

Drummer boys played important role in the Civil War



Johnny Clem, a sergeant by the time he was 12, was one of the youngest Union soldiers.

By — Carolyn Reeder February 21, 2012

The Civil War is sometimes called “The Boys’ War,” because so many soldiers who fought in it were still in their teens. The rule in the Union Army was that soldiers had to be 18 to join, but many younger boys answered “I’m over 18, sir,” when the recruiter asked.

Many of the youngest boys served as drummers; they weren’t supposed to be fighters, but they did a very important job during the Civil War. You’ve probably seen pictures of a boy walking beside the marching soldiers, beating his drum to keep them together. But this wasn’t the drummer’s most important — or most difficult — job.

In the noise and confusion of battle, it was often impossible to hear the officers’ orders, so each order was given a series of drumbeats to represent it. Both soldiers and drummers had to learn which drumroll meant “meet here” and which meant “attack now” and which meant “retreat” and all the other commands of battlefield and camp. (The most exciting drum call was “the long roll,” which was the signal to attack. The drummer would just beat-beat-beat — and every other drummer in hearing distance would beat-beat-beat — until all that could be heard was an overwhelming thunder pushing the army forward.)

When the drummer boys weren't needed for sounding the calls, they had another job. They were stretcher bearers. They walked around the battlefield looking for the wounded and brought them to medical care.

Many young boys marched off to war looking for adventure, but they found hard, dangerous work along with it.



Drumbeats helped officers communicate with their troops in the noise and confusion of battle.
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Many say that Johnny Clem, who ran away from his home in Ohio when he was 9 to follow the Union troops, was the youngest boy to fight in the Civil War. Of course, the Union Army turned him away. In addition to being so young, he was small for his age. But Johnny tried again, and when he refused to go home, troops from Michigan adopted him as their mascot and drummer boy.

The story tells us that the officers contributed some of their pay so he could earn a soldier's salary of \$13 a month. They had a little uniform made for him, too, and later they had a rifle cut down to size for him. Johnny was a brave fighter. By the time he was 11, he was enlisted as a regular soldier. He would spend much of his life in the Army; he was a brigadier general when he retired in 1915.

People were fascinated by stories of Johnny the boy soldier. Some of the stories were legends, but military records show that Johnny's military career did, in fact, begin at age 9. He lived to be 85 and is buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

— Carolyn Reeder