

Bluebellies and Butternuts: Civil War Uniforms

Unbearably hot in the summertime. Heavy and soggy in the wintertime. Either way too big or way too small. These are some of the complaints Civil War soldiers had about their uniforms. A Confederate soldier named William Burch Short wrote that *I've been marching all day in the mud and mire and am very tired indeed my clothes are as wet as if they have been dipped in water...* (Museum of the Confederacy)

For the Union, the uniform was light blue trousers worn with a long, dark blue, single-breasted, dress coat or a short dark blue jacket or *blouse*, a dark blue hat with a black visor, shoes, a wool flannel shirt, cotton drawers, and socks. There was also a long, dark blue overcoat with a cape for winter. Most Union uniforms didn't quite fit since they were only made in four sizes. (Museum of the Confederacy; *Common Soldier*, 3-4)



Throughout the war, there were shortages of uniforms and shoes – especially in the Confederacy. At least a third of the Southern army was barefoot throughout the war.



What would happen if you took your next gym class in your bare feet? (Other than getting yelled at by the teacher!) Could you imagine being cold and wet and marching in the rain – in November – in your bare feet? What would you do to protect your feet? Here is one attempted solution:

A Confederate brigadier gave strips of fresh cowhide to his men so they could wrap them around their feet. A soldier describes the result: *General Armstad sent me a pair of raw hide shoes the other day and [they] stretch out at the heel so that when I start down a hill they whip me nearly to death. they flop up and down. they stink very bad and I have to keep a bush in my hand to keep the flies off of them. Unfortunately, some of the boys got hungry last night and boiled them and ate them, so farewell raw hide shoes.* (Library of Congress, 35-36)

The South had basically the same type of uniform as the Union soldiers, but it was light gray. Frequently, uniforms were unavailable. Due to blockades, cloth was hard to find in the South, so soldiers sometimes got their uniforms from captured Union soldiers. They would dye it in a mixture of walnut hulls, acorns, and lye until it was a light tan color that they called *butternut*. They also got uniforms from home (*Common Soldier*, 3-4).

✓ SOME THINGS TO CONSIDER

There are many plant substances that can make wonderful natural dyes. For example, in many places in Eastern Europe, the brown, papery skins of onions are boiled to make a light, golden brown dye for Easter eggs. What other plant substances (fruits, vegetables, leaves and roots) do you think might make a good dye? Would any of these substances be good to dye a large number of items, such as thousands of uniforms?

Abel Sheeks, an Alabama soldier who was sixteen said, *I was not very tall and caps and drawers were in short supply, so they went to the older, bigger men. I did not mind this and was happy with what I had, which was what I had brought from home, until the sergeant came to me and said, 'Do you want to be taken for a...Yankee in all that blue?' I did not, so after each fight I would search the field for anyone near my size who did not require use of his equipment. I must confess to feeling very bad doing this, believing the dead should not be disturbed...but I had no other course. In just a few weeks my uniform was the equal of anyone's.* (Library of Congress, 35-36)

✓ SOME THINGS TO CONSIDER

Could you take the clothing off a dead person after a battle? Would you want to wear it? Why or why not? What circumstances might make you change your mind? Discuss these questions with other members of your group.

Blue = Union. Grey = Confederate. Right? Maybe ... maybe not!

✓ SOME THINGS TO CONSIDER

If you were going to create your own uniform for battle, what colors would you use? Would you be bright red, so you'd intimidate your enemy? Would you be royal purple? If you were Irish, would you march in green? Or, if you were a Scot, would you march in plaid?

Does marching in plaid sound silly to you? Well, when the Civil War began, marching in plaid sounded like a GOOD idea to some people – especially one New York regiment of “Highlanders”. At first, the Civil War uniform was sometimes used as a way to show pride in one's state, ethnic background, or occupation. Modern wars use “camouflage” – as a means of disguising oneself – but during the Civil War this was not the case.

What kind of uniforms did soldiers wear when the war started?

Massachusetts and Pennsylvania	U.S.	Blue
21st Alabama – early war	C.S.	Blue
Wisconsin and Iowa	U.S.	Gray
Carolina soldiers	C.S.	Gray
Vermont	U.S.	Gray with green trim
Mobile, Alabama	C.S.	Dark green (Emerald Guards)
Minnesota	U.S.	Black trousers and red flannel shirt
North Carolina (Granville Rifles)	C.S.	Black trousers and red flannel shirt
5th New York (Durye's Zouaves)	US.	Baggy red trousers, blue & red blouse, and red fez
Louisiana (Coppin's Zouaves)	C.S.	Baggy red trousers, blue & yellow blouse, red fez

— Battle Cry of Freedom, 323
(Echoes of Glory: Arms and Equipment of the Confederacy,
Time Life Books, Alexandria, VA, 1998, 81
<http://sbaung.tripod.com/cwuni.html>)

At the beginning of the war, one Confederate soldier noted that uniforms varied from *the dirty gray and tarnished silver of the Carolinian*, to the *dingy butternut of the Georgian*, with its *green trimming and full skirts*, and *the Alabamians nearly all in blue of a cleaner hue and neater cut* (*Arms and Equipment of the Confederacy*, 92). Even within a single regiment, there could be several different colors and varieties of uniforms.

✓ SOME THINGS TO CONSIDER

Why would having many different uniforms on both sides be confusing?

Imagine for a moment that you are a Union artillery soldier and it is your first battle. Your palms are sweating, your heart is pounding, and you are terrified. (Though you'd never admit it!) Despite your fears, your battery is really knocking holes in the Confederate line. Still, bullets are flying all around you and you really need some infantry support. Suddenly, you see a blue-clad regiment charging right at you – it is about 70 yards away (or, about $\frac{3}{4}$ of the length of a football field). You are relieved, thinking that this is the infantry you asked for – and you hold your fire. After all, the blue guys are on your side, right?

Whoops! You're wrong!

In this case, it is July 21, 1861, and you are a Union artilleryman fighting at the Battle of Bull Run (Confederates called this battle Manassas). The struggle is on for Henry House Hill – and the fighting is terrible. The blue-clad soldiers are not on your side – they are the 33rd Virginia under Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson.

Because you held your fire, the 33rd Virginia wiped out your battery. As a result, the Union attack at Henry House Hill fell apart (*Battle Cry of Freedom*, 342-344).

After mix-ups such as this one, both sides began to make their uniforms, well ... uniform!

Confederates in blue had a big advantage at Antietam, also. On September 17, 1862, another Union attack was stopped dead in its tracks by pure confusion. Troops under Confederate General A.P. Hill had captured many blue Federal uniforms at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, just before the battle of Antietam. (Uniforms of any kind were in short supply in the Confederate army.) A.P. Hill's troops made a surprise hit on the Union flank. At first, even Robert E. Lee was not sure which side they were on – since it took him a while to see their Confederate battle flag! The Union soldiers were also confused – especially since they saw the blue uniforms and held their fire. Eventually, the stunned Union soldiers retreated (*Battle Cry of Freedom*, 544).

✓ SOME THINGS TO CONSIDER

In this case, the 33rd Virginia had an advantage in having blue uniforms. What would the disadvantages be, if they were in a different part of the battlefield?