

# A Soldier's Life

By Randal Garrison\*

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Images may differ from those in the original article.

*Editor's Note: This is a fictional account based on historical sources.*

Will awoke with a startled jerk, as he most always did. He still wasn't used to being in the canvas A-frame tent with three other—sometimes snoring and often smelly—comrades (not that he didn't snore or have his own unique set of smells, too). The field musicians sounded like they were right inside the tent, as their fifes and drums loudly called the men to morning roll call. The sergeants' voices began rousing the nearly 1,000 soldiers from the 10 companies of the regiment. Will remembered that he and his tentmates needed to be dressed and in front of their tents on the company street by the time the tunes making up reveille ended.



*Kepi. Image courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of History.*

Will pulled on his brogans in the gray light of dawn, making sure the right shoe was on the right foot. (This was the first pair of shoes he had owned that *had* a right and a left.) He slipped into his stylish, nine-button shell jacket, found his kepi and mashed it on his head, and crawled out of the tent. He immediately headed to the camp sinks to relieve himself. His friends in the tent were getting dressed, too. Complaints such as “Watch your elbows!” and “Get your knee out of my back!” could be heard through the tent's open flaps.

Will hustled back to his company street and fell in, along with nearly 100 other groggy men. The first and second sergeants started wrangling the men into two rows, or ranks. When the two lines became about equal in length, the first sergeant, with a gravelly voice, ordered, “Attention, Company. In two ranks, right face. . . . Size march.” The taller men began moving forward, as the shorter ones moved back. Will always found this lineup a bit funny. In battle it could mean that the taller men on one side fought the shorter men from the opposing force. Will measured about average height, so he usually ended up near the center of the company. The first sergeant then gave the order to “front and cover down.” This formed the file (two men, one in front of the other) for the rank and file. On one end of the front rank stood a private who was nearly 6 feet 5 inches tall. On the left flank, the final private was a shade over 5 feet.

Will and friends around him joked quietly as the roll was called. Several men fell out to report to the surgeon—usually there were only a few sick, lame, or lazy. No soldier wanted to visit the surgeon unless he was really, really sick. The doctor had too many ways to hurt a man. (Unclean water, crowding, lack of food, and other conditions did lead to lots of illness in camp. More Tar Heels died from disease than battle.) The sky grew brighter quickly in Crabtree Valley. Smoke hung close to the ground—a sure sign of rain later. Will hoped so, at least. Rain was about the only thing that might get the troops out of company drill. It would need to be a heavy rain. Will kept on hoping.

Soon the sergeants dismissed the men for morning mess. Will and his tentmates quickly headed back to the tent to get their breakfast ready. Two potatoes, a highly prized onion, and some slab bacon were soon cut up. The bacon hit the frying pan first to make grease for the taters and onions. Will squeezed into a

spot by the one fire allowed to the company. He nestled the frying pan down over red-hot coals. Friendly banter and cooking advice drifted back and forth across the firepit, and the bacon was soon ready. Will divvied it up into four mess plates at his feet and turned his attention to cooking taters and onions. One of his friends brought out a small sack of salt, and Will used some to season the food. There was no coffee today. Supplies had gotten scarce, since coffee mostly came from the North. Will and his friends did break out some hardtack crackers. The men devoured the meal, washing it down with canteen water.

In almost no time, the field musicians had their wooden fifes shrilling away again, accompanied by the side and bass drums. They sounded “first call.” The men of the 26th North Carolina Troops had 15 minutes to clean their plates and pans, then put on their gear in preparation for the morning dress parade followed by drill.

The gear, or accoutrements (cooters), consisted of a waist belt, bayonet and scabbard, and cap pouch; cartridge box slung over the shoulder and held down by the waist belt; canteen; and most importantly, a rifled musket. The 26th had just been issued new Enfield rifles made in England and delivered into Wilmington by daring blockade-runners. These weapons were the finest, most modern available, and Will loved his. It could hit a target easily from 300 yards away or more.



Orderly Sergeant Alfred May, company F (Trio Guards), 61<sup>st</sup> Regiment North Carolina Troops, used this oil-cloth haversack with leather straps. *Image courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of History.*

The only items that the men left in their tents were haversacks. These tarred canvas bags held the few personal items an 18-year-old might possess, such as a comb, a toothbrush, a spare shirt, some clean socks, a housewife (a soldier’s name for a sewing kit), and a small Bible. Will’s bag also contained several letters from home, including one from a special young lady that he read every night. Haversacks stayed in the tent, because they were not needed for drill. They would just be extra weight.

Will fell in with the Company I men and watched as morning parade—quite a sight—formed. The entire regiment lined up for the colonel’s inspection. The color guard, the sergeants who guarded the flag of the regiment, were placed, or posted, in line first. Captains then led out the two center companies to form on the right and left of the colors. The rest of the companies followed in order. Will was always fascinated by the mathematical precision of even the simplest movement. The process felt like a dance with 1,000 armed men.

