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THE FEDERAL VOLUNTEER SOLDIER
IN THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR
1861-1865

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the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of
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FOREWORD

Aims of the Study
Special Difficulties Encountered
Sources-Brief Explanation

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FOREWORD

Since its close the American Civil War has been a rich field for historical research. Practically every conceivable phase of the struggle has been investigated by partial and impartial observers both in this country and abroad. Much that has been written, however, is of little value because it has been either colored by partisanship or by an attempt to conciliate the two sections of the country.

One of the fields that has not received the study it merits is an evaluation of the Federal volunteer. One reason for this is the commonly accepted belief that the North won only through superiority in manpower and matériel. This attitude tends toward a natural admiration for the numerically inferior South, and equally significant, a lack of interest in the Federal soldier per se.

The purpose of this study is to examine the Federal volunteer soldier from his entrance into the military service of his country through the various phases of army life until his final discharge from service. Included in such a study are: motivations for enlistment; training; organization; equipment; weapons; conduct in battle; and morale in camp, on the march, at the front, in the hospital and in the prison pen. There will be no attempt to evaluate the grand strategy of the war as it evolved itself in the campaigns nor to discuss the pros and cons of the Federal soldier versus the Confederate

soldier as representative fighting men. But those factors that had to do with the morale of the Federal soldier in the war will be studied, divorced as completely as possible from comparisons with his adversary. By morale will be meant the mental state of the soldier. The morale of the soldier will be examined not only for its quality in combat but in all the situations of military life typical of the Federal soldier from 1861 to 1865.

The sources for such a study are many but extreme caution was exercised in the selection and evaluation of published materials. Except for private letters and diaries not written for publication, which have a definite value, most of the general works published between 1861 and 1900 are worthless for a dissertation of this sort since they discuss the generalship of the war; they talk about units and not men. Especially is this true in respect to biographies of the leading military figures. After the lapse of two decades the South became a bit more articulate in expressing itself on the war than it had been in the reconstruction period and a substantial increase in Southern Civil War histories and memoirs was the result, but when these works are examined one notes how rarely the Northern soldier as an individual is discussed. Most Southern writers of that period either refrained from discussing the fighting ability of their opponents or dismissed the question by classifying the Federal soldier as a foreigner fighting for hire. Newspapers of the

war period are equally disappointing when examined as sources for morale. The Southern newspapers are too bitterly hostile and the Northern newspapers are too friendly or too politically opposed to the Northern cause to be reliable. The Army and Navy Journal was used extensively because it expressed current attitudes and problems, often giving several viewpoints. One of the most frequently consulted sources is The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies which is a work totaling one hundred and thirty volumes. This valuable collection appeared after many of the leading actors in the war had published their memoirs. The reports of the Committee on the Conduct of the War are mainly investigations of the strategy of Federal commanders by politicians, but some of the testimony proved useful. Valuable material was found in Battles and Leaders of the Civil War. Many of the contributions to this source were made by actual participants in the events described. Much consulted for details on equipment was the collection of photographs in The Photographic History of the Civil War. Although fortunately there are exceptions, the majority of Civil War regimental histories are replete with local prejudices, gossip, and self-praise. Their chief value was their inclusion of excerpts from soldiers' letters and diaries of the war period.

The most revealing and informative sources were the letters and diaries of enlisted men and company grade officers

who usually wrote exactly what they saw, felt, and did. Of considerable value, also, were the few autobiographies of those younger men who rose to high command near the close of the war. Several of these officers were graduated from West Point just prior to the war; others were commissioned from civilian life or rose from the ranks. This type of young officer was alert and intelligent, observant of what went on around him, capable of retaining in later years the elasticity of mind and honesty of purpose to pass on his impressions to posterity. Possibly the most famous is Upton, but Cox, Gibbon, Merritt, C. F. Adams, Jr., and others have left us indebted to them for their objective treatment of the experiences of the Federal soldier as seen in the eyes of his comrades and superiors.

CHAPTER I

RECRUITING AND DRAFTING

At the outbreak of the Civil War the military forces of the Federal government consisted of a standing army and militia, but neither was prepared for the extremely difficult task of overcoming the resistance of an excellent fighting force operating in an area of roughly one million square miles. The Regular Army, which had had combat experience in Mexico a decade before, was a well disciplined force dispersed over the United States. This army, numbering only 16,402 men on January 1, 1861, was reduced by the resignation and desertion of 313 commissioned officers or approximately one-fifth the total commissioned strength.¹ Such a force was obviously incapable of crushing the revolt of a determined people who had 401,395 men in the field by the end of the first year of the war.² The role of the Regular Army throughout the war was really divided between acting as a "token force" in the field and serving as an officer pool. Unfortunately, it never was permitted to concentrate on either of these roles and the contribution of the Regular Army toward winning the war must be found in the higher command echelons. It did not function as a significant training or fighting

¹Report of Provost Marshal General, House Executive Documents, 39 Cong., 1 Sess., Part I, Document 1, 6-7.

