



THE MUSEUM GAZETTE

An American Melting Pot: Foreign Born Soldiers

Foreign-born Soldiers in the United States Regular Army Through the smoke of thousands of cannons, rifles, and small brush fires, Corp. Peter Petroff of the 14th United States Infantry could see his comrades moving ahead across an open field. Petroff, a recent immigrant from St. Petersburg, Russia, had been pressed into service by army recruiters almost as soon as he touched American soil. His commanders were so impressed with his soldierly dedication that they promoted him to corporal, despite the fact that he couldn't speak a word of English! Now, in May 1864, he found himself in the middle of a Civil War, moving toward the "Stonewall" Brigade of the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia in an area known as "the Wilderness." Suddenly, Petroff was wounded in the left arm, losing consciousness. Later carried to safety, Petroff's arm was amputated. He survived the war to become a leading figure in the veteran's organization "The Grand Army of the Republic."

This was not an unusual situation. In fact, for most of the 19th century, the United States Regular Army was staffed by great numbers of foreign-born men. At times foreign-born soldiers made up over half of the Regular Army enlisted ranks. In an era in which recruitment difficulties and high numbers of desertions plagued the service, immigrants filled the empty ranks of the army and, in doing so, made significant contributions to the development and westward expansion of the nation. The mixture of soldiers from many nations, including men born in America, created a true "melting pot" where cooperation was

necessary for survival. Immigrants who became soldiers had to live, work, eat, train, socialize, and sleep together in the small confines of many small frontier military posts.

Americans of the 19th century tended to dislike the idea of a standing regular army. George III's use of the British Army against the colonists in the American Revolution remained in the consciousness of most Americans, and resulted in continual recruitment problems for the professional U.S. Army. The army was also unattractive due to low pay, deplorable living conditions and locales, poor food, and harsh discipline. The pay of a 19th century infantry private ranged from \$5 per month in the early century to a later high of \$20 per month. Common laborers during this same period earned approximately one dollar a day. During the Civil War the private's pay was increased from \$13 a month to \$16, but in 1872 Congress failed to maintain emergency legislation and dropped the pay back to its pre-war levels. Fully one-third of the enlisted complement of the Regular Army deserted within the next twelve months. Out of this paltry salary the government garnished its share for retirement and a portion to be held until the soldier was discharged, in an attempt to prevent desertion.

During the period of westward expansion, most infantry, dragoon, and cavalry regiments were spread out along the borders of the frontier in sparsely populated areas, far from towns and cities. Artillery units rotated between frontier

service and garrisoning eastern coastal forts. The duties of the frontier regulars included patrolling overland trails, protecting the mail, and protecting settlers and relocated American Indian people. Soldiers were often used as common laborers, building roads, bridges, and buildings, and spent very little time engaged in military activities. These mundane duties added to morale problems, as did the poor quality of the food. Inadequate supply services and the lack of fresh foods such as vegetables often limited the soldier's diet to beans, bread, and salt pork. Fresh meat was available only if there was adequate game in an area. These diet problems did not usually affect those Regular Army units stationed in Atlantic coastal forts, since they could be supplied by ship, but sickness due to being located near southern swamps was common.

Most frontier army posts were built of local materials and were designed to be temporary, so comfort was rarely considered. Soldiers often lived in quickly built huts, adobe brick or log barracks. Most of these structures were insect and vermin-ridden, and many soldiers preferred to sleep outside under the stars if the weather permitted. After the Civil War the government began to build permanent buildings at posts it believed would continue to have strategic importance.

If a soldier deserted due to some or all of these hardships, he could expect to be pursued and, if caught, face severe discipline. In the period prior to the Civil War, the Regular Army was noted for its creative punishments. Infractions of military law or orders could result in confinement to the guardhouse for a period of time, with only bread and water; assignment to a work detail with a ball and chain attached to an ankle; being fitted in an iron collar with spikes to prevent restful sleep; carrying a 50-pound weight during all activities; or being lashed with a rawhide whip. Desertion could result in a death sentence, but was usually punished by branding the individual with a "D" on the thigh, and drumming them out of the service to the tune of the "Rogue's March." During the War of 1812, the Mexican War, and the Civil War, volunteer troops who served along with the regulars were often amazed by harsh military

discipline.

