

# ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

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## The Experience of Battle in the Civil War

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Many of the men and boys who enlisted in either army, particularly in the early stages of the war, did so to see the elephant. This exotic creature, rarely to be found outside the big cities, and only when a traveling circus came to town, epitomized the exotic and romantic in lives often dominated by the humdrum. To have seen the elephant was an experience to brag about for years to come. Recruits thought that combat would be an adventure, filled with noteworthy individual exploits, heroic and redolent with glorious deeds. They would charge forward in glamorous uniforms, decorously stepping forward over the fallen who assumed restful poses, to rout the demoralized foe.

In fact, the dominant characteristics of battle proved to be anything but romantic: soldiers found anonymity, chaos, brutal assaults on the senses, the infliction of terrible wounds and painful deaths, bloody and traumatizing in the extreme. The participants became part of a killing process that was enormous and relentless—slaughter on an industrial scale. Why was this?

Although casualties in eighteenth-century battles could be heavy, armies then were relatively small, made up of professionals often drawn from the least privileged of society and with little stake in the fighting beyond pride in the regiment and in doing one's duty. The American and French revolutions changed this, significantly expanding the manpower pool available to political and military authorities. The Declaration of Independence with its ringing assertion that all men are created equal, although not literally true, carried the concomitant inference that all citizens might, and perhaps should, serve in defense of their homes and liberties.

A concept of the citizen soldier whose motivation was patriotism grew to replace that of the hired mercenary fighting primarily for pay as the nation's major bulwark in war. The idea was enshrined in the Second Amendment to the Constitution of the United States with its endorsement of a well-regulated militia as the core of a republic's reliance for defense. From the late 1820s on, with the age of the common man, represented by self-made figures such as Andrew Jackson, it became axiomatic that the ordinary white male citizen could do anything he turned his hand to, including soldiering. The militia,

reflecting the society at large, would in time of crisis provide battalions of superior men in numbers hitherto inconceivable on the American continent.

The French Revolution was partially inspired by the American. It took the notion of political equality in a particular and dynamic direction. Surrounded by reactionary enemies, the new republic resorted to the concept of the nation in arms, declaring that every person was required to serve the necessities of the state, placing personal interest second. In effect, this was universal conscription and would be pursued not only in France but in other Continental countries from the age of Napoleon onwards. Great Britain and the United States were both reluctant to follow this model of drastic compulsion. But, by 1862, with the volunteer impulse waning in both the Union and Confederacy, each side resorted to a draft. Although this early form of selective service was not popular, causing riots in both sections, and was never the primary means of filling the ranks, it did guarantee a flow of fresh human material to the armies. From 1862 on, the Union also recruited African-Americans to swell the ranks.

If political developments meant that governments could raise massive numbers of men, technological innovations allowed them to be placed in the field and to be sustained there. The steam engine, applied to railroad locomotion and to paddle or screw-powered vessels, transported men and supplies to the theaters of war with unprecedented speed and efficiency. The telegraph allowed political and military leaders to communicate with generals in far-away localities and move units at the click of a morse key. The mass production of everything from uniforms to canned beans kept the armies clothed and fed. Most importantly, the perfection of interchangeable parts meant that small arms could be manufactured and maintained to a consistently high standard hitherto restricted to expensive hand-crafted pieces. And dramatic advances in the design of weapons and munitions radically increased the range, accuracy, and reliability of the armies' arsenals.

Two key innovations vastly improved the standard infantry shoulder weapon, the rifled musket. First, from the 1840s on, the percussion lock steadily surpassed the flint as the firing mechanism. The percussion hammer coming down on a waterproof explosive cap was a much more reliable method of igniting a powder channel to the main charge than the flint hitting a powder pan, igniting a spark to set off a fire down the touchhole to the cartridge in the barrel. Whereas the percussion musket was almost 100% effective, a flintlock might fail to ignite the main charge twice or more in a dozen firings, enshrined in the phrase a flash in the pan. Often, the problem was damp, to which the percussion cap was impervious (hence the Prussian army saying of the flintlock, "All is for nought if an angel pisses down your touchhole").<sup>1</sup>

Second, a new musket load significantly improved the rate of fire and accuracy of the standard infantry shoulder weapon. This projectile was pioneered in France by Colonel Claude-Etienne Minié and by Lieutenant Colonel James Henry Burton in the

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<sup>1</sup> Michael C. C. Adams, *Living Hell: The Dark Side of the Civil War* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 77.

U.S., and was known colloquially as a Minnie. The Minnie for the first time placed a rapid-fire rifle in the hands of most infantry. How? Prior to this invention, most troops carried a smoothbore musket that fired a round lead ball. The piece was not accurate over fifty to seventy-five yards, the ball flying wide as the un-grooved barrel did not provide the spin and velocity of a rifle. But it was cheap to make and fast firing, the ball dropping straight down the barrel. Officers, unable to count on distance and accuracy, relied on mass fire at close range, men being clumped together in columns or dense two-rank firing lines to put out a wall of missiles in the enemy's face.

