

Introduction

On February 8, 1865, after three days of fighting, Private Beverly Ross of the 56th Virginia Infantry took a few moments to write his wife. Ross mentioned the pitiful state of rations within the army and his doubts about the prospect for peace. As he closed his letter, Ross noted that Thomas Saunders, a member of his company, deserted to the enemy and remarked, “I had no idea up to that time that any of company E would go over to the Yankees, but now the question is who will be next.”¹

Ross’ words serve as a vivid example of the collapse occurring within the Army of Northern Virginia during the Civil War’s fourth year. However, 1865 was not the first time desertion siphoned men away from the Confederacy’s already depleted forces. Desertion was a problem for Confederate military leaders throughout the war and took

¹ Beverly Ross to Virginia Ann Goodrich Ross, Feb. 8, 1865, Beverly Ross Letter, Personal Papers Collection, The Library of Virginia.

more men from the army than Union bullets. A February 1865 report by the Confederate Superintendent of Conscription calculated that desertion had accounted for the loss of 103,400 soldiers. That figure is more than the number of Southerners who were killed in action and mortally wounded combined.²

Despite these figures, the study of Confederate desertion has been a neglected aspect of Civil War history. The most likely explanation is that historians have found desertion difficult to quantify. While soldiers' correspondence and military dispatches indicate that desertion occurred on an enormous scale, the quality of recordkeeping varied widely. The loss or destruction of many documents at the end of the war left sizable gaps in the primary record. As a result, researchers have found it difficult to uncover desertion patterns both within the Confederate military and on the Southern home front. Recently, however, some scholars have made headway in overcoming this dilemma.

Over the last several decades historians of Virginia military history have compiled an outstanding collection of regimental histories that include a complete record for every soldier from each Virginia regiment. These regimental histories offer a manageable and convenient way to compile statistics on Virginia's Confederate soldiers. This thesis will seek to explain why Virginia soldiers deserted the Confederate Army during the Civil War. An analysis of the number and patterns of Virginia desertion can provide striking insights into the nature of the Virginia home front during the war and the effects desertion had on the Confederate government's ability to wage an effective war against the Union.

² "Report of the Superintendent of Conscription to the Secretary of War, February 1865," in "Report of the Provost Marshal General," *House Executive Documents*, 1st Session, 39th Congress, no. 1, vol. IV, pt. 1, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1866), 121-41.

Despite the difficulties associated with researching Confederate desertion, further study could help answer a variety of questions posed recently by historians. The role the Southern home front played in the defeat of the Confederate military is one such question. This interest stems from a debate about the role the Southern home front played in the Confederate military's defeat..

Recent interest in the Southern home front is due largely to the work of women's historians focusing on the role of women during the Civil War. Two example of this are works by George Rable and Drew Gilpin Faust, who have highlighted the effect of Southern white women on Confederate nationalism. Rable's work, *Civil Wars: Women and the Crisis of Southern Nationalism*, centered on the effects the "total war" tactics of Union generals had on the psyches of women. The Union generals "struck at the heart of the home, tearing down sinews of memory that bound families together," he argued.³ In her work, *Mothers of Invention*, Faust found that throughout the South women contributed to military defeat by "actively urging" the men in their lives to desert when defeat seemed inevitable.⁴ Owing in large part to the work of Rable and Faust, a consensus emerged within Confederate home front studies that as life behind the lines became untenable, civilian morale disintegrated. They argue that these factors contributed directly to the loss of the war.

It was in response to this trend in home front studies that Gary Gallagher delivered the 1995 Littlefield lectures at the University of Texas. Later published as *Confederate War*, Gallagher maintained that too much emphasis had been placed on

³ George C. Rable, *Civil Wars: Women and the Crisis of Southern Nationalism*, (Urbana, 1989), 171.

⁴ Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War*, (Chapel Hill, 1996), 243.

dissent within the Confederacy during the war. Instead of looking for reasons why the Confederacy lost, historians should have focused on how it continued to make war for so long. “Contrary to what much recent literature proclaims,” he asserted, “defeat in the military sphere, rather than dissolution behind the lines, brought the collapse of the Confederacy.”⁵ However, Gallagher’s argument about the lack of Southern dissent and division in the Confederacy’s defeat downplayed serious home front problems, such as unionism, disintegrating nationalism, and civilian destitution.

The most serious home front problem minimized by Gallagher is Confederate desertion. He argued that “desertion by Confederate soldiers has been a main beam supporting the lack-of-will edifice.” He concluded that desertion “may be more apparent than real.”⁶

To support his claim, Gallagher noted the difficulty in calculating the number of men who deserted and sought to make distinctions between men who returned to the army and those who left permanently. He sided with the historians William Blair and Kevin Ruffner, who claimed that the number of deserting soldiers decreased as the war progressed.⁷ While Gallagher raised a valid point, the examples that he cited were micro-histories, which only looked at single counties. Moreover, Gallagher did not take into account statements by Robert E. Lee, Joseph E. Johnston, and Jefferson Davis, who all believed that desertion was crippling the ability to fight the Union.

⁵ Gary Gallagher, *Confederate War: How Popular Will, Nationalism, and Military Strategy Could Not Stave Off Defeat* (Cambridge, 1997), 11.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 32; William A Blair, *Virginia’s Private War: Feeding Body and Soul in the Confederacy 1861-1865*, (New York, 1998), 61; Kevin Conley Ruffner, “Civil War Desertion from a Black Belt Regiment: An Examination of the 44th Virginia Infantry,” in Edward L. Ayers and John C. Wills, eds., *The Edge of the South: Life in Nineteenth-Century Virginia* (Charlottesville, 1991), 100.

The year after Gallagher gave his lectures, the University of Texas invited another noted Civil War scholar, William W. Freehling, to rebut his claims. As in Gallagher's presentation, Freehling's lectures also became the foundation of a book, *The South vs. The South*. Freehling challenged Gallagher's definition of a "Southerner" and attempted to broaden his definition of the Southern home front. Freehling correctly pointed out that Gallagher did not examine how Southern unionists, poor whites, and slaves felt about secession and the war. He noted that "if all the Slave South's inhabitants had emulated Confederate state whites, Southern battlefield commitments would have trumped home-front defections."⁸

For Freehling, the Union had an almost impossible task. If the South had been unified, he contended, it would have been unbeatable. Thus, for Freehling, the loyalty of the Southern people was crucial to the success or failure of the Confederacy.⁹

While Freehling did not specifically address desertion, his analysis of the Union blockade, emancipation, invasion, and unionism pointed out significant fissures within the South. Even though they have considerable disagreements about the importance of the Southern home front, both Freehling and Gallagher have helped make desertion a central question in Civil War scholarship. Consequently, the debate about desertion has moved away from causality and toward a study of the problems it caused for the Confederacy. Subsequent historians have studied desertion in hopes of either rebutting or proving the arguments of Gallagher and Freehling. Moreover, this debate can be credited with changing the way scholars study desertion, reinforcing the need to study the

⁸ William W. Freehling, *The South vs. The South: How Anti-Confederate Southerners Shaped the Course of the Civil War* (New York, 2001), xii.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

effects of desertion on the Confederacy's ability to wage war and demonstrating the need for innovative analysis of desertion which utilizes untapped resources.

The first major study of Civil War desertion was published in 1928. Regardless of its age, Ella Lonn's *Desertion during the Civil War* has remained the starting point for all desertion studies. Lonn looked at both Union and Confederate desertion and sought to dispel the stigma of cowardice often associated with it. To achieve this, she studied chiefly the causes of desertion, yet still found room to analyze its effects on both armies.¹⁰ She contended that poor leadership, conscription, a lack of basic necessities, and destitution and lawlessness at home were the major causes of desertion in the Confederate army.¹¹ Turning to the effects of desertion, she found that it kept the Confederacy from winning key battles, strengthened Union armies, gave away valuable intelligence, and demoralized the home front.¹² She argued that "desertion certainly contributed to the Confederate defeats after 1862 and was a prime factor in precipitation the catastrophe of 1865." Yet Lonn did not go so far as to claim that the eventual defeat was caused by desertion. Rather, it sped up the "inevitable."¹³

One criticism leveled at Lonn's study is that its broad nature did not lend itself to detailed analysis of specific desertion patterns across the geographically and culturally diverse Confederacy. Subsequently, a number of local and state studies have attempted to fill this void. The first, and best-known, example of this is Bessie Martin's *Desertion of Alabama Troops from the Confederate Army*, which appeared four years after Lonn's study. Martin used Lonn as a template for her own work, which examined when and why

¹⁰ Ella Lonn, *Desertion During the Civil War*, (New York, 1928), 226.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2-17.

¹² *Ibid.*, 120-121.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 124.

Alabama soldiers deserted. Yet in tying her study to causality, Martin was unable to draw any significant conclusions about what ramifications the social, economic, and political problems in Alabama had on the military strength and morale of the larger Confederacy.¹⁴

After Martin's work, desertion studies continued to focus on regional and local analysis and accordingly encountered many of the same problems she did. Two examples are Richard Bardolph's "Inconsistent Rebels" and Richard Reid's "A Test Case for Evil." Both examined the factors contributing to desertion among North Carolina soldiers. As a result, Reid and Bardolph became ensnared in the need to present qualitative evidence to substantiate their claims. To find deserters, Bardolph looked at military and civil correspondence plus newspapers - the exact same sources used by Lonn and Martin in their studies. Not surprisingly, Bardolph similarly concluded that desertion in North Carolina was caused by a combination of poor leadership, food and clothing shortages, and problems on the home front.¹⁵

In contrast, Reid found that the conventional sources used by Lonn and Bardolph presented "major weaknesses in determining the number of deserters,"¹⁶ To avoid this, he used a statistical analysis of regimental muster rolls to challenge long-held assumptions about Confederate desertion. Reid contended that the number of officers and enlisted men who deserted was actually fifty percent less than previously thought. His work showed the need for future desertion studies to be cautious when using the available

¹⁴ Bessie Martin, *Desertion of Alabama Troops from the Confederate Army: A Study in Sectionalism*, (New York, 1932).

¹⁵ Richard Bardolph, "Inconsistent Rebels: Desertion of North Carolina Troops in the Civil War", *North Carolina Historical Review*, 41 (Spring 1964): 170-82.

¹⁶ Richard Reid, "A Test Case for 'Crying Evil': Desertion among North Carolina Troops during the Civil War", *North Carolina Historical Review* 58, no. 3 (1981): 240.

primary material. Regrettably, neither author attempted to link specific desertion patterns in North Carolina to any larger effects on the Confederate military.

