

# Galvanized Yankees – Meet the Confederate POWs that joined the Union Army



The Battle of Platte Bridge of 1865 saw a U.S. Army regiment made up of Confederate POWs fight off a vastly superior force of native warriors.

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**IT WAS JULY 26, 1865** when a force of 3,000 Sioux and Cheyenne descended onto the U.S. Army outpost at [Platte Bridge in Wyoming](#). All that stood between the raiders and the vital 1,000-foot long river crossing that connected the territories of Oregon and Montana was a detachment of 120 lightly armed troops. Among them was a contingent from the 3rd United States Volunteer Infantry (USVI).

At first glance, the men from the regiment were indistinguishable from their fellow bluecoats. Yet this was no ordinary U.S. Army outfit. Raised the previous winter in Rock Island, Illinois, the 3rd USVI was made up entirely of veterans of the Confederate States Army. Following their capture on the battlefields of the Civil War, the prisoners had been offered a reprieve from the purgatory of their internment for a chance to serve the very enemy they had only recently been fighting.

When the native warriors struck the remote outpost, the men of 3<sup>rd</sup>, along with troopers from the 11th Ohio Cavalry (another unit made up of Confederate POWs), sallied forth to engage the attackers. Heavily outnumbered, the defenders withdrew to the relative safety of the bridge and continued the fight from there. By the end of the day, more than 39 of the bluecoats were casualties; 60 native warriors lay dead. It was the 3rd's first taste of combat as a unit. And according to all accounts, the one-time rebels had acquitted themselves admirably.

Amazingly, the 3<sup>rd</sup> USVI wasn't the only Yankee regiment to be made up of Confederate POWs. The Union had raised five others between 1864 and 1865 enlisting at total of 5,600 Southerners. Another 800 rebel prisoners were absorbed into various state regiments from Northern prison camps. Most of these units were ordered to perform rear echelon duties or to serve on the distant western frontier. Amazingly however, a handful of turncoats did eventually fight against their Confederate brethren. Considered traitors by their

Southern comrades, these reluctant Union-men became known as “white-washed rebels” or even “galvanized Yankees” — a reference to the process in which steel is surface-treated to prevent corrosion. And theirs is one of the more curious stories of the American Civil War.



Thousands of Rebel POWs were recruited into the Union army after surrendering. (Image source: WikiCommons)

Some in the North tried to enlist Confederate prisoners almost from the war's outset. As early as 1862, the commander of an Illinois regiment lobbied rebels held at Camp Douglas near Chicago to renounce their allegiance to the Confederacy and join his outfit. About 200 agreed before top Union commanders ordered a halt to the practice. Despite this, a number of ethnic regiments quietly drew replacements from the ranks of Confederate prisoners, although their recruiting targeted only recent immigrants from those regiments' respective 'old countries'.

Yet by the beginning of 1864, with the war dragging on, manpower reserves dwindling and native uprisings breaking out all along the frontier, the War Department in Washington found itself compelled to offer bluecoats and muskets to rebel detainees.

At first, these recruitment offers came entirely from the U.S. Navy. Few volunteered. But in January 1864, prisoners held at the overcrowded holding camp at Point Lookout, Maryland were invited to join the Federal army, under the proviso that they wouldn't be required to fight their former comrades. Hundreds accepted the offer. Together, they formed 1st United States Volunteer Infantry.

Initially, the men of the 1st USVI were assigned to provost or military police duties in Virginia and North Carolina before being transferred to the Dakota Territory. After spending a harsh winter on the prairies, in July of 1865, the 1<sup>st</sup> USVI repelled an attack on Fort Rice by Cheyenne and Lakota Sioux led by Sitting Bull himself. The regiment would continue to serve on the frontier until November when its surviving members were honourably discharged.

The War Department soon raised five other 'galvanized' regiments, which garrisoned forts in Arkansas, New Mexico, Nebraska, Montana, Idaho, Kansas, Oregon, Utah and Colorado between 1864 and 1866.

A number of Northern states even raised galvanized infantry units as well, along with cavalry and even artillery. After suffering grievous casualties early in the war, the 1<sup>st</sup> Connecticut Cavalry drew replacements from Confederate prisoners being held in Delaware, which it scattered throughout its companies, as did the 3<sup>rd</sup> Pennsylvania Heavy Artillery and the 4<sup>th</sup> Delaware Infantry.

While the vast majority of Confederate recruits were eventually sent to the frontier far away from the battlefields of the Civil War, at least one unit was sent into combat against rebel forces. More than 450 Southerners captured at Gettysburg agreed to join the 3<sup>rd</sup> Maryland Cavalry regiment in early 1864. The unit was folded into the U.S. Army's Eighth Corp and sent to Louisiana where it would eventually take part in the Red River campaign and the Union assault on Fort Morgan and the capture of Mobile, Alabama.

While some galvanized units served with distinction, the program was only moderately successful. Some units suffered high desertion rates. In the case of the 4<sup>th</sup> USVI, more than a tenth of its recruits slipped away from the regiment before it even arrived at its first frontier outpost.

Despite the mixed results of the scheme, the Confederates also attempted to draw volunteers from its own prisoner of war camps.

All told, the Confederacy recruited more than 1,600 mostly foreign-born Yankee POWs in the final six months of the war. Four provisional army units including: Brooks Battalion of Foreigners, the Confederate 1<sup>st</sup> Foreign Legion (aka Tucker's Confederate Regiment), and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Foreign Legion (aka 8<sup>th</sup> Confederate Battalion). The state of Tennessee replaced losses in at least one of its regiments from the ranks of Yankee prisoners too. The 10<sup>th</sup> Tennessee Irish Volunteers drew mostly from recent Irish immigrants who had been captured in Union uniform.

Unlike the galvanized Yankees who served almost entirely in the far-flung corners of the continent, the Confederates threw their POW recruits right into action against their former comrades.

In most cases, the volunteers had accepted Southern recruitment offers mostly to escape the squalid living conditions in rebel-run POW camps. Once on the battlefield, many deserted, surrendered and in some cases mutinied.

Once in federal custody, a number of these former Union soldiers sought to rejoin their old regiments. Their requests were denied. Despite pressure to try the prisoners for desertion or even treason, eventually those taken in rebel uniform were eventually allowed to enlist in the USVI regiments as galvanized Yankees.

By 1866, the last of the USVI regiments were disbanded and its soldiers discharged.