LOSSES TO DESERTION A PLAGUE TO BOTH SIDES
By Jack Trammell SPECIAL TO THE WASHINGTON TIMES

A regimental band played the "Dead March." The entire division, including the famous Stonewall Brigade, formed three sides around the convicted men. A chaplain knelt quietly with the victims and uttered prayers for their souls. Then a sergeant gave the order; the men were shot dead and fell into their own graves. Their crime: desertion. They had attempted to go home without permission.

Although the above event transpired early in the war on the Confederate side (1862), the problem of desertion was pervasive on both sides throughout the war. Variously referred to as "French furlough," "French leave" or "extended sick leave," desertion became the bane of every loyal officer.

Desertion had been a problem in the American Army (as in every army) dating back to the Revolutionary War. Because Army regulations were inconsistent and seldom were applied with uniformity or enthusiasm, both prewar and early Civil War soldiers tended to view being AWOL as low on the list of possible military offenses. Many Confederate veterans were shocked at the treatment of the Stonewall deserters.

The truth is that desertion grew worse over time and authorities on both sides were forced to take extreme measures to combat the "evil." By the Petersburg Campaign of 1864-65, Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee was losing hundreds of men every day.

"General Lee may soon find himself without an army," one reporter wrote.

For practical reasons, not all deserters could be executed. It is true that hundreds were shot (147 were officially reported shot on the Union side alone), but the act was carried out for effect more than punishment.

"Men were too precious to be shot," historian Ella Lonn wrote.

Lincoln was forced to defend the increasing executions in the Union Army and said to one angry mother of a loyal soldier, "You cannot order men shot by the dozens and twenties. People won't stand it, and they ought not stand it."

Even with the risk of execution and shame, men were motivated to desert for a variety of reasons. At the top of the list were desperate pleas for help from families at home. Though men often were loyal to their state, region

and nation, family came first. An emotional plea from a struggling wife or a suffering parent often was enough to negate any other loyalties.

The vast majority of Confederate soldiers who left the army without permission did, in fact, leave to help their families, knowing full well the risk they were taking but deciding that family was more important. The Confederate government's inability to help civilians at home exacerbated the problem.

"The will to make war was crippled by the obligations men felt to their families," Reid Mitchell wrote in "The Vacant Chair."

Dislike of the unit or unit commander (every infantry private was convinced he would be better off in the cavalry) or service far outside his native region (which was arguably both a good and bad factor) could lead other men to desert. Men at loosely supervised medical facilities could slip away. Soldiers who were characterized as having "baser personalities" sometimes opted to desert.

In the Union Army, bounty jumping led to countless desertions. Men would enlist at one station, collect their bounty, desert and enlist at another station under a different name, collecting another bounty. Sometimes the bounty jumper had to look inside his hat at roll call to remember what name he had used to enlist.

In the novel and movie "Cold Mountain," the character of Inman leaves a Confederate army hospital because he feels the war is lost, that further bloodshed is senseless and that he can do more good at home, where his lover is eking out a subsistence living on a neglected farm.

There were countless real soldiers like Inman who left for similar reasons. Many of them intended to return to the army when the plowing was done or when the situation at home was stabilized. Many did return after tending to home, which makes analysis of desertion numbers problematic at best. Confederate officers in particular understood this value conflict and generally were forgiving of many soldiers who returned to the ranks under such circumstances.

Some soldiers had no intention of returning once they left. They rubbed onions on their feet to throw off the bloodhounds, built log cabins in remote woods, disguised themselves and used their guns to terrorize anyone who approached them. There are recorded incidents of deserter communities growing up in the mountainous regions of the South and even in parts of Pennsylvania. In some cases,

entire regiments of regular army troops were detached from duty to deal with the renegades.

Authorities tried every strategy they could to stem the tide of desertion. They placed pickets at all transportation points (fords, bridges, railroad stations, etc.); they stationed men far from their homes (which reportedly improved discipline); they checked all small groups of soldiers for official passes; and they shot anyone who resisted arrest.