The most recent work on Confederate desertion made a concerted effort to avoid these methodological problems and directly engaged in the Gallagher-Freehling debate. Mark Weitz's *More Damning Than Slaughter* returned focus to the significance of the home front. He took aim at Gallagher and argued that desertion seriously crippled the Confederacy's "ability to wage war" and "served as a vivid example of weakened or destroyed Confederate nationalism."¹⁷

Weitz took note of Gallagher's argument that historians must do a better job proving desertion actually existed. He addressed this challenge by relying heavily on personal correspondence to gauge desertion's impact and its causes. When he did incorporate quantitative evidence, he used non-traditional sources. The "Register of Confederate Deserters" illustrates this practice.

Compiled by the Union during the war, this roster listed only those soldiers who took an oath of loyalty to the United States. Even though this source has existed since the end of the war, Weitz is the first scholar to use it in a desertion study. Weitz's work does an excellent job assessing the effects on the larger war effort. However, he does not fully appreciate the diversity of the South. A description of how desertion was different across the South was lacking and could have strengthened his argument. Moreover, by basing his study primarily on letters and diaries, Weitz overlooked a large portion of the Confederate population who were either partially or completely illiterate.

¹⁷ Mark Weitz, *More Damning than Slaughter: Desertion in the Confederate Army* (Lincoln, Neb., 2005), ix.

Any future study of desertion must incorporate both an examination of its causes and its impact. Although previous regional studies have not been successful bringing these two aspects together, Weitz started the process of integrating the effects of desertion on the war effort. Such a study is not only possible but also necessary to understand fully Confederate desertion and its implications. Virginia is one area that could benefit from such a regional study. Southerners past and present have viewed Virginia as the embodiment of the Confederate war effort and the state that suffered the most from four years of civil war. Because of this, Virginia could make an excellent study of how home front issues and disintegrating nationalism impacted the decisions of the men who have been considered the most loyal of all Confederate soldiers.

This study of Virginia desertion differs from other desertion studies in several respects. The statistical analysis of the patterns of desertion within the army is one of the most unique characteristics of this study. Several other scholars have attempted to track desertion across the Confederacy, but limited sources restricted their studies. Lonn and Martin primarily relied on the *Official Records* and other forms of political and military correspondence, while Weirtz's study of Georgia desertion relied almost exclusively on an analysis of soldiers who deserted to the Union army. By compiling data from compiled service records, this thesis attempts a comprehensive study of all Virginia's Confederate soldiers.

The first chapter examines the patterns of desertion both across the state and in Virginia's infantry, cavalry, and artillery regiments. This chapter has three specific aims. First, calculates how many soldiers deserted from Virginia's Confederate units during the Civil War. By compiling data from the muster rolls found in the *Virginia Regimental*

Histories Series, one can tackle a problem that has crippled previous desertion studies. Such numerical data maps patterns of desertion across the state both chronologically and geographically. Uncovering when these men left the army, and the parts the state from which they hailed, will lay the foundation for a careful evaluation of what caused desertion and its consequences for the army.

The second chapter examines the causes of desertion among Virginia troops. No single reason was responsible for such desertion. Owing to the risks deserting carried, when a soldier left the army he did so for varied and intensely personal reasons. This chapter examines how conscription, concerns about home and family, morale and disaffection, and an ineffective policy for punishment, all combined to increase desertion from Virginia units.

The conclusions look at the effects of desertion on the Confederate military's ability to wage an effective war against the Union and how desertion affected the civilians behind the lines. Obviously desertion drained the army of manpower it could not afford to lose. In what other ways did its effects manifest themselves? Central to this aspect of the thesis will be the opinions of Confederate military leaders. What impact did they believe desertion was having on the army? By answering these questions, we can begin to learn desertion's impact on the Confederacy.

Chapter 1

“They are going in flocks”: Patterns of Desertion

“Mr. President: The number of desertions from this army is so great and still continues to such an extent, that unless some cessation of them can be caused, I fear success in the field will be seriously endangered.”¹⁸

These are the words of a Confederate general who was witnessing his army melt in front of his eyes. These are the words of Robert E. Lee. That Lee’s appeal to Jefferson Davis mentioned desertion should come as no surprise to Civil War historians. Over the past eighty years, several books and numerous articles have documented the toll that desertion took on the Confederate armies. The remarkable feature of this letter is not what it said, but when it was written. Dated August 17, 1863, this note contradicts the

¹⁸ Robert E. Lee, *The Wartime Papers of Robert E. Lee*, (New York, 1961), 591.

accepted belief among historians that desertion peaked in the final months of the war when defeat seemed inevitable.

Although much has been written about Confederate desertion, historians continue to grapple with the two most fundamental questions surrounding it: how many men left and when did they leave? Beginning with Ella Lonn's path-breaking study *Desertion During the Civil War*, researchers have looked to the 128-volume *Official Records* for evidence of desertion. They discovered that desertion occurred on an enormous scale. Moreover, a February, 1865, report from by John S. Preston, Superintendent of Conscription, to Secretary of War John C. Breckinridge seemed to confirm these conclusions. The report, based on an extensive study of field returns, listed 103,400 enlisted men and 1,028 officers as deserters from the Confederate armies.¹⁹ Recently, however, scholars have begun challenging these numbers as gross overestimates.

Historians are debating other questions concerning Confederate desertion. In addition to the actual number of men who left service, scant attention has been paid to when these soldiers deserted, the relationship between geography and desertion, and the character of soldiers who deserted. A careful analysis of the experiences of Virginia's Confederate soldiers will help answer these lingering questions.

This chapter answers three straightforward questions about desertion: how many men left, when did they leave, and in what part of the state were their homes? These answers will uncover patterns of desertion –chronological and geographical – across Virginia. Furthermore, these answers challenge historical scholarship about desertion. A

¹⁹ "Report of the Superintendent of Conscription to the Secretary of War, February 1865," *House Executive Documents*, 1st Session, 39th Congress, no. 1, vol. IV, pt. 1, (Washington, 1866), 121-141. Others have cited this report as simply "Report of the Provost Marshal General". However, this implied that Union officials after the war prepared the report, when Confederate authorities actually compiled it.

discussion of the causes of desertion will not be found in this chapter. However, answering these basic questions will lay the foundation by which a further exploration about the causes of desertion and its effects on Virginia and the Confederacy will be possible.

In order to uncover the patterns of desertion among Virginia soldiers throughout the war and across the state, I developed a database that included an entry for each soldier I deemed a deserter. The Confederate army defined desertion as being absent without leave (AWOL) for thirty days without the intention to return.²⁰ However, this simple definition does not adequately take into account deficiencies that plagued Confederate wartime records. For this study I have developed a more nuanced definition that takes into account this problem as well as the complex nature of Confederate desertion. I included a soldier in the database for the following reasons:

- a. If a soldier was listed as a deserter on the regimental returns.
- b. If a soldier was listed as AWOL for at least six months.
- c. If the final entry for the soldier was AWOL in any month of 1865.
- d. If a soldier deserted and either returned or was arrested.
- e. If a soldier deserted and enlisted in another unit without authorization.
- f. If a soldier swore allegiance to the Union prior to April 9, 1865.

While compiling this database, I have made a determined effort to remain conservative. If there was any evidence that a soldier had been declared a deserter in error, that soldier was not included. Finally, two important notes should be made. I do not claim that I have found every soldier who deserted from a Virginia unit during the Civil War. Conversely, I am sure that some soldiers have been included in this list who were in fact not deserters. Confederate muster rolls and regimental returns are far from complete. One of the factors that made the *Virginia Regimental Histories Series* an

²⁰ Martin, *Desertion of Alabama*, 13-25.

excellent source for this type of study is the number of sources beyond the compiled service records that each volume includes. Manuscript sources, pension records, and muster rolls not included in the compiled service records, all combine to make these regimental rosters arguably the most complete account of Confederate service available.

How Many?

The most basic and difficult question historians must answer when they study Confederate desertion is how many soldiers illegally left the army. The report from John Preston to the secretary of war has served as the baseline estimate for historians studying desertion in both individual states and the Confederacy as a whole. Richard Reid, a student of desertion from North Carolina units, was one of the first scholars to challenge these findings. Using a statistical sample, Reid argued that Preston's report overestimated the number of Tar Heel deserters by roughly 10,000 soldiers.²¹

Preston claimed that 12,155 men (including 84 officers) deserted from Virginia units from April 1861 to February 1865.²² However, a careful analysis of desertion based on the regimental rosters found in the *Virginia Regimental Histories Series* also calls into question Preston's findings. Unlike Reid's argument that the report overestimated the number of deserters, a study of Virginia units yields the opposite result. These rosters indicate that 15,098 soldiers deserted over the same period, a 24 percent increase. When the final two and a half months of war are included, the total number of deserters reaches an astounding 16,399 men.²³

²¹ Reid, "A Test Case," 253.

²² Preston, "Report of the Superintendent of Conscription," 141.

²³ This conclusion is based on a database of deserters which includes the soldier's last name, year of enlistment, month and year of desertion, if the soldier returned voluntarily, was arrested, or joined another

Of these, 129 were officers. The vast majority of officer-desertions were lieutenants (83.7 percent). The remaining twenty-two men represent an amazing cross-section of ranks, including one chaplain, two surgeons, two ensigns, thirteen captains, a major, and two lieutenant-colonels.

Table 1 -- Desertion By Branch of Service

Branch	Total Desertion	Percentage of Total Enlisted
Infantry	11,887	12.9
Artillery	2,839	11.7
Cavalry	1,673	4.4
Total	16,399	10.6

The branch of service with the highest rate of desertion was the infantry (12.9 percent), followed by the artillery (11.7 percent), and the cavalry (4.4 percent). Overall the rate of desertion among the 154,000 men who served in Virginia units stands at 10.6 percent.²⁴

Chronological Distribution of Desertion

In many respects, uncovering when these men left the service is just as important as knowing the actual number of deserters. Identifying periods of heavy desertion will help to explain its causes. The chronological distribution of desertion has also been a point of historical debate between scholars. Through careful study of the *Official*

unit, if the soldier deserted multiple times, if the soldier was ever wounded, and if the soldier was a substitute or conscript. The statistics were compiled from *Virginia Regimental Histories Series*. 141 vols. Lynchburg, Va., 1981-2002.

²⁴ Lee A. Wallace, *A Guide to Virginia's Military Organization, 1861-1865*, (Lynchburg, Va., 1986); American Civil War Research Database, http://www.civilwardata.com/active/reg_dyn.html [accessed Jan. 3, 2007].

