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**The Saint Patrick's Battalion of the Mexican-American
War: Why They Deserted Just to Fight On**

College of Liberal Arts

History 492

Senior Paper

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This paper will examine the deserters from the United States Army who, during the Mexican-American War, deserted one army only to organize and fight for the other. What would prompt men to do this is the main topic this paper seeks to discuss. That soldiers who took an oath to fight for one nation would change sides to continue fighting against their former brothers in arms seemingly precludes that the horrors of war was the sole reason. Soldiers changing sides to fight for the opposing side is a rare instance in war, so, there must be other reasons to cause such behavior. While this was an unpopular war with many people in the U.S., the main reasons for the desertions and continued fighting seemed to be -- living conditions in and treatment by the U.S. Army, inducements by the Mexicans, and that most deserters had newly immigrated to the U.S. -- will be examined to address which would most likely be the key to why these desertions took place.

One fact of the Mexican-American War of 1846-1848 is that a lot of men who deserted from the ranks of the U.S. army crossed over to fight for the Mexicans. Most were immigrants to America who had recently left their home nations. Almost all deserters who joined the Saint Patrick's Battalion, the unit that foreigners fighting for Mexico were organized into, were from the regular army and the biggest percentage were Irish. Once in the Mexican army, the deserters were organized, with other foreign soldiers already present, into the unit by an Irishman named John Riley. This is why the unit was named the San Patricios or The Saint Patrick's Battalion. Not all deserters from the U.S. army joined because Riley only had around 200 men in the unit¹ and many more had de-

serted, but, those that joined became known for their hard fighting.² This also became a notorious episode in U.S. military history and that is why it must be looked at.

The Mexican-American War had many causes, but had gone beyond the point of no return when the U.S. annexed Texas into the Union. As early as 1843, Mexican president Antonio López de Santa Anna told the U.S., in no uncertain words, that war would come if Texas was annexed.³ So, no one should have been surprised to see American forces massed along the Mexican-U.S. border before the annexation vote came up in mid 1845. Corpus Christi, the town occupied, was on the Mexican side of the Nueces river (the traditional southern boundary of Texas) so justification for the move was that the leader, as well as most of the settlers there, were Texans and therefore the town was an extension of Texas. This justification was not believed by those in the army.⁴ By the end of October, 1845, General Zachary Taylor would have over 3,000 troops in his army. This army was unusual for U.S. wars in that it was made up entirely of regular troops, although almost half were of foreign birth.⁵ This fact would be a problem later.

Late in 1845, the new, fiercely nationalistic President, Mariano Paredes, vowed to fight for Mexican territory.⁶ The U.S. had sent a special envoy with an offer that President Polk had hoped would quell the trouble and gain the U.S. more territory. When the newly installed Mexican president refused to even see this envoy, Polk ordered Taylor to move farther south – to the disputed boundary line of the Río Grande River.⁷ In early 1846, Taylor moved his army to the mouth of the Río Grande, across the river from Matamoros, and built a small fort.⁸ U.S. troops across from Matamoros brought the Mexican Army of the North and its General, Pedro Ampudia, to the Río Grande. Once there, he

demanded the U.S. army decamp and return to the Nueces River. Taylor replied that his orders did not include the permission to withdraw. General Mariano Arista, a replacement for Ampudia, came with orders to attack the U.S. army which, in Paredes's view, had invaded their territory. Hostilities started when a Mexican cavalry force engaged a U.S. scouting party on the 25 of April. Even though the boundaries were in dispute, Polk announced to Congress that, "American blood had been shed on American soil." Congress swiftly voted for a declaration of war against Mexico. There were enthusiastic demonstrations in the United States although not everyone joined in. Some leaders in our government such as former President John Quincy Adams as well as private leaders like the poet Henry David Thoreau were highly vocal opponents of the war.⁹ War had come to North America.

