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The War for the Common Soldier: How Men Thought, Fought, and Survived in Civil War Armies

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The War for the Common Soldier: How Men Thought, Fought, and Survived in Civil War Armies

Description

How did Civil War soldiers endure the brutal and unpredictable existence of army life during the conflict? This question is at the heart of Peter S. Carmichael's sweeping new study of men at war. Based on close examination of the letters and records left behind by individual soldiers from both the North and the South, Carmichael explores the totality of the Civil War experience--the marching, the fighting, the boredom, the idealism, the exhaustion, the punishments, and the frustrations of being away from families who often faced their own dire circumstances. Carmichael focuses not on *what* soldiers thought but rather *how* they thought. In doing so, he reveals how, to the shock of most men, well-established notions of duty or disobedience, morality or immorality, loyalty or disloyalty, and bravery or cowardice were blurred by war.

Digging deeply into his soldiers' writing, Carmichael resists the idea that there was "a common soldier" but looks into their own words to find common threads in soldiers' experiences and ways of understanding what was happening around them. In the end, he argues that a pragmatic philosophy of soldiering emerged, guiding members of the rank and file as they struggled to live with the contradictory elements of their violent and volatile world. Soldiering in the Civil War, as Carmichael argues, was never a state of being but a process of becoming.

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The Introduction is available to download here.

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*the war for the
Common
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How Men Thought, Fought,
and Survived in Civil War Armies

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PETER S. CARMICHAEL

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Introduction

Michigan's John Pardington slept among the dead and the dying at Antietam. The slim, full-bearded twenty-three-year-old awoke to smells and sights that exceeded his worst expectations of war. The battered landscape aroused Pardington's curiosity as he left camp to get a closer view of the destruction. Pardington was understandably intrigued, given that his regiment had missed the fighting on September 17, 1862. Just two months earlier, in response to Abraham Lincoln's call for three hundred thousand Union volunteers, John had quit his job as a store clerk, enlisted in the Twenty-Fourth Michigan Infantry, and said goodbye to his wife, Sarah, and their infant daughter in Trenton, Michigan. The mighty conflict that Pardington could only imagine as something on a distant horizon was suddenly upon him.

Pardington only had to walk "a stone throw of our camp" to see bodies mangled by war. Hundreds of Confederate wounded lay sprawled before him, barely holding on to life without an attending nurse or doctor. "The awfulest sight you ever see Sarah," a shaken Pardington scribbled in a letter to his wife. "Some Dying some legs off and arms and they are as lousey as they can be. They are lying in Barns and sheds just as they can get shelter." "I go down and see them every day," he added. "There is one or two die every day. It is an awful sight." His outpouring of sympathy, though deeply felt, did not soften his hatred for the Southern cause or temper his desire to kill a Confederate. "Dear Sarah," he wrote, "I must now close for I must clean my gun and keep in good fighting trim so I can Pop a Rebel every time."¹

Pardington's bravado could not mask his struggles in deciphering God's intentions in such human suffering. He felt deeply for the Confederates wasting away in makeshift hospitals, even though he despised their rebellious cause and believed the fight to preserve the Union was a sacred one. Pardington never countenanced the idea that God might abandon the North, yet he could not help but wonder about providential intentions after so much killing when the prospect of peace appeared so distant. Was anything gained or lost from the slaughter of nearly twenty-three thousand men in a single day at Antietam? "God grant it there has been enough lives sacrificed in this unholy war," he pleaded. "Now I should think if the head men would see the suffering it [has] caused they would close it at once." Yet Pardington was not sure if anyone could rein in this seemingly unstoppable conflict until both nations were drained of blood. "But I hope for myself if it is ever settled it will be done satisfactory to Both Parties. If it aint let it go on till ether side or the other is Anihilated. It is very strong talk but it must be so. But things somtime look dark. But the darkest Hour is just befor day. We are on the Right and god will Help us and favor our arms."² Despite his confident words, Pardington worried that God's ways were not discernible. As with most Americans, John expected the war to follow a predictable cause-and-effect equation in which divine favor would reward his people with victory. He discovered, as all soldiers did, that God ruled over man in ways that existed beyond human comprehension and control.³

