

Starvation, Rags, Dirt, and Vermin In The Civil War Army

From Randolph Shotwell's' "Three Years in Battle."

Our Quarter Masters department.., really did a great deal more to break down the army than to keep it up. I mean that their shortcomings, their negligence, improvidence, and lack of energy counterbalanced their services. It is a well-known fact, and a most disgraceful one, that when General Lee crossed the Potomac fully ten thousand of his men were barefooted, blanketless, and hatless! The roads were lined with stragglers limping on swollen and blistered feet, shivering all night, (for despite the heat of the day the nights were chilly), for want of blankets; and utterly devoid of underclothes--if indeed they possessed so much as one shirt!

And the lack of proper equipment gradually made itself felt on the morale of the men. In the earlier stages of the war when our men were well dressed and cleanly--every company having its wagon for extra baggage-- enabling the private soldier to have a change of clothing and necessary toilet articles--the men retained much of their individuality as citizen-soldiers, volunteering to undergo for a time, the privations and perils of army life, but never forgetting that they were citizens and gentlemen, with a good name and reputation for gentlemanliness to maintain. Hence, when in battle array, these gallant fellows, each had a pride in bearing himself bravely; and when the hour of conflict arrived they rushed upon the foe with an impetuosity and fearlessness that amazed the old army officers; and caused foreign military men to declare them the best fighters in the world. After a while the spirit of the men became broken. Constant marching and fighting were sufficient of themselves to gradually wear out the army; but it was more undermined by the continual neglect and ill-provision to which the men were subjected. Months on months they were without a change of underclothing, or a

chance to wash that they had worn so long, hence it became actually coated with grease and dust, moistened with daily perspiration under the broiling sun.

Pestiferous vermin swarmed in every camp, and on the march--an indescribable annoyance to every well-raised man yet seemingly uneradicable. Nothing would destroy the little pests but hours of steady boiling, and of course, we had neither kettles, nor the time to boil them, if we had been provided with ample means.

As to purchasing clothes, the private soldiers did not have an opportunity of so doing once in six months, as their miserable pittance of \$12 per month was generally withheld that length of time, or longer-- (I only drew pay three times in four years, and after the first year, I could not have bought a couple of shirts with a whole months pay.) Naturally fastidious in tastes, and habituated to the strictest personal cleanliness and neatness, I chafed from morning till night at the insuperable obstacles to decency by which I was surrounded, and as a consequence there was not one time in the whole four years of the war that I could not have blushed with mortification at meeting with any of my old friends.

It is impossible for such a state of things to continue for years without breaking down ones self-respect, wounding his amour pro pre, stirring his deepest discontent, and very materially impairing his efficiency as a soldier.

Starvation, rags, dirt, and vermin may be borne for a time by the neatest of gentlemen; but when he has become habituated to them, he is no longer a gentleman. The personal pride which made many a man act the hero during the first year of the war was gradually worn out, and undermined by the open, palpable neglect, stupidity, and indifference of the authorities until during the last year of the war, the hero became a "shirker," and finally a "deserter.--