Rifles were in use by units of most armies during the late eighteenth century but were only distributed to picked men, often in special rifle regiments. This was because rifles were expensive to manufacture, craftsman-made, with balls custom-cast for the specific piece. They were slow to load, the ball having to be hammered or screwed down the rifling in a greased patch so as not to damage the grooving. It took between a minute and a minute and a half to load the piece, an unacceptably long time in battle, when slowness might cost the rifleman a bayonet or spear in the gut.

The genius of the Minnie was that it dropped down the barrel like a smoothbore round, avoiding damage to the rifling, and being fast to load, but on discharge it exited as a rifle bullet, snugly fitting the grooves and highly accurate. This characteristic was achieved through the special construction of the projectile. The Minnie was a conical lead bullet. Minié's version had a cylindrical wood base that swelled on discharge, hugging the rifling. The more effective and more popular American product had a hollow base in its soft lead housing, with three concentric rings on the lower outside of the round. When fired, the gases pushing into the cavity forced it outward, the rings fitting neatly into the rifling. This new round had spin producing accuracy and velocity. Instead of fifty to seventy-five yards, it was effective at five hundred to seven hundred yards. The leading examples of percussion rifles carried in the Civil War were the American Springfield and the British Enfield.

There were similarly sophisticated advances in the science of heavy weapons. The 1862 iron Parrott rifle could throw a 10 lb. shell that, exploding let us say a half mile away, through contact or via a timing fuse, blew up with great force, tearing men apart, causing concussions, and creating further damage by throwing jagged chunks of metal, called shrapnel, over a wide area. The brass Napoleon 12 lb. smoothbore fired either solid round shot that emasculated men as they bounced along or, at closer ranges, discharged grape shot (clusters of small iron balls held together by a stem that snapped on discharge, throwing the balls over a wide area) or canister (cans or bags of musket balls and other small hard objects that, when fired, had the effect of a giant shotgun).

Civil War weaponry looks oddly quaint, even antique now. The cannon sitting peacefully in battlefield parks have a quiet grace and beauty. The rifles on museum walls look little different to earlier flintlock pieces like the British Brown Bess smoothbore that shattered Napoleon's cavalry at Waterloo in June, 1815. But that charming quality is misleading. The efficiency of advanced modern weapons caused massive casualty rates.

It was not unusual for a Civil War unit in action to lose 50% or more of its effectives, numbers that we would find utterly unacceptable today. For example, after Shiloh, Tennessee, April 1862, Confederate Major General Patrick Roynane Cleburne reported that his brigade was reduced from 2,700 to 800 fit for duty. In the 6<sup>th</sup> Georgia at Antietam, Maryland, September 1862, only 24 men remained unharmed. At Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, July 1-3, 1863, the 1<sup>st</sup> Minnesota lost 234 of 384 men engaged. On July 1 alone, 70% of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Ohio's 258 effectives were lost.

Statistics for overall army losses tell the same story. About 9,700 fell on each side at Shiloh. At Antietam, combined army casualties were over 22,700. Chickamauga, Tennessee, cost the North 16,550 casualties and the South 17,800. General Robert E. Lee at Gettysburg lost approximately 28,000 or 40% of his force, Major General George Gordon Meade 23,000 or 25%. In an age when officers led from the front and had to expose themselves in battle to direct and encourage their men, their losses were particularly high. The chivalric ethic which kept an officer in the field while he could still stand or sit a horse added to the casualty rate. Thus Confederate Commander General Albert Sidney Johnson bled to death at Shiloh when he did not leave the field after being wounded. Officers faced a 12% higher risk than men in the ranks, and generals took on a whopping 50% greater physical liability. At Gettysburg, six rebel generals died and four were seriously wounded. The Union had five killed and thirteen wounded. In one afternoon at Franklin, November 1864, the Confederate Army of Tennessee lost 50% of its regimental commanders and 6 general officers. In the war, at least 660,000 combat soldiers were killed, more than in all of America's major wars put together, and some authorities put the total as high as a million.

Perhaps this dismal record of bloodshed was partly inevitable. The enhanced firepower worked to help the defense, making it hard for either side to make headway against the storm of lead that eyewitnesses said literally darkened the sky and covered the ground like snow. Cartridge expenditure, made possible by the transportation revolution that rushed ammunition to the fronts, was prodigious. The Union Army of the Cumberland expended 2.2 million rounds of rifle cartridges during June 1864 alone. But the devastating losses were made worse by the failure of senior officers to adjust their thinking to the new technology. It appears to be a law of human nature that in the modern age our physical circumstances (especially in the realm of technology) change faster than our ability to adapt to them. Officers trained in the musket drill of the old smoothbore days still waited to seventy-five, even fifty yards or less, "whites of the eyes" range, before ordering their ranks to open fire. This guaranteed that both sides would be mown down. Many officers didn't trust the marksmanship of their amateur citizen soldiers to hit anything over a hundred yards and many were appalled at the waste of ammunition by their half-trained levies, so they kept to the old ways.

