

Module 5: The Civil War and Reconstruction - 1860 to 1877

Topic 5 Content: The Common Soldier Notes

Introduction



The graphic features four tabs at the top: "Letters and Diaries", "Living Conditions", "Hand-to-Hand Combat", and "Returning Home". Below the tabs is a black and white photograph of seven Civil War soldiers standing in a field with their rifles. The text "The Common Soldier" is overlaid in large, bold letters at the bottom of the image. The "whro EDUCATION" logo is in the top right corner of the image area.

The Common Soldier

Click the tabs on the top of the interactivity to learn about the common soldier during the Civil War.

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Letters and Diaries

Letters and Diaries


Living Conditions

Hand-to-Hand Combat

Returning Home

Letters and Diaries

- Each soldier had a unique experience.
- The harsh reality of the war was documented in the soldiers' diaries and letters.
- Soldiers were lonely and bored when not in battle.



Union soldiers at camp

Each of the three million soldiers who served in the Civil War had a unique experience. Many of the soldiers were literate, and documented their harsh war experiences in letters diaries and letters they sent home. When the soldiers were not engaged in battle, they became lonely and bored; and writing helped them pass the time. This same writing provided historians a detailed history of the war through the eyes of the individual soldiers.

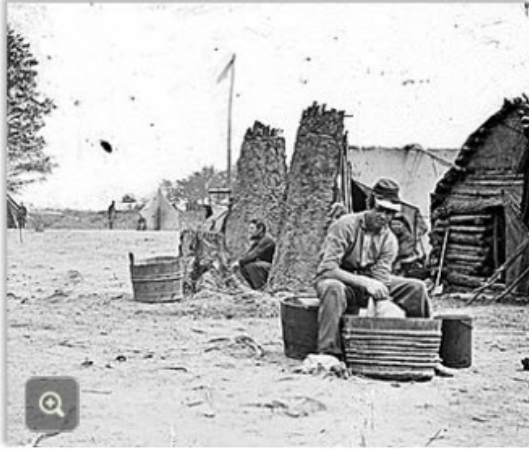
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Living Conditions

Letters and DiariesLiving ConditionsHand-to-Hand CombatReturning Home

Living Conditions



- The living conditions were poor at camp.
- Most soldiers were young and inexperienced.
- Many soldiers became sick due to poor hygiene and poor diet.

Soldier washing his clothes in a tub

Information provided from the writings of soldiers spoke of the poor living conditions experienced at camp. Many soldiers were not ready for a life of war. The climate and living conditions caused many soldiers to become sick during their first year of service. To protect themselves from disease and illness, soldiers were instructed to wash their hands and face daily and shower once per week. By ignoring these instructions, many soldiers experienced lice and dysentery. A soldier's diet was composed of beans, biscuits, and bacon. The lack of a proper diet only added to the amount of sickness.

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Hand-to-Hand Combat

Letters and Diaries

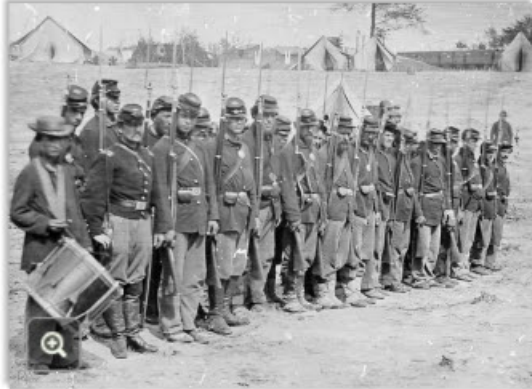
Living Conditions

Hand-to-Hand Combat

Returning Home

Hand-to-Hand Combat

- The process of loading and firing a gun took a long time.
- Soldiers who exhausted all of their ammunition engaged in hand-to-hand combat.
- Soldiers used bayonets or knives during hand-to-hand combat.



Union soldiers with bayonets equipped after the Battle of Fredericksburg, Virginia in December 1862

During battle, soldiers went through a long process of loading their guns. This often led to the need for soldiers to engage in hand-to-hand combat. In many battles, the soldiers would exhaust their ammunition. When they could no longer fire their rifles, the battle would not end. Rather, soldiers would defend themselves by using knives or the bayonets at the end of their rifles.

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Returning Home

- The bullets used in the war resulted in many amputations, leaving soldiers disabled.
- Soldiers, especially in the South, found their homes destroyed upon their return.



Destroyed city of Richmond, Virginia

Once the war ended, many soldiers were disabled. The types of bullets used in the Civil War were composed of soft lead. When these bullets struck a target, they spread and fragmented. Each bullet had the ability to shatter bone. Rather than spending a long amount of time removing each piece of bone and bullet, surgeons had to amputate limbs. Cannon fire also had the ability to tear limb from bone if an explosion occurred near a target.

When soldiers returned home, they often found their homes destroyed, especially if they lived in the South. Disabled and likely poor, soldiers typically could not contribute to any rebuilding efforts. In addition, poverty plagued the South as a result of the Civil War.