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Reading

Mrs. Waling

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The Reality of the Civil War

The reality of the Civil War was something soldiers today have never experienced. In The Red Badge of Courage, by Stephen Crane, Henry Fleming urgently enlisted in the war. He had read of marches, sieges, conflicts, and he had longed to see it all (Crane 3). When he got to the regiment, his eagerness fell flat. He became terrified of fighting and he hid during the beginning of the war. Like in this story, many men who enlisted were very young; some were only about thirteen.

The number of the North and South soldiers killed in the 2-day Battle of Shiloh was far greater than what was killed in all previous battles in the Civil War, which is ironic because Shiloh was a Biblical name, meaning “a place of peace” (Boomhower 57). In this battle, approximately 20,000 people were killed. There was very poor communication and a great amount of orders came from “word of mouth.” Battle was terrifying, probably the most horrific thing a person ever saw. Some challenges were finding enough food and water to stay alive. Others included rationalizing people’s own actions, staying with the regiment, and having faith in fellow comrades. Many soldiers thought their generals were incompetent (Crane 23).

Modern soldiers will never exactly experience the treacherous fears of the soldiers from the Civil War. Battle was superlatively brutal. One of a soldier's greatest fears was dying and being buried. They didn't know how or when they would die and death came upon them from a variety of reasons. Being wounded, suffering from starvation, and becoming ill were ways the soldiers died, all of them nightmarish. Most burials were deplorable. After a battle, each regiment was in charge of burying their deceased comrades. Soldiers that could be identified had a headboard placed at their grave; if they were unidentifiable, they were buried last. Their poor friends and families would never know who they died. If there were a large number of dead soldiers, a shallow trench was dug and they were thrown in and quickly covered with dirt before they decayed (if they hadn't already).

Prison camps were another great fear; becoming a prisoner of the enemy was torture, sometimes literally. In 1864, there was a prison camp in Georgia built to hold 10,000 prisoners, but 33,000 Union soldiers were crowded into it. These prisoners were treated so cruelly that after the Civil War was over, the commandant of this camp was tried for war crimes. They had to sleep on the floor and they were lucky if they had a blanket. Soldiers sometimes took the blanket of a dead soldier to stay warm. Prisoners were fed meagerly and they caught rats to eat so they had enough to stay alive. Sometimes a game called baseball was played in the evening for entertainment, or prisoners had a promenade (the joining in of religious hymns) before trying to get some sleep at night.

Also, the Civil War soldiers greatly feared getting wounded and going to an army hospital. Those who suffered through such had the worst fate. Most injuries occurred at close range, so flesh was ripped open and arms and legs were gone easily. To make matters worse, the knowledge of the doctors was primitive. When morphine and chloroform weren't available to ease pain, sometimes doctors used bourbon or whiskey. Arms and legs were amputated if they had wounds too severe for treatment. Iron poker were heated until white-hot and put directly on wounds to stop bleeding. Some soldiers tried to doctor themselves by using sap from certain barks of trees, because doctors developed a bad reputation for their practices. There really wasn't a way to keep hospitals sanitary, so many people went through pain and their wounds became infected. Most of those unfortunate soldiers died.

There are books about the romance and fame of Civil War soldiers. In such stories, the soldiers sometimes painlessly witness everything and enjoy defending their homes. In reality, each and every soldier went through pain in the Civil War, whether it was mentally, emotionally, or physically. A lot of soldiers do revel in defending their home and family and friends; but they do so with much pain. The Civil War soldiers went through so much more than other people. They suffered tremendously. However, their suffering paid off. No man was allowed to own another ever again.

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