Still, commanding officers should have spread their men out over the field to dilute the density of the target offered to the enemy. Instead, they insisted on maneuvering their men in dense columns, blocks akin to moving boxes, or clung to the

old two-rank firing lines, the men standing pressed together presenting a solid target to the enemy. The justification frequently given was that the inexperienced and often ill-disciplined citizen soldiers needed the comforting assurance of shoulder-to-shoulder contact or they would surely bolt the field. Also, if spread out in fluid formations requiring more individual grasp of the immediate tactical situation, would they not lose cohesion and with it the officers' ability to control their movements? There was some sense to the rationalization, but it was costly in lives

As late as 1876, when the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry under Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer met disaster on the Little Big Horn, the troopers, unused to fighting in the new four-man squads (each man five yards apart, and the whole unit separated by fifteen yards from the next squad) failed in confidence, panicked, and lost cohesion, bunching in terror. This did not have to happen, but resulted from poor officer management. Instead of the four-man squad being made up of buddies, sharing a mess and bonded by intimate trust, in the 7<sup>th</sup> they were the first four men to dismount, often virtual strangers to each other. Custer, who put a low value on his men's lives, neither understood nor appreciated the buddy system as vital to the new expanded battlefield. Those officers in the Civil War who did experiment with spreading their men out on a more flexible skirmish line, such as Major General Francis Channing Barlow on the Union side, experienced good results in saved lives because they worked to ensure the men had confidence in each other and in their leaders.

Also militating against economy of lives, generals had been educated to believe with an almost religious faith in the power of the offense, both strategically and tactically. Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte was deemed to be the finest general of the modern age, and conventional wisdom at both West Point and other military academies held that the core of Napoleon's genius lay in his ability to pinpoint the enemy's weakness, even at the moment of crisis when the action appeared to be going against him, and break the enemy's momentum through the offensive thrust pressed to the hilt. Thus, he crushingly defeated his more cautious, less daring opponents. *Élan* was all. Civil War generals dreamed of a Napoleonic moment when they would break into pieces the opposing army, shattering it for good, laying open the enemy's heartland and bringing the war to a speedy end through a daring thrust. They clung to this stubborn belief in the superiority of the offense as a winning weapon in the face of multiple evidence that armies equipped with modern weapons and backed by the will of whole peoples to carry on the fight could not be demolished in a day and would inflict massive losses on their attackers. The most obvious example of the Napoleonic chimera is the belief of Lee and some of his senior officers that he could break the Army of the Potomac on the third day at Gettysburg by a crushing blow at the center, opening the way to Washington, the enemy's capital, and a negotiated peace.

Faith in the unbridled offense was exhibited on field after field, often in situations where disastrous failure seems to have been inevitable. A good example is Union Major General Ambrose Everett Burnside's doomed frontal assaults at Fredericksburg, Virginia, in December, 1862. On the Confederate side, Major General John Bell Hood had a

fanatical belief in the pell-mell offense to bring decisive results. As a corps commander, he exhibited rashness in the attack. Then, after he took over army operations in the west, summer 1864, he destroyed his army in desperate frontal assaults at Atlanta, Franklin, and Nashville. More cautious generals, who stressed maneuver to economize lives and conserve their forces, did not fare well with the high command. Such a one was General Joseph Eggleston Johnston, who was replaced by Hood, and Major General George Henry Thomas on the Union side who, despite successes that were chary of his men's lives, met fierce criticism from his superiors, General of the Army Ulysses S. Grant and Major General Henry Wager Halleck, as being too slow, lacking in the aggressive instinct.

To assist troops slated to make frontal attacks into the face of murderous defensive fire delivered from strong positions, generals relied first on an artillery bombardment to soften up the target. Often this failed in its purpose, as on the third day at Gettysburg when Lee's artillery did not dislodge the Union forces on Cemetery Ridge. Then, troops would go into the attack as quickly as possible, starting at the quick time, followed by double quick, and swiftly into the charge. Often, the assaulting troops and their supporting units would go in en echelon or on a slant, providing a shortened front as a target, and hitting the enemy lines at an angle. The results were shown at Fort Wagner in the harbor of Charleston, South Carolina, July 1863, when the preliminary Union bombardment did not search out the rebel garrison sheltering in bomb-proofs, the supporting brigades, badly managed, got badly mangled, and the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts, leading the assault, suffered heavy losses, including the regiment's colonel, Robert Gould Shaw, shot down on the fort's ramparts. Facing a devastating storm of lead and iron, many of the soldiers did not get beyond the ditch of the fort but died there. Watching the attack go in, Union Colonel John Johnson Elwell cried, "My God, our men are being slaughtered". The question might be why he was surprised.<sup>2</sup>