Records, Ella Lonn argued that Confederate desertion began to escalate in the fall of 1864 and continued unchecked through the end of the war.²⁵ Using the same sources, Bessie Martin (the foremost student of Alabama desertion) added two more “great waves” to Lonn’s findings. She contended that June 1862 and July 1863 were the peaks of these exoduses, while “1861 – January 1862, March, April, and May 1863, and May, June, and July 1864” were relatively low periods of desertion.²⁶

In contrast to Lonn and Martin, two more recent studies of desertion in Georgia and North Carolina have argued that a large proportion of desertion occurred before 1865. In *A Higher Duty*, Mark Weitz asserted that 39 percent of Georgians who deserted to the Union did so between December 1863 and April 1864.²⁷ Similarly, Richard Reid declared that 50 percent of the desertions from North Carolina’s infantry units occurred by January 1864.²⁸ Finally, a recent study of the Virginia home-front during the war, argued that desertion crested in 1862 and declined dramatically in each successive year of the conflict.²⁹

Statistics of deserters compiled from the regimental rosters for Virginia’s Confederate units cast light on these assertions. Much like Martin’s study, these statistics reveal waves of desertion throughout the war. While desertions were light during the early months of the conflict, the first wave of heavy desertion began in April 1862 and continued through December of that year. More Virginia soldiers (1,145) left in May 1862 than during any other month of the war.³⁰ The next period lasted from April to

²⁵ Lonn, *Desertion During the Civil War*, 27.

²⁶ Martin, *Desertion Among Alabama Troops*, 26, 27.

²⁷ Weitz, *A Higher Duty*, 67.

²⁸ Reid, “A Test Case,” 245.

²⁹ Blair, *Virginia’s Private War*, 61- 62.

³⁰ All statistics are based on the same database mentioned in note 11.

September 1863, with a peak in August. The final wave of desertion began in December 1864 and, with the exception of January 1865, the number of absentees increased every month until the end of the war.

Desertions in the three full years of the war (1862-1864) followed a relatively consistent chronological pattern. The early months of each year saw relatively low desertion rates. However, desertion began to increase each year as spring approached. It remained strong throughout summer. These findings dispel any notion that desertion primarily occurred during the fall and winter as the campaign season ended and the army entered winter quarters. Indeed, desertion clearly drained the Confederate forces of critical manpower when they were needed the most. The sharp increase in desertion in December stands as a notable exception. Home undoubtedly beckoned as Christmas neared. In the 22nd Virginia Cavalry, for example, sixty-two men deserted in December 1864.³¹

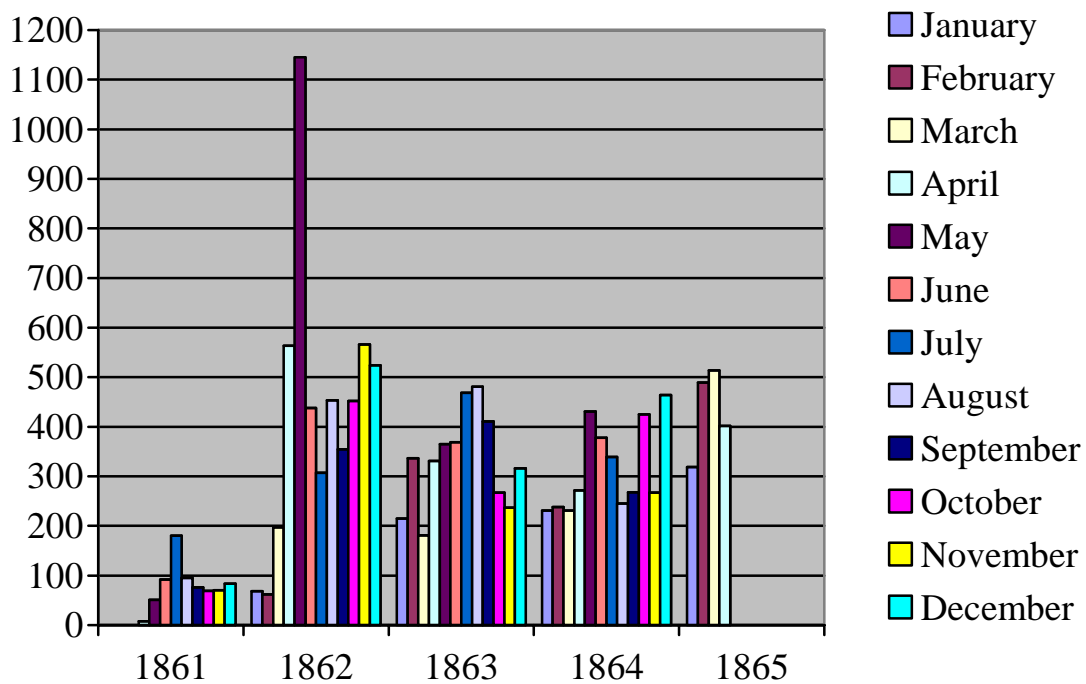
The men who deserted each year remained relatively consistent throughout the war. The year 1862 saw the most desertion (32.7 percent) the number of men leaving the army decreased slightly in 1863 (25.5 percent) and 1864 (23.7 percent).³² Additionally, a statistical report compiled by the Medical Director of Virginia concerning hospitals within his department revealed a similar pattern of desertion throughout the war. The consolidated report only covered the twenty-three month period from September 1862 to July 1864. The monthly average for the four months in 1862 is 279.5 desertions.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

AWOLs from hospitals dip only slightly in 1863 (the only full year covered by the report) to an average of 270.7. The seven months of 1864 average 218.³³

Table 2 -- Desertion By Month of the War, 1861-1865.



On the surface, the number of desertions for 1865 indicates a sharp drop at the end of the war. Several factors, however, point to desertion being much higher in 1865 than it had been at any point in the war. First, an average 501 desertions occurred per month from

³³ Records of the Medical Director of Virginia, "Medical Department Statistical Reports of Hospitals in the Department of Virginia, 1862-1864", Record Group 109, Ch VI, vol. 151, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

Table 3 -- Desertion By Year

Year	Number of Deserters	Percentage
1861	816	4.98
1862	5,370	32.74
1863	4,182	25.50
1864	3,892	23.73
1865	1,754	10.70
No Date	385	2.35
Total	16,399	100.0

January to mid-April 1865. This monthly average stands much higher than the 447.5 average of 1862, the peak year. Second, the primary documentation of 1865 desertions is a roster kept by Union authorities of Confederate soldiers who deserted to Federal lines. Undoubtedly, in the waning months of the war, many soldiers simply left the army and went home rather than desert to the Union. Reports from Confederates deserting across Federal lines compelled Ulysses S. Grant to write the Secretary of War in February 1865: “Desertions from the enemy are on the increase. Their testimony is that many more go their homes than come within our lines.”³⁴

The Army of Northern Virginia field returns plainly demonstrate the toll desertion took on the army’s strength in the final months of the war. A February 20, 1865 return showed Robert E. Lee’s army at 59,621 men present for duty. By the time Lee surrendered his command at Appomattox less than two months later, the Army of

³⁴ United States War Dept. (comp), *The War of Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, (Washington, 1880-1901), ser. I, vol. 46, pt. 2, 596. Hereafter cited as *O.R.*

Northern Virginia had shrunk to a mere 28,231 men.³⁵ Granted, desertion does not account for all of these losses, but the sharp loss of manpower indicates that desertion took a serious toll on the army in the final weeks of the war.

Witnessing this exodus, some Virginia soldiers mentioned it in letters to family and friends. Their accounts confirm that desertion only escalated during the closing months of the war. In the winter of 1864-65, James Griggs wrote his cousin: “You may see some grounds upon which to build your hopes of our final success but as for me I see none.” Griggs added, “I am certainly not overstating the number when I tell you that the average per night is 100 men and in most cases they desert to the enemy. Genl. Lee no longer uses threats of punishment to prevent this but he simply begs the men to wait until Spring.”³⁶

Middlesex County artilleryman Silas Chandler confessed to his wife in a January 1865 letter: “There is a great deal of desertion now in our army and if Virginia was evacuated it would be ten times greater in such a case I can tell any one what I would do.”³⁷

Samuel R. Johnson of the 21st Virginia Infantry echoed Chandler’s observations. In a March letter to his father, he stated: “Pa I don’t tell you this to discourage you ... but it is a sad fact, you never heard of so much disaffection in your life. We lose ten or twelve men from our brigade every time we go on picket.”³⁸ Writing a friend from the Petersburg trenches, Robert Coleman expressed doubt that the war could continue much

³⁵ *O.R.* ser. IV, vol. 3, 1182; Records of the Chief Historian, Appomattox National Historic Park.

³⁶ James Griggs to William Griggs, Winter 1864-65, Griggs Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society,

³⁷ Silas Chandler to wife, Jan. 25, 1865, Chandler Family Letters, 1862-1865, Personal Papers Collection, Library of Virginia.

³⁸ Samuel R. Johnson to Parents, Mar. 3, 1865, Johnson Family Papers, Personal Papers Collection, Library of Virginia.

longer: “It seems that all the army will quit soon and go home or to the Yankees. They are going in flocks.”³⁹

Taken together, these statistics and the personal accounts of soldiers challenge the assertions of other scholars that desertion significantly declined after 1862. This evidence challenges two more recent studies of Virginia wartime experience, by Aaron Sheehan-Dean and William Blair, both of which argue that desertion declined. However, small samples undermined these studies – Sheehan-Dean studied 1,000 men and Blair focused on ten regiments.⁴⁰ While Martin and Lonn were incorrect to argue that desertion increased in strength as the war progressed, Sheehan-Dean and Blair were equally mistaken to suggest that desertion significantly declined each year after 1862. Rather, the level of desertion fluctuated month to month throughout the war. Without question, desertion peaked in Virginia’s units in 1862. However, strong evidence suggests that it remained at consistent levels throughout the war and again reached epidemic proportions in the conflict’s final months.

Geographic Distribution of Desertion

Much like chronological patterns of desertion in Virginia units, understanding geographic and regional patterns of desertion can provide important insights into its causes and effects. While approximately 25 percent of soldiers deserted to Union forces and swore an oath of allegiance to the United States,⁴¹ it is safe to assume that most

³⁹ Robert Coleman to John, Mar. 7, 1865, Coleman-Griggs Family Letters, Personal Papers Collection, The Library of Virginia..

⁴⁰ Blair, *Virginia’s Private War*, 62; Aaron Sheehan-Dean, “Justice Has Something to Do with It: Class Relations and the Confederate Army,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 113, no. 4 (2005): 364; Ayers and Wills, *The Edge of the South*, 100.