The terrible images of Antietam stayed with Pardington, but they never fully possessed his thoughts or owned his emotions. He rarely dwelled on the evils of war when writing home, always striving to be cheerful, believing that if he cultivated the right feelings, he would uplift his wife and protect her from the dangers of despair. Keeping spirits up throughout the war would be no easy task when his wife Sarah lived on the brink of destitution. She boarded with relatives out of financial necessity, often finding herself in the crosshairs of family squabbles, and at one point she considered cutting her hair for extra cash. All the while Pardington scraped by on the army's irregular and paltry pay. When the financial demands became so severe Sarah considered going outside the home and taking a job, John flew into a rage. If she ever suggested working again, he would desert and she would be responsible for his crime that would dishonor the family for generations to come. The incident passed and Sarah remained at home, fulfilling John's idealized vision of their marriage as a partnership in war. By all accounts, Sarah played the part, encouraging her husband to do his duty, to be a good Christian, and to know that their letters kept them emotionally connected. "Dear Sarah," John wrote in a typical letter, "God and your Prayers give me strength and courage to Pass through whatever may be

my lot. . . . I have Put a little Pocket in that Blue flannel shirt right By my heart and there you and Baby lays night and day (that is the locket) the one you sent me last. I keep it in the Bible and I carry that in my Breast Pocket. So you see dear I have you By me all the time and through every danger. I will try and not get you hurt.”⁴

As soon as Pardington buttoned his blue sack coat and shouldered a musket, he turned to Sarah as his spiritual comrade in war. He beseeched her to pray for him in almost every letter. Her words soothed his emotions and inspired him to live a godly life. He put down the bottle and picked up a Bible, showing himself and Sarah his deep desire to live and fight like a Christian warrior. His high aspirations reflected the society that had sent him off to war. The North, like the South, looked to war as a moral purifier for men who would, through a disciplined and religious life in the ranks, achieve character. Pardington promised to return home a different man. The shame of having surrendered to drink in his past clearly haunted him; there were too many memories of coming home full of whiskey and rage. What transpired during their late-night altercations is impossible to say from John’s letters, but in admitting his sin Pardington found hope in the Lord’s eternal promise of redemption. He also sought forgiveness from his wife: “Sarah,” Pardington pleaded, “if I could recall those nights I would sacrifice my right hand But you will forgive me wont you dear and I make a faithful Promise before God if ever I get back to you I will live a different life.”⁵ Like so many Northern and Southern men, Pardington underwent a conversion experience in the ranks, believing that fighting made the man and that courage and piety were the pillars of a dutiful soldier sacrificing for the nation by leaving his beloved wife and family behind.



If the scenes from Antietam had caused Pardington to wonder if God directed the war, then the disaster at Fredericksburg shattered his belief that wartime conduct would lead to predictable results. The useless slaughter of Union soldiers on December 13, 1862, showed Pardington that acts of supreme courage, even when inspired by a just cause, could not defeat impregnable Confederate works or overcome bungling Union generalship. The deaths were indiscriminate, impersonal, and gruesome. Shell fragments tore into the bodies of comrades while he stood unharmed, leading him to think that God must have shielded him. And yet Pardington walked away from his first battle feeling “out of spirits.” He did not care “how quick they comprise this thing.” Only a week later he regained his emotional equilibrium when he reflected upon his own survival. Only Providence, he reasoned, could have protected him from death.



John H. Pardington left his Michigan home in the summer of 1862 with the Twenty-Fourth Michigan Infantry. Once in the field, he struggled to find the hand of Providence in human affairs, but he never doubted that the Union cause was a righteous one and that military service purified his love for his wife, Sarah.

(Photo courtesy of Tod Davis and Gettysburg National Military Park)

“Thank God,” Pardington wrote, “I have come out safe though our foarces suffered teberall and lucky enough for us that we left as we did for had we staid there another day they would completely destroyed our army.”⁶ Pardington’s gratitude to Providence has to be placed side by side with his acknowledgment that luck and military field position determined who lived and who won. Pardington composed a letter full of trepidation to Sarah on January 18: “But I tell you Sarah I don’t like much to cross that river in the same Place as we did before. I wold not care so much if we only had them on equal footing. But to take them w[h]ere they are behind such entrenchment and Barricade it dont seem fair.”⁷

In the weeks that followed the Battle of Fredericksburg, Pardington tried to avoid any talk of the dismal war situation. His letters were devotionals to Sarah, for in their love he generally found peace and contentment in the ranks. As was with any soldier, however, emotions could master the man to the point that a longing for home could descend to the blues. On Christmas Eve John felt his spirits sinking after seeing a close hometown friend who, "when ever I look at him," he wrote to Sarah, "I think of you more." "No one knows the feeling of a Husband and Father away from home," John confided, "and everything looks so discouring and dark that I am almost sick and tired of it." Pardington was edging toward a dark place in his letter, even though he knew, like most Civil War soldiers, that keeping one's spirits up demonstrated character, proved one's faith, and testified to the power of loving a woman. "I Pray for you and Baby every night as I lay down for God to keep you Both in health and spirits. Sarah I did not think a man could love a woman so as I love you today. . . . O that the time was come when I could clasp them once more to my breast but keep up spirits dear for your John sake."⁸