As the conflict dragged on beyond the first year or so, the fierceness of fighting was deepened by what we call war psychosis. That is to say, as the destruction mounts, so does bitterness against the enemy held responsible for the suffering. Perceived violations of the accepted conventions of war stoked the anger. Skirmishing between partisan rangers, who did not always wear uniform or behave honorably, and the soldiers chasing them, became vicious and merciless. Again, the Union enlistment of black soldiers enraged Southerners who saw this as incitement to race war. In October 1863, Texas officer Thomas H. Coleman wrote of Union corpses at Chickamauga: "It actually done me good to see them lying dead, and every one else I heard expressed [that] opinion". Colonel Osmund Latrobe of Lieutenant General James Longstreet's staff said of the Union dead at Fredericksburg, "Doing my soul good". Yankees reciprocated the animosity. Indiana soldier William Bufton Miller confided after a fight that, "We captured about a hundred prisoners and killed about thirty of them. It was fun for us to see them Skip out".<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 167.

Fighting involving white and black soldiers was particularly venomous. Allegedly, rebels often refused to let African-Americans surrender or shot them and their white officers after capture. Such was asserted in the Fort Pillow, Tennessee, massacre on April 12, 1864. Inevitably, Union troops responded. John Probst of the 25<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin wrote after a fight on May 23, 1864, “twenty-three of the rebs surrendered but the boys asked them if they remembered Fort Pillow and Killed them all.”<sup>4</sup>

The fierce rage of combat can be traced back as far as the Classical period. In Homer’s epic poem, *The Iliad*, the Greek champion Achilles is lukewarm toward the war until the Trojan hero Hector kills his friend Patroklos, and boasts over the body. Now, the Greek is filled by a towering rage: “Achilles the warrior was once gallant and chivalrous; since the death of Patroklos he is a different, murderous man.” He hunts Hector to his death, strips the body of armor and drags the corpse behind his chariot around the walls of Troy. He will not give Hector’s body up for burial but leaves him to be devoured by beasts. In a later echo, Confederates stripped the body of Robert Gould Shaw, colonel of the black 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts, and tossed his body in an anonymous grave with his African-American soldiers. They rejected the family’s request for return of the remains. This was the microcosm. The macrocosm was in the final stages of what had become a total war, what historians call the hard war. The ferocity was memorialized in the names of battles: Atlanta, Franklin, Spotsylvania, and Cold Harbor.<sup>5</sup>

The ultimate experience of close-order combat was of extreme violence, an arena of Gothic horrors where flying metal blasted flesh and bone. Shrapnel and round shot tore off heads, smashed away jaws, crushed features, ripped off limbs, opened up stomachs and abdomens, exposed beating hearts. Rebel private Nick Weekes described shells bursting in the ranks of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Alabama at Chancellorsville: “an arm and shoulder fly from the man just in front, exposing his throbbing heart. The foot of another flew up and kicked him in the face as a shell struck his leg. Another, disemboweled, crawled along on all fours, his entrails trailing behind, and still another held up his tongue with his hand, a piece of shell having carried away his lower jaw.” Grape and canister tore men into shreds. The effects of canister hitting at close range were compared to being in the eye of a storm. Heat rising from the blistering gun barrels met cold air to create circular convection currents in which there swirled bits of flesh, teeth, eyeballs, buttons, uniform shreds, hands, ears, noses. Captain Nathaniel Southgate Shaler, 5<sup>th</sup> Kentucky Battery (U.S.), wrote of firing canister into a struggling mass of blue and gray:

And they are blown out, rent by hurricane  
To bits and shreds that spatter down to earth  
What once were men—good friends and foes alike.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 167, 168.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 71,74.

Experiences were ghoulish. At Fort Harrison, Virginia, 1864, Brigadier Union General Edward Hastings Ripley thought he had lost his features when he was “dashed in the face with a hot and steaming mass of something horrible.” But it was the smashed head of the man standing directly in front of him. Joseph E. Crowell, 13<sup>th</sup> New Jersey, waiting in line to advance at Chancellorsville, admitted to screaming involuntarily when a staff officer on horseback, standing nearby, suddenly lacked the lower half of his face. Shrapnel had carried away the much of his features, the metal chunk traveling so fast it could not be seen.<sup>7</sup>

Relatively few wounds were made by swords, bayonets or clubbed muskets. But infantry shoulder weapons accounted for many injuries. The nature of the Minnie ball ensured that most small arms wounds would be highly damaging to flesh, bone, and muscle. A modern steel-head bullet in, say, the .30 caliber range, usually will hold its shape on contact and may well go completely through the victim. By contrast, the Minnie was a heavy soft-lead bullet of .57 to .58 caliber and was so slow moving that it very often stayed in the body, unable to drive through. Adding to this devastating effect, though not intentionally designed to be so, the Minnie was essentially a soft-head or dum dum bullet that tore up the victim. It will be recalled that the typical Minnie base was hollow and the bullet expanded on discharge to fit the grooves. This spread it out, increasing the likelihood that the flattened bullet would not hold its original conical shape on contact. It often assumed the size and shape of a quarter or even half dollar, shattering all in its path and steadily enlarging. Too slow to exit, the lump of lead ranged or travelled the body, wrecking its integrity. Thus, it might enter the shoulder, roam through the chest and stomach, exiting via the buttocks. Or a Minnie entering the jaw might rattle around the mouth, taking out the teeth, before moving up through the nose to blind both eyes.

