

Living History

By Philip Schreier

Books To Read To Get It Right

Part 1: The War Between the States

When it comes to donning the impression of a soldier from any military period it is important to know and try and get inside the soldiers who actually participated in the events that comprise the era in which you want to accurately portray. You cannot get an accurate feeling for the time just by watching movies (which for the most part, could not be more wrong in the accuracy department) nor just by



purposes of this article I will confine my remarks to a few of my favorites from the Civil War era and hope that in a future issue of *Military Classics Illustrated* I can share with you my favorites from subsequent periods of military history.

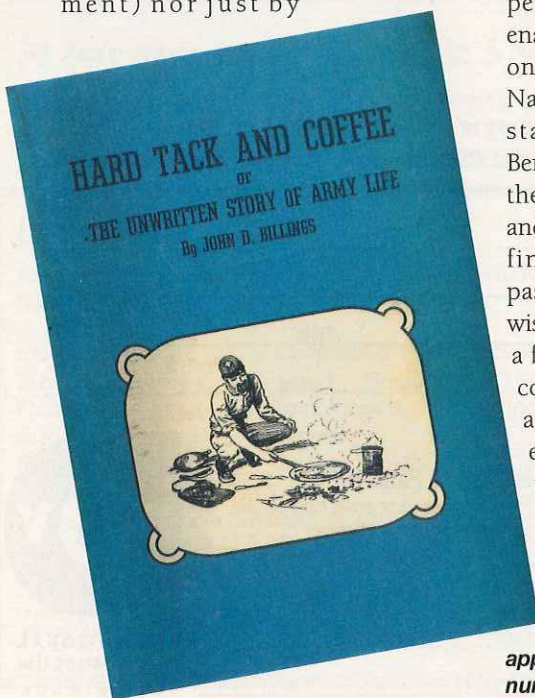
THE WAR BETWEEN THE STATES, 1861 - 1865

Perhaps no other event in U.S. history has generated as many books as the Civil War. Thousands and thousands of volumes were published in the years following the war in the dawn of popular publishing in this country. In what was considered an author's market, personal reminiscences were hitting the shelves by the dozens every week for the 30 - 40 years following the end of the conflict. Perhaps the most celebrated of these was U. S. Grant's highly anticipated memoirs published by Samuel L. Clemens. Grant's two-volume set was considered one of the first blockbuster best sellers of the 19th century. The "Century War Magazine" heightened public interest by publishing first-hand accounts of the major events and battles written by the participants themselves. Soon, a four-volume set entitled *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War* was published by the magazine in hardback form and has been a standard reference work ever since. Aside from the recounting and retelling of the war's battles and the men who lead in them, books on the life of the common soldier were unknown until Charlton McCarthy, a veteran of Cutshaw's Battery, Army of Northern Virginia, late of the CS of A, wrote his *Detailed Minutiae of Soldier Life* in 1882. This highly generalized account of the common soldier's war provides a good outline for the subsequent works that followed.

Though McCarthy's book is somewhat romanticized and strays from the point from time to time it is a good reference and contains an excellent accounting of the origin of the Confederate battle flag. McCarthy, although only a private during the war,

looking at photographs. You actually need to crawl into the mind set not only of the average soldier but the society in which he lived as well. For those military periods that time has put out of reach of our own personal experience, it is necessary to read up on what was going on back when the deeds were done and the battles won, that have captured our imagination to the point we desire to escape to that era. For me, personally, the annual Civil War re-enactment season ended in November on Remembrance Day at Gettysburg National Battlefield Park and did not start up again until the Battle of Bentonville, NC in mid-March. During the 4-5 months I wasn't wearing gray and chasing Yankees about, I was 'confined to quarters' so to speak and passed the time reading about what I wish I was re-living. The suggestions of a few friends as to what I should, or could, be reading lead me to discover a few written gems that I now consider essential reading material for any re-enactor, veteran or novice. For the

John D. Billings' *Hard Tack and Coffee* is one of the best known and most entertaining of first-person Civil War soldier accounts. First appearing in 1887, it has been reprinted a number of times since then.



