

LITTLEST BOY BLUE

A Civil War hero
at 12, Johnny Clem
was the youngest
soldier ever to serve
in the U.S. Army



Johnny stood his ground staunchly and dropped the Rebel colonel with one shot.

BY AL SILVERMAN

THREE UNION SOLDIERS in dusty, faded blue uniforms sat wearily on the caisson as it bounced along Tennessee's Chickamauga Valley. Two of the troopers were bearded, but between them sat a fuzzy-cheeked lad who stood only four feet tall and weighed just 85 pounds.

Johnny Clem was his name, and he was 12 years and five weeks old—the youngest soldier ever to carry arms as a regular in the U.S. Army.

It was September 18, 1863, and Johnny Clem's brigade was rolling toward the battle of Chickamauga, one of the bloodiest of the Civil War.

During the Civil War many young boys enlisted. In fact, three out of every ten men on the Union side were under 21, and not until 1864 did Congress pass a law forbidding the enlistment of anyone under 16. But Johnny, who joined up at ten, had them all beaten.

Johnny Clem was born in Newark, Ohio, on August 13, 1851. In April of 1861, when President Abraham Lincoln issued the first call for volunteers, Johnny offered his services to the Third Ohio Regiment. The captain in charge burst out laughing. "I'm not taking infants," he said.

Johnny Clem

But when the Third Ohio Regiment boarded a train for Cincinnati, Johnny sneaked into the baggage car and hid until the train reached its destination. There he attached himself to the 22nd Michigan Regiment and refused to leave. Soon he became the regiment's drummer boy.

Though Johnny wasn't on the muster roll, he drew \$13 a month, the pay coming from the pockets of regimental officers who liked the



boy's spirit. He asked no favors. He slept in a tent with two soldiers. He marched in the rain with the others. He drew regular Army rations—sow-belly, beans, hardtack and coffee. When the others went hungry, he went hungry, too.

On April 6, 1862, Johnny saw action for the first time. The battle of Pittsburg Landing—or Shiloh, as it came to be known in the North—lasted two days and one night and casualties ran high on both sides. During the engagement Johnny was scared stiff by the piercing Rebel yell, the thunder of bursting shells, the death whinnies of stricken horses and the groans of the wounded. Even so, he beat out a steady rhythm on his drum until a shell fragment smashed it to pieces.

In May of 1862, a month after Shiloh, Clem was officially inducted into the Federal Army at Covington, Kentucky. His comrades gave him a musket after they had sawed off the barrel to his size, and a regimental tailor made him a soldier's uniform. Under the command of Maj. Gen. George Thomas, Johnny's

Johnny Clem

regiment advanced through Tennessee, heading for a showdown with Confederate forces under Gen. Braxton Bragg.

At 10:30 on the morning of September 20, however, the Southern Army fell upon the Federals, turned their flank and came in from the rear. Except for Thomas' own unit, which held firm and earned its commander the title of "Rock of Chickamauga," the Yankees collapsed and fled toward Chattanooga.

In the midst of the retreat, little Johnny suddenly found himself alone. Out of the smoke and haze, a sword-wielding Confederate colonel riding a horse swiftly bore down on him.

"Surrender, you damn little Yankee," the colonel yelled.

Johnny raised the heavy weapon and fired. The bullet toppled the Confederate colonel from his horse.

That night Johnny crawled through the thicket and made his way back to Chattanooga. When he presented himself to General Thomas and told him he had shot a Rebel colonel, Thomas promptly promoted him to lance sergeant.

Later, Clem met Lieut. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, who had come to confer with Thomas. Grant had heard of Johnny from Shiloh, where he had been nicknamed "The Drummer Boy of Shiloh." Smiling at the lad, Grant asked Thomas, "Where did you pick up little John?"

"At Chickamauga. I have made him a sergeant," Thomas replied.

Brashly, the 12-year-old interrupted. "General," he queried, "is that all you are going to make me?"

The two generals laughed at the boy's boldness and Grant embraced him heartily.

Soon after Chickamauga, Johnny was captured while participating in a raid on a Confederate wagon train near Bridgeport, Alabama. He was held captive 63 days and then released in a prisoner exchange. Later he acted as messenger for General Thomas at the battle of Atlanta. While carrying a dispatch, he was nipped on the ear by a stray bullet. He was finally mustered out of the Army on September 19, 1864.

Johnny went back to Newark and eventually tried to enter West Point—only to fail the exam. Determined to get back into the Army, he journeyed to Washington to plead his

Johnny Clem

case with Grant, now President of the U.S.

“Don’t worry,” said the President. “We can do better than that. I will appoint you a second lieutenant.”

And so Johnny returned to the Army, where he served honorably for 44 years, rising to chief quartermaster during the Spanish-American War. In 1915, Maj. Gen. John Clem retired—the last man on the active list of the U.S. Army who had seen service in the Civil War.

Johnny Clem died in 1937 at San Antonio, Texas. He was 86 years old, remembered with affection as “the littlest soldier of them all.”