Corporal James Quick was hit by a Minnie that entered his left jaw and exited through the nose. Chaplain Joseph Twichell, of the 71<sup>st</sup> New York, “saw one man who received a ball in his cheek and, glancing over his jaw, it was taken out between his shoulders.” Another “was hit in the side, yet some how or other the ball found its way up to behind his ear.” Officers warned men against bending over in an assault, as though wading into a storm, because a Minnie entering a crouched body would travel the whole length of the frame, destroying the vital organs. When Lieutenant Charles Johnsen of the Washington Artillery instinctively bent over in action he sustained a fatal wound, “A bullet took him, low down, about his waist and in his left side, and ranged up diagonally through the entire length of his body, tearing through his kidneys, bowels, stomach, lungs, and coming out at his shoulder.” Minnie wounds were so painful that some men committed suicide to end the agony.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 73,72.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 70, 68.



The noise and smoke of battle constituted other assaults upon the constitution of the combat soldier, impairing the senses. The racket of percussion muskets was compared to hail falling on a tin roof or to a brick building collapsing. Shell blasts addled minds. Concussion created traumatic brain injuries, from which some men never recovered. John Bumgardner, 26<sup>th</sup> Indiana Light Artillery, knocked flat by a shell blast, lost his reason, running around and endlessly repeating, “There they come men,” and “run away boys,” when no enemy was in sight. Private James Melton, 7<sup>th</sup> Ohio, hit over the left ear, became deranged and disappeared from hospital. Captain Frederick William Stowe, Harriet’s son, also wandered into oblivion; hit in the head by shrapnel at Gettysburg, he never fully recovered his senses, became alcoholic, and drifted away one day. Surgeons were often unsympathetic to men with nervous complaints. It was only in World War One that these injuries became diagnosed as shell shock.<sup>9</sup>

The screaming of wounded and dying men and animals completed the sense of being in a scene from Hell. Those who fell wounded were not released from the butchery or out of harm’s way. If they could not stagger to the rear, casualties fell under the feet of those still fighting, to be trampled on as they squirmed and wriggled in pain. Frequently, officers refused intact men permission to carry badly wounded to the rear, fearing that those who volunteered were trying to shirk combat and were needed on the firing line. The fallen could be hit again, or ridden over by artillery going into action, for the drivers could not swerve their guns and carriages out of line to avoid those lying on the ground. Jonathan P. Stowe, 15<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts, hit at Antietam, managed to scribble: “I am wounded! And am afraid shall be again as shells fly past me every few seconds ... Am in severe pain.” Neglected, serious casualties cried in vain for water and aid. Immobile, they feared death by burning, a common nightmare of combat soldiers. For heated projectiles and burning cartridge wadding set scrub, grass, and even trees on fire. Veterans recalled that the screams of roasting men were particularly horrible at Shiloh in 1862, and in Virginia’s Wilderness, in the spring of 1864. The lucky might gain release when the flames ignited their cartridge boxes, bringing a quicker death. Or they might manage to shoot themselves when in extremis.<sup>10</sup>

The men lying thick on the field might not be retrieved for days, often not until one side or the other asked for a truce to fetch in the wounded and bury the dead. Commanders were reluctant to make the first request as this was a tacit admission of a battle lost and possession of the field yielded to the enemy. In the meantime, snipers picked off those who ventured into no man’s land to try to bring in or succor the wounded with water. Death from blood loss, gangrene and peritonitis were ever-present threats. Flies coated the wounded and maggots ate decayed flesh, which, ironically, might save a man from putrescent death. Adding to the macabre nature of the field, the dead, lying amongst and even on top of the living, quickly decayed, their bodies bloating, faces swelling to three times the normal size, features turning, yellow, green, black, and covered in huge blisters of puss and water. Hogs ate out the guts of the dead and near

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 119, 118-119.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

dead, especially roasted flesh, while winged carrion came to tear strips of tender flesh or peck out eyeballs. Rebel Brigadier General Joseph Orville Shelby wrote of the swine at Prairie Grove, Arkansas, December 1862: “Intestines, heads, arms, feet, and even hearts were dragged over the ground and devoured at leisure.” And human predators roamed the fields after battle, robbing the wounded and dead, even pulling the boots from the legs of men whose limbs were shattered by grapeshot, causing excruciating pain.<sup>11</sup>

