

For soldiers fighting in the Civil War, part of life was camping—living in tents in the woods, sitting around campfires, making sure food would last. Unlike most camping trips, however, soldiers had to be ready to charge into battle at a moment's notice. They lived this way for years.

### The Day Begins

A day in the life of a Union soldier could hold either boredom or surprise. One moment he might be cleaning up the tent, and the next moment bullets might be buzzing past his head. Word of enemy activity could bring a bugle call at 3:00 a.m. This did not mean that he would see battle that day, but soldiers scrambled to pack their gear and line up for inspection in any case.

After inspection, soldiers would have a small breakfast of crackers, old meat, vegetables, and coffee. Food could be hard to come by. Union soldiers did not generally have the food shortages that were common for Confederate soldiers, but meals were hardly filling or nutritious. If they expected to be marching in the coming days, soldiers prepared and cooked food beforehand. This way, soldiers could focus on military orders when they did go into battle.



Union soldiers, like the artillery privates shown above, faced both challenge and boredom.

### A Tidy, Disease-Filled Camp

If there were no immediate battles on the horizon, soldiers would keep their tents and campsites tidy. A tidy camp reflected a disciplined unit. This also helped to keep away rodents and insects.

However, it was common for campsites to be unsanitary and to smell terrible. Hundreds of soldiers who were injured or sick occupied a very small area. Because of such close quarters, diseases quickly spread among soldiers. Another reason for widespread disease was the lack of knowledge about germs. Theories on germs and diseases were not yet widely understood or practiced. This meant that people did not often take the precautions of sterilizing tools and hand-washing.

Without knowledge of how diseases spread, countless men were stricken with an array of illnesses. Many soldiers suffered from dysentery, an infection in the intestine that causes dehydration, nausea, and stomach pain. Another typical disease was typhoid. Typhoid results in a high fever, bodily weakness, stomach pain, and loss of appetite. It is contracted by consuming infected food or water. Smallpox was common as well. Smallpox is similar to chickenpox, but far more dangerous and contagious.

Other soldiers contracted malaria, which has symptoms similar to those of typhoid. Malaria is caused by a parasite transmitted by mosquitoes. Mosquitoes weren't the only insects to look out for. Fleas, ticks, and lice infested campsites. Unaware that they were warning signs of unsanitary conditions, soldiers were simply annoyed by the bugs.

Soldiers were also unaware of the seriousness of these diseases. Imagine the misery of camping—possibly in extreme cold or summer heat—with any of these diseases. Death could come quickly if individuals did not get treatment. More than 400,000 soldiers died of diseases in the Civil War.

### **The Daily Drills**

Whether feeling healthy or not, soldiers were expected to take part in daily military drills. These drills kept men on their feet for hours. The men likely became bored with day after day of drill after drill. Battle drills—which are still used today—are designed to train soldiers to follow the orders of their superiors. Drills also familiarize soldiers with their weapons. Though the drills were repetitive, they did help the soldiers become very comfortable handling their weapons, a skill that was useful during the stressful moments of battle. Psychologically, drills provide a sense of teambuilding and trust. The drills created unity among the soldiers and helped them work well together. A soldier knew that the rest of his unit was there to help him if needed.

Drills also helped the soldiers practice to become more precise. Soldiers learned how to hold their weapons in exact positions. They learned where to point their heads and exactly how high to raise their elbows. Precision was crucial. Civil War drills were different from those in previous wars. With longer range weapons that were far more accurate, soldiers practiced drills called extended-order, or combat, drills. Extended-order drills were a way for soldiers to practice attacking a faraway enemy. They learned how to spread out in an orderly way across a large area and quickly dig trenches for cover. In previous wars, there was no need for these tactics, and soldiers only practiced close-order drills. Close-order drills consisted of marching in formation. Tightly unified marching made a unit look and feel unstoppable.

## Lunch

Meals were arguably worth stopping for, especially big meals. Lunchtime was often called dinner and, as long as there was no fighting, would be eaten around noon. Soldiers would eat whatever was available. They were exhausted and hungry from hours of drills. Dinner foods included pork or beef, vegetables, and sometimes even cheese. If animals were found, killed, or captured along the way, they would be added to the meal. Dinner was the largest of the three daily meals.

If soldiers were on their way to battle or engaged in it, they would have to eat quickly. Depending on how far soldiers had to march, some days allowed for a sit-down dinner. On days when units had to march 20 or 30 miles a day, commanders would provide rest breaks. If the distance was shorter, soldiers might have to eat while walking.