Taylor's forces had to engage the opposing forces in his immediate area before he could advance. Attacks against his supplies at Point Isabel and his troops at Fort Texas were repelled and reinforcements were received. On their journey back from Point Isabel, the U.S. troops met the Mexican army at Palo Alto.¹⁰ Taylor and his men pushed the Mexicans back to Resaca de la Palma where they routed them. Then he pushed Arista's army out of Matamoros and on to Carmargo. Next, Taylor advanced to Monterrey where they met and defeated Ampudia's forces. The new year found Taylor's army had moved to Agua Nueva. Some days later, his force met and defeated the new President's (Antonio López de Santa Anna again) forces, in the Battle of Buena Vista.¹¹ His army having suffered many casualties and other deprivations, Taylor retreated to Monterrey where he remained for the rest of the war.¹²

General Stephen Kearny left San Antonio in 1846 on a march towards Santa Fe, which he occupied in August. Kearny left Santa Fe for California where he fought the battle of San Pascual but could not dislodge the opposing forces. After a short siege, Kearny drove his troops through the enemy to reach San Diego.¹³ Much to everyone's surprise, the leader of Californian irregular troops, John C. Fremont, had negotiated a treaty with the Mexican forces in California and the U.S. commanders abided by it.¹⁴ Colonel Alexander Doniphan's force marched with Kearny's army until Santa Fe.¹⁵ Doniphan's troops then moved south towards El Paso on the way to Chihuahua.¹⁶ A few miles from El Paso they met forces of the Mexican Army and quickly defeated them. After the skirmish, Doniphan marched forward to Chihuahua where they routed the enemy and occupied the town. Ordered to join with General Wool, Doniphan marched his men to the east and met up with the forces at Buena Vista. Not really needed now, General Taylor allowed Doniphan's Missouri volunteers to go home.¹⁷ General John Wool left San Antonio and began the march south in September of 1846. Wool and his men made it to Monclova and occupied it. December found them in the town of Parras and from there they met up with Taylor's force to take part in the Battle of Buena Vista.¹⁸

General Winfield Scott was to head the amphibian forces going to Vera Cruz and in November 1846 he departed for the Río Grande by ship. Scott arrived at Carmargo and, after a stop in Tampico, landed at Vera Cruz in March 1847 to begin a siege. Vera Cruz fell on the 29th. Scott defeated Santa Anna's troops at Cerro Gordo and occupied Jalapa in April. An emissary, Nicholas Trist arrived at Jalapa in May to handle negotiations with the Mexican Government. Scott moved onward to the town of Puebla. Con-

tinuing on to the capital, Scott's forces fought the battles of Contreras and Churubusco. It was here at Churubusco that John Riley and most of the Saint Patrick's Battalion were killed or captured.¹⁹ Scott continued towards Mexico City, fought at Molino del Rey and made an assault on Chapultepec Castle. The next day Gen. Scott and his forces occupied Mexico City. Hostilities ended when Nicholas Trist and the new President of Mexico, Manuel Peña y Peña signed the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.²⁰ U.S. troops fought hard won battles as well as suffered great hardships due to the occasional scarcity and poor quality of provisions and a foreign (to most) climate. Often it is the hardships a soldier suffers that leads to desertion and this conflict had its share of hardships.

Every war has had desertions. Soldiers on the training field never know just what their reaction will be when placed in harm's way. The battlefield has experiences impossible to train for and as soon as Taylor's troops were camped across from Matamoros the desertions began (For a view of a typical encampment see figure 1). It was at Fort Texas, before the war started, that the organizer of the Saint Patrick's Battalion, John Riley, had deserted.²¹ In a message sent to the Adjutant General soon after his arrival, Taylor wrote of the extreme measures he had to take to stop desertions. After many had swam across the Río Grande to Matamoros, he issued the order that others attempting the same were to be commanded to stop, and, upon the refusal of that order, were to be shot.²² The ease and temptation of desertion can be seen by the closeness of Matamoros in figure 2. Out of 31,000 total regular army in service through 1848, 2,850 deserted. Of the 59,000 volunteers who served, 3,900 left by desertion.²³ Thus, the greater percentage of desertions were from the regular army. While there were deserters from both regular army and

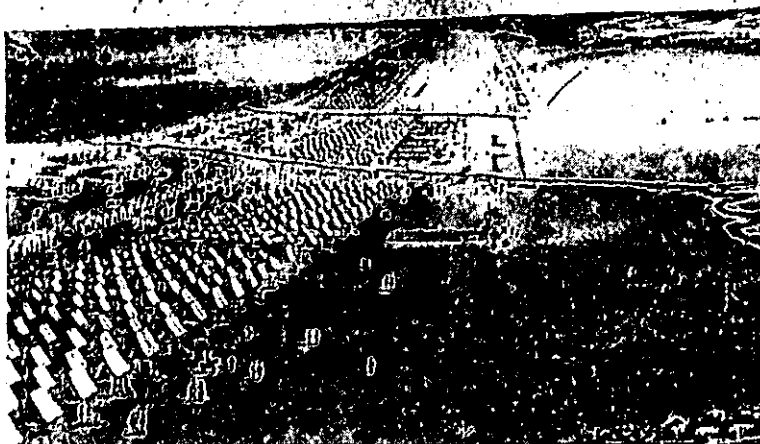


Figure 1. Typical U.S.-Mexican War encampment.