When help finally arrived, and the wounded began the journey to a regimental first-aid dressing station, it might be in an unsprung two-wheeled ambulance, a rickety farm cart, or in a swaying blanket held by four men. Some maimed and mangled begged to be laid down to die by the roadside in preference to the long agony. The lucky got to travel in a modern, four-bed ambulance, with springs and proper stretchers, more of which became available as the war progressed. Yet the ordeal was not over, as men might lie on the bare ground for hours awaiting their turn for attention. Physicians gave preliminary treatment, extracting metal and fabric fragments from wounds, searching for balls with fingers and metal probes, removing detritus with forceps, snipping off shreds of flesh, including smashed fingers and toes putrefying from exposure. As there was little water to wash hands and tools, and few antiseptics to sterilize instruments, post-examination infections were common. Wounds were then bandaged and patients with minor wounds sent back to their units or laid out to recuperate. Desperate men pleaded to be allowed a drink from buckets of water thick with blood from the washing of instruments and surgeons’ hands.

More serious cases went on to brigade hospitals where senior surgeons performed operations. Trepanning to take pressure off of swollen brain tissue, stitching up of torn flesh, and, most notoriously, amputation of shattered limbs, all major surgical procedures, took place under difficult conditions, but with increasingly positive results. Astoundingly, despite difficult conditions, surgeons in the field achieved better results than their civilian colleagues, with a mortality rate for major interventions of about 26% versus 50% in civilian operating theaters. There is a myth nurtured by Hollywood, such as the limb-cutting scene in *Gone With the Wind*, that amputation was a slow process, like sawing logs, and causing acute pain to patients. Actually, a skilled surgeon could remove a limb in three minutes or less. Usually, anesthetic was available: surgeons preferred chloroform to ether, which was highly flammable, a problem when procedures had to be performed by lamp or candle light.

Our image of patients screaming in agony actually reflects a condition called phantom pain: because medical staff could not accurately assess the body weight and physical fortitude of men in shock, doses of pain-killing drugs had to be modest, just enough to put men under. In this shallow state of numbness, patients would feel no pain but would be conscious enough to witness the cutting and hallucinate the tortures of hell. The real misery came later, when men awoke to the loss of limbs, with stumps that created excruciating pain for months, or shattered nerve endings and tendons that,

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 88.

although cleansed of foreign objects, might never heal. To avoid amputation, surgeons could attempt resection, that is, removal of a length of shattered bone, hoping that the limb would heal back in time. Often this was unsuccessful, the limb distorted, the wound suppurating and abscessing, often causing death through blood poisoning. Postoperative pain might be relieved only by dripping water on the wound, applying opium plasters, or injections of morphine, none of which provided permanent relief, and might lead to drug addiction.

Given the traumatic nature of combat, it is not surprising that many veterans became unhinged, temporarily or permanently. Men would bolt during every action where the elephant reared and trampled. Officers and non-coms were stationed behind the firing lines to push and punch men back into line, if necessary beating them with the flats of sabers or shooting runners who threatened to precipitate a stampede. Cavalry might be stationed further in the rear to cut off those who had escaped being corralled. Surprise attacks, disconcerting men and destroying their equanimity, could precipitate mass panic and flight. At Shiloh, after an unexpected rebel assault, as many as 10,000 bluecoats left the front to huddle in a frightened mass to the rear. Illustrating the mental turmoil produced by the noise, chaos, and terror of combat, of 27,000 single-shot shoulder weapons recovered from the field of Gettysburg after the battle, 12,000 had two unfired loads in the barrel, 6,000 had from three to ten, and one was stuffed with twenty-three. In short, at least 18,000 men had at some point lost their presence of mind in combat.

After action ended, many men were so emotionally spent that they wandered around aimlessly, appearing stunned, despondent, and perplexed. Many suffered diarrhea, a physical response to stress. To some degree, these reactions represented sensory overload, the eyes, ears, and nervous system stunned by violent stimuli too great to cope with. But also there was a simple withdrawing from a reality too horrific to assimilate: this is called dissociation, a denial of recent experience that could last hours, months, or a lifetime. There is a popular myth that if rookies survive their first exposure to combat, they become tough and hardened combat veterans who can go on indefinitely. In fact, many survivors of multiple actions suffered from what came to be known in World War Two as combat fatigue or exhaustion. Field studies carried out by the army in that war found that men who survived their initiation into combat did indeed grow in experience, becoming savvy about survival. But this competence would peak around ninety days if the soldiers got no reprieve from the trauma of constant danger, such as a rest period away from the front. After that three-month period, the soldier's mental and physical powers would decline rapidly until he finally broke down. Simply put, we all have stocks of physical stamina and mental resilience in a personal constitutional bank account. Constant withdrawals on the credit in that bank, such as going forward into the attack over and over, will render the account moribund.