⁴¹ Mark Weitz, *More Damning than Slaughter*, 131.

soldiers went home or hid out near home after they deserted. Evidence of this exists in the records of enrolling offices and provost marshals who were charged with arresting and returning deserters hiding within their jurisdiction. One report made by the Scott County Enrolling Office for 1864 and 1865, listed the capture of 159 deserters. Of these men, all but seventeen were residents of that county.⁴² If most soldiers went home after they deserted, identifying their county of origin becomes a critical component to understanding what caused them to desert.

Today Virginia is one of the nation's largest and most diverse states. Its 39,594 square miles extend from the Atlantic Ocean to the Blue Ridge and Alleghany Mountains to the West.⁴³ Yet Civil War Virginia was even larger and more diverse. Before forty-four western counties seceded from the state to become West Virginia, Virginia's western most boundary stretched to the Ohio River. With such a vast size, appreciating patterns of desertion within the state is critically important. For the purpose of this study, the state has been divided into five geographic regions: Tidewater, Piedmont, Shenandoah Valley, Southwest, and West Virginia. The Tidewater extends west from the Atlantic Ocean to the fall line and includes Accomack and Northampton counties on the Eastern Shore. The rolling hills of the Piedmont run west from the fall line to the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. Between the Blue Ridge and Valley Mountain Ranges lies the Shenandoah Valley. Southwest Virginia includes the Southern portion of the Valley region, but was designated as a separate region by state authorities in 1860 and will thus

⁴² Scott County, Virginia Enrolling Office, "Records 1864-1865," Virginia Historical Society, 63-68.

⁴³ United States Census Bureau, "State and County QuickFacts", <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/51000.html> [accessed January 3, 2007].

be considered a separate region here.⁴⁴ Finally, the counties that became West Virginia have been designated a separate geographic region so that the impact of this event on desertion in the units from this region can be further explored.

Contrary to the conclusions of previous studies, desertion plagued units raised from all parts of the state.⁴⁵ More deserters lived in the Piedmont than any other region.⁴⁶ At least 3,594 men (21.9 percent of all deserters) deserted from companies raised there. One factor that might increase the number of Piedmont deserters is the region's size and population. With seventeen of the state's heaviest populated counties, it stands to reason

Table 4 – Desertion by Region and Year

Region	Total	1861	1862	1863	1864	1865	No Date
Tidewater	2,361	107	906	510	443	360	35
Piedmont	3,594	108	1,250	889	809	486	52
Valley	2,050	118	821	538	404	135	34
Southwest	2,435	65	475	800	836	187	72
West Virginia	2,089	221	786	469	432	144	37
Unknown	3870	197	1132	976	968	442	155
Total	12,529	816	5,370	4,182	3,892	1,754	230

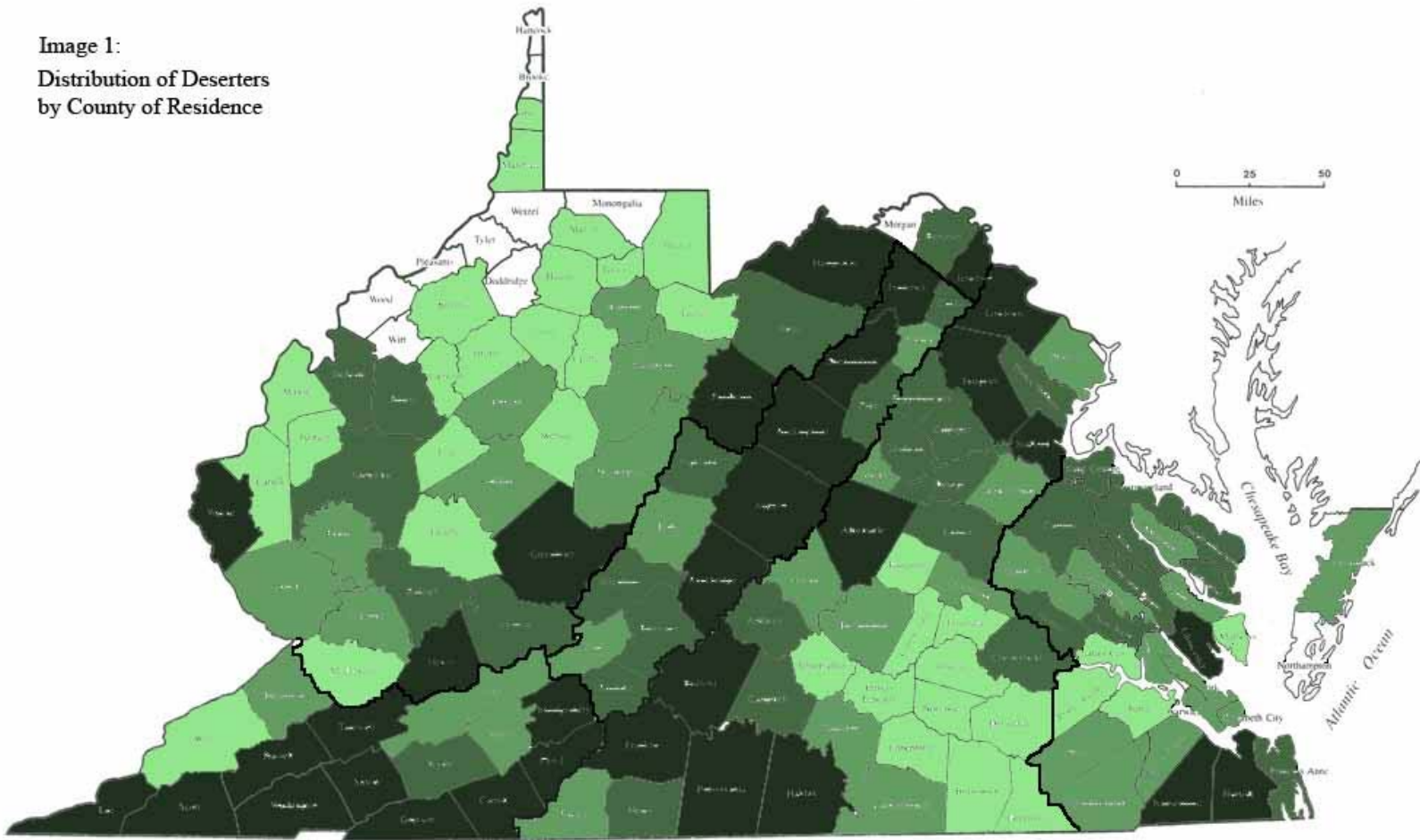
⁴⁴ Kenneth Noe, *Southwest Virginia's Railroad: Modernization and the Sectional Crisis*, (Urbana, 1994), 10.

⁴⁵ Lonn, *Desertion During the Civil War*, xvi-xvii, 67.

⁴⁶ All statistics are based on the same database mentioned in note 11. A soldier's residence was determined in one of two ways. First, if the rosters found in the *Virginia Regimental Histories Series* listed residential data for a particular soldier, it was added to each soldier's entry in the database. This information was obtained from original regimental muster rolls and the 1860 Census. Second, if no residence was listed in these rosters, the county where individual companies were raised substituted for the soldier's residence. This information was obtained Wallace, *A Guide to Virginia's Military Organization*. If the company's origin could not be determined, no county was entered. Residential data could not be determined for 3,870 soldiers.

that it would have the most deserters. As Table 4 shows, not only was desertion evenly distributed among Virginia regions; desertion also took on similar chronological patterns across the state. In four of the five regions, desertion peaked in 1862. The exception is Southwest Virginia, where desertion crested in 1864 (with 836 men). Overall, these statistics reveal that desertion inflicted havoc on units from across the state, regardless of region. In addition to assessing the distribution of deserters by region, another approach would be to analyze areas of concentrated desertion across the state. Doing this allows a clearer picture of desertion patterns to emerge.

Image 1:
Distribution of Deserters
by County of Residence



Counties and independent cities with the highest and lowest number of deserters clearly demonstrate this point. The five cities and counties with the highest number of deserters represent four of Virginia’s five regions (only West Virginia unrepresented). However, the same cannot be said if this group is extended to ten cities and counties, where five of the ten are located in the state’s Southwest region. The same is true for those areas with the lowest number of deserters. Twelve counties recorded no deserters. Of these, ten are located in the West Virginia region. Furthermore, these counties are clustered in the northwestern portion of the region and it is unlikely that they contributed many men to the army.

County or City	Number of Deserters	Region
Augusta	470	Valley
Norfolk	449	Tidewater
City of Richmond	448	Tidewater
Pittsylvania	364	Piedmont
Washington	300	Southwest

Civil and military correspondents made note of these areas of concentrated desertion. Though their efforts did not meet with much success, military officials sought to contain AWOLs and desertions early in the war. Late in 1861, squads were sent into the Shenandoah Valley with the orders to “proceed with all dispatch to Winchester and other points in the Valley of Virginia there and enroute ... to arrest and bring back or cause to return to duty all persons belonging to the army ... whom you may find absent

without leave or who may without lawful excuse overstayed their leaves.”⁴⁷ Likewise Albemarle County in the Piedmont, struggled with the rash of deserters returning home from war. “The whole county is filled with stragglers,” the local enrolling officer wrote. “With my poor means I can do little. I have arrested all who come to town and all who are near.”⁴⁸

The mountainous Southwestern portion of the state particularly suffered from deserters who flocked to this isolated region. J. E. Joyner, a traveler who passed through the area in 1863 was so shocked by the number of deserters and stragglers he saw that he wrote the Confederate War Department: “In parts of Bedford, in portions of Botetourt, Roanoke, Montgomery, Giles, Floyd, Franklin, Patrick, Henry, and portions of Pittsylvania, the people seem completely demoralized.” He continued:

“A good many deserters are passing the various roads daily, and greatly increase the demoralization. These deserters almost invariably have their guns and accoutrements with them, and when halted and asked for their furloughs or their authority to be absent from their commands, they just pat their guns and defiantly say, ‘This is my furlough,’ and even the enrolling officers turn away as peaceably as possible, evidently intimidated by their defiant manner.”

Joyner’s observations apparently came as no surprise to officials in the war department. An officer in the Bureau of Conscription attached this comments to the letter: “The information concerning deserters has long since been known.”⁴⁹

Studying the chronological and geographical distribution of deserters from Virginia units yields several important findings. First, desertion occurred on a much

⁴⁷ Samuel W. Melton to S.J.C. Moore, Oct. 11 1861, S.J.C. Moore Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

⁴⁸ John Taylor to John Randolph, June 28, 1862, Records of the Secretary of War, Letters Received, RG M437, roll 74, National Archives.

⁴⁹ *O.R.*, ser. IV, vol. 2, 721-722.

larger scale than previous scholars have thought. Second, it became a serious problem for Confederate military and civil authorities as early as May 1862 and would continue for the duration of the war. Third, areas of heavy desertion can be found across the state, but it was particularly heavy in the Shenandoah Valley and Southwest regions. Each of these points leads to a series of new questions about the causes of desertion. Knowing when the men left and where they departed for war will help uncover and explain the factors that compelled these soldiers' to leave the army in such large numbers.