The bottom nearly fell out for Pardington and the entire Army of the Potomac after Burnside's failed offensive at the end of January, which was derisively called the "Mud March." Union morale plunged and desertion skyrocketed, but Pardington would not budge from the ranks. Nothing could induce him to abandon the army; his reputation as a fighting man was too precious to risk. "I would sooner be brought home in my coffin to you as bad as I want to see you dear I never could desert. Sarah I never could Bring such disgrace to you and my little darling."⁹ Pardington remained committed to military victory, but in his letters following Fredericksburg he focused more on the hardships of soldiering than the idealism of the Union cause. After describing a trying rotation on picket duty, where he stood in the blowing snow for more than twenty-four hours without a fire, Pardington reminded his wife that the trials of a soldier could not be imagined but only experienced: "Sarah I never knew before what a man could stand. . . . Talk about hardships here is where you will find them."¹⁰

Just before the opening of the Gettysburg Campaign, Pardington sent a cautionary letter to Sarah, reminding her that luck might bring victory to the enemy once again. He expected the Rebels to maneuver toward Manassas, where Union armies had suffered a humiliating defeat in July 1861 and again in August 1862. Pardington judged the Manassas battleground a favorite Confederate hunting ground for Yankees. "That is a lucky Battle feild for the Rebels," John opined. "If we should have one there I hope it will Prove lucky for us this time."¹¹ At the same time, Pardington could not imagine that God's hand would not direct military affairs. His lack of certitude about providential intentions is

telling. Pardington was likely reassuring himself as much as he was Sarah when he wrote, "God Prosper Our arms if we do for we are on the *Right Side* and (Right is might) we all know," and yet he still suggested in the same letter that the campaign's outcome might hinge on luck. His confusion should not be interpreted as a loss of faith. He was only coming to terms with a war that was not easy to read. Even if misfortune struck, and the Army of the Potomac blundered into another death trap like Fredericksburg, Pardington remained confident of one thing—he and his comrades would follow any order with unhesitating obedience. He could, as a result, look to the future with a measure of confidence, given that he would "bare up with soldiers fortitude."¹²

Pardington's belief in "soldiers fortitude" illustrates how much he had changed in less than a year of service. During those times he struggled to find certainty about God and his will, John always knew in doing the job of the soldier he found the truth of his existence. He and his comrades had endured brutal marches in the field, punishing discipline in camp, and gut-wrenching fear in battle. No one who had not endured the same experiences could possibly question their standing as men of moral courage. His sense of duty drew its strength from relationships forged by experience in the ranks, and religious or patriotic rhetoric receded to descriptions of men suffering and sacrificing. Pardington explained it very simply to Sarah: "For I don't think it is hardly Possible for me to come home this summer," he wrote on June 5, "for they need every man they got, and I don't think its my duty to leave now when we are needed the most."

If there were any doubts about his standing as a soldier, Pardington could also point to the bullet-riddled flag of the Twenty-Fourth Michigan as indisputable evidence of his regiment's valor for the cause of Union. The banner actually guided Pardington's thoughts and actions, keeping him from applying for a furlough in early June even though he wanted to see Sarah as much as he ever did. Military necessity demanded that every man shoulder a musket when there was a whiff of a coming campaign. He explained to his wife that when he saw the flag he felt an overpowering love for her and his country. "Not [that] I love you less than the good old flag." "But," he added, "I love that next to you and will stick by it as long as she waves for it is the only flag of the free." Pardington predicted that preservation of the flag depended on the will of the individual soldier, who would have to keep killing until the national banner would "triumph over all other rags that are afloat against us now and ever."¹³

John Pardington's account is not *the* story of the common soldier of the Civil War, but his personal history shows how members of the rank and file learned to be flexible in thought and in action. It did not take long for Union and Confederate volunteers to appreciate how they were conditioned by the

world they inhabited. Circumstances controlled army life, and adaptability, more than any other trait, best describes how Union and Confederate soldiers navigated their world on a daily basis. A Minnesota soldier captured this perspective when he outlined the qualities most valued by the rank and file. "We want a man of greater flexibility of character, a man of rough and ready energy, who knows how to adapt himself to circumstances and men in all conditions of life."¹⁴

