

Child Soldiers in the Civil War (6)

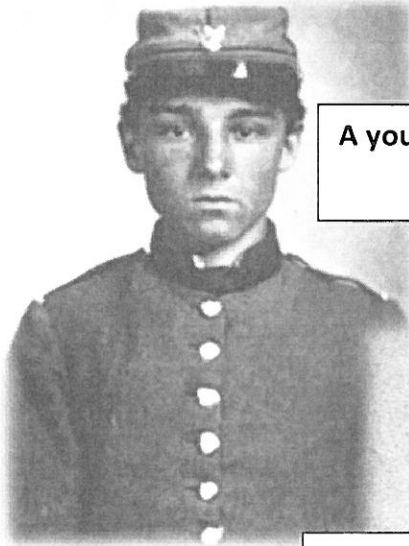
Reading

Unlike later wars in American history, young people were involved in all aspects of the Civil War, including fighting on the battlefield. In 1861, President Lincoln announced that boys under eighteen could enlist only with their parents' consent. The next year, he forbid any enlistment of those under eighteen. But heavy casualties (deaths and serious wounds) led recruiting officers to look the other way when underaged boys tried to enlist. Thousands participated in the conflict as drummers, messengers, hospital helpers, and often as actual soldiers. They carried canteens, bandages, and stretchers, and assisted surgeons and nurses. Many young soldiers signed up as drummers, who relayed officers' commands. In the heat of battle, many carried orders or assisted with the wounded; at least a few picked up rifles and participated in the fighting.

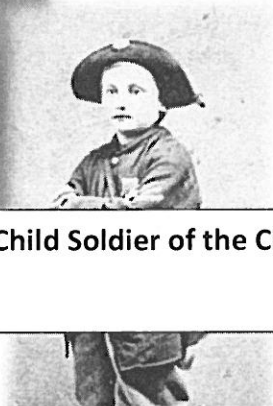
Their motives for enlisting varied, including patriotism and a desire to escape the boring routine of farm life or an abusive family. A few were jealous of older brothers, and some young Northerners were eager to rid the country of slavery. For some young Confederates, there was a desire to repel northern invaders from their soil. One southern boy made his feelings clear with words colored by irony: "*I reather die then be com a Slave to the North.*"

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Photographs



A young Union Soldier



A Child Soldier of the Civil War



Civil War Drummer boys, who would drum music as the troops walked into battle.

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Primary Sources

“As we lay there and the shells were flying over us, my thoughts went back to my home, and I thought what a foolish boy I was to run away to get into such a mess I was in. I would have been glad to have seen my father coming after me.”

**Source: Elisha Stockwell after the battle of Shiloh in Tennessee in 1862.
Quoted in Murphy, Boys' War, age 13**

“The rains have uncovered many of the shallow graves. Bony knees, long toes, and grinning skulls are to be seen in all directions. In one place I saw a man's boot protruding from the grave...leaving the skeleton's toes pointing to a land where there is no war.”

Source: Thomas Galwey, quoted in Werner, Reluctant Witnesses, 17 years old

“I passed . . . the corpse of a boy in gray who lay with his blond curls scattered about his face and his hand folded peacefully across his chest. He was clad in a bright and neat uniform, well garnished with gold, which seemed to tell the story of a loving mother and sisters who had sent their household pet to the field of war. His neat little hat lying beside him bore the number of a Georgia regiment He was about my age At the sight of the poor boy's corpse, I burst into a regular boo hoo and started on.

Source: John A. Cockerill, age 16, Union regimental musician, at Pittsburg Landing, Mississippi, April 1862, quoted in Emmy E. Werner