

Civil War Army Organization and Rank

Organization

A Civil War army consisted of many small parts that were joined together in stair step fashion to make larger units. There were six basic units of organization. The smallest was a company, which had around 100 men. The largest was an army, which could have many thousands of men.

COMPANY

A company was the basic unit in a Civil War army. A company had approximately 100 men and was commanded by a captain. Companies were named with the letters A–K (J was not used because it looked too much like I.)

REGIMENT

A regiment usually contained ten companies. A regiment had approximately 1,000 men and was commanded by a colonel. If the unit had only four to eight companies, it was called a battalion rather than a regiment.

BRIGADE

A brigade contained an average of four regiments. A brigade had approximately 4,000 men and was commanded by a brigadier general. Union brigades were named with numbers, but Confederate brigades were often named after their current or former commanding officers.

DIVISION

A division contained three to five brigades. A division had approximately 12,000 men and was commanded by a major general. Confederate divisions tended to contain more brigades than their Union counterparts. Confederate divisions often had twice as many men as Union divisions had.

CORPS

A corps contained an average of three divisions. A corps had approximately 36,000 men and was commanded by a major general (Union) or a lieutenant general (Confederate).

ARMY

An army comprised from one to eight corps. An army was commanded by a general. The Union often named its armies after rivers or waterways, i.e., Army of the Potomac. The Confederacy named its armies after states or regions, i.e., Army of Northern Virginia.

Rank and Responsibilities

The rank of a Civil War soldier indicated his duties and responsibilities within the army. The vast majority of soldiers were enlisted men—they made up the bulk of the fighting force. Above them were noncommissioned officers (also considered enlisted soldiers) and commissioned officers. While officers had more prestige than privates, they also carried added burdens, since they were accountable for all the soldiers under their command.

MAJOR GENERAL

A major general had the command and administrative responsibilities for an infantry division. He had to ensure that his division was well cared for and ready to fight when needed. In battle, he commanded his division by issuing orders to his brigade commanders on where to position their troops.

BRIGADIER GENERAL

A brigadier general had the command and administrative duties for an infantry or cavalry brigade, made up usually of four regiments. He had to keep his men in good condition and ready to fight. In battle, he led his brigade by instructing his regiments on where to fight.

COLONEL

A colonel had the command and administrative duties for an infantry, cavalry, or artillery regiment, made up of varying numbers of companies. The colonel was expected to lead his regiment into battle personally to ensure that it performed to its utmost ability. For this reason, colonels were often killed or wounded in action.

LIEUTENANT COLONEL

A lieutenant colonel was the second in command of an infantry, cavalry, or artillery regiment. He had to assist the colonel in all duties, and in battle, he helped lead the regiment into the fight. If the colonel was killed or wounded, the lieutenant colonel immediately took command of the regiment.

MAJOR

A major was third in command of an infantry, cavalry, or artillery regiment and assisted the colonel in administrative and combat duties. In battle, an infantry major led the regimental attack, positioning himself at the front with the color guard. If the colonel and the lieutenant colonel were killed or wounded, the major took command of the regiment.

CAPTAIN

A captain had command of a company of infantry or cavalry, or an artillery battery of guns. In addition to his administrative duties, an infantry captain led his company into battle by giving the proper commands for the movement and fighting of his troops, in concert with the other companies in the regiment.

LIUTENANT

Lieutenants were second in command of infantry and cavalry companies and artillery batteries. Infantry lieutenants assisted the company captain in their positions behind the line of battle by guiding the troops in their movements and firing.

SERGEANT MAJOR

A sergeant major was a regimental staff member responsible for keeping reports for the regiment. In battle, he advanced on the left, behind the line of battle, to help guide troop movement.

SERGEANT

Sergeants served either in the regimental color guard or in the individual companies of the regiment. There could be divisions, related to administrative duties, within the rank—for example, first sergeant, ordnance sergeant, and quartermaster sergeant.

Infantry sergeants advanced either in or behind the line of battle, depending on individual responsibilities. They helped guide troop movements and kept the men in their positions by example and force of command.

CORPORAL

Corporals served either in the regimental color guard or in the individual companies of the regiment. During combat, infantry corporals who were not part of the color guard were positioned in the line of battle. They helped to keep a uniform line in the movement of the company. Privates looked to corporals to help guide them during combat.