Ideas never lost their importance to Civil War soldiers, but beliefs did not always lead to a predictable cause-and-effect pattern of rewards and punishments during a tumultuous armed conflict. Even as soldiers insisted that the war had a higher moral and political purpose, they struggled to find moral certitude in the waging of war. Acts deemed criminal in the civilian world suddenly seemed just, necessary, and essential to survival. The randomness with which men died in camp or were indiscriminately shot down on the battlefield was especially troubling, for it suggested the absence of an orderly universe based on divine selection. Soldiers could not help but wonder—as Pardington did—if maybe it was every man for himself. A Mississippi soldier echoed this point shortly after his enlistment. "We cannot rely upon any one with certainty. The distress everywhere prevailing . . . [has] thrown every individual upon his own resources for a support and have had the effect to isolate, it seems, every human being."¹⁵ Yet their probing questions about the war's destiny and human nature rarely caused a crisis of faith or led to widespread disillusionment. Union and Confederate soldiers kept going, even when all seemed lost, relentlessly driven by a strong desire to live up to the expectations of home and their desire to preserve male honor in pursuit of military victory. Pardington cherished his standing in the ranks as a man of courage, and any loss of reputation would have called into question a deeply felt and robust love that bound him to his wife, his comrades, and his nation. Duty became Pardington's watchword, as it did with most Civil War veterans, because it made the job of soldiering sacred while also offering men a degree of latitude in dealing with the dilemmas of army life. The concept of duty proved malleable, rarely triggering a mechanical or predictable course of action among veteran soldiers who knew that they did not have a prayer of surviving unless one assumed a situational view of life.

In *The War for the Common Soldier* I argue that Union and Confederate soldiers navigated the war with a spontaneous philosophy that can best be described as a hard-nosed pragmatism. Louis Menand was among the first historians to show the importance of pragmatism in his exceedingly important study of Union officer and Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes

in *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America*. According to Menand, Holmes's pragmatism overshadowed his idealism by 1864, when Holmes came to distrust ideology and to value duty, experience, and professionalism above all else. Plenty of soldiers on both sides shared Holmes's veteran outlook, but their pragmatism did not compete with their idealism as Menand's argument would suggest. Rather, I believe that pragmatism gave them the flexibility to act in ways that actually helped them preserve their faith in ideas. Adaptability, the hallmark of pragmatism, empowered soldiers to shape themselves to the ground conditions of war, thus the ideas themselves could bend. As Joseph Glatthaar has shown in his pioneering study of Sherman's army, the reworking of codes of appropriate conduct did not drain Union soldiers of their idealism.¹⁶ In fact, the rampant foraging and destruction of Southern property rarely descended into plundering. The men saw themselves as acting out of military necessity and legitimate retribution in order to restore the Union. Sherman's men might have been the most pragmatic in their approach to war, but they were far from alone. Adhering to a strict code of conduct proved unsustainable in the field on both sides and in all armies. To most men's shock, well-established binaries of duty or disobedience, morality or immorality, loyalty or disloyalty, and bravery or cowardice were blurred by war. Situational thinking prevailed but never occurred in isolation from soldiers' relationships to their households, families, and wives. The fluid ways in which soldiers read and reacted to daily life in the ranks largely drew from their hard experiences and lessons learned on the ground, making it possible for Union and Confederate soldiers to live with the contradictory elements of their violent and volatile existence in the ranks.¹⁷

Pragmatism also helped affirm Civil War soldiers' sense of being independent-minded citizen-soldiers. This ethos drew from the example of George Washington, whose civic virtue and high-minded service set a standard Northern and Southern volunteers sought to emulate. They fashioned themselves as selfless defenders of liberty, having set aside the mundane matters of life to achieve immortal fame by defending the nation. When the crisis passed, Northern and Southern men intended to return to their civilian pursuits just as Washington had done after the American Revolution. Life would resume after the war, but people would see them differently. They were war heroes deserving of eternal gratitude and remembered as patriots.¹⁸

Sentimentalism proved incapable of reconciling the inherent tensions in the model of the citizen-soldier. Wartime sentimentalists put their faith in the individual soldier's ability to rise above the dehumanizing aspects of military life through physical and moral discipline. Living with a pure heart was supposed to instill moral courage in men so that they might face battle without fear.