## Afternoon Activities

Eating was, at the very least, a way to pass the time. After the dinner meal, soldiers would again resume their drills. Hours upon hours of marching and drilling became tedious, and soldiers looked for any way they could find to stave off boredom. Soldiers also kept themselves busy by reading, playing cards and other games, carving wood, and even drawing. But those activities could only entertain for so long, especially when units did not move for weeks. One soldier, artillery Private Jenkins Lloyd Jones of Spring Green, Wisconsin, wrote in his diary that “there was nothing to break the monotony of camp life.”



Union soldiers could spend days waiting for instructions.

## Supper

The third meal of the day came when soldiers were finished fighting or marching. If there had been no action that day, supper would be eaten around 5:00 p.m. The food choices did not change from those of breakfast and dinner. Often, soldiers would eat the same foods, just in smaller portions.

When soldiers were in battle, fighting could last many hours. Even if battles never occurred, soldiers might wait for hours after a false rumor of enemy activity. Often those rumors provoked pre-dawn starts to the day. Soldiers would sometimes rise at 3:00 a.m. to wait for an enemy that never showed up. False rumors like these made for very long days.

### **Evening Activities**

Evening activities depended on what had happened during the day. If the soldiers had been marching, there was generally not much time between setting up camp and sleep. Some units marched until the early hours of the morning. This meant little rest before the morning bugle.

If soldiers had not marched or been in battle, evenings would be spent telling stories around a campfire and cleaning or fixing weapons. Some Union soldiers had never seen the mountains of the South and took opportunities to explore them. Many soldiers made time to write letters home. Most had never spent such a long time away from their families. They longed to be back in their familiar towns.

Rest from the days' events came at varying times. Private Jones wrote about going to sleep sometimes at 11:30 p.m., sometimes not until 1:30 a.m. Rest was very important when battle could be waged at any minute. It was also vital to have the energy to walk many miles to the next campsite. Sometimes soldiers did not have enough tents to sleep in and had to sleep outside. Private Jones recalled sleeping "in the open air." Even if one was fortunate enough to be in a tent, this brought little protection in bad weather. A strong storm could take down rows of tents, and many tents leaked when it rained. Many mornings, soldiers awoke in beds that were soaking wet.

### **The Psychological Battle**

It is important to note that battle could come at any point in the day. In war, there are no rules. This meant that no time or place was safe. Private Jones was in a hospital when Confederate soldiers, or the "rebs," opened fire. He and a fellow soldier had to be pulled away on mules. He wrote that "the shells whistled over our heads in every direction, while off went the mules as fast as they could trot." It certainly must have been frightening for Private Jones to imagine what could have happened if the mules moved too slowly. These terrifying situations took their toll on the mental health of Civil War soldiers.

In the late 1860s, doctors uncovered a remarkable trend in the mental health of returning soldiers. Family members and neighbors spoke of changed men coming home from battle. Boys who were once quiet and well-mannered were now

agitated, angry, or constantly frightened. Doctors named the condition Da Costa's syndrome or soldier's heart. Today these and other symptoms are called post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD. Modern-day physicians are better equipped to help soldiers with PTSD. In the post-Civil War era, however, very little was known about the condition, and there were few successful treatments. Most doctors encouraged rest and medications such as aconite, an herb that served as a pain reliever.

Soldiers who returned home had many painful memories. It was very traumatic watching fellow soldiers get injured or die. Soldiers coming home from war often battled survivor's guilt. Why did they live, when so many others did not? When they left for war, these young men had no idea what the brutal realities of war involved. On the field, they watched as friends were killed in battle or ravaged by disease. There were also memories of killing others. No one had prepared the men for the anguish of taking another person's life. Was the killing patriotic duty or murder? For many, that question was never answered and brought lasting torment.

The men who fought in the Civil War placed their lives on hold, sometimes for several years. Many men thought life as a soldier would be heroic and adventurous, and it was in some cases. But it was also a life of repetition, boredom, and constant fear of fighting. It was a hard life, and it took a toll on the thousands of men who volunteered for duty.

After reading the passage, answer the following questions:

- 1.** What caused soldier's heart?
  - A.** malnutrition and starvation
  - B.** traumatic experiences of war
  - C.** being too close to cannons
  - D.** typhoid and other diseases
  
- 2.** Disease spread quickly among campsites because doctors and soldiers did not know about the effects of which of the following?
  - A.** dehydration and sharing sleeping quarters
  - B.** germs and communicable infections
  - C.** sanitation and sterilization
  - D.** immunization and contamination
  
- 3.** What was something that soldiers would practice in extended-order drills?
  - A.** how to clean their weapons
  - B.** how to spread out over a large area
  - C.** how to fight the enemy at close range
  - D.** how to send secret messages to other soldiers
  
- 4.** Civil War soldiers had rarely been away from their families before going off to war. Because of their homesickness, they often turned to writing and receiving letters. Imagine you are a private in the Civil War. Write a letter to your family back home, detailing the events of one day. Use evidence from the text to support your descriptions.