



The Typical Confederate Soldier

Nearly thirty-three years have passed since the alarm of war called from their peaceful pursuits the citizens who were to make name and fame as Confederate soldiers. The stirring scenes and the dreadful carnage of a memorable conflict have been removed by the lapse of time into the hazy past, and a new generation, however ready it may be to honor those who fought the battles of the South, is likely to form its idea of their appearance from the conventional military type. The Confederate soldier was not an ordinary soldier, either in appearance or character. With your permission I will undertake to draw a portrait of him as he really appeared in the hard service of privation and danger.

A face browned by exposure and heavily bearded, or for some weeks unshaven, begrimed with dust and sweat, and marked here and there by the darker stains of powder - a face whose stolid and even melancholy composure is easily broken into ripples of good humor or quickly flushed in the fervor and abandon of the charge; a frame tough and sinewy, and trained by hardship to surprising powers of endurance; a form, the shapeliness of which is hidden by its encumberments, suggesting in its careless and unaffected pose a languorous indisposition to exertion, yet a latent, lion-like strength and a terrible energy of action when aroused. Around the upper part of the face is a fringe of unkempt hair, and above this an old wool hat, worn and weather-beaten, the flaccid brim of which falls limp upon the shoulders behind, and is folded back in front against the elongated and crumpled crown.

Over a soiled shirt, which is unbuttoned and button-less at the collar, is a ragged grey jacket that does not reach to the hips, with sleeves some inches too short. Below this, trousers of a nondescript color, without form and almost void, are held in place by a leather belt, to which is attached the cartridge box that rests behind the right hip, and the bayonet scabbard which dangles on the left. Just above the ankles each trouser leg is tied closely to the limb - a la Zouave - and beneath reaches of dirty socks disappear in a pair of badly used and curiously contorted shoes. Between the jacket and the waistband of the trousers, or the supporting belt, there appears a puffy display of cotton shirt which works out further with every hitch made by Johnny in his effort to keep his pantaloons in place.

Across his body from his left shoulder there is a roll of threadbare blanket, the ends tied together resting on or falling below the right hip. This blanket is Johnny's bed. Whenever he arises he takes up his bed and walks. Within this roll is a shirt, his only extra article of clothing. In action the blanket roll is thrown further back, and the cartridge is drawn forward, frequently in front of the body. From the right shoulder, across the body pass two straps, one cloth the other leather, making a cross with blanket roll on breast and back. These straps support respectively a greasy cloth haversack and a flannel-covered canteen, captured from the Yankees. Attached to the haversack strap is a tin cup, while in addition to some odds and ends of camp trumpery, there hangs over his back a frying pan, an invaluable utensil with which the soldier would be loath to part.

With his trusty gun in hand - an Enfield rifle, also captured from the enemy and substituted for the old flint-lock musket or the shotgun with which he was originally armed - Johnny Reb, thus imperfectly sketched, stands in his shreds and patches a marvelous ensemble - picturesque, grotesque, unique - the model citizen soldier, the military hero of the nineteenth century. There is none of the tinsel or trappings of the professional about him. From an esthetic military point of view he must appear a sorry looking soldier. But Johnny is not one of your dress parade soldiers. He doesn't care a copper whether anybody likes his looks or not. He is the most independent soldier that ever belonged to an organized army. He has respect for authority, and he cheerfully submits to discipline, because he sees the necessity of organization to affect the best results, but he maintains his individual autonomy, as it were, and never surrenders his sense of personal pride and responsibility. He is

thoroughly tractable, if properly officered, and is always ready to obey necessary orders, but he is quick to resent any official incivility, and is a high private who feels, and is, every inch as good as a general.

He may appear ludicrous enough on a display occasion of the holiday pomp and splendor of war, but place him where duty calls, in the imminent deadly breach or the perilous charge, and none in all the armies of the earth can claim a higher rank or prouder record. He may be outré and ill-fashioned in dress, but he has sublimated his poverty and rags. The worn and faded grey jacket, glorified by valor and stained with the life blood of its wearer, becomes, in its immortality of association, a more splendid vestment than mail of medieval knight or the rarest robe of royalty. That old, weather-beaten slouch hat, seen as the ages will see it, with its halo of fire, through the smoke of battle, is a kinglier covering than a crown. Half clad, half armed, often half fed, without money and without price, the Confederate soldier fought against the resources of the world. When at last his flag was furled and his arms were grounded in defeat, the cause for which he had struggled was lost, but he had won the faceless victory of soldiership.

Source: Written by G.H. Baskett, Nashville, Tenn., published in the Confederate Veteran, Vol. I, No. 12, Nashville, Tenn., December 1893.