The Regular U.S. Army had an attrition rate of an average of 28% due to desertion, death, discharge, or disability. Since most qualified men did not want to live under the harsh conditions common in the military, they stayed away from army recruiting offices. Consequently, the army often filled its ranks with destitute, disillusioned, disoriented, or naive men, and after the Civil War, with former slaves trying to make a new life for themselves.

Many millions of immigrants arrived in the United States between 1800 and 1900, most from Ireland, Germany, and England. They left their homelands to escape famines, wars, and political or religious persecution, hoping to improve their lives in a new land. Many were farmers, artisans, or tradesmen looking for opportunities, and many had served in the "Grand Armies" of Europe. The reality of American life was often different than the imagination had been for these immigrants, however. Slums, dangerous working conditions, industrial pollution, crime, and prejudice greeted many. One of the ways these men found to integrate into American life was to join the army, where they could learn English, earn a salary, and absorb American culture.

Although immigrants were desperately needed to fill the ranks of the Regular Army, they were rarely welcomed wholeheartedly. The Government itself seemed to change its attitude toward the enlistment of foreigners a regular basis. The General Regulations of the Army in 1820 stated that qualified Regular Army enlistees would consist of "all free white male persons, above eighteen and under thirty-five years, who are able bodied, active, and free from disease." By 1825, when the number of foreign-born army recruits inched its way up to 25%, the regulations were changed to state that "no foreigner shall be enlisted in the army without special permission from general head-quarters." Following a significant decline in enlistments, the Government reversed itself again in 1828. In 1842 the army could only take those foreign-born persons that had taken the first steps toward naturalization. It seemed that the Government was following the

ebb and flow of public opinion when dealing with foreigners, but these fluctuations did not stop the flood of foreign enlistees. Out of 505 enlistees in 1858 with prior military service, 37% were Irish, 28% German, 9% from the British Isles, and only 21% were born in America.

Many of the immigrants who had served as soldiers in the “Grand Armies” of Europe brought a high level of professionalism to the infant United States Army. Regular Army recruiters delighted in signing up veterans of these forces, especially those of the British Army. In an effort to recruit regiments up to strength, the medical condition of many foreign enlistees was completely ignored. Many had poor eyesight, deficient general health, and could not speak English. These enlistments became so frequent that the Inspector General of the Army warned against them. Gen. George Croghan stated in 1838, “It is no pleasant task to instruct raw recruits but when those recruits are ignorant of your language, the task becomes ten times more tedious and disagreeable.”

In most American cities immigrants tended to congregate together in neighborhoods with people from the same national origin, and had very little contact with members of other ethnic backgrounds. In the army, however, the mixture of soldiers at small frontier posts created a unique “melting pot” situation. Irish, German, English, Italian, Scots, Welsh, Norwegian, and French-born soldiers found themselves to be bunk-mates of persons that in Europe might have been a bitter enemy. In order to maintain a peaceful existence between themselves and their American-born comrades, each had to adjust, learn, and accept the traditions, customs, religion, and lifestyles of the others.

One concept almost all of the foreign-born soldiers held in common was their love of freedom and democracy. This was especially beneficial to the United States during the Civil War. Many German immigrants retained memories of fiefdoms in Europe, and held no love for the concept of slavery. When the war started foreign-born men swelled the ranks of the Union Army, with no allegiance to any particular state, making it easier to convince them to join for the

duration of the war. Many of these Civil War veterans re-enlisted and made a long career of military service with the Regular Army. At the end of their careers they sometimes settled near the last post at which they were stationed, helping to create a diversity of cultures on the frontier.

Foreign immigration was an essential ingredient which made the United States a powerful yet diverse nation. During the period of westward expansion, native-born Americans (with the exception of African-Americans following the Civil War) showed little interest in a hard life of army service. Those empty ranks were filled by thousands of immigrants who brought their customs, traditions, religious beliefs, and lifestyles into close contact with native-born Americans. They contributed much to the development of the American West by protecting it and eventually settling it. We are a greater nation because of their service.