Lieutenant Albert Theodore Goodloe, 35<sup>th</sup> Alabama, wrote of the worn-down men at Kennesaw Mountain, June 1864: "There were some with whom the sense of danger was so oppressive that they had to be literally pushed along as we advanced upon the

enemy, being overcome by a dread of death, which to them was very humiliating.” Even generals, who were supposed to present a model of endurance, broke down under relentless strain. Confederate Lieutenant General Richard Stoddert Ewell and Union Major General Gouverneur Kemble Warren both broke down under the relentless slaughter of the war’s latter stages. Colonel Charles Shiels Wainwright, chief of artillery, Army of the Potomac, said of Warren at Cold Harbor, Virginia, June 1864: “He appears to have sunk into a sort of lethargic sulk, sleeps a great part of the time, and says nothing to anyone. I think at times that these fits of his must be the result of a sort of insanity.”<sup>12</sup>

Again contrary to popular conception, Civil War soldiers did suffer Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. This misunderstanding is partly because the disorder was not diagnosed until the 1970s and even now is not fully understood, many claims by veterans to have the condition being rejected by unconvinced military authorities. Civil War hospital cases were often observed to suffer recurring nightmares, both asleep and awake, associated with their wounding. Hannah Ropes, nursing at a hospital in Georgetown, near Washington, wrote of one patient’s nightmares that, “as they all are, he was on the battlefield, struggling to get away from the enemy.” And Louisa May Alcott wrote that another patient’s waking nightmares often included “clutching my arm, to drag me from the vicinity of a bursting shell, or covering up his head to screen himself from a shower of shot.” This involuntary recurrence might be accompanied by violent, abusive, or self-destructive behavior such as chronic alcoholism.<sup>13</sup>

A traumatic event causing emotional disability might be a man being thrown into the air by a shell blast, or witnessing the particularly horrible death of a friend. Because Victorians did not have a psychiatric vocabulary, witnesses resorted to simple physical descriptions of what they were witnessing: they might say a man had gone “plum loco” or was just “shook over Hell,” a reference to the physical shaking associated with reliving traumatic events. Officers and even military physicians were generally unsympathetic, referring contemptuously to emotionally disabled men as slackers, and making the pejorative moral judgment that they had “lost their character.” In late 1864, Captain J. McEntire of the U.S. Provost Marshal’s office, wrote sardonically of Private William Leeds, whom he found in the woods and took into custody, that he had no doubt been wandering about “mourning for the loss of his character.” A soldier who could no longer face the stress of combat was subject to harsh punishment, including being drummed out of his unit, or posted as a coward in his hometown newspaper or from the pulpit of his family church.<sup>14</sup>

What might keep men from running? As in all armies at all times and in all places, the cement of comradeship was a huge factor: men tried not to let down their buddies. This loyalty could expand to cover the whole company or regiment in a sense of pride that overcame terror. Also, the fear of being branded a coward at home and perhaps

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 117, 123.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 125, 114.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 109.

never being able to return to one's community was a great incentive to try to remain on the line. Heavy drinking allowed both officers and men to carry on, a self-medication of the nerves. However, over time, this remedy could become a deficit, adding to a soldier's physical and mental decline, wearing down the immune system and the strength to continue. Religion was a source of solace for many, assuring the faithful that if they died a miserable death on the battlefield, they would find a better fate awaiting them in Heaven. Captain Thaddeus J. Hyatt, 12<sup>th</sup> Ohio, wrote home before the Third Battle of Winchester, VA, 1864: "Sometimes when I think how you will miss me at home it is hard to be entirely willing never to see you and the boys again but . . . we will meet again in the better land."<sup>15</sup>

