Uniforms

One striking element of the American Civil War was the way in which the characteristics, quality, and quantity of clothing and shoes made available to the soldiers that filled the ranks of the Union and Confederate armies reflected the overall progress and direction of the larger war. In the heady early days of the conflict, soldiers on both sides dressed in trousers, shirts, and coats that were so vibrantly colored they almost appeared celebratory. As the conflict wore on, however, this finery disappeared, to be replaced by the dusty, tattered blue and gray uniforms long associated with the War Between the States. Clothing shortages deepened with each passing month, paralleling the growing death toll on both sides, and by the closing months of the war many members of the Confederate Army shuffling across the countryside were literally shoeless and clad in rags.

A Parade of Colors in the North

When the Union Army first gathered in the spring of 1861, the volunteer companies that poured into Washington, DC, and other training centers wore a wide range of uniforms. Some regiments arrived in the brilliant red pants, blue belts, and turbans and fezzes of the Algerian Zouaves, the famed French infantry units that had been created in Africa in the 1830s. Others cobbled together unique...
wardrobes based on local tastes, ethnic allegiances, and availability of materials. In numerous instances, regiments from the same state reported for duty in wildly varying colors.

In some cases, commanders devoted a fair amount of time and energy to questions of appearance. When John Gibbon (1827–1896) took command of a brigade of combined Wisconsin and Indiana troops in May 1862, for example, he determined that proper uniforms would lead to a boost in morale, pride, and greater cohesiveness. With these goals in mind, Gibbon authorized the issuance of new uniforms that included long, dark-blue frock coats, standard army hats, and white leggings. His troops accepted the dark blue coats and regulation headwear, but balked at the leggings—Gibbon’s main effort to differentiate his soldiers from the larger Union force. As historian Jeffrey Wert noted in A Brotherhood of Valor (1999), Gibbon brushed aside his soldiers’ complaints about the leggings until he awoke one morning to discover that sometime during the night, his horse had been outfitted with four of the leggings.

Many other Union soldiers, however, took peacock-like pride in their colorful and unique finery, and some of these outfits endured well into the second year of the war. As the months passed, though, Union soldiers—like their Confederate counterparts, who showed up for war in similarly variegated uniforms—came to recognize that the wide assortment of uniform types made it difficult to distinguish comrades from foes. As reports of deaths from friendly fire proliferated, especially after the Battle of Shiloh in April 1862, Northern troops became more favorably disposed to federal attempts to establish a more uniform dress code. All uniform colors except the regulation light and dark blue were banned by the War Department in 1862, and by the early winter months of 1863 most of the army had been supplied with uniforms of that color scheme.

Problems of Quality

Union soldiers maintained their allegiance to homespun clothing and broken-in work shoes in large part because the quality of government-issued uniforms and shoes in the war’s opening months often was atrocious. Harper’s Weekly reported that when it rained, Union troops “found their clothes, overcoats, and blankets scattering to the winds in rags, or dissolving into their primitive elements of dust” (Donald 2001, p. 238). Complaints of this sort were legion, and the War Department began shifting away from the most corrupt and venal of the clothing contractors.

Adding insult to injury, the common soldier frequently had to pay out of his own pocket for these poor-quality items. Each Yankee private had a clothing allowance of $3.50 per month; if he did not use the full allotment, he was free to pocket the remainder. But long hours of marching and explosive bouts of fighting took a heavy toll on clothing, which was usually substandard to begin with. Many soldiers were forced to spend more than their small clothing allowance to keep themselves outfitted, and any amount of additional spending was deducted from their regular monthly $13 paycheck.

Such stories became less commonplace after the first year of the war as the durability of government-issued uniforms dramatically improved. Still, the wool fabric was suffocating in the summertime—especially in the South—and many of the uniforms were somewhat ill-fitting. Soldiers could do nothing about the former issue, but they addressed the latter problem by embracing a haphazard but ultimately effective bartering system. When shipments of new coats, pants, and shoes reached regiments in camp or in the field, soldiers typically waded in a mad scramble and grabbed whatever they could, reasoning—usually accurately—that they could later trade for garments and footwear of a more suitable size and fit (Shannon 2002, p. 96).

