The Youngest NCO in the U.S. Army

Sergeant John Clem (John Joseph Klem)

Battlefield communication before the 20th Century was done by sound of drums in camps and on the battlefield. The day started with the drums beating Reveille followed with Roll Call and a Warning Drum to let the troops know food was ready. Other drum beats were the Alarm (a long roll), To Arms, Church Call, March, Police Call (to begin cleaning up) and Retreat. The main targets on the battlefield were anyone on horseback, the Regimental Colors (the Stars and Strips were not in battle during the Civil War), and the drummers to knockout the drums and cutoff communications. Drummers were best if small to reduce the target. The youngest drummer in the American Revolution was Nathan Futrell who was seven years old.

When the American Civil War began John Clem (John Joseph Klem) from Ohio after running away from home at the age nine tried to join the 3rd Ohio and other units before the 22nd Michigan allowed John to become a mascot to the regiment and march with the men. The men chipped in to buy him a uniform. He was allowed to enlist when he turned 13 years old.

The myth of John has him at the Battle of Shiloh (April 1862) when an artillery shell destroyed his drum and knocked him unconscious. However the 22nd Michigan regiment was not formed until after that battle. A song was written about “The Drummer Boy of Shiloh” by William S. Hays.

He participated in many of the major Battles of the war - at Murfreesboro (July 1862), Perryville (October 19862), Chickamauga (September 1863), and Kennesaw Mountain (1864). The drummers during battle were often used as medical aides. There were some 40,000 drummer boys during the Civil War.

At the Battle of Chickamauga it was reported that a Confederate Colonel from Tennessee commanded the little “Yankee Devil” to surrender. Instead John shot the Colonel and made his way back to Union lines. This act won him a promotion to sergeant making him the youngest NCO in American Army history. He was captured in Georgia while guarding a rail road. The Confederate troops stripped him of his uniform and Confederate General Joseph Wheeler used young John as propaganda saying, “Look what the Damn Yankees are sending down to fight us.” John was part of a prisoner exchange and returned to the Union. He had been wounded twice during the war and discharged. After the War he finished high school and was appointed to West Point, but failed the entrance exam. President Grant appointed him a commission as a Second Lieutenant. John went on to fight in the Spanish/American War. He retired in 1915 with rank the of Brigadier General and in 1916 was promoted to Major General.