Civil War Soldiers

What types of backgrounds did Civil War soldiers have?

- Very few men who fought for the Union or the Confederacy were professional soldiers. Most had to leave behind their peacetime jobs to join the fighting. Nearly half of them were farmers, and most of the rest were skilled or unskilled workers. Only about 1 in 10 was a businessman or a professional such as a lawyer or doctor.

- Union soldiers were of all races and nationalities. About 180,000 African Americans served in northern armies, as did 500,000 immigrants, mostly German and Irish.

- Fewer than 10 percent of the Confederate soldiers were immigrants because few immigrants lived in the South. African Americans, whether free or enslaved, were not permitted to join Confederate armies but were required to labor at home. Due to General Lee’s support, the Virginia legislature passed an act on March 13, 1865, allowing the enlistment of African Americans. Before a full regiment was organized, however, Lee surrendered to Grant and the war was over.

- American Indians fought on each side, but mainly for the South. Most Mexican American soldiers fought for the Union.

For more information, see the Raising the Regiments More of the Story Reading on the Exploring America’s Past CD-ROM.

How did each side get soldiers and organize them to fight?

- At first, thousands on each side volunteered. Groups of men—friends, neighbors, and relatives—from the same town or county enlisted together and fought in the same company. Companies consisted of 100 men each, and 10 companies combined to form a regiment. Regiments were identified by the state from which they came—for example, the 54th Massachusetts Infantry or the 4th Texas Infantry. A brigade consisted of three to five regiments. Brigades were combined into even larger groups, such as divisions and corps. For more information on the formation of armies, see the Raising the Regiments More of the Story Reading on the CD-ROM.

- Company officers were typically elected by their men. A regiment was usually led by the person who raised it, often a city mayor or wealthy planter. Commanding generals—such as McClellan, Lee, and Grant—and their assistants were usually professional soldiers and graduates of West Point military academy.

- As time passed, the number of volunteers in both the North and South dropped, and each side established a draft—a system requiring men to serve in the military. However, in both armies a draftee who had enough money could hire a substitute to serve in his place. In the North a man could also avoid service by paying the government $300.
What was everyday life like for a typical Civil War soldier?

- On average, soldiers spent 50 days in camp for every day they spent in battle. Most lived in tents, but some built huts when they could. On a typical day, soldiers gathered for roll call, trained with their company and regiment, and served guard duty. In their spare time they played games, wrote letters, told stories, sang songs, and attended religious services.

- Despite his training, the typical soldier was not prepared for the experiences of war. Tens of thousands of men were involved in major battles, which were noisy, dusty, smoky, and bloody. Casualties in large battles could total in the thousands or even the tens of thousands. For more information, see the Casualties of War Literature Reading on the CD-ROM.

- Medical care was crude by today's standards. Some injured soldiers waited for days after a battle before receiving treatment. Arms or legs that received gunshot wounds were frequently amputated, or cut off. This procedure often led to death because doctors knew little about stopping infection or the spread of disease. Epidemics swept through the camps, killing twice as many soldiers as were killed in battle.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

Directions: Write T next to a true statement and F next to a false one.

1. Nearly half of the soldiers who fought in the Civil War were businessmen and professionals.  
   
2. Because few immigrants lived in the South, most of the Confederate soldiers were native-born Americans.  

3. Most of the immigrants who fought in the Union armies were French and Irish.  

4. African Americans, Mexican Americans, and American Indians fought in the Civil War.  

5. Early in the war, groups of men from the same town or county formed volunteer companies and elected their own officers.  

6. Later in the war, both sides drafted men to serve in their armies, but in both the North and the South a man could hire a substitute.  

7. Civil War soldiers spent most of their time in battle.  

8. More than twice as many soldiers died of disease during the war than were killed in battle.