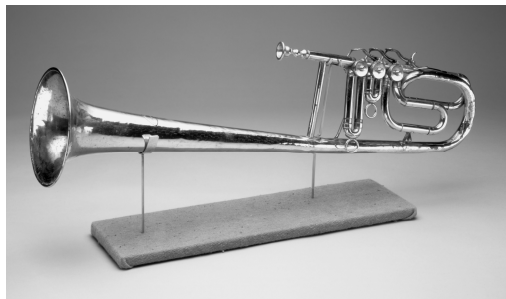
Morning parade offered even more military ballet than forming the line. The field music trooped the line, passing back and forth across the face of the whole regiment. The adjutant, an officer who was an assistant or aide to the colonel, opened the two ranks by bellowing, “Prepare to open ranks. To the rear, open order!” The rear line moved backward three steps, and the officers checked the dress, or straightness, of the line. The lieutenant colonel and major double-checked the dress. All the officers moved forward into their positions ahead of the companies and wings of the regiment. The adjutant reported to the colonel, and then called the first sergeants “front and center” to report each company’s numbers of men as “presented or accounted for.” Soon the adjutant sent the sergeants back to their places, and the orders of the day were read. Will groaned inwardly. Drill, drill, and more drill—it never changed.

Drill meant practicing all the maneuvers that a regiment or a company might be ordered to attempt while marching or in battle. With the company split into small, manageable groups, drill time began. First came what they called the “school of the soldier.” Will knew most of this drill by heart, but a fair number of men (some of them new) had trouble remembering the commands. Some did not know left from right.

The nearly 10-pound musket felt awkward, but after much repetition, most of the movements came naturally: Right shoulder shift! Shoulder arms! Order arms!

The first sergeant and his assistants were not easy to please. Every movement must be just right and done together in unison with the other soldiers. Will’s right arm felt an inch longer than his left because they practiced so much. Simple marching, or moving from two ranks into four ranks, was complicated and needed to be perfected as well. Right wheel! Left wheel! By the right flank! By the left flank! Sometimes drill commands sounded like a foreign language, but the men learned. Loading and firing the rifle in nine commands, also known as “load in nine times,” was one of Will’s favorite parts. The soldiers had seldom actually fired their guns, however, due to a shortage of powder and caps. Sometimes the first lieutenant or the company captain would give the orders, but usually they hung back as observers. The sergeants and other noncommissioned officers gave most orders.

After about two hours, the school of the soldier ended. The troops began company drill, led by each company’s officers. The men practiced more marching and maneuvering. Will had noticed that company drill was basically the school of the soldier with bigger groups. The troops practiced commands such as “On the right by file into line,” “Left turn,” and “Right about” until they were thoroughly tired. Noonday mess was announced by bugles and the field music. Will and his pards relaxed for an hour, cooked a dinner just like their breakfast, and complained about drill. Unkind remarks about the officers—especially the slim, aristocratic colonel who headed the regiment—made the rounds. Real combat would soon prove the wisdom of all this practice, but the men did not know that yet. They would find out at the Battle of New Bern that drill saved lives.



Flugelhorn belonging to Oliver J. Lehman, of Forsyth County, a musician in the 33<sup>rd</sup> Regiment North Carolina Troops. *Image courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of History.*

The afternoon included skirmish drill, when the soldiers practiced spreading out and advancing in front of the main line of battle, firing in pairs and charged with uncovering the enemy’s lines. The day ended with battalion drill, as the whole regiment went through the maneuvers practiced throughout the day. Rain finally arrived, but it only canceled the evening parade and made the supper mess a *real* mess. Soon darkness fell. Will crawled into his tent, going last since he slept on the end closest to the flap. He took off his wet shell jacket and brogans, and rolled up in his big, state-issued wool blanket. He was sound asleep and snoring before the field musicians finished their regular evening tunes.

What you have just read is a fictional account of the daily, somewhat boring, and physically demanding life of a Civil War Confederate soldier in a training camp near Raleigh. Much more time was spent in drill than in battle, and Will’s story would be a common one. Constant research of historical primary sources—especially diaries, letters, and journals—helps modern-day reenactors such as the large 26th North Carolina, Reactivated, group re-create the soldier’s experience every time they take the field. Read more about the real 26th North Carolina Troops, and the 26th North Carolina, Reactivated, at [26nc.org](http://26nc.org). Several other reenactment groups exist across the state. Who knows—one day, you might help keep these wartime memories alive as a reenactor.

\*At the time of this article’s publication, Randal Garrison had taught English for 28 years for Burke County Public Schools, and he served as a part-time instructor at Western Piedmont Community College. He had been a reenactor with the 26th North Carolina Troops, Reactivated, for 22 years, with the current rank of major, and previously edited the group’s

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