Of all the items in a soldier’s personal wardrobe, the one that often received the most attention was footwear. The quality and fit of a soldier’s footwear determined whether a ten- or twenty-mile march would leave the soldier with tired but intact feet or a horror of bloody blisters. Most shoes resulted in the latter condition, for the quality of government-issued uniforms and shoes in large part because the quality of government-issued uniforms and shoes in the war’s opening months often was atrocious. Harper’s Weekly reported that when it rained, Union troops “found their clothes, overcoats, and blankets scattering to the winds in rags, or dissolving into their primitive elements of dust” (Donald 2001, p. 238). Complaints of this sort were legion, and the War Department began shifting away from the most corrupt and venal of the clothing contractors.

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Nonetheless, even shoes that fit poorly were prized by their owners, for the alternative—marching barefoot—was even more daunting scenario. This basic reality led many Union soldiers to steal shoes and boots off the feet of the battlefield dead, and when “foraging” of Southern
farm and plantations became common in the last years of the war, functional shoes were among the most highly sought after items in any household.

**Shortages in the South**

In the South, the Confederate government had great difficulty obtaining uniforms for its soldiers from the war’s outset. The newly formed Confederate army had no uniforms in stock, and it would take time to manufacture new ones or arrange for their shipment from Europe. Some troops received uniforms from state authorities, but this did not do much to offset the problem, as uniforms were in short supply at the state level as well. Civilian women pitched in to help fill the void, but many were not skilled seamstresses.

The Confederate army that took shape in 1861 thus featured a cornucopia of uniform styles and colors. Some arriving volunteers were garbed as though they were embarking on a hunting excursion into the woods behind their homes. Others arrived dressed in the colorful uniforms they had worn for parade purposes as members of militia organizations. And still others reported for duty in clothing created by local women’s societies. When Virginians from the Shenandoah Valley arrived at their regional training center in Harpers Ferry, then, it was little surprise that each company had its own distinctive garb: red shirts and gray trousers for the Mountain guards; gray jackets and trousers for the West Augusta Guards and Augusta Rifles; and blue shirts, gray trousers, and U.S. Navy caps for the Southern Guards (Wert 1999, p. 14).

As was the case in the North, difficulties in differentiating friend from foe on the battlefield led the Confederate War Department to select gray as the official color of the army. The wide assortment of styles and splashes of colors that had previously marked Rebel encampments disappeared, to be replaced by a somber blend of gray and “butternut.” The latter color was a direct result of Union blockades that forced the South to conjure up its own garment dyes. The butternut tint was a yellowish-brown color created by a dye made of copperas, walnut hulls, and other ingredients. This dye became so widely used that both Yankee and Rebel troops began to use the term *butternuts* for Confederate forces.

**Competition for Clothing and Shoes**

Throughout the South, shortages of coats, pants, shirts, and shoes continued for the duration of the war. The Confederate War Department’s difficulties in this regard stemmed from several factors. Increased production by Southern factories offset losses caused by Union blockades to some degree, but the productivity of the Confederate manufacturing sector declined as the war dragged on, due to the conscription of workers and territorial gains by Northern troops. In addition, individual states shielded their uniform and footwear output from Richmond and from other states, to ensure that their own soldiers were adequately outfitted. This practice worked well for a state like North Carolina, which had many more textile factories than surrounding states, but it exacerbated shortages in states with less productive capacity.