The individualized sentimental soldier (who was always imagined as white) would fight courageously, pray fervently, and suffer silently for the national cause. If a soldier cultivated the “right” feelings, sentimentalists predicted that he would show himself as a man of character whose sacrifices would demonstrate the power of willed behavior over the impersonal forces of mass organized warfare.¹⁹

Although sentimentalism never lost its potency in making the bodily sacrifice of the citizen-soldiers sacred, it could not accommodate the extremes of the military world, where days could oscillate between sheer boredom and uncontrollable terror, between a feeling of safety and a sudden fear of death. To conclude that war’s horrors kept soldiers from following an idealized cultural script is a prosaic point. The challenge is to understand how the ideas of the citizen-soldier—imbued with the feelings of sentimentalism—intermeshed with the daily practices of soldiering. Northern and Southern volunteers reinterpreted the idea of the citizen-soldier in ways that countered its intended meaning of strict obedience. Necessity compelled them to pursue alternatives that simultaneously deepened the hold of the citizen-soldier as a practice and offered opportunities for subversion. Citizen-soldiers were expected to be dutiful, yet absolute submission to authority was unthinkable to American men steeped in the idea of white liberty. Professional officers had no choice but to compromise, since volunteers insisted on having a say as to who ruled over them and under what terms. Even generous concessions could not placate volunteers, who often mistrusted their officers. Veterans came to realize that blind obedience could lead to needless death in camp or battle. As historian Kathryn Meier shows in her pathbreaking work, enlisted men thought by the seat of their pants in the field, always trying to adapt to the natural environment without regard to regulation or authority. Their spontaneous acts likely enhanced their chances of surviving, but they often put them in the crosshairs of their superiors, who dismissed self-care tactics as the mischievous shenanigans of undisciplined volunteers.²⁰

The whirlwind of conflicting obligations of military life reminds us that a “soldier” was never a state of being but always a process of becoming. *The War for the Common Soldier* considers the totality of the Civil War military experience—the idealism, the camaraderie, the boredom, the marching, the singing, the sickness, the stink, the filth, the drilling, the punishments, the hunger, the exhaustion, the frustrations of being away from their families, the mental fatigue, and the grinding poverty that caused men to forget who they were, what they looked like, and even what they used to be—all punctuated by the horrible violence that in an instant turned beloved comrades into unrecogniz-

able corpses. To persevere, soldiers were continually remaking themselves as circumstances dictated. The fortunate managed to find themselves as men, husbands, and soldiers. They passed through the eye of the storm because of a pragmatic “come what may” outlook that kept them going until either they were played out or the war was over.

Ideas had the power to rescue Civil War soldiers during the darkest moments of military service. Thanks to historians Joseph Glatthaar, Earl Hess, Reid Mitchell, James McPherson, Chandra Manning, Aaron Sheehan-Dean, Frances Clarke, Stephen Berry, Susannah Ural, Lorien Foote, and many others, we understand why men fought and why their reasons changed over time. We know that the defense of slavery mattered to Confederate soldiers; we have discovered that antislavery sentiments gained strength in Northern armies without submerging the primary commitment to Union; and we have reconstructed the dialogue between soldiers and the home front, with all of its tensions, contradictions, and expressions of mutual support.²¹ Virtually all historians agree that Civil War soldiers were not apolitical defenders of home and hearth, but complicated political beings who were deeply ideological, articulate, and driven to fight and die for high ideals. We also know how Civil War soldiers could act with incredible political solidarity at one moment and, in the next instance, turn against their government, the people back home, and each other. Both North and South, goes an established argument, also shared a political culture of republicanism, a similar national history, a deep faith in Christianity, and a universal commitment to manly honor and duty, which instilled in Northern and Southern soldiers the fortitude to endure incredible suffering as they strove to live out their sentimental ideals about manliness, religion, and national duty. Much of this scholarship pivots around an immensely important question: What motivated Union and Confederate soldiers?²² We have, as a result, a deeper appreciation and understanding of the reasons why men fought and why their reasons for fighting changed over time. I did not write *The War for the Common Soldier* as a rebuttal to the work on soldier motivation, but I do not believe that this body of scholarship has fully recovered the life of the rank and file as it was lived. Too often historians invest ideology and identity with an all-encompassing explanatory power. This creates the impression that soldiers acted in reflexive ways to abstractions like sentimentalism, the ideal of the citizen-soldier, nationalism, and duty. In many cases, the connections between soldiers’ thought and action appear mechanical and static because they fail to adequately account for the ways that beliefs and actions rose spontaneously out of particular conditions. The contingencies of soldiering, above all else, are

often lost when ideological comments are extracted as transparent statements as to why men fought.