Chapter 2

“Notwithstanding all my efforts”: The Causes of Desertion

“Desertions have been frequent during the whole season, and the morale of the army is somewhat impaired. The causes have been abundant for this. Exposed to the most protracted and violent campaign that is known in history, contending against overwhelming numbers, badly equipped, fed, paid, and cared for in camp and hospital, with families suffering at home, this army has exhibited the noblest qualities.”⁵⁰

J. H. Campbell to John C. Breckinridge
March 5, 1865

Deserting the army was a risky enterprise, and by doing so a soldier assumed a number of risks for himself and his family. The most obvious of these dangers was the possibility of capture by civil or military authorities. If caught, imprisonment, flogging, and even death were possible punishments. Yet, this threat paled in comparison to the dishonor and shame desertion brought to the name of the offender and his family. The

⁵⁰ J. H. Campbell to John C. Breckinridge, Mar. 5, 1865, *O.R.*, Ser. 1, Vol. 51, Pt. 2, 1066.

recruiting and military structure of the Confederate army guaranteed that companies were comprised of men from a single community. While this allowed men to serve with friends and family and ensured companionship for the men in the ranks, it also served to keep men in line. As a result, a soldier could not desert with anonymity. Soldiers often reported to correspondents back home when a member of the community deserted.

“Thomas Saunders that married Miss Hitchcock left for the Yankees last Tuesday morning,” wrote Beverley Ross, “we call it sending over Commissioners.”⁵¹ Moreover, the men knew the stigma that desertion carried. A soldier from the Ashland Light Artillery confided in his wife, “If I were to desert it would be a disgrace on my children forever.”⁵² Yet despite these risks, soldiers continued to desert. What factors can explain why a soldier would risk his life, his reputation, and the reputation of his family to leave the army?

While no single reason directly led to the desertion of 16,399 men, I will examine how larger issues like conscription, home and family concerns, troop morale, and ineffective policies to punish desertion contributed to the growth of the problem. Before examining the causes of desertion, the character of the men who deserted must first be analyzed. What can the muster rolls tell us about these men and what conclusions can we draw about desertion from what is known about their service in the army?

Character of Virginia Deserters

⁵¹ Beverly Ross to Virginia Ross, Feb. 8, 1865, Beverly Ross Letter.

⁵² Silas Chandler to Wife, Jan. 25, 1865, Chandler Letters.

In her analysis of the causes of Confederate desertion Ella Lonn asserted: “First, and probably foremost in the minds of the Confederate leaders as an explanation of disaffection stood the character of many of the privates.”⁵³ Lonn further stated that these men had been drafted into service against their will. This type of soldier “was ready to fall back into his neutrality as a deserter at the first opportunity.”⁵⁴ However, an analysis of the muster rolls for Virginia’s units calls Lonn’s assertions about the character of Confederate deserters into question.

A sizable number of Virginia deserters returned to the army after they deserted. John Preston, the Superintendent of Conscription, asserted to his superiors that his department captured and brought back 8,596 Virginia deserters.⁵⁵ While the muster rolls show that fewer men returned than Preston alleged, the numbers remain compelling. Over 19 percent of those who deserted would eventually resume their military service. However, returning to the army was not always a permanent decision. Of these men, 1,253 deserted again, sometimes as soon as the same day they came back to the army. Of those who returned for good, 781 voluntarily rejoined their unit and at least another 374 enlisted in a new unit. Civil or military authorities arrested and returned 723 men to the army. In all, muster rolls indicate that no fewer than 3,131 men returned to the ranks.⁵⁶ Because of poor record-keeping and gaps in Confederate military records, a concrete number of men who returned from desertion will never be known. While these statistics

⁵³ Lonn, *Desertion during the Civil War*, 3.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Preston, “Report of the Superintendent of Conscription,” 139.

⁵⁶ Unless otherwise cited, the author has compiled all numbers and statistics regarding the soldiers from the same database mentioned in note 11 of Chapter 1. Again, this primary source for this database are the muster rolls in the 141 volume *Virginia Regimental Histories Series*.

indicate fewer men returned than Preston asserted, a sizable portion nevertheless did come back.

A typical misconception by scholars is that deserters were most often men who joined the army late in the war. Implicit in this argument is the belief that late enlistees were likely to desert because of a perceived lack of nationalism or an inability to identify with the Confederate cause.⁵⁷ However, facts do not support this theory. Over 76 percent of the deserters from Virginia units enlisted during the first two years of the war. Moreover, 6,043 of these men enlisted in 1861.

Table 6 -- Desertion by Year of Enlistment

Year of Enlistment		Year of Desertion					
Year	Total	1861	1862	1863	1864	1865	No Date
1861	6043	790	2256	1289	1062	569	77
1862	6534	-	2824	1755	1274	549	132
1863	1886	-	-	916	738	170	16
1864	797	-	-	-	560	214	23
1865	9	-	-	-	-	9	-

After they joined, a sizable portion those men who would eventually desert remained in the army for at least a year. 48 percent of deserters who enlisted in 1861 left after 1862. Although admittedly to a lesser degree, a significant number of deserters who enlisted in the later years of the war stayed in the army for considerable period of time. Viewed in this way, it becomes clear that the vast majority of deserters did not leave at the first opportunity.

⁵⁷ Lonn, *Desertion during the Civil War*, 3.

Casualty rates serve as another indicator of the type of service performed by deserters while they remained in the army. Records indicate that 933 deserters were wounded at some point during the war. Moreover, 41 men who deserted and returned to the army would eventually die either in combat or from combat wounds. The number of deserters who held a position of responsibility further illustrates this point. At least 876 deserters served as commissioned and non-commissioned officers at some point during the war.

The picture that emerges from the muster rolls shows these soldiers to be quite different than the opportunistic “cracker” that Lonn described. While some of these men had no desire to fight, the actions of many others indicate that they wanted to fulfill their obligation to the army. It is clear that their character did not have the impact on desertion that others have claimed. Other issues such as conscription, a dangerous home-front, and low morale played a more significant role in a soldier’s decision to desert.

Conscription

April 1862 saw the first year of the war come to a close. During the previous twelve months, desertion had been remarkably light with only 95 men deserting every month from Virginia’s units. However, a dramatic shift occurred by May, when a total of 1,145 men left the ranks that month alone.⁵⁸ Thereafter, desertion never abated. What accounts for this dramatic increase in desertion? The answer lay in actions taken by Confederate authorities to build an army for a protracted conflict, specifically conscription. The First Conscription Act, passed by the Confederate Congress on April

⁵⁸ Based on statistics compiled for the database mentioned in note 7.

16, 1862, had a tremendous impact on the shape desertion took in Virginia's Confederate units.

Simply put the 1862 Conscription Act declared that "every able bodied white man between the ages of 18 and 35 to be subject to the military service of the Confederate States."⁵⁹ Congress' chief aim in approving the act was to keep men in the army at the expiration of their twelve-month enlistments. The act has come to be remembered as a tool to bring more men into the ranks; however recruitment served a secondary motive. Recognizing the dual purpose of conscription is necessary in order to understand the impact it had on desertion.

Conscription served to alienate two groups of soldiers. Veteran soldiers comprised the first group. For a full year they had slept under the stars, been subject to camp diseases, and fought and bled for their new nation. They had been the first to enlist in a furor of nationalistic spirit, and now they stood ready to see home for the first time in a year. The second alienated group, the new recruits, resented being dragged into a conflict in which few had interest in. Not all of these new soldiers were "conscripts." By joining the service before May 1862, soldiers could be assured of retaining the rights of a volunteer, namely the right to join the unit of their choice and to elect their regimental and company officers.

This effort by Confederate authorities to increase the army's strength through conscription met with mixed results. Nearly 29,000 men, or 19 percent, of Virginia soldiers entered service after April 16, 1862, according to the Superintendent of

⁵⁹ Albert Burton Moore, *Conscription and Conflict in the Confederacy*, (New York: 1963), 13.

Conscription. Around 15,000 of these men volunteered for service, while 13,933 were formally enrolled as conscripts and passed through various camps of instruction.⁶⁰

Some conscripted men showed their dislike for army life almost as soon as their service began. The camps of instruction were merely holding stations, while officials determined where to assign them within the army. The result was a high rate of desertion among these new soldiers. Many of the conscripts who that were assigned to Virginia units passed through Camp Lee in Richmond. A statistical report compiled from September 1862 to February 1865 showed that 1,487 men deserted from Camp Lee alone.⁶¹

After the conscripts left the camps of instruction, Confederate authorities had no guarantee that they would actually make it to their assigned unit. At any point along the journey to the army's encampment, a soldier could make a break for home. Apparently these escape attempts were quite successful. Robert E. Lee reported to the secretary of war in February 1863: "Our strength is not much increased by the arrival of conscripts; only four hundred and twenty-one are reported to have joined by enlistment and two hundred and eighty-seven to have returned from desertion."⁶²

Surprisingly, little correlation exists between the units with high rates of desertion and units that were assigned large numbers of conscripts. The simplest explanation for this could be that the conscripts who planned to desert had already done so before they reached their assigned units. Ultimately, conscription's real impact can be found not in

⁶⁰ Preston, "Report of the Superintendent of Conscription," 128.

⁶¹ Records of the Adjutant and Inspector General, "Statistical Report on Conscripts in Virginia", September 1862-February 1865, RG 109, Ch I, Vol. 250, National Archives.

⁶² Preston, "Report of the Superintendent of Conscription," 121.

the desertion rates of those it dragged unwillingly into the war, but in the way it affected the veteran soldiers already serving.

Conscription was a psychological blow to the veteran soldier. As Albert Moore, the foremost scholar on Confederate conscription explained: “Fundamentally ... it did not harmonize with the individualist instincts of Southerners and with their conception of genuine manhood.”⁶³ Many soldiers resented that they were required to “reenlist”. In a letter to a cousin, a Virginia private lamented, “The idea of a man’s being compelled to soldier is absurd, ridiculous. It destroys the pride a volunteer has; because he cannot say then, with truth ‘I am a volunteer’”.⁶⁴

Although the men could technically refuse to reenlist, they would be immediately drafted back into service. Realizing this, John Booker used an angry tone to describe reenlistment in his regiment to his cousin Chloe. “I didn’t intend to reenlist,” Booker noted. He recognized the futility of refusing to reenlist and asserted: “I believe that as long as we express a willingness to stay here our leaders will keep the war up. For I believe that we will all have to serve unless we desert and that I never want to do.”⁶⁵

The crisis that occurred in John Floyd’s division of the Virginia State Line in the spring of 1863 serves as a clear example of the demoralization that occurred in the ranks because of the Conscription Act. Micah Woods, an aide to Floyd wrote his father that the men were “stating their determination not to serve under any officer but one of their own free choice.” Denied this right, “squads of two, three, four, and five [are] repeatedly

⁶³ Moore, *Conscription and Conflict*, 17.

