

U.S. Army Military History Institute  
950 Soldiers Drive  
Carlisle Barracks, PA 17013-5021  
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Military Service-Desertion

## **NOTES: On Desertion Statistics, Valley Forge to World War II**

### **VALLEY FORGE**

Washington's Army encamped at Valley Forge from 19 Dec 1777 to 19 Jun 1778. Lesser, cited below, provides no desertion statistic for Jan. The number of reported desertions in the monthly return: Dec, 137; Feb, 247; Mar, 235; Apr, 317; May, 276; and Jun, 122, totaling 1,334. (A few of these desertions occurred at troop sites other than Valley Forge, since Washington's Army was also stationed in Wilmington, Delaware, and Fishkill, NY). Total strength of this force averaged 23,539. In a typical month, Feb, strength stood at 22,283, with only 7,556 present and fit for duty; and the remainder sick (6,881); absent with permission (4,814); or lacking clothes (3,032). In regard to illness, Feb fared no worse than June's 5,968 reported sick.

According to one historian: "...the greatest disciplinary threat to the Army's survival during the Valley Forge winter was desertion. The number of cases of this crime that came to trial can give only the barest indication of its frequency. Unfortunately, reliable data on the number of deserters does not exist. Indeed, such data was not always available even at the time." Sources:

Lesser, Charles H., editor. The Sinews of Independence: Monthly Strength Reports of the Continental Army. Chicago: U Chicago, 1976. pp. 54-74. E259.S56.

Trussell, John B. B., Jr. Birthplace of an Army: A Study of the Valley Forge Encampment. Harrisburg, PA: PHMC, 1976. pp. 65-66 & 73. E234.T712.

### **CIVIL WAR**

One attempt was made to determine the desertion rate during the Gettysburg campaign. The Federal Army's total numbers of deserters for Jun and Jul, 1863, as reported by the Provost Marshal General, were 3,956 and 5,540, respectively. A breakdown for the 5,540 revealed that the largest number of deserters were New York state volunteers (1,175). "General hospitals" was the second largest category - 1,073 (Provost Marshal General's Report, cited below, pp. 232-33).

The Army of the Potomac's strength at Gettysburg was about 80,000 (Livermore, p. 102). The aggregate strength of the Federal Army in Jul has not been computed, but its strength as of 1 Jan 1863 is known - 918,121 (PMG, p. 102). By the time of the Gettysburg campaign, that figure had shrunk, because men who had enlisted for two years in 1861 or for nine months in Aug 1862 were being released (Lerwill, pp. 73-74). In the middle of 1863 the Federals were probably losing men to desertion at the rate of about 0.6% a month or 7-8% annually.

The number of deserters per month, 1863 to 1865, averaged 5,500, with the greatest number deserting (or, at least, being reported as having deserted) in Oct 1864 as 10,692 (Lonn, pp. 151-52). For the entire war, the Provost Marshal General reported 278,644 desertions, but added:

This number is much too large. Many of those reported as deserters are not so in reality, but are men who became unavoidably absent from their commands by falling sick on the march; being injured in action without the knowledge of their officers; and reported "missing, and subsequently deserted"; and by intentionally or unintentionally overstaying their furloughs, &c., (#p. 230).

Provost Marshal General James B. Fry estimated that about 201,000 were actual deserters (p. 89). Livermore (p. 48) states that the total number of deserters during the war was 125,000, whereas Chanal (p. 66) says 190,045 and Phisterer (p.67) says 199,045. The general ratio for all volunteers was 62.51 desertions per thousand (Lonn p. 149).

The total number of enlistments during the war was about 2.8 million (Heitman p. 285), but probably at least half a million were reenlistments (Livermore, p. 1).

Thus, it seems that the number of men who deserted during the war was approximately 7.1% (200,000 divided by 2.8 million).

To illustrate the uneasiness with which one should accept any Civil War desertion statistics, the 7% figure should be compared with the following two documents.