²Livermore, Numbers and Losses in the Civil War in America 1861-65, 47. Hereafter, this work will be cited as Numbers and Losses in the Civil War.

element.

The militia, mostly unorganized and numbering more than 3,000,000,³ was weak in fighting potential. What little training the militiaman received was antiquated and discipline was poor. With the exception of a few "crack" units such as were found in the larger cities, the militia regiments were no better than their inglorious predecessors had been at Camden and Blandensburg. The Northern people were not military-minded and had never come to appreciate the value of training and discipline for their militia. A few of the States had made preparations to get their militia ready before hostilities began. For instance we find that for three months prior to the attack on Sumpter the Massachusetts Volunteer Militia, "in anticipation of some great traitorous movement in the South",⁴ drilled almost nightly in their armories. Governor Andrew issued his "General Order No. 4" on January 16, 1861, which placed the militia on a wartime footing. As a result of this order certain companies dropped from their rolls men unfit or unwilling to serve and accepted replacements.⁵ Even before these preparations in Massachusetts the New York State Legislature extended the service of the State militia to President Lincoln to be used

³Upton, The Military Policy of the United States, 225.

⁴Adjutant General of Massachusetts, Annual Report, 1861, 6.

⁵Nason, Minute Men of '61, 9.

as he deemed best "to preserve the Union and enforce the Constitution and laws of the Country."⁶ Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Massachusetts were equally prompt.

The reaction in the North to the attack upon Fort Sumpter was instantaneous and widespread. Mobs went about New York and elsewhere forcing suspect newspapers and private dwellings to display the Stars and Stripes. The garrison from Sumpter met with a hearty reception when it reached New York. Officers and men were carried on the shoulders of crowds wild with enthusiasm. The great city's streets were decked with banners.⁷ For a short time dissenters were discreetly silent.

To meet the challenge of insurrection the President called on the States for 75,000 militia for a period of three months. The legal basis for this call of April 15, 1861, was found in two ancient militia acts, those of February 28, 1795, and March 3, 1803. The 1795 act empowered the President to call forth the militia of any State or States "whenever the laws of the United States should be opposed or the operation thereof obstructed in any State, by combinations too powerful to be suppressed by the ordi-

⁶Victor, A History of the Southern Rebellion, I, 161.

⁷Doubleday, "From Moultrie to Sumpter," Battles and Leaders of the Civil War. (Buel and Johnson, editors), I, 48-49. Hereafter, this work will be cited as Battles and Leaders. The garrison's commander, Major Robert Anderson, was promoted to brigadier general a month later. Phisterer, Statistical Record of the Armies of the United States, 262.

nary course of judicial proceedings, or by the powers vested in the Marshals by this Act."⁸ By this act no militiaman could be compelled to serve more than three months in any one year. The 1803 law provided for the calling out of the militia in the District of Columbia for the maintenance of law and order within the District alone.⁹ Under this 1803 law the President issued calls in April for three regiments, but many of the men refused to take the oath of allegiance for fear they would thereby become regular soldiers. However, they were reassured that they were merely militia and were not sent out of the District.¹⁰ It was popularly believed that the war would be of short duration. The Federal government was weak at this period of the war as evidenced by its complete lack of military policy. Secretary of War Cameron, a political appointee, was incapable of administering his office. The States took the lead in the first effort to raise troops since the Regular Army was too small and too greatly dispersed to be of use. Although regular officers like Sherman firmly believed that such troops "never were and never will be fit for invasion,"¹¹

⁸Peters, ed., The Public Statutes At Large of The United States of America, I, 424. (Hereafter, this work will be cited as Statutes At Large).

⁹Ibid., II, 215-225.