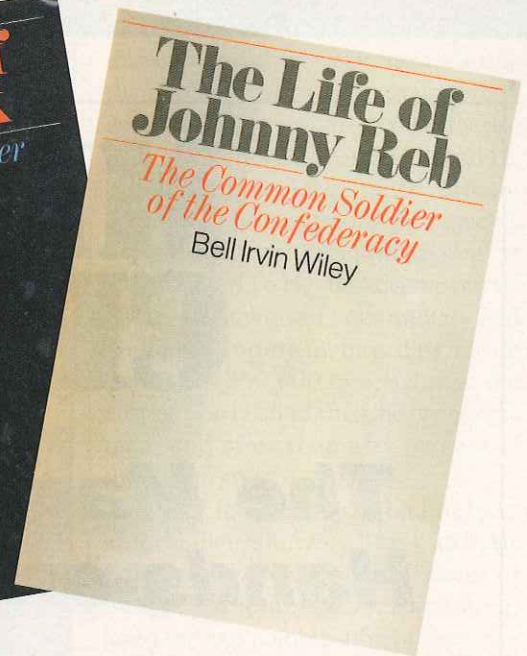
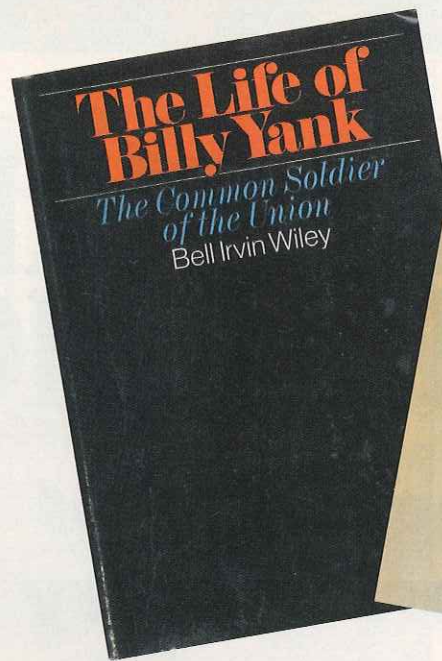
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was well educated, an articulate writer and eventually became Mayor of Richmond, Virginia. The same year that McCarthy's book broke new ground, the Columbia Herald in Tennessee was publishing the memoirs of Sam Watkins, late of Company H, 1st TN Vol. Inf. Eventually published in book form, Watkin's *Company Aytch, a Side Show of the Big Show* became one of the best of the 'common soldier' accountings of life in the ranks. Watkins wrote with humor reminiscent of Mark Twain's work and remains the best of the period accountings. No Confederate impression would be considered correct without having first read *Company Aytch*.

They say that the winners of wars get to write the history books. If you were to believe the press that has been generated by the followers of a veteran of the 10th Massachusetts Artillery, John D. Billings, wrote the very first 'common soldier' book in 1887. Billings' *Hard Tack and Coffee, the Unwritten Story of Soldier Life* came about when Billings was approached by some young lads while he was vacationing at a hotel in the White Mountains. They asked him to tell them what it was like to have been a soldier during 'the late unpleasantness'. Alternating every other evening with another comrade, he would regale the youngsters with the life of the common soldier. Five years later he began to write these stories down and in 1887 published them in book form. This classic tome is now considered one of the finest 'common soldier' accounts to have ever been written and somewhat the standard from which all other subsequent works of similar nature have been measured.

Some 60 years later a ground-breaking effort substantially added to the bank of knowledge shared by civil war buffs. Professor Bell Irvin Wiley of Emory



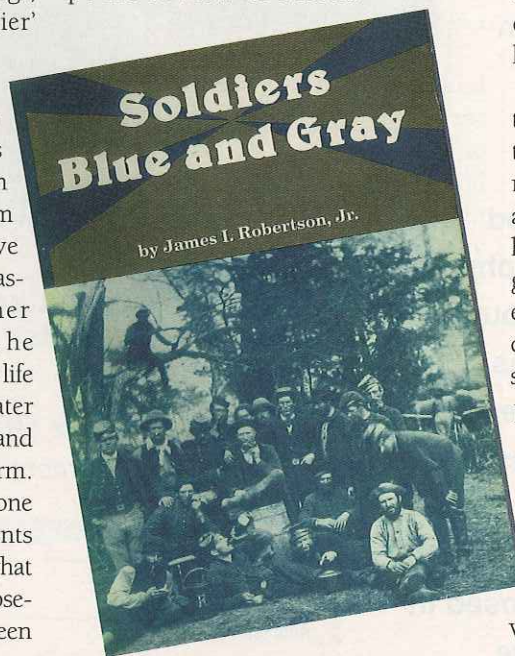
Bell Irvin Wiley's *The Life of Billy Yank* and *The Life of Johnny Reb* are excellent compilations of letters and other early published works outlining the experiences of the common soldier in the Civil War.

