

Who Survived? Who Deserted?

by Bill Silag

Why did some Union prisoners-of-war die, and others survive? In their book *Heroes & Cowards: The Social Face of War*, Dora L. Costa and Matthew E. Kahn tackle this question.

According to Costa and Kahn, the most important factor in a POW's chances for survival was the size of the Confederate prison in which he was held; the bigger the prison, the dimmer his chances for getting out alive. But survival rates were also strongly influenced by the presence or absence of fellow soldiers from the same company. "Having friends helped men survive," Costa and Kahn conclude. "Men's ability to obtain food and shelter and to avoid disease also depended on their social networks, both the number of men in the network and the strength of their ties to each other." Prisoners formed "families" with men of their own company or regiment. "A group member could benefit from the extra food or clothing that his friends could provide, from the care his friends provided when he was sick, from moral support, and from protection against other prisoners." POWs imprisoned without comrades in the larger camps fared worst of all.

Costa and Kahn come to these conclusions based on their use of the massive Union Army life cycle data set of more than 40,000 Union soldiers. The data for these soldiers includes basic personal information such as date and place of birth, ethnicity, and occupation, as well as information regarding the 303 companies in which they served. (Fifteen of the 303 companies were from Iowa.)

Union Army companies were recruited locally, and thus each company had a geographical identity. The authors view each company (roughly 100 men) as an individual social order with specific characteristics, such as age distributions, ethnic concentrations, length of time in combat, and the political notions of a company's place of origin. In all, the source details 67 individual- and community-level variables.

The statistics presented in *Heroes & Cowards* show that the strongest predictors of group loyalty within a company were common demographic characteristics (such as age and ethnicity and shared political notions back home). Ideology, morale, and leadership were

certainly among the factors determining which soldiers ran and which stood their ground, but Costa and Kahn found that no characteristic proved as important a determinant of loyalty than a tightly knit company of men from a particular locale with a shared ethnic or occupational identity.

Logically enough, the companies with the highest mortality rates were also those more homogeneous demographically. In the authors' view, companies in which the men were more alike one another were more likely to fight to the finish for each other. Loyalty and courage were thus two sides of the same coin.

The remarkable Union Army data set includes information from U.S. population censuses (1850 to 1910) and federal health and pension records, permitting Costa and Kahn to follow the life trajectories of the individual soldiers in their sample. They know if and when a soldier deserted or went absent without leave; when and where he mustered out; where he settled after the war and what he did for a living; and when and where he died. The authors found that deserters originating from smaller communities—and particularly those more homogeneous—were more likely to head west for a new a start in life rather than return home. Deserters from larger cities would have found it easier to slip back into civilian life undetected.

Although Costa and Kahn, both professors of economics, take a less conventional approach to Civil War history, their book delves into "tests of adversity on the battlefield, on long marches and in the POW camps where so many soldiers died." The "common thread," they explain, is "how men interacted with their comrades, and how these interactions affected their decisions and their outcomes." ❖

Bill Silag, a former editor of The Palimpsest, is writing a biography of Iowa novelist Ruth Suckow.

Heroes & Cowards: The Social Face of War was published by Princeton University Press in 2008. The Union Army life cycle data now includes socioeconomic and biomedical data on 6,000 African American men in the Union Army. The Union Army data Web site tells more about this rich source of information. Visit www.uadata.org.