Above all else, this book seeks to reconstruct the totality of the military experience by pursuing three broad questions.²³ First, what were the cultural and ideological boundaries that framed the world as Civil War soldiers imagined it? Second, how did soldiers respond to those moments when they felt hemmed in by the sentimental expectations of society, the military's need for discipline, and the pleas for help from those at home while also facing the pressing practical demands of trying to survive in the ranks? Third, how did soldiers intellectually and practically navigate moments of doubt, when the nature of knowledge and its relationship to truth and belief seemed incongruous with a war that overturned the idea of an orderly universe under God's direction? I respond to these questions by shifting the axis of investigation from *what* Union and Confederate soldiers thought to *how* they thought.²⁴

Examining how soldiers thought is fraught with challenges, given that so much of the existing Civil War correspondence can be catalogued as terse tales that never pierce the inner world of the writer. The internalization of the war among veterans, as pervasive as it was, does not mean that any inquiry into how these men thought is beyond reach. Moving the inquiry below the content of wartime writings uncovers cultural orientations that shape, color, and organize the way people see, comprehend, and represent the world around them.²⁵ My understanding of the act of writing is closely aligned with my belief that soldier letters are neither transparent windows into the workings of the author's mind nor unmediated statements that reveal why men fought.²⁶ The act of writing registers an expression of reality filtered through cultural lenses and the idiosyncratic tendencies of the writer. When less emphasis is placed on the truthfulness of a soldier's writings, it is possible to see letter writing as a creative act. Historian Arlette Farge correctly observes that greater attention should be given "to understanding how a narrative came to be articulated in the way that it was. How was it shaped by the authority that compelled it to be given, the speaker's desire to convince, and his or her pattern of speech?"²⁷ Farge reminds us of the importance of situating the words of Civil War soldiers within the cultural and rhetorical models of the time. It is then possible to identify the circumstances that helped create them. My approach is not an exercise in intellectual history or a study of rhetoric. Rather, analyzing the act of writing serves as a bridge between intellectual, social, and cultural history. To create a fuller contextual picture of the soldier experience, I have incorporated material and visual culture as well as sensory and emotional history. From these varied

sources and methodologies emerge the many dramas of soldiering, where men heard the diverse, confusing, and often contradictory voices — both private and public — that framed their everyday perceptions of a world fraught by turmoil.

The War for the Common Soldier relies heavily on case studies of men of all backgrounds. Using a case-study approach minimizes the cherry-picking of quotes from soldier writings, a persistent problem in the historiography that has led to a static view of Civil War soldiers as men of duty who acted on a set of beliefs in predictable and unchanging ways. I have tried to minimize this standard approach by positioning the words of soldiers within the flow of events over an extended period of time, capturing in the process the fluid nature of thought and action while also revealing the tensions embedded in this dialectic. Above all else, a case-study approach illustrates that no one man can stand for all the experiences in the ranks and that no single individual can possibly represent the approximately 2.7 million men who served in the Union forces and the 1.2 to 1.4 million men who stood in the ranks of the Confederate military. There was no common soldier in the Civil War.²⁸

The case studies reflect a wide spectrum of social, racial, class, and regional backgrounds and men who fought in the Eastern and Western Theaters. Some soldiers came from privilege, while others were dirt poor. Most of the men were well educated, but others were barely literate, including two Confederates who dictated letters to their comrades. All of the men were reflective about their place in the ranks, but they made meaning of their experiences in radically different ways. A few deserted, but most remained in the army, including some battlefield shirkers and medical malingerers. The majority of these men were motivated, dutiful, and committed to using the violence of war as a redemptive power for the individual and the nation. At other moments, these same men were depressed and apathetic about the war. The patriotism of some soldiers cracked under the economic pressures of army life, while other men persevered even when they and their families were destitute. The link between household and soldiers plays a critical role in almost every soldier case study. It was rare when a man did not feel the emotional pull of family and sought the approval of loved ones on the home front. There was no boundary between the home front and the army, as the examples in *The War for the Common Soldier* illustrate.