These shortages became acute and constant in some parts of the army within the space of two years. When General Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia set out for Maryland in August 1862, for example, one Virginian commented bleakly, “there is not a scarecrow in our cornfields that would not scorn to exchange clothes with [the passing soldiers]” (Williams 2000, p. 15). During the winters, the dearth of warm coats and other clothing sometimes became a matter of life and death. One Southerner recounted his shock when his regiment came across a group of Confederate sentries that had literally frozen to death:

> When we arrived there we found the guard sure enough. If I remember correctly, there were just eleven of them. Some were sitting down and some were lying down; but each and every one was as cold and as hard frozen as the icicles that hung from their hands and faces and clothing—dead! They had died at their post of duty. Two of them, a little in advance of the others, were standing with their guns in their hands, as cold and as hard frozen as a monument of marble. (Williams 2005, pp. 206–207)

**Barefoot Soldiers**

The direst shortages experienced in the Confederate army lay in the realm of footwear. As the Civil War progressed, many Rebel soldiers were reduced to marching barefoot or wrapping rags around their feet. “Most . . . marches were on graveled turnpike roads, which were very severe
on the barefooted men and cut up their feet horribly,” recalled one Southern surgeon in a letter home. “When the poor fellows could get rags they would tie them around their feet for protection” (Dean 2002, p. 397).

Shortages of shoes were so severe that some Confederate regiments became utterly dependent on scavenging shoes from the battlefield. As one historian observed, “the practice of reshoeing at the expense of dead and live Yankees was so common that the remark became trite among troops, ‘All a Yankee is worth is his shoes’” (Wiley 1992, p. 115).

Perhaps the most infamous instance in which large numbers of Confederate soldiers were forced to go to war barefoot occurred in the winter of 1864–1865. Over the course of a long and arduous campaign through Tennessee, thousands of men in the bedraggled ranks of General John Bell Hood’s army were forced to march barefoot through heavy sleet and snow. As they marched, their unprotected feet smeared tracks of blood through the white snow (Wiley 1992, p. 121).

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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Equipment

Civil War soldiers on both sides of the conflict carried much of the same gear in their packs. Standard accoutrements included such essential items as mess kits (plate, knife, fork, and spoon), cups and tin cans for drinking and grinding coffee, sewing kits (called housewives by Union troops), pocketknives, wool blankets, oilcloth ground-sheets (which were much more common in Northern regiments than Southern ones), canteens, firearms, cartridge boxes, and bayonets. Rations were carried in the soldier’s haversack. Other commonplace but nonessential items teted by infantry soldiers in both the Union and Confederate armies included pipes and tobacco pouches, straight razors, Bibles, writing kits, family portraits, harmonicas and other small musical instruments, matchesafes, handkerchiefs, change purses, combs, towels, and soap. These personal items were supplemented by wagon-drawn supplies used by entire companies or regiments, like cooking materials, spades, tents, and the like.

Troops received staple items from federal or state authorities, but other supplies were either brought from home upon enlistment, delivered to grateful soldiers from home via mail service, lifted from the battlefield or civilian residences, or procured—usually at exorbitant rates—from civilian merchants known as sutlers. Soldiers also occasionally raided sutlers’ tents late at night and helped themselves to what they needed.

As was the case with shoes and uniforms, both the North and South grappled with shoddy workmanship and perennial supply shortages in many equipment categories. Some Union blankets, for example, were so poorly made that they provided little warmth and quickly fell apart (Shannon 2002, p. 97). Confederate supply shortages were further exacerbated by a tendency on the part of many state authorities to hoard uniforms, blankets, and other supplies manufactured within their borders for the exclusive use of their own troops.

The North was able to use its vastly superior industrial capacity to address many of its supply shortages over time, but Southern problems with equipment quality and shortfalls became more acute as the war progressed. These problems—due to losses of territory (and hence manufacturing productivity), an inadequate transportation network, and severe shortfalls in raw materials for factory production—finally became so great that the Confederate Army became starved for many necessary types of equipment.

The Rifle: The Soldier’s Most Important Piece of Equipment

The most valuable piece of equipment possessed by Rebel and Yankee soldiers was the rifle. At the war’s outset, soldiers on both sides were almost exclusively armed with various types of smoothbore muskets that