Source: Robert Ryal Miller, Shamrock and Sword: The St. Patrick's Battalion in the U.S.-Mexican War, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989, 12.



Figure 2. Matamoros, Mexico.

Source: Miller, Shamrock and Sword, 32.

volunteer units, those deserters who went on to fight for the Mexican army were entirely from the regular army.²⁴ That army being almost half foreign born proved problematic to U.S. military leaders.

The living conditions of those fighting for the U.S., as well as the treatment they received from their superiors, were among the many reasons for such high desertion rates. A table in Robert R. Miller's book, Shamrock and Sword: The St. Patrick's Battalion in the U.S. - Mexican War, shows that desertion rates of the U.S-Mexican war were the highest of all U.S. foreign wars.²⁵ Diaries and other writings of men who fought there reveal some of the hardships experienced by the armies. They wrote of the shoddy conditions of some of the equipment given to sustain them on their campaign. Many of the tents given them were "transparent as gauze" or were "worn out" and "rotten." Therefore, with even the lightest of rains, most of the men were left shivering and wet. This, understandably, left them open to disease and death -- especially in a climate that could drop from 90 degrees to below freezing during the night.²⁶ A letter sent by an officer to his wife in 1847 reflects not only the weather problems encountered but the differences in treatment between the ranks. He wrote, "At Jalapa they are eating ice cream and at Perote . . . it is so cold [we] have to sleep under three blankets."²⁷ Another time he writes of sleeping in a castle under "as many blankets as I can get."²⁸ Apparently an officer could at least get good blankets because he did not criticize their quality. A soldier stationed at Point Isabel also wrote of the extreme temperature changes "We lolled our tongues at drill - we panted in the shade . . . but in an hour last night every thing was changed . . . there is a nose-nipping cold."²⁹ Another supply problem experienced by the men, al-

though not as a whole, was getting fed. A soldier wrote of visiting neighboring units only to discover items of food that “was the first time I knew . . . such things could be obtained.”³⁰

The weather and supplies were not the only problems the soldiers had to endure. Many soldiers wrote in their diaries of pest problems. One soldier wrote of the “myriad of crawling, flying, stinging , and biting things.” The plentiful number of spiders prompted a check of one’s boots before putting them on. There were pests other than spiders. A soldier wrote of quickly removing his pants to dislodge what the unit Doctor informed him was a Mexican scorpion and that it was as “poisonous as a rattlesnake.” Along with having to endure the physical contact of pests, there were many pests that made noise. Crickets and locusts as well as frogs, prairie dogs, and panthers all made noise during the night. It prompted the writer of this account to pen, “ [all the nuisances] are universally pronounced...as death to one’s patriotic emotions, and a right hard fight...to be followed by a riddance to this pestilent country...” is what was needed.³¹

The pests were very often the least of a soldier’s worries. Many soldiers wrote of the harsh punishments meted out by their superiors. Being commissioned an officer in the United States military is no guarantee of competency and a volunteer who wrote of his Mexican War experiences related as much. Some officers he had encountered seemed unable to handle “the greatness thrust upon them.” He was thankful they were not the supreme leaders.³² An English soldier fighting in the regular U.S. army, upon hearing of the punishments meted out to the deserters captured, wrote he felt bad for them because he was sure it was “harsh and cruel handling” which drove them to their desertions. This

English soldier wrote of minor offenses being punished by “[tying] them up by the wrists, as high as their hands could reach . . . with a gag in their mouths.”³³ An eyewitness account and watercolor painted by Samuel E. Chamberlain best illustrates the terrible cruelty that soldiers could experience from their superiors. After refusing an order from a superior officer (who was lauding his superiority over the men), Chamberlain and others were “bucked and gagged” and made to watch while a man, whom they refused to help punish, was whipped right in front of them.³⁴ To be bucked and gagged was to be tied to a pole with your knees up tight to your chest while having a rag tightly inside your mouth, knotted at the back of your head. A graphic description is related in Chamberlain’s book but his pictorial illustration is better (see Figure 3). Such treatment as well as being whipped, could well lead men to leave their posts as it made Chamberlain choose being shot rather than submit to it. Punishments like this as well as the horror of 19th century warfare (see Figure 4) could well, by themselves, drive men to desert. If there were enticements from the other side to seemingly make it worth while, and in this war there were, less virtuous men would leave very quickly.