Patriotic appeals discouraging cowardly behavior were published almost daily. In addition, rewards were offered for turning in offenders. Ironically, one of the rewards offered was extended furlough.

When armies were on the march, rear guards and flank guards were assigned to harass stragglers. Officers were held accountable for straggling and called frequent stops to take roll or count arms. The cavalry, more mobile than the infantry, often cooperated (albeit reluctantly) with rounding up those who had become "lost." In some cases, entire regiments were broken up and reorganized when they consistently caused problems.

Authorities also tried to make examples of those caught in the act. Common punishments were bucking and gagging, being made to carry a ball and chain, being branded with a "D," or being hung by the thumbs. There also were what Peter Carmichael calls "ritual executions" such those already mentioned involving the Stonewall Brigade.

Late in the war, executions were increasingly resorted to, and after 1863, soldiers became resigned to the violence, making statements to the effect of, "They knew the rules; they had it coming."

On the Union side, the Office of Provost Marshal was created in 1862, in large part to deal with deserters. President Lincoln himself issued two proclamations (in 1863 and 1865) promising leniency for those returning to their units without delay.

In the South, where state authorities resisted any hint of draconian Confederate military rule, individual state governors struggled to maintain law and order and protect loyal citizens, while deserters from both sides roamed the backcountry, often unchecked.

While governors scrambled to organize home guards and equip police forces, President Davis and other Confederate authorities were simultaneously placing more demands on states for their remaining able men.

There can be little doubt that desertion affected the outcome of battles and the war. In 1862, after the crucial

battle of Antietam, desertion (mainly from straggling) led to Lee's withdrawal from Maryland. Confederate Gen. Braxton Bragg's defeat at Missionary Ridge was in large part blamed on desertion. Union Gen. William T. Sherman of March to the Sea fame stated that Shiloh was almost lost because of the 70,000 Union soldiers absent or unaccounted for. Lee's desperate attempts to slow desertion from the trenches of Petersburg in 1864-65 are well-documented.

He wrote to Davis about his men deserting from Richmond hospitals to join commands closer to home. "You will see if this conduct is allowed that all discipline is destroyed and our armies will be ruined. I have, therefore, to request that all these men be returned to this army, and that the officers who have been engaged in this illicit conduct be punished."

Naturally, each side encouraged the other to desert. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant's men spread specially printed fliers into the wind from the top of signal towers to encourage Confederate defections. The Confederates promised free passage home or jobs at the Tredegar Ironworks in Richmond as laborers.

An average of most sources places the number of total desertions around 400,000, with 275,000 on the Union side and more than 100,000 on the Confederate side. Gerald Linderman reports that as many as 80,000 of the Union deserters and 21,000 of the Confederates were apprehended and returned to their commands.

A brief glimpse at several Confederate units reveals hard data: 7th Virginia Infantry, Company D, 16 of 123 men deserted; 9th Virginia Cavalry, 96 of 1,815 men deserted (interestingly, almost half of the men listed as illiterate deserted); 13th N.C. Light Artillery, five of approximately 180 men deserted. Such evidence exists for hundreds of units on both sides and affirms that desertion was a real problem.

Even after the war, desertion remained an issue. A good lawyer often could help a former Union deserter qualify for a federal pension. Former Civil War veteran-turned-president Grover Cleveland vetoed numerous attempts to liberalize the pension laws. Even then, one former deserter had the audacity to request a pension because he was shot when trying to desert.

Legitimate Union veterans didn't know whether to be outraged, sorry or both at the plight of the postwar deserter who was desperate for help. As late as 1927, Congress was still busy changing the service records of

dishonorably discharged Civil War soldiers to honorably discharged based on scanty or nonexistent evidence.

When Lee finally surrendered at Appomattox, his Army of Northern Virginia was a mere shadow of its former self. Fewer than 30,000 men remained. Part of its demise can be blamed squarely on desertion. Lee admitted it readily when asked about desertion before the final campaign: "[Grant] can afford it; we cannot."

Many soldiers, like Inman, voiced their opinion about the war with their feet. Even threat of death and dishonor was not enough to stop them.

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