⁶⁴ C.A. James to Cousin, 1862, Bidgood Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

⁶⁵ John Booker to Chloe Unity Blair, Mar. 1, 1864, Letters of John and James Booker, Small Library, University of Virginia.

taking French leave. One regiment alone ... 116 privates and non-commissioned officers have deserted with guns in and a large supply of ammunition.”⁶⁶

When a Confederate deserted across Federal lines, a Union officer would conduct an interview to learn any military intelligence and to ascertain if the soldier sincerely wanted to swear allegiance to the United States. Occasionally an officer would write a note explaining why the soldier deserted. Some of these men indicated to Union officials that after their initial enlistment expired, they ceased being volunteer soldiers and became conscripts. These records, provide a glimpse at the frustration felt by the soldiers who enlisted in 1861.

In July 1861, William J. Fix of Augusta County enlisted in the 52nd Virginia. After deserting to the Union in March 1865, Fix told a Union officer that he had a “wife and five small children” and that he was “conscripted at the exhaustion of enlistment.”⁶⁷ Nineteen year old Ruben Gaines also joined the army in July 1861. Much like Fix, Confederate officials denied Gaines a discharge when his twelve month enlistment expired. He went home anyway and stayed there for eight months before being arrested as a deserter.⁶⁸

On January 3, 1863, almost nine months after the passage of the Conscription Act, Secretary of War James A. Seddon informed Jefferson Davis about how the act had been received by the ranks. “Yet was there scarce a murmur of disappointment and disaffection, and not an instance, as far as known, of resistance or revolt,” he stated.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Micah Woods to John Woods, Mar. 3, 1863, Micah Woods Papers, Small Library, University of Virginia.

⁶⁷ War Department Collection of Confederate Records, “Compiled Service Records of Confederate Soldiers Who Served in Organizations From the State of Virginia,” RG 109, Roll 936, National Archives. Hereafter cited as *CSR*.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, Roll 918.

⁶⁹ James A. Seddon to Jefferson Davis, Jan. 3, 1863, *O.R.*, ser. IV, vol. 2, 281.

Seddon could not have been further from the truth. In reality, the act caused an enormous amount of “disaffection” and Seddon needed to look no further than the army’s strength reports to find thousands of cases of “resistance” to the policy.

Family and Home

Unease and concern about family and home laid at the heart of Virginia soldiers’ frustration over conscription. Serving miles away from their homes, soldiers were left to speculate about the safety of loved ones. Moreover, for the vast majority of Southerners, the loss of a military-age family member meant a significant loss of labor. The particularly high rate of mobilization among Southern white males only further compounded the problem. Extended family and close friends could not provide protection or to pitch in with planting or harvest because more than likely they too were in the army. If a serious problem did occur back home, applying for a furlough was a soldier’s only legal avenue to get home. However, even under the best military conditions, only a small fraction of men would be granted extended leaves. Sadly these options were insufficient to deal with the degree of upheaval occurring across sections of the Virginia home front. As a result, some of the soldiers most affected by these problems took matters in their own hands and took unauthorized leaves.

An emergency at home could prompt a soldier to desert the army especially when he felt as though he had no chance to secure a furlough or one could not be secured in time. One such crisis was the birth of a child or an illness of a loved one. Wiley Schools of the 47th Virginia took an 84-day unauthorized leave between early July and late

September 1862, dates that correspond to the birth of his son.⁷⁰ Fragments of court-martial transcripts provide glimpse into such problems. Soldiers would disclose these events at the trial in an attempt to provide exculpatory evidence. A Virginia private asserted that while recovering at Chimberazo Hospital, he received word that his wife's tuberculosis had become debilitating. He claimed he deserted because he was the only means of support for their five children.⁷¹ A Southampton County private testified at his trial that he was needed at home to take care of his mother "who is a widow and about 50 years of age and poor."⁷²

As the war progressed, a soldier's concern about his family undoubtedly grew. By serving alongside friends and neighbors in his regiment, a soldier would be abreast of problems in his community even if he not recently received a letter from home. Soldiers would have been aware of the toll that privation, Federal raids, and Confederate impressments were taking on those behind the lines. Virginia was unique among Confederate states in that it did not pass legislation to provide financial support for the families of soldiers. Some counties such as Henrico were able to provide support to the neediest families on their own, but this result is not typical.⁷³ The Confederate government found it increasingly difficult to provide food for the army and ensure affordable and readily obtainable foodstuffs for civilians. With the help of skyrocketing inflation, the prices for flour, meal, and other necessities continued to climb despite government efforts to curtail prices.

⁷⁰ Homer D. Musselman, *47th Virginia Infantry*, (Lynchburg, Va.: 1991), 154.

⁷¹ Ruben H. Gaines, *CSR*, roll 918.

⁷² Nathaniel Felts, *CSR*, roll 863.

⁷³ Blair, *Virginia's Private War*, 75, 115.

In January 1863, in an effort to combat the ever-increasing prices of foodstuffs, the women of Henry County composed a petition to Robert M. T. Hunter, a Confederate senator representing Virginia. They asked that Congress pass legislation to place caps on the prices of food and grain. The letter that accompanied the petition clearly explained the disastrous effects the high prices had on soldier's families asserting: "Numbers of women here have not bread to last them till April and no money to buy at present prices."

The letter went on to say:

"[High prices are] starving the poor and helpless, putting fortunes into the pockets of the unpatriotic, killing the patriotism of our brave soldiers in the army and causing numbers of them to desert who never would have thought of such a thing under other circumstances."⁷⁴

The link between crises at home (in this case a lack of food) and desertion was clear in the minds of Henry County women. If the government could not or would not protect and provide for a soldier's family in his absence, he had to do so.

Because Virginia was the site of so much of the fighting in the Eastern theater, large portions of the state faced destruction when they were in the path of opposing armies. Control of these areas seesawed back and forth between Union and Confederate forces. Additionally, foraging parties wrought havoc for civilians attempting to eke out an existence. This was particularly the case later in the war in parts of the Shenandoah Valley and Southwest Virginia. Serving with troops from Southwest Virginia, a staff officer of the Virginia State Line explained to his father: "I confess that I am not at all astonished at the course of these men. They are principally from the border – a region occupied or at the mercy of the enemy. Their wives and family in a majority of the cases

⁷⁴ Raleigh W. Dyer to Robert M. T. Hunter, Jan. 15, 1863, Records of the Secretary of War, Letters Received, RG M437, roll 89, National Archives.

are helpless and destitute of the absolute necessities of life, and worse than this, are subject to the insults and depredations of the marauding parties of each side that infest their whole country.”⁷⁵

Unable to secure a furlough, soldiers responded to these threats to their families in several ways. The lack of legal means to resolve these matters undeniably led men to desert. While these men may or may not have intended to return, the army considered them deserters and charged them as such if they were ever captured. Facing a trial for desertion in 1864, Thomas Taylor of the 48th Virginia wrote his congressman and stressed his loyalty to the Confederacy. Stating his desire “to prove to the world that I am true to the cause and to the flag,” he stated: “I had never had a furlough. . . . I only wished to see home for a few days.”⁷⁶

As the war dragged on, soldiers became increasingly restless in the ranks. Some began looking for opportunities to go home either through a furlough or by deserting. Entering 1865 this was especially the case. In a New Year’s letter to his wife, Jamison Bailey had a less than optimistic outlook on the prospect of furloughs in the year to come. “If I don’t get a furlow this winter I think I will have to take one in the spring anyhow fer I am getting very tired of the war and I think the Confederacy is about gon up and it is no use for me to stay when most every body else are a going home in the spring and if all goes that says they are going thar will be but a few left,” he asserted.⁷⁷ True to his word, Bailey deserted in April. The commander of a company of Pittsylvania County soldiers reported to his parents in early March: “Eleven of them left last week for home, one of them left me a note stating that he was very sorry he had to leave under such

⁷⁵ Micah Woods to John Woods, Mar. 5, 1863, Micah Woods Papers.

⁷⁶ Thomas Taylor to H.S. Foote, Feb. 7, 1864, CSR, Roll 915.

⁷⁷ Jamison Bailey to Polly Bailey, Jan. 1, 1865, Bailey Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

circumstance, but he has business to attend to and that he saw there was no chance for a furlough.”⁷⁸

Rather than taking an unauthorized leave, other soldiers used a different tactic in order to be closer to home. These men would desert their regiments and either join units stationed near their homes or join irregular units known as partisan rangers. Although they were still technically in service, these men hindered the efforts of military authorities to wage war. Robert E. Lee particularly recognized the dangers caused by this type of desertion. In a dispatch to the Adjutant General, Lee noted, “There is a natural preference to serve in the vicinity of their homes, and such organizations ... cause men to desert from the general service.” Lee continued, “Every man who may wish to get home to serve would only have to desert and join some command agreeable to him.”⁷⁹

To stop this practice, Lee strongly encouraged the secretary of war to order “those engaged in recruiting new commands to take sufficient precautions against receiving deserters.”⁸⁰ Furthermore, with regard to irregular units, he suggested that “their local character should be abolished by law, all deserters from other armies be returned to their proper commands, and all authority to raise [irregular] companies ... be revoked.”⁸¹

Did a soldier’s primary duty lie at home, with his family and community, or in the army to a young nation? The wartime governor of Alabama, Thomas Watts, articulated this paradox in a circular meant to appeal to absent soldiers: “Many of you have, doubtless, remained at home after the expiration of your furloughs, without the intention to desert the cause of your country. Many of you have left your Commands without

⁷⁸ Samuel R. Johnson to Parents, Mar. 3, 1865, Johnston Family Papers, Personal Papers Collection, Library of Virginia.

⁷⁹ Robert E. Lee to Samuel Cooper, Feb. 4, 1865, *O.R.*, ser. I, vol. 46, pt. 2, 1200.

⁸⁰ Robert E. Lee to Secretary of War, Aug. 14, 1864, *O.R.*, ser. I, vol. 42, pt. 2, 1175.

⁸¹ Robert E. Lee to Jefferson Davis, Jan. 24, 1864, *O.R.*, ser. I, vol. 33, 1124.

leave, under the notion that your highest duty required you to provide sustenance and protection to your families.”⁸² For Watts, the answer was clear: a soldier’s first duty was to his country. Yet many soldiers disagreed. Kept in the army by the Conscription Act, denied the right to visit home, and with families and communities subject to the privations and depredations of war, some men had had enough.