Inticements to get soldiers to desert are no rarity in war. In the U.S.-Mexican War, they began as soon as Taylor’s troops reached the Río Grande. General Ampudia ordered a handbill distributed that would appeal directly to the foreign men serving in the U.S. forces. Besides stating the Mexican stance that this was a “barbarous aggression” against them, it, in an appeal directly to the newly immigrated soldiers, reminded some “you were born in Great Britain . . . The [U.S.] looks with coldness on the powerful flag of St. George.” It reminded them that Polk’s eyes were on Oregon (claimed by the Brit-



Figure 3. Bucked and Gagged.

Source: Samuel E. Chamberlain, My Confession: The Recollections of a Rogue, New York: Harper and Brothers Co., 1956, 195.



Figure 4. Storming the Ramparts.

Source: Ralph W. Kirkham, The Mexican War Journal and Letters of Ralph W. Kirkham ed. Robert Ryal Miller, College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1991, 51.

ish) as they were also on Mexico, and offered to pay their travel expenses once in Mexico City. The proclamation also offered the same deal to “Germans, French, Poles, and individuals of all nations.” With the policy, stated above, of shooting deserters as they swam the river, this offer was, as a U.S. soldier wrote, “not unattended with success.”³⁵ A later handbill, printed in German, English, and French, reminded combatants that Mexico “[lived] in peace and friendship” with their home nations. It implored the foreign born to cross and fight for their shared “sacred imperiled religion.” It thus played on the fact many foreign born U.S. soldiers were also Catholic, like the Mexicans.³⁶

Along with religious unity and nationalistic inducements, the Mexicans relied on a couple of human weaknesses to thin the U.S. ranks: greed and lust. One U.S. soldier, when writing of a Priest who was recruiting for the Mexicans, mentioned a “one hundred and fifty dollar per man” cash payment and a raise in rank being offered. He had wrote earlier of the difference between our “cash” and their “promise to pay,”³⁷ but, despite these differences, men did desert and join the Mexican Army. Offers of land as well as money were made to the U.S. soldiers by the Mexicans. After taking over as head of the Northern Division, General Arista offered of up to 350 acres per soldier, and more to officers, as well as Mexican citizenship to any who deserted and joined them in their fight.³⁸ While there is no evidence of the Mexican Government offering women as a premium for desertion, some of the men claimed love for a Mexican damsel as a reason for their actions, and, some wrote of Mexican mothers tempting soldiers with the prospect of marrying a daughter as an inducement to desert. One Dennis Conahan claimed after his capture that he was taken while spending the night with a Mexican woman and

made to fight for the Mexican army.³⁹ Samuel Chamberlain, mentioned above, also tells of a Mexican woman who, as he and a friend were seeing her two daughters, urged him and his friend to desert and marry them. He wrote, “What a temptation to a poor soldier ill paid and roughly used.” He did not desert and “fly to [their] hacienda” but his friend did.⁴⁰ The inticements seemed to make desertion worth the trouble, but, conditions in the Mexican army were much worse than in the U.S. army.⁴¹ By the time the deserters found this out, it was too late.⁴²

As stated above, many of the soldiers in the U.S. military at this time were immigrants from Europe. The Mexicans had played on this fact in their handbills. Prospects of a better life were hard to find for these new immigrants so many enlisted in the military. Enlisting in an army for work does not necessarily ensure loyalty. Of the deserters in the Mexican-American War, as we see from statistics stated above, most were from the regular army.⁴³ They were there for the pay and not from a sense of national loyalty. It is not surprising then the regular army had a higher rate of desertions. The volunteers came from state militias and other locally organized groups. It is also not surprising they suffered fewer desertions but also had fewer deserters join the opposing forces. A soldier wrote in his account of his service in the war that he had heard of no volunteer going over to the enemy. He wrote of some who volunteered in haste and “returned to their ‘anxious mammas’” but of none who joined the Mexicans. He went on to state that, of the volunteers he was with, there were many Catholics and close to a hundred Irish and many “were proof against the fascinating lures” the Mexicans were offering. He wrote of some Irish men who lured an emissary of the Mexican army into the area so they could arrest him.⁴⁴