1. Opposite p. 276 of the 1914 War Dept Annual Report, Vol. I, appears a desertion rate chart covering 1830 to 1914. It is based upon the total number of enlistment contracts in force each year. The chart shows that Civil War desertion rates were as follows:

1861	13.7%
1862	16.0%
1863	16.0%
1864	28.0%
1865	45.0%

No explanation is given of these rates. Did they pertain only to Regular Army contracts?

2. General Samuel B. Holabird in "Some Considerations Respecting Desertion in the Army," Ordnance Notes No. 232, 20 Nov 1882 (UF7.A15), said: "In the Civil War [men] deserted by the hundred thousand. Of an army of one hundred thousand men, after a campaign had progressed somewhat, not much more than from thirty to fifty percent, could be got into line of battle."

Estimates of the total number of men enlisted into the Confederate Army range from 600,000 to 1,500,000, with one million near the median (Livermore p. 40). The number of CSA deserters was

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82,922, according to the same source (p. 48), who also cites the Jan 1863 CSA strength as 446,622, of which about 70,000 fought at Gettysburg (pp. 45 & 103). Sources:

Chanal, Francois Victor Adolphe de. The American Army in the War of Secession. Ft. Leavenworth, KS: Spooner, 1894. E491.C4513.

Heitman, Francis B. Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army.... Vol. 2. Wash, DC: GPO 1903. U11.U5.H8.

Lerwill, Leonard L. The Personnel Replacement System in the United States Army: DA Pam 20-211, dated Aug 1954. MilPub-Pam.

Livermore, Thomas L. Numbers & Losses in the Civil War in America, 1861-65. Bloomington, IN: IN U, 1957. E491.L78.

Lonn, Ella. Desertion During the Civil War. NY: Century, 1928. E468.L86.

Phisterer, Frederick. Statistical Record of the Armies of the United States. NY: Scribner, 1883. E491.P45.

U.S. War Dept. Provost Marshal General. Report of the Provost Marshal General. Wash, DC: GPO, 1866. E491.M53.

## **INDIAN WARS**

Between 1867 and 1890, the annual desertion rate varied from 32.6% (1871) to 6.9% (1876). See the chart of annual enlisted strength, numbers of desertions, and desertion percentage in:

Foner, Jack D. The United States Soldier Between Two Wars. NY: Humanities, 1970. p. 223. U766.F65.

## **SPANISH-AMERICAN WAR**

Total number of officers and enlisted men in the volunteer force raised was 223,235. The number of deserters was 3,069. Rate: less than 1.5%. See:

Heitman, cited above, pp. 287-88.

## WORLD WAR I

Between 6 Apr 1917 and 11 Nov 1918, 4,057,101 men served in the Army. Total number charged with desertion between 6 Apr 1917 and 31 Dec 1918 was 5,584. Of those, 2,657 were convicted of the charge.

The five-page Loughry study of desertion rates, 1821-1926 (which corresponds with the aforementioned 1914 War Dept study) shows by far the lowest desertion rates of the 106 years were achieved in 1918 and 1919, when the number who deserted was 2 or 3 per thousand. See:

The Army Almanac. Wash, DC: GPO, 1950. p. 652. RefColl.

Humber, Robert C. "Absences and Desertions during First World War." Study, Hist Sec, AWC, Nov 1942. p. 6. AWC-HS-no35, Arch.

Loughry, H. K. & others. "Present Desertion Rates." General Staff Memorandum, G-1 course, AWC, Class of 1926-27, 16 Oct 1926. p. 14. File #331A045, Arch.

## WORLD WAR II

As of 31 Dec 1941, the Army's strength was 1,686,403. From 1942 through 1945, Army accessions of enlisted men, warrant officers and commissioned officers totaled 9,468,311. Of these 11 million plus men, 21,000 were apprehended and convicted of desertion. Rate: 0.22% See:

Army Almanac, cited above, pp. 625 & 634-37.

U.S. War Dept. Judge Advocate General. Court Martial Records Branch. Statistics compiled in 1959.