¹⁰The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, First series, LI, Part 1, 322-323. (Hereafter, this work will be cited as Official Records).

the Northern States responded enthusiastically to this first call to arms and recruited their militia regiments very rapidly to full strength. Under the call of April 15, 1861, the States raised 91,816 men.¹² Even then, some governors were insisting that the Federal government call many more regiments, and in some cases, for longer periods of time than ninety days.¹³

These demands by State governors were backed by a seemingly irresistible advance in the military program of the enemy. In Baltimore the passage of two Northern militia regiments (6 Massachusetts Infantry and 7 Pennsylvania Infantry) was disputed by civilians hostile to the Federal government. Federal forts and arsenals within the Southern lines were seized; railroads and telegraph lines were cut; the Capital was in a state of siege, and communication with the outside world was possible only through the medium of private messenger. It seemed as if 1814 was to be repeated. To prevent such a disaster the President on May 3, 1861, issued a proclamation whereby the Regular Army was to be increased by 22,714 officers and men, and the Navy by 18,000 seamen. In addition, he called for 42,834 volunteers. This meant an increase of ten regiments of regulars and

¹¹William T. Sherman to John Sherman, April, 1861, in Thorndike, ed., The Sherman Letters, 111.

¹²Official Records, Third series, IV, 1264.

¹³Ibid., I, 93-144.

forty regiments of volunteers.¹⁴ Although the call provided for a Regular Army of 42,000 men, enlistments in this force were disappointingly few and by December, 1861, when the volunteers already totalled 640,000 men, the total of the Regular Army was only 20,334.¹⁵

In those early months of the war before Bull Run the Federal government could have accepted a much larger volunteer force, but the war matériel for additional troops was lacking.¹⁶ Hundreds of thousands of volunteers offered their services in 1861 but were turned away by this unfortunate situation. Not only did the States function as agencies in raising troops, but sometimes individuals tried to raise and proffer regiments or even brigades directly to the President. Usually these individuals were prevented by their respective governors but Daniel Sickles, ex-diplomat and society man, succeeded in raising the famous Excelsior Brigade in New York and took it directly to Washington. The brigade lost half its men by the vicissitudes of war before President Lincoln finally overrode Sickles and credited the five regiments to New York.¹⁷

While the volunteers were pouring into State rendezvous

¹⁴Ibid., 145-146.

¹⁵Ibid., 154.

¹⁶Nicolay and Hay, Abraham Lincoln, IV, 77-78.

¹⁷Comte de Paris, History of the Civil War in America, I, 175-176.

camps the three-month militia received their baptism of fire in the Battle of Bull Run, July 21, 1861. The men fought bravely but lost the battle late in the day. These men have never received the credit they deserve; they served for a short period only and saw little action but they did give the Federal government time to catch its breath in the almost impossible task of forming an army out of raw material. Bull Run was the inevitable answer to the clamorous "on to Richmond" but the people were rudely awakened and the fervor of recruiting which so characterized the spring fell off sharply. It is true that the quotas under the 1861 calls were substantially oversubscribed but the distribution was very unequal. Some New England States and such States as Delaware and Maryland failed to fill their quotas.¹⁸ There was a slight increase in recruiting during the winter of 1861-1862 due to the seasonal slackness of labor in the agricultural regions. But the increase was not sufficient for attaining the goal set by General McClellan, who assumed command after Bull Run, and hence it was necessary to resort to special appeals, extraordinary financial inducements and even covert threats of possible future drafts in order to stir up the laggards. The reasons given for prompt enlistment were: it was a noble cause; the pay was the highest in the world; the rations and supplies were good; and

¹⁸Official Records, Third series, IV, 1264.

weapons were unsurpassed.¹⁹

An order of December 3, 1861, placed recruiting in the hands of the War Department. By March 31, 1862, the army consisted of 23,308 regulars and 613,818 volunteers.²⁰ The militia is not included in these figures except in the cases of those militia units which had become "federalized", that is, had come under Federal control. Then they were in the same category as regiments of volunteers raised for service in the war. On April 3, 1862, recruiting for volunteers was temporarily halted.²¹ Officers and men returned to their regiments from their detached duty at recruiting offices; the offices themselves were closed down; and the public property belonging to the volunteer recruiting service was sold to the highest bidders, the proceeds being credited to a fund for collecting, drilling, and organizing volunteers.²² To replace the men lost by Grant at Shiloh and McClellan on the Peninsula it was necessary to re-establish recruiting, which was done by an order issued June 6, 1862.²³ The shortage of men continued, however,

¹⁹Editorial in New York Tribune, September 2, 1861, quoted by Shannon, The Organization and Administration of The Union Army 1861-1865, I, 263.

²⁰Phisterer, Statistical Record of the Armies of the United States, 62.

²¹United States War Department, "General Order No. 33," April 3, 1862, General Orders for 1862.