Others of the time wrote of the facts that many who deserted the U.S. to join the Mexicans were already deserters of another army. A note in Ramón Alcaraz's The Other Side: or, Notes for the History of the War Between Mexico and the United States, translated by Albert Ramsey describes the Saint Patrick's Battalion as "all Europeans and some . . . deserters from the British Army in Canada."⁴⁵ In his many tales, Sam Chamberlain also tells of a man in his outfit who had deserted from the British. Many of the Saint Patrick's were then not only newly immigrated but also deserters from at least one army before this one.⁴⁶

But, being deserters does not mean they were not fighters. The Saint Patrick's Battalion is as famous in Mexico for their gallantry in defense of that country as they are reviled for their desertion in this one. While they were not officially organized as a unit until December 1846,⁴⁷ some, notably the unit organizer John Riley, fought in the early battles at Matamoros.⁴⁸ While they saw action in several battles, they fought with distinction at Buena Vista and at Churubusco. At Buena Vista, the Saint Patrick's Battalion led an attack and fought with such distinction (they were almost wiped out) that Riley was given a promotion.⁴⁹ Prisoners of war being led away after the battle reported of spotting "O'Reilly [sic] and his company of deserters." Apparently the unit enjoyed shooting at their former officers while fighting them.⁵⁰ It was at the Battle of Churubusco that Riley and his unit fought their hardest and paid a high price for it. It was at this battle the Saint Patrick's Battalion was captured. They fought hard while defending their fortification at Churubusco, they decimated the forces arrayed in front of them.⁵¹ But, one reason for their hard fighting could be their knowledge of the consequences of their actions. One

soldier who fought against them at this battle wrote “[n]o mercy was shown” the deserters who fought against their former mates “bayonets and rifle butts killed many of them.”⁵² The Mexicans fighting along side them were said to have tried to surrender several times but the Saint Patrick’s Battalion stopped them, even killing one flag man. Not until the building they were in was captured and a white flag raised by an American soldier did the attack against the Saint Patrick’s stop.⁵³

Now the deserters were once again in custody of the U.S. forces and, according to military laws, they had to pay the price. George Kendall, a correspondent with the New Orleans Picayune, sent out a dispatch that told of their future. He wrote “the most important capture of all was the entire Foreign Battalion . . . all are under close guard and I trust will be strictly dealt with.”⁵⁴ After two military trials, most of those captured were hung. Most said they were forced into serving in the Mexican army and all had some excuse or another but none could deny they were captured while attacking their former brothers in arms. For this, those who deserted in war time paid with their lives.⁵⁵ Figures 5 and 6 show a contemporary’s view of their punishment. In all, fifty deserters paid with their lives. Sixteen of them were hung on September 9th, 4 were hung on the 10th (figure 5) and thirty were hung on the 13th (fig. 6). Those who were not sentenced to die were punished by 200 lashes, branded with a D (for deserter) on the cheek, had to wear an iron yoke, suffered hard labor, and were drummed from the army.⁵⁶ Those who were executed on the 13th endured an extra punishment. They had to stand on their platforms (the backs of wagons hitched to mules) while U.S. forces attacked the fortress of Chapultapec. There they waited, for hours, until the American flag was raised in victory and the order

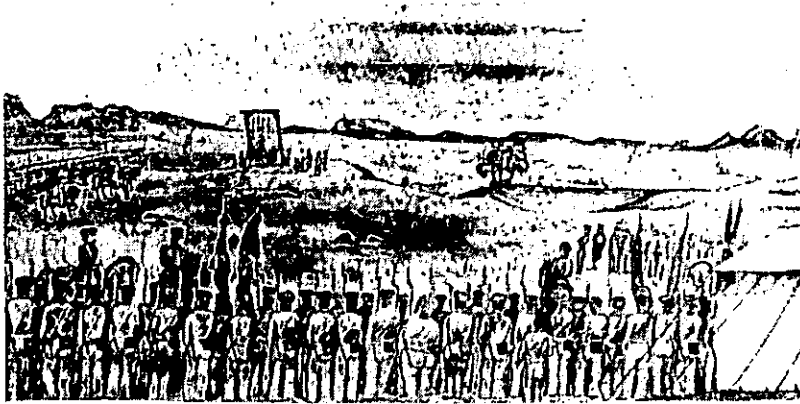


Figure 5. Hangings of the 10th.