Ultimately, I chose the soldiers who serve as case studies here because their letters are sufficiently rich to tell a man's story over an extended period of time. Rather than poll soldier opinion in the search of representative enlisted men, I have relied heavily on deeply contextualized stories that resemble what cinematographers call deep focus. This visual framework keeps the lens on the main figure without blotting out or blurring the background. The consequence

is a narrative of greater depth, for it keeps a variety of people, institutions, and forces on center stage, enabling us to see how a soldier interacted with a cast of characters as he sized up his choices in the field. This technique helps recapture the spontaneity of the historical moment so that we may get to the ground level of war as it looked from the ranks. Some might question my reliance on men who deserted or openly contested military authority, since the vast majority of Civil War soldiers remained at their posts and rarely felt estranged from their respective causes. Such a criticism misses the value of studying soldiers seen as the army's outliers. Case studies of shirkers and deserters mark the permissible boundaries of expression and action in Civil War armies. While each man had his own conception of the world, putting a spotlight on deserters and malingers is crucial to understanding the experience of the majority. The words and deeds of dissenters reveal how military and cultural authority functioned, getting us closer to what Union and Confederate soldiers imagined as available alternatives of political action. Deserters and shirkers, by their very exceptionalism, help us to understand the strategies of the "dutiful" who had to make their own accommodations to military power.

A final note about methodology is in order. Every page in a book has margins, and I, like any author, had to stay within them. I decided to focus on the soldiers who experienced combat in the ranks of mainline Civil War armies. As a result, I did not include soldiers who were assigned to garrison duty, veterans who served in the invalid corps, prisoners of war, Native Americans who aligned themselves with the Union or Confederate armies, and women who passed as men to fight in the ranks. I also did not incorporate guerrillas or partisan rangers into my narrative. My omissions should not be interpreted as dismissiveness. Scholars such as Dan Sutherland, Kenneth Noe, LeeAnn Whites, Barton Myer, Brian D. McKnight, Matthew Hulbert, and others have produced valuable work on the ways that guerrillas shaped broader military operations while working within and on household networks. The field of irregular warfare contains some of the most exciting and engaging scholarship coming out in the field of Civil War history, but unfortunately its inclusion would have diverted attention away from my primary focus on conventional armies.²⁹



I have divided *The War for the Common Soldier* into seven chapters. Each chapter addresses key aspects of the soldier experience. All are tied together by a common inquiry: How did soldiering trigger shifts in attitudes, beliefs, and emotional dispositions? Chapter 1, "Comrades, Camp, and Community," explores the "job" of being a soldier and how soldiers bent their bodies and minds

to the circumstances of camp. They came to embrace a pragmatic or flexible understanding of what it meant to be a citizen-soldier. Their challenges in the ranks were inseparable from the household, despite their geographical distance from home. How civilians and soldiers forged support networks of survival is at the heart of this chapter. Chapter 2, "Providence and Cheerfulness," explores the ways that providential pragmatism and the emotion of cheerfulness served Northern and Southern soldiers when God's intentions appeared indecipherable. Special attention is given to the coping strategies of soldiers seeking guidance from above while also trying to read the practical situation on the ground. Men on both sides struggled to describe these moments of crisis when the war weakened their bodies and wore down their minds. The composition of letters to family and friends and its connections to the act of soldiering are detailed in chapter 3, "Writing Home." So much of what we know of the wartime experiences of Civil War soldiers comes from their writing, but in the evaluation of *what* soldiers wrote, it is easy to miss the equally important question of *how* the men wrote their stories. The manner of language, aesthetics, and writing style can tell us much about how they interacted with the sentimental culture that was so prevalent in the Civil War era. Social class and educational background proved crucial in shaping different writing aesthetics.

Chapter 4, "Courage and Cowardice," offers a fresh perspective on what propelled men to fight and how survivors dealt with the ghastly results of combat. The important linkages between ideas and motivation are crucial to understanding the violence of combat, but what is missing from the literature is a greater sensitivity to the forces of compulsion—physical coercion, medical knowledge, male honor, and sentimentalism—that pushed men to attack and kill in battle. As the war progressed, there was a growing awareness that willed behavior and human endurance had its limits, that a soldier's body could stand only so much punishment before his morale wavered and his body collapsed. When this occurred, soldiers referred to themselves as being "broken down" or "used up," as if they were draft animals driven past the point of usefulness. Chapter 5, "Desertion and Military Justice," examines those soldiers who risked their reputations to escape battle or to flee the army for good. The causes and consequences of desertion have been well chronicled and analyzed by scholars, but the voice of the runaway is rarely heard, especially if the man was caught and condemned to death. The intent of this chapter is to see the world through the eyes of a soldier at that moment when he decided to risk his life for the freedom of home. This chapter reveals that desertion was situational and usually a defensive measure animated by the desire to survive.