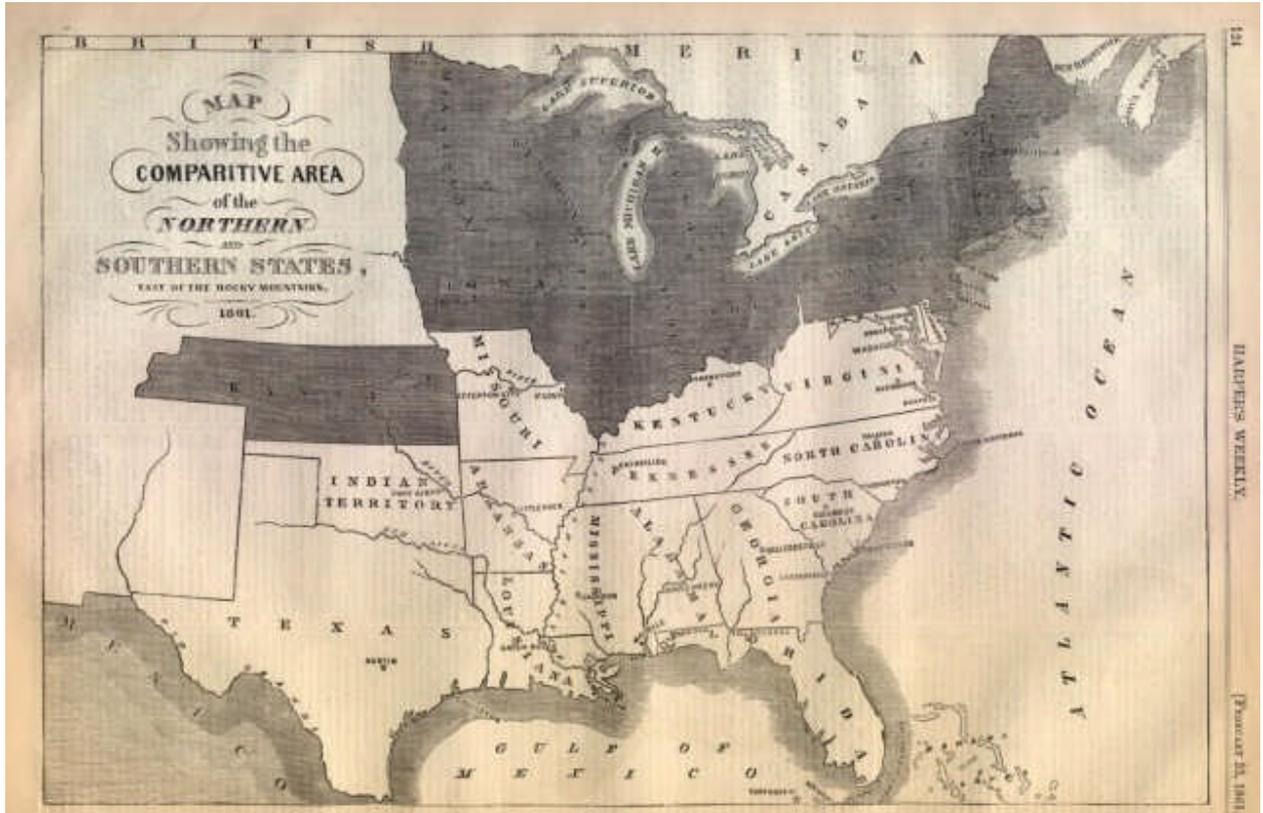
PRIVATE

Privates served as the backbone of the army and did most of the fighting in battle. Privates moved together shoulder to shoulder in straight battle lines and acted on the commands of their company officers. Privates rarely acted independently but rather worked as a group with the single purpose of fighting as a sheer force of numbers.

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In addition to the regular ranks, Civil War armies had several specialist ranks. Each regiment had a contingent of staff officers, which included surgeons, quartermasters, adjutants, and, on occasion, chaplains. There were also special ranks for soldiers in specific parts of a regiment, such as the field music (fife and drums), the regimental band (brass instruments and drums), and the color guard. The color guard was an honorary group chosen to carry the flag, or colors, of the regiment. It usually consisted of eight color corporals and one color sergeant.

Harpers Weekly Map dated February 21, 1861



Organizations Arranged By County

Onondaga County

Infantry: Regiments: 3rd, 12th, 14th, 19th, 20th, 24th, 86th, 101st, 122nd, 149th, 176th, 179th, 185th, 187th, 193nd, 194th.

Cavalry Regiments: Troop F*, 1st; 2nd, 10th, 12th, 15th, 16th, 20th, 22d, 24th, 1st

Mounted Rifles: 1st Veteran, Oneida Company.

Artillery Regiments: Batteries A and B, 1st; new batteries, A, C, D, F, G, 3d; 13th, 14th, 16th; independent batteries, 10th (old) and 12th.

Engineers Regiments: 15th (new), 50th.

Union Draft

Recruiting in the New York City Hall Park

[Source: *Atlas Editions; Civil War Cards*]

An act for "enrolling and calling out the National Forces" was signed into law on March 3, 1863, by President Abraham Lincoln. This, the first effective draft by the federal government, called for all men between the ages of 18 and 45 to be enrolled into local militia units and be available to be called into national service. The draft law exempted men in some occupations, such as telegraph operators, railroad engineers, judges, and certain other government employees. Men with mental disabilities or with certain types of dependents were also exempted. Physical disabilities that would exempt a man included imperfect vision in the right eye, lack of front teeth and molars, and loss of more than one finger of the right hand or more than two fingers of the left hand.

The actual drafting of the men was the responsibility of the states, which usually used a lottery system. When the government issued a call for more troops, each state would be given a quota to fill based on its population. The number of volunteers would be subtracted from the quota and the difference would be drafted. If a draftee volunteered before the final muster, he avoided the stigma of compulsory service and was eligible to collect a bounty of \$100 from the federal government plus additional bounties from the state and local communities. In total, the bounties could exceed \$500, which was about the average yearly wage in those days. States considered it a matter of pride to fill their quotas without having to resort to the draft.

A draftee could gain an exemption by paying a fee of \$300 or by hiring a substitute. The obvious inequity of this provision prompted the cry of "rich man's war, but poor man's fight." The bounty system also made possible the enrichment of a large number of unscrupulous persons called "bounty jumpers." These men would enlist to collect their bounty, then desert and enlist somewhere else and collect another bounty.

Where the Men were Obtained.

From Frederick Phisterer's New York in the War of the Rebellion, 1861-1865.

3d edition, 1912, volume 1, pages 72-77.

"It is impracticable, in fact impossible, to obtain any accurate figures of the number of men furnished during the war by each county, city, town, and village of the state. The best that can be done, is to indicate here the organizations (original or new; recruits not considered) to which the counties of the state contributed men; those marked * being entirely recruited in the county, to which they are credited, all others only in part."