Source: Miller, Shamrock and Sword, 106.



Figure 6. Waiting on the Fort to be Taken.

Source: Miller, Shamrock and Sword, 108.

was given to remove the wagons.⁵⁷ A last bit of officer cruelty they had to endure before dying. The result of this episode that infuriated most every one was that the unit's organizer, John Riley himself, had deserted before war was declared and thus escaped being hung. In a dispatch to his paper in New Orleans, George Kendall wrote of the "miscreant Riley" escaping his punishment.⁵⁸ Many were as disappointed in Riley's escape of justice as with any of the deserters escaping the rope. Some soldiers believed that if the officers had not intervened at Churubusco, all the deserters would have paid the ultimate price. But, as it was, a large part of the unit, Riley key among them, had their sentences reduced by General Scott. He reviewed every case and pardoned those he felt deserving.⁵⁹ Thus was the end of the Saint Patrick's Battalion. An episode fondly remembered by those who they had fought for and a scourge to those who they fought against.

One fact of the Mexican-American War of 1846-1848 is that yes, a lot of men who deserted from the ranks of the U.S. army crossed over to fight for the Mexicans. Not all the men who deserted the U.S. army fought for the enemy, but enough did that a unit was formed just for them. Armies are thought of as unifying organizations where feelings of camaraderie and loyalty are strengthened and solidified. What would influence a man in that sort of situation, a situation of supposed patriotism and expected obedience, to not only turn his back, but, to turn frontwards again with an attitude for war? There were several reasons for desertion given by captured Saint Patricks and some theories suggested by the facts. As argued in this paper, conditions of U.S. army life and treatment by the officers, inducements from the Mexicans like money, rank, and land as well as some naturally tempting feminine possessions of Mexico, and a lack of loyalty to a newly

adopted country were major issues pertaining to desertions in this war. The Soldiers themselves proposed a more involuntary reasoning for their actions, but, they were on trial for their lives and thus this explanation is looked at with skepticism. To single out any one of the answers as the most influential one, we have to look at what all soldiers did and not just at the deserters.

The forces sent to this harsh and somewhat alien environment were given like materials according to rank. The higher the rank, the better the gear. This means all the soldiers, loyal ones and deserters alike, received the same shoddy and worn materials. Also, the problem with mistreatment from officers seemed not to be localized to a few areas either. This treatment caused desertions as well as the practice of aiming at past officers when fighting for the Mexicans, but, if all they wanted was to kill the offending officer, they could have done this easier if they had remained where they were. More reasons for their overall behavior are needed.

Inducements would be fantastically more alluring to soldiers ill equipped and terribly mishandled. Handbills promising promotions of rank, higher wages and other benefits were sent often into the American lines as well as ladies coming over for visits and parties. A soldier disgusted with his station would be immensely tempted to leave and many did. But, many more who were tempted by these things did not succumb. Many others, for whatever reason, stayed loyal to their army and women waiting back home. Besides, as stated above, money paid every payday was better than money promised in the future. These are reasons which, when added to others, could drive men to change

sides in battle. But, it is the lack of connection to the United States that appears to be the strongest motive for such a complete switch of loyalties.

That most of the regular army members who left their ranks to fight for Mexico were Europeans who had only recently immigrated is the most telling fact of this story. Some who immigrated during this time had never fully integrated into American life. We have Irish, German, and other European neighborhoods all over America today. It is not hard to imagine a man, who had just come to a new country and – out of necessity – joined that country's military, finding his loyalty focused on himself in situations such as these men had found themselves. Without a Nation or some other group one can be loyal to, we have to be loyal to ourselves. It was their necessity to pick the right situation for their own preservation that led these soldiers to carry their allegiance with them as they chose to war against comrades and, for a great many, they paid for it with just what they had hoped to keep; their lives.

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