How did soldiers respond to a military loss? Chapter 6, "Facing the Enemy

and Confronting Defeat,” suggests that members of the Union rank and file had the capacity to stand outside themselves and recognize the paradoxical effects of their own behavior on the world around them, even in the wake of a defeat. They were also disposed to confess both privately and publicly how they were at least partially responsible for the unintended consequences of their individual actions, rather than assigning blame to the impersonal forces of war or the mysteries of Providence. This kind of critical distance was much more difficult for white Southerners, whose need for reputation and whose desire for mastery kept them from deep self-criticism. Even when the material foundations of their slave system started crumbling around them, exposing the most jarring ideological contradictions of their world, Confederates, particularly of the slaveholding class, tended to frame the demise of their nation as a tragedy outside their control and beyond their responsibility.

How soldiers came to terms with the end of the war is the focus of the final chapter, “The Trophies of Victory and the Relics of Defeat.” A discussion of veterans transitioning to civilian life does not appear in these pages, though the reader will find references to a rich body of scholarship on this important subject.³⁰ Rather, much of this chapter explores how soldiers dealt with the war’s end through their collections of relics. Attention to the common practice of gathering artifacts reveals that Southern soldiers, though shamed by defeat at Appomattox, recovered their reputations through mementos associated with the last days of the Army of Northern Virginia’s existence. Union soldiers, on the other hand, treasured any relic associated with the war’s final campaign as a way to commemorate their individual role in saving the Union. The lively trading of mementos that occurred between the former combatants also speaks to the astonishing degree of political moderation that characterized the breakup of Rebel armies. The chapter concludes by following Union soldiers across Virginia to the Grand Review in Washington, D.C. During the journey William Sherman’s men became tourists for a day, visiting the famous battlefields around Fredericksburg, Virginia. The sight of shallow burial pits and a ravaged landscape was a poignant reminder of a violent world that they were finally leaving behind.

Any study of the American Civil War is both blessed and cursed by a primary source base that one could describe as oceanic. *The War for the Common Soldier* is based on extensive research in letters, diaries, newspapers, and official documents that other scholars have utilized. I come to the sources at a slightly different angle. In every soldier letter that I read, I looked for the collision between official and unofficial stories. It is here that we can locate the dialogue that takes place between an individual and society, and this is where the tension

resides between how a soldier identified with the self and how he was identified by others. Exploring the tensions between collective solidarities — such as a man's family, community, regiment, army, and nation — and his understanding of himself is of central importance. A close examination of these pressure points exposes the many forms of power that bore down on every enlisted man through the duration of the war.

John Pardington again serves as a useful illustration in this regard; throughout the course of his service he wrote about life in the army with a distinct ambiguity. There were plenty of inconsistencies in soldiering that proved to be troubling for Pardington. He had expected the army to pay him regularly, to issue him a livable ration, and to provide sufficient shelter from hostile conditions. In return, he would always stand by his comrades and would never turn his back to the enemy. The military, however, routinely violated this covenant, as was frequently the case on both sides during the Civil War. Therefore, there were times when Pardington described a soldier's life as a world of honor, duty, and bravery and other moments when he could not stand in the ranks without feeling empty, embittered, and alone.

The ever-pressing demands of home and nation led Pardington to question his place in the war and nearly pushed him to the brink of desertion. He harbored a deep resentment toward tyrannical officers; he was disgusted by the wretchedness of army life; and he was appalled by the slaughter of the battlefield. At the same time, he imagined that all of the death and destruction was necessary to defeat a traitorous rebellion for the cause of Union. In having to discipline and subordinate his self while in the army, Pardington assured his wife that he was becoming a decent and God-fearing man who was finally worthy of her love and respect.

Unfortunately, Pardington never had the chance to make amends to Sarah for all of those drunken nights back in Michigan. In a fierce melee at Gettysburg on July 1, Confederates from North Carolina shot him down; his body was lost somewhere in the carnage of McPherson's Woods. Months passed before Sarah received confirmation that her husband had been killed. A comrade from the burial party wrote that he could not find John because "those I buried on the field were so changed that I should not have known his body had it been there."³¹ Pardington's corpse was likely removed to an anonymous grave on Cemetery Hill, not far from where Lincoln gave his famous oration on November 19. The power of the president's address not only resided in the words themselves, but also stemmed from the field of action where soldiers like Pardington discovered the truth of their conviction in the blood sacrifices of their comrades.