But religious consolation did not work for all. Some committed suicide rather than face the emotional agony of advancing again and again into combat. They might lie down on the railroad tracks, blow their brains out, or stand on top of a breastwork, waiting for an enemy sniper to end their torture. Blowing off fingers or a foot, knocking one's teeth out so as to be unable to bite the end off a paper cartridge, were escape gambits that brought on the further humiliation of a dishonorable discharge, accompanied by harsh punishment, such as lashing, before being turned out of the camp. Many thousands left the ranks in desperation, straggling before the onset of battle, perhaps to return later. Many hung around the periphery of the armies, skulking in woods or hiding in abandoned buildings. They could become a menace to civilians, breaking into liquor stores or stealing provisions to survive, threatening those who resisted their depredations with violence. Robert Chilton, the army's adjutant, estimated that after Antietam about 40,000 Confederates alone were missing from their units and Lee charged angrily that his army was being undermined by disgraceful straggling, charging that "our men are acting badly." A little later, after the demoralizing Union defeat at Fredericksburg, a contemporary estimated that perhaps 3,000 officers and 82,000 other ranks were absent without official leave from the Army of the Potomac.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 119; The numbers for army absences appear contradictory. Thus, the figures for Lee's army in Maryland appear to be no larger than 38,000, so how could 40,000 be AWOL? The difference is between effectives present for duty and men carried on the rolls but away from their units. The numbers of stragglers differed from day to day so that unit commanders often did not have an accurate tally of those answering the roll call. Joseph L. Harsh, a careful scholar, accepts Chilton's figures, and also estimates that in early July 1862 one third of Lee's men were unaccountably missing. Instead of 86,000, only 56,000 were with the army. See Joseph L. Harsh, *Taken at the Flood: Robert E. Lee and Confederate Strategy in the Maryland Campaign of 1862* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1999), 475, and Harsh, *Confederate Tide Rising: Robert E. Lee and the Making of Southern Strategy, 1861-1862* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1998), 102-3; As with the rebels at Antietam, the figures for the Army of the Potomac at the end of 1862 seem paradoxical, given that only about 118,000 effectives were present for duty. But, again, many more men were carried on the books. The contemporary figures are from newspaperman Charles Carleton Coffin, *The Boys of '61 or Four Years of Fighting*, rev. ed. (Boston: Dana Estes, 1896), 123. William C. Davis, a recent historian, reaches a similar conclusion: *The Cause Lost: Myths and Realities of the Confederacy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996), 114-5.

During the war, at least 105,000 rebels and 279,000 Yankees were reported officially as deserters. We can't always ascribe individual motives. Some went home to try to protect and provide for their families. Some suffered from nostalgia, a chronic homesickness often accompanied by physical debility. Others were bounty jumpers who deserted to join up again for the enlistment bonus. But many left the ranks because they could no longer face the savagery of combat, straggling developing into desertion. If caught, punishments included being branded in the cheek with the letter D or facing a firing squad. As the war wore on and skedaddling grew, the infliction of capital punishment also increased. But this did not solve the problem. Running and shooting continued to swell together. Sadly, many boys who had gone away to see the elephant and experience a great adventure ended their romantic experience tied to a stake or seated on their coffin awaiting the clatter of musketry. Walt Whitman recorded the shooting of William Grover, a nineteen-year-old boy; he had run because the experience of fighting through twelve battles had made him "simple." The death sentence, felt Whitman, was a "horrid sarcasm" upon justice.<sup>17</sup>

If their families found out their ultimate fate, they would often be bewildered by what had brought their boys to this extremity. Most veterans did not speak about their experiences, although some did in remarkably candid memoirs and published letters and diaries. Often it was clear that battle had changed those involved because of violent or eccentric behavior, a shunning of company, heavy drinking, an inability to hold down a job, or make a successful marriage. For many, who were not disfigured or disabled, the raw edge of memory about combat softened over time. With increasing age, nostalgia for lost youth made the days of war more mellow and appealing. More than a few veterans donned rose-colored spectacles.

Not even the most educated and successful veterans were immune to romanticizing. Union Brigadier General Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, who served in the war with great gallantry, was nevertheless wounded six times, contracted malaria and dysentery, and after Gettysburg had to take convalescent leave, suffering nervous prostration. By 1865, he had entered an emotional abyss, moody and difficult; he both physically and emotionally abused his wife. Serving as Governor of Maine and President of Bowdoin College, civilian successes, brought him back to normality, yet it was to the Civil War that he increasingly recalled as being his finest years, especially his stubborn defense of Little Round Top at Gettysburg, ending in a desperate bayonet charge. He scrupulously attended the annual Gettysburg commemorations.

Equally remarkable was the turnabout in the outlook of Oliver Wendell Homes Jr., a postwar Supreme Court Justice. He was badly injured several times in the fighting, contemplating suicide when hit by a Minnie ball at Ball's Bluff, October 1861, because

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 131; The official statistics are from Ella Lonn: *Desertion During the Civil War*, 1966 repr. Peter Smith (New York/London: The Century Co., 1928), p. 231. Some recent historians think the figures are low, particularly for the Confederacy which couldn't keep accurate records as the government crumbled. Compare Kenneth Radley, *Rebel Watchdog: The Confederate States Army Provost Guard* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 30, 83.

the pain was excruciating and he thought the bullet had penetrated his right lung, inflicting a fatal wound. By 1864, he had become so depressed by the fighting that he worried about his sanity and contemplated resigning his commission. He left the army when his three-year term of enlistment expired in 1864. Yet, by 1884, twenty years later, he had reevaluated his war, telling young people in a famous Memorial Day address in May of that year that his generation was fortunate to have experienced the fighting: “Through our great good fortune, in our youth our hearts were touched with fire.” His rhetoric soaring, Holmes proclaimed that, “We have seen with our own eyes the snowy heights of honor.”<sup>18</sup>

By the time American volunteers left to fight the Spanish in 1898, the true nature of Civil War combat was largely forgotten and the nation could embark on a splendid little war. The elephant had again come to town.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 211.