²²Ibid.

and in May and June special authority was granted to the States of New York, Illinois, and Indiana to furnish men for three months of service. Under this authority New York furnished 8,588 men, Indiana furnished 1,723, and Illinois furnished 4,696.²⁴ The reinforcement of 15,007 three-month troops would obviously be meagre in the light of what was transpiring on the Peninsula and on other fronts. More men were needed at once.

The President and his cabinet were gravely concerned over the military situation in general and that of the Army of the Potomac in particular. Now realizing that a new call was imperative, they reached an agreement which resulted in a War Department order published July 2, 1862, calling for 300,000 volunteers.²⁵ By this call the States raised 421,465 men for three years.²⁶ The caliber of men responding to this call was exceptionally high. The reason for this high type of volunteer coming forward in response to this call is not difficult to ascertain. He had not enlisted in the spring of 1861 because he was bound by domestic and economic ties that were not as easily severed as were those of the less stable elements that were usually found to pre-

²³Official Records, Third series, II, 109.

²⁴Phisterer, 4.

²⁵Official Records, Third series, II, 180-188.

²⁶Ibid., IV, 1265.

dominate in the militia units that responded to the earlier calls. Those who were well established in society and who did try to enlist in 1861 were quite often turned away because a lack of arms and equipment had sharply curtailed the number of regiments permitted each State. Domestic and foreign sources had largely remedied these deficiencies and the men could now be accepted. In an article entitled "Recruiting in the City," which appeared July 15, 1862, the New York Times described the situation in many places in the North at that time:

There was a brisker business done at the recruiting offices yesterday than on any day since the issue of the President's requisition.... The men who are coming forward are far superior, on the average, to those who have filled up the regiments that went from the State last winter. They are mainly men who seem to be acting, not from impulse, or necessity, or in the belief that they will have an easy time of it, but from conscientious motives of patriotism; volunteering freely, under the full comprehension of the serious nature of the work they will have to do, and with the determination, by this volunteering, to, if possible, end the struggle quickly and effectually.²⁷

The first great outburst of patriotic enthusiasm had subsided. War was no longer romantic. The Federal armies were being depleted by battle casualties and disease; maimed veterans were observed more often in the Northern cities and rural areas. One veteran who responded to this July call pointed out that it required a good deal of courage to enlist in the Federal armies under this call. "The men

²⁷New York Times, July 15, 1862, 1.

who responded were not Bohemians, nor mere seekers for a better fortune. They were mostly fixtures in society... They were men who could not have been bought from wife, children, and the family home of generations for one hundred or one thousand dollars. And such men were the overwhelming majority of the three-years' volunteers of 1862."²⁸ President Lincoln's call of July 2, 1862, for 300,000 three-year troops was a very severe drain on the North. It absorbed the best fighting element, the grand reserve force of the country. After this reserve force had been enlisted in the armed services no later call ever produced men of equal caliber.

As was so often the case throughout the entire war, however, some States were less co-operative in their support of the war effort than others. This was especially true in the raising of men. In some localities volunteering was not as enthusiastic as it should have been. The Federal government finally decided that a draft would be necessary to provide the requisite number of troops. The Southern victories in this stage of the war can be partially attributed to the fact that the Confederate Congress had passed universal conscription as early as April 16, 1862.²⁹ The Federal government proceeded slowly along the path of an out-and-out conscription of the manpower of the country.

²⁸Buffum, A Memorial of the Great Rebellion: Being a History of the Fourteenth Regiment New Hampshire Volunteers, 1-3.

²⁹Upton, 466-467.

On July 14, 1862, Congress passed a law whereby the President could call out the militia for a period not to exceed nine months with quotas apportioned to each State. By militia was meant all able-bodied male citizens between the ages of eighteen and forty-five.³⁰ This was merely a revision of the old 1795 militia law and was not a draft administered by the Federal government. States were allowed to draft if they so desired; the main interest of the government was to get the men. The military situation was chaotic; it was becoming obvious that Pope was not going to be able to check Lee. The significance of the Law of July 14, 1862 is that it allowed a draft by the States based on executive interpretation rather than direct legislative sanction. It was also the first step taken by the executive department of the Federal government toward recruiting under authority of this law and the 1795 law.

The War Department issued a call on August 4, 1862, for 300,000 militia to serve for nine months. This number, which was in addition to the quota of July 2, 1862, stipulated that if any State should fail to meet its quota of the additional 300,000 by August 15th, the deficiency in that State would be made up by a special draft from the permanent militia.³¹ A general order dated August 9, 1862, listed

³⁰Sanger, ed., Public Laws of the United States of America (1862), 597. (Hereafter cited as Public Laws).

³¹Official Records, Third series, II, 291-292.