These sentiments were best voiced by soldier from Southwest Virginia, who, upon being captured at home, stated: “You can send me back, or shoot me, or do what you like, but I tell you now, I’ll desert again, the very fust chance I git. My home and my fambly is mo’ to me than anything, and if I git killed no slaveholder ani’t a-gwine to take keer o’ them.”⁸³

Disaffection and Low Morale

Much like conscription and concern about their families, low morale and disaffection significantly contributed to desertion among Virginia soldiers. In any protracted conflict, morale can rise and fall. Yet for Virginia soldiers several factors influenced morale and in turn caused desertion. The impact of two such factors, conscription and the well being of their families - has already been discussed. In addition to these, military defeats, war weariness, and insufficient food and clothing all lowered morale to the point where, for some, soldiering became unbearable.

No one wants to die for a lost cause. To continue to throw themselves in front of Union bullets, Confederates needed to believe that victory could still be achieved. For

⁸² Thomas Watts, “To Alabama Soldiers Absent from their Commands,” 2 Oct. 1864, *Confederate Imprints*, roll 33, no. 1476.

⁸³ John S. Wise, “Deserter Hunting,” *Putnam’s Monthly: An Illustrated Monthly of Literature, Art and Life*, (New Rochelle, 1909), 601.

two and a half years, the Army of Northern Virginia delivered victories, which served to raise the morale of the southern people and the Confederate armies. However, the military defeats of July 1863 crippled the spirit of the army. Just days after the defeat at Gettysburg, Captain Frank Imboden of the 18th Virginia Cavalry noted with surprise that “no evidence what ever of demoralization is visible in Lee’s great old army.”⁸⁴ Yet in little more than two weeks, things could not have been more different. Imboden noted on July 31, “Another month has passed and the results are perhaps more disastrous than were in Feb. 1862. Vicksburg, Port Hudson, Gettysburg have been fought and leave a gloom on the country ... Even the army grows despondent and evidence of demoralization is visible. More desertions than unusual are occurring.”⁸⁵ While the Army of Northern Virginia would regain its winning edge, the dramatic decline in morale and corresponding increase in desertion after Gettysburg demonstrated the need for important military success both to keep spirits high behind the lines and to keep the army from breaking apart.

By early 1865 a considerable number of soldiers had been in service for almost four years. An even larger number had been serving for almost three years. The army and the nation had been exhausted by war. Writing to his wife Beverly Ross of the 56th Virginia observed:

“You will see also from today’s paper that the peace question is knocked in the head and we have nothing now to hope for and may reasonably calculate upon another four years of war if Old Jeff can keep his army together and feed them for that length of time, which I think is doubtful,

⁸⁴ Frank Imboden Diary, July 13, 1863, Papers of John D. Imboden, The Small Library, University of Virginia.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, July 31, 1863.

for the men are generally tired of war and have little idea of going through another campaign.”⁸⁶

Ross’ letter reveals quite a bit about the morale and temper of the men in the ranks.

Nowhere in the letter did he hope for victory, only peace. By 1865, most Virginia soldiers simply wanted the war to end. When the war continued to drag on, some soldiers simply ended their part in the war.

As detrimental as military setbacks and war weariness were, nothing was more harmful to army morale than inadequate and insufficient food and clothing. Food shortages began to haunt the Confederate armies as early as October 1862, and feeding the men became a constant struggle.⁸⁷ As the war progressed, foraging took on greater importance. By late 1864 bonus furloughs of thirty days were offered to any man who could bring in 20,000 pounds of forage.⁸⁸ By November 1864, want of food had some fearing the army was nearing a breaking point. R. G. Cole of the Confederate Subsistence Department wrote to his superior, “I find that much complaint is arising upon the subject of the bread ration. It is alleged also that much disaffection leading to desertion among the men is increasing.”⁸⁹

In January 1865 Robert E. Lee expressed similar concerns to the secretary of war. Lee wrote, “I ... think that the insufficiency of food and non-payment of the troops have more to do with the dissatisfaction among the troops than anything else. ... The ration is too small for men who have to undergo so much exposure and labor as ours.”⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Beverly Ross to Anne Goodrich Ross, Feb. 8, 1865, Beverly Ross Letter.

⁸⁷ Lonn, *Desertion during the Civil War*, 9.

⁸⁸ Blair, *Virginia’s Private War*, 129-30.

⁸⁹ R.G. Cole to S.B. Northrop, Nov. 30, 1864, Frank G. Ruffin Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

⁹⁰ Lee, *Wartime Papers*, 886.

In addition to food, the army lacked shoes needed to keep the army marching and the uniforms and blankets needed to stay warm during the winters. Lieutenant Luther Mills of Halifax County explained the pitiful condition of the men in November 1864. Mills wrote: “Many of the men were entirely destitute of blankets and overcoats and it was really distressing to see them shivering over a little fire made of green pine wood.” He added, “I have never seen our army so completely whipped.”⁹¹

Morale of soldiers is an important factor to take into account when studying desertion among Virginia troops. While few soldiers left solely because of low morale. Unbearable army life, when combined with other factors, could push soldiers over the edge. The average man could only endure so much.

Amnesty and Ineffective Punishment

The Confederate government’s policy for the punishment of desertion remains one aspect of the problem that has received scant attention from historians. What they would have found is that the lack of a coherent policy toward desertion and deserters throughout the war only caused it to increase. In theory, the preferred punishment for soldiers found guilty of desertion was death. The 20th Article of War stated:

“All officers and soldiers who have received pay, or have been duly enlisted in the services of the Confederate States, and shall be convicted of having deserted the same, shall suffer death, or such other punishment as, by sentence of a court-martial, shall be inflicted.”⁹²

⁹¹ George D. Harmon, ed., “Letters of Luther Rice Mills – A Confederate Soldier,” *North Carolina Historical Review*, (July 1927): 303.

⁹² “Articles of War: An Act for Establishing Rules and Articles for the Government of the Armies of the Confederate States,” *Confederate Imprints*, roll 19, no. 1212.

In reality, proportionally few, unlucky souls were executed for desertion. Most deserters were never captured; and even then, court-martials would convict them of the lesser charge of being absent without leave. Only after a soldier had deserted multiple times or in the face of the enemy, could he reasonably expect the death penalty. To compound the problem further, on several occasions during the war, the Confederate government issued amnesty to all AWOL soldiers. Officers and enlisted men alike knew that the system to punish offenders was inept and useless. As a consequence, soldiers took advantage of this leniency. Rather than serving as a deterrent, the lack of a coherent policy to punish desertion only served to increase it.

Military commanders understood the disastrous effects leniency toward desertion was having on the army. Writing in October 1863 to the secretary of war, Robert E. Lee feared “a relapse into that lenient policy which our past experience has shown to be so ruinous to the army.” Lee urged Seddon to adopt a course that would inflict upon the guilty party “the sternest punishment, and leave the offender without hope of escape making the penalty inevitable.”⁹³ E. P. Alexander, Lee’s chief artilleryman, had similar frustrations about the way deserters were punished. Alexander asserted, “The principal evils of our present system of discipline are, I believe, the lack of uniformity in the punishments.”⁹⁴

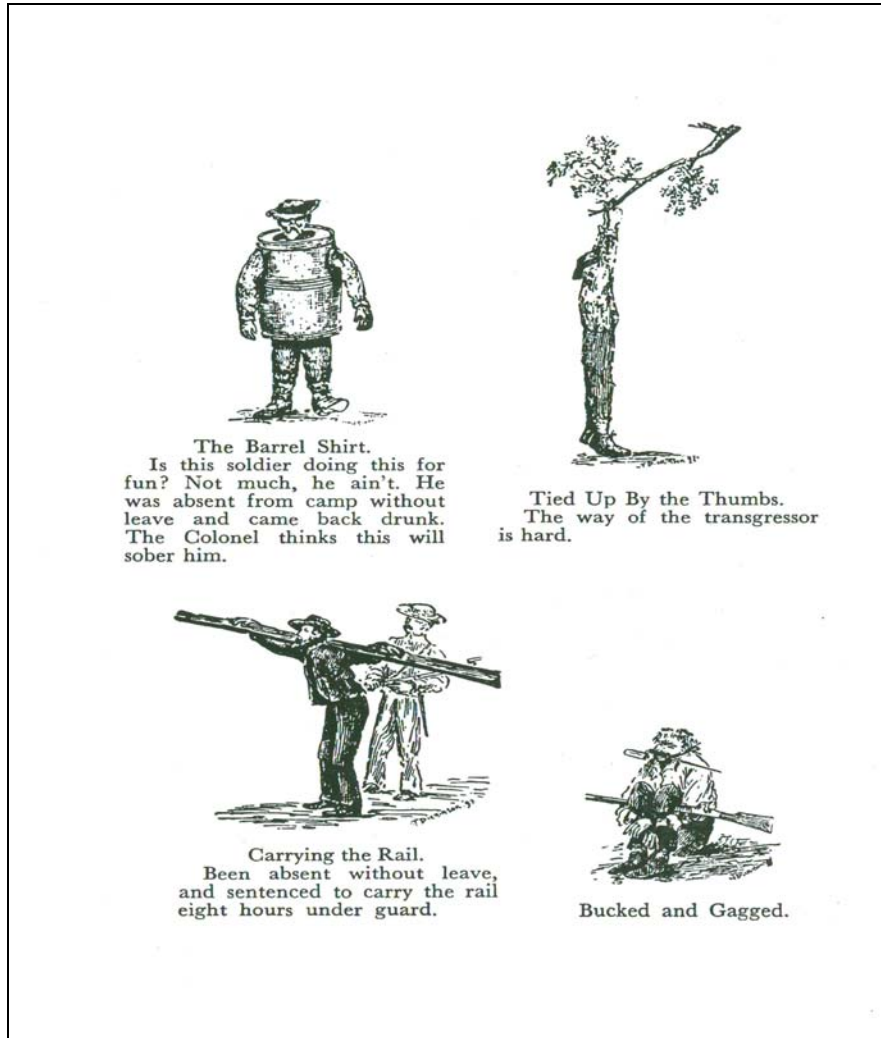
Alexander’s assertion was correct. Once caught a deserter was sent back to his corps for trial by court-martial. If a soldier had been gone for more than thirty days, he would be charged with desertion. The jury and presiding officer of the court had full discretion to find the defendant guilty of a lesser charge which did not carry the death

⁹³ Robert E. Lee to James A. Seddon, Oct. 30, 1863, *O.R.*, ser. I, vol. 29, pt. 2, 806-7.