University published in 1942 his seminal work, *The Life of Johnny Reb* (followed in 1952 by *The Life of Billy Yank*) to great acclaim and renewed interest in the war, its events and participants. Wiley's volumes broke new ground in that they were not written from the point of view of a participant but from the point of view of a keen

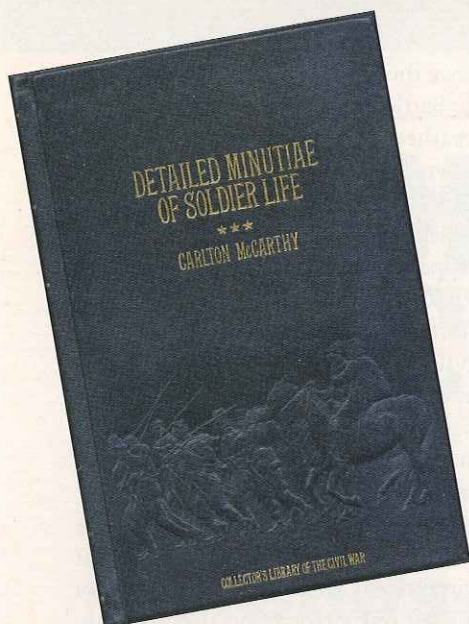
observer with the practiced eye of an academic who viewed over 20,000 letters to provide the reader with a clear overview of how life differed, not only from year to year but also in each theater of the war. Wiley describes religious fads, hair lengths and clothing problems in ways that Watkins, McCarthy and Billings could not have contemplated due to the relatively confined view they had of the war.

Wiley's work details such interesting tidbits as: how long mail took to reach the troops, when fevers ravaged the ranks and what kind of food was available to the men in the field, as well as hundreds of other details that help greatly in bringing the common experience of the soldier to life. Both volumes complement each other greatly and should be read together to get the full picture of soldier life during the war.

Professor Wiley, while at Emory University, mentored a young historian working on his graduate degree by the name of James I. Robertson, Jr. Dr. Robertson has since become the nation's pre-eminent scholar on the War Between the States and supplemented Dr. Wiley's work with one of his own entitled *Soldiers Blue and Gray* (University of South Carolina Press, 1988). Robertson's work adds greatly to the wealth of information that has come



***Soldiers Blue and Gray* is an excellent, in-depth treatment of the life of Civil War soldiers. It draws upon many previously unpublished letters written by the combatants.**



Detailed Minutiae of Soldier Life, by Carleton McCarthy, was one of the earliest of the common soldiers' memoirs, published in 1882. McCarthy served in Cutshaw's Battery, Army of Northern Virginia.

to light in the 50 years since Wiley's work was completed. Dr. Robertson not only drew insights from published histories which Wiley did not rely on to a great extent, but he was able to make use of the tens of thousands of letters and published works that rose to the surface following the burst of national interest that came about as a result of the Civil War Centennial in the early 1960s. Robertson's book is required reading for any student of the war or of military matters in general.

Today the book stores are full of "first person" accounts, retelling familiar stories about famous as well as forgotten or insignificant events in military history. Each new author attempts to relate what they saw and interpret their role in that chapter of history. Some do great jobs of their task and some need the wisdom of the Wiley's and Robertson's of the world to complete the picture for us. If it is a clear understanding of just what it was like to have been in the ranks during the civil war that you seek, these five books will provide you with a life time of interesting facts to quote and dwell upon as well as providing you with a better understanding of how these men lived, fought and endured the most significant chapter in our national history.



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