on the rebel's side, I could fight them as well as the rebels...."

Since many immigrants came from ethnic communities in America, volunteer units often consisted of a single ethnic element. A group of Swedish immigrants from Galesburg, IL, for example, formed a company in which all the NCOs were Swedish.

Usually, ethnic units had ethnic NCOs, but in some instances the ethnic designation of the regiment didn't apply to NCOs. In one company of the nominally all-Irish Corcoran Legion all sergeants and seven of the eight corporals were German. The eighth corporal was from France. None was Irish.

Many volunteer units included immigrant NCOs who had received military training in Europe. These soldiers, trained in the Prussian, French, Swiss and other European armies, provided volunteer units with the experience they needed to build a fighting force.

Soldiers from Germany, Ireland, England, Canada, Scotland, France, Norway, India and other countries served bravely and honorably. Many received the Congressional Medal of Honor.

These soldiers saw the Army as a way to adapt to American society, to better themselves and receive the acceptance of other Americans. In a land of immigrants, the foreign NCO proved a valuable resource for the Army from the early 1800s to the dawn of the 20th century. ■

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