⁹⁴ E. P. Alexander to H. E. Young, Mar. 10, 1865, *O.R.*, ser. I, vol. 46, pt. 2, 1300.

penalty. Throughout the war juries were reluctant to condemn a man to death for desertion, unless he was a habitual offender. Yet even in these cases, hard labor was the preferred sentence. Most often, soldiers were sentenced to a variety of other punishments designed both to humiliate the guilty party and to serve as a deterrent to others.

Image 2: Army Punishments



Source: John O. Casler, *Four Years in the Stonewall Brigade*.

Some of the punishments for desertion and AWOL seem almost comical. Soldiers might be ordered to wear a placard or a barrel with the word “Deserter” painted or carved onto it. Other times a soldier had to carry a long wooden rail while under guard for a

predetermined number of hours. One of the most unusual forms of punishment was the “buck and gag”. While sitting the deserter would have his hands secured around his knees, a rifle placed between his arms and legs, and a bayonet put in his mouth. All guilty offenders were docked pay for the time they were absent. One of the more serious penalties was to have a “D” branded on the soldier’s hand as a lasting symbol of shame.

In an effort to put a stop to these practices, E. P. Alexander proposed to the Judge Advocate General of the Army of Northern Virginia that desertion be clearly defined so that punishment could be effective and consistent. He wanted to designate two distinct classes of desertion. The first and more serious form entailed deserting to the enemy, deserting with a weapon, or a second desertion offence. These crimes were to be punished by death, without exception. Alexander considered it a lesser offence if a soldier deserted to his home. For this he was to receive six years hard labor.⁹⁵ He also proposed that courts-martial could not convict a soldier of a lesser crime, if he was charged with desertion. Alexander’s plan would have made significant improvements in way deserters were punished. Unfortunately for the Confederacy, Alexander submitted his plan less than a month before Appomattox. His proposals were four years too late.

General amnesties issued by the War Department, individual states, and military commanders only complicated matters. Southern leaders understood that issuing these proclamations only served to undermine morale and did little to swell the ranks. As the Davis administration pondered another amnesty in July 1864, the secretary of war wrote Robert E. Lee: “Such amnesty might have more effecting inducing desertions with the hope of future pardons than of repressing the offense and inducing the return of

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1301.

deserters.”⁹⁶ Despite knowing this, and on behalf of the president, he asked Lee to issue a blanket pardon anyway.

Even the common soldier saw the futility of the amnesty proclamations. One soldier told his mother, “In our command the army has been much increased of late by the return of deserters . . . These deserters returned under Davis’s Proclamation, though I am sorry to say that about an equal number ran away as soon as the Proclamation was received.”⁹⁷

Lee was clearly frustrated by the lack of a coherent policy for dealing with deserters. Repeated offers of amnesty and the excessive remitting of death sentences particularly bothered Lee. Several times he disagreed with Jefferson Davis over the proper course for discouraging desertion. On one of these occasions, Lee received a dispatch indicating that 100 deserters had escaped from a divisional guardhouse. The letter’s author believed the men deserted again because “every man sentenced to be shot for desertion in his division in the past two months has been reprieved.”⁹⁸ Lee forwarded the dispatch to the War Department adding the note: “I think a rigid execution of the law is [sic] in the end. The great want of our army is firm discipline.”⁹⁹ When the dispatch finally received the president’s attention several weeks later, Davis returned it to Lee with the terse note: “If the sentences are reviewed and remitted that is not the proper subject for the criticism of a military commander.”¹⁰⁰

The clearest examples of how inconsistent punishment affected attitudes toward desertion come from the soldiers themselves. Patrick County trooper Henry Hefflefinger

⁹⁶ James A. Seddon to Robert E. Lee, July 30, 1864, ser. I, vol. 40, pt. 3, 817.

⁹⁷ Hodijah Lincoln Meade to Jane Meade, Aug. 15, 1863, Meade Family Papers, Library of Virginia.

⁹⁸ Osman Latrobe to W.H. Taylor, Nov. 14, 1864, *O.R.* ser. I, vol. 42, pt. 3, 1213.

⁹⁹ Robert E. Lee to Adjutant and Inspector General’s Office, Nov. 18, 1864, *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Jefferson Davis, Nov. 29, 1864, *Ibid.*

wrote in November 1862, “I want to come home very bad but I dont think I will runaway yet awile they get to punishing runaways tolerable bad.”¹⁰¹ However, by May 1863, more lenient treatment of deserters made an attempt look more favorable. Hefflefinger noted, “There is heap of men running away at nite. ... I [have] a good mind to leave myself.”¹⁰² When the authorities cracked down were also most likely times when larger efforts were made to arrest absentees. The laxity of punishment served as an indicator of the possibility of success.

When analyzing why soldiers from Virginia units deserted, it is important to remember that for the vast majority of men, there was no single cause. Rather, a number of factors combined together to compel a soldier to leave the army. Whatever the cause, more than 16,000 men deserted from Virginia units over the course of the war. The vast majority of these men did not leave the army because they were cowards or opportunists looking for their first chance to desert. Rather, a variety of causes including conscription, anxiety over their families, declining morale, and lenient punishments combined to make desertion an acceptable risk.

¹⁰¹ Henry A. Hefflefinger to unknown, Nov. 29, 1862, Henry A. Hefflefinger Civil War Letters, Small Library, University of Virginia.

¹⁰² Hefflefinger to unknown, May 30, 1863, *Ibid.*.

Conclusion

The Effects of Desertion

The full effect of desertion on the Confederate military and the Southern home front remains difficult to quantify. Its impact cannot simply be measured in numbers. The loss of manpower to the Confederate army because of Virginia's desertions was equivalent to losing a division at full strength. These were men the Confederacy could not afford to lose. Yet desertion also devastated morale both in the army and on the home front. Moreover, deserters who did not go home, but instead became outlaws roaming the countryside, served to create an atmosphere of chaos and lawlessness in mountainous regions across the South. Only by understanding its impact on the military and the home front will desertion's true importance become apparent.

Desertion impacted the Confederate military in three distinct ways. In the most obvious sense, it prevented military leaders from employing the army's full strength against the Union. Every soldier lost to desertion made Confederate attacks that much weaker and defensive lines that much thinner. Likewise, soldiers who deserted their original units and joined ones closer to home without authorization disrupted army organization and undercut military planning. To make matters worse, when a soldier left the army he often took his gun and ammunition with him. Robert E. Lee sent several warnings to the War Department that desertions were draining the army of both men and arms – both of which were precious commodities in the South.¹⁰³

In addition to losing manpower, deserters were also known to share military intelligence with the enemy. Soldiers who deserted across enemy lines and took the oath of loyalty to the United States would at times share bits of information in an effort to prove their loyalty. This often happened inadvertently. Information ranging from the morale of the men and conditions in the army to reports of the army's strength and rumors about movements, could help Union officers better gauge their enemy. This type of information would have been particularly detrimental to the strategies of generals like Robert E. Lee who often relied on secrecy and deception to get the better of their military foe.

Aside from the strategic problems desertion that caused to the military, it also had a detrimental psychological effect on the men who remained. Lee once confided to the secretary of war: "These desertions have a very bad effect upon the troops who remain and give rise to apprehension."¹⁰⁴ This was especially the case as the war drew to a

¹⁰³ Lee, *Wartime Papers*, 910.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

close. Watching their comrades leave the army, the men who remained must have experienced thoughts of hopelessness. Excuses could be made earlier in the war when soldiers equated desertion with cowardice. Yet it was another matter entirely when soldiers began seeing comrades beside whom they had fought for several years leave the army.

Perhaps the most serious effects of desertion happened to those behind the lines, on the home front. Not all deserters went home and quietly sat out the war. Groups of deserters from both the Union and Confederate armies fled to the nearest hideout to avoid capture. The mountains of Southwest and West Virginia made ideal places to lay low. Some of these men banded together in an attempt to survive. These groups would raid towns, ambush home guard units, and steal from local homes.

Young Lucy Breckinridge and her family became quite frightened when they learned that a small group of Union deserters was living in the woods near their home in Botetourt County. One afternoon, one of these men cornered the family's servant and began asking questions about how to sneak into the house and where the family kept its silver. Alarmed, the servant recounted the story to the Breckinridge women. Four nights later, Lucy was awakened from her sleep by a gun shot. "I acknowledge I am nervous about *that man*," she later wrote in her diary. "I jumped up and went into Sister Julia's room and found her and Eliza up, and soon Ma joined us. ...I stood by the window watching all night and heard two more shots."¹⁰⁵

Events like these could have undermined nationalism among civilians. In an 1863 letter describing the immense problem Southwest Virginia was having with deserters, a

¹⁰⁵ Mary D. Robertson, ed., *Lucy Breckinridge of Grove Hill: The Journal of A Virginia Girl, 1862-1864*, (Columbia: 1997), 197-98.

Henry County man observed that “the people seem completely demoralized.” A large segment of the population believed this level of desertion indicated that “we are whipped and are bound to be overrun and subjugated.”¹⁰⁶ This chaotic environment only caused further desertion. In some places desertion was cyclical - chaos at home caused others to desert in order to protect their family and property.

While it would be going too far to assert that desertion cost the Confederacy the Civil War, few could argue that desertion did not have an impact on war. If this is indeed the case, desertion studies will continue to have an impact on Civil War scholarship. However, questions about deserters and desertion remain and more work is needed. Further scholarship could help answer unresolved questions about the socio-economic backgrounds of deserters. Moreover, additional study is needed to understand how the war behind the lines, the war against poverty, hunger, and fear, changed the Southern home front. What can studies about masculinity reveal about the tension between duty to country and duty to family? By looking at the many facets of Confederate desertion, Civil War historians can address many of the more complex questions facing the field today.

Luther Rice Mills of Halifax County began a March 2, 1865 letter to his brother by stating: “Something is about to happen.” Mills knew the war was finally coming to an end. For him, one of the clearest indications of this was the enormous number of desertions taking place nightly. He commented, “The men seem to think desertion no crime and hence never shoot a deserter when he goes over [to the enemy] – they always shoot but never hit.”¹⁰⁷ Mills’ words imply that by intentionally missing the fleeing men

¹⁰⁶ J.E. Joyner to Sidney Smith, Aug. 15, 1863, *O.R.*, ser. IV, vol. 2, 721.

¹⁰⁷ Harman, “Letters of Luther Rice Mills,” 307.

soldiers had begun to condone desertion as a justifiable act. The scale of desertions over the war had been so great and its so causes clear, that in the end, soldiers refused to condemn those who left, not knowing if they might themselves be the next to leave.

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