



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

The Veterans Reserve Corps

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Image: Washington, District of Columbia. Company A, 10th U.S. Veteran Reserve Corps. Library of Congress

When the Civil War began in spring 1861, men happily joined the ranks and marched away to save the Union in what they believed would be a short conflict. Fewer and fewer soldiers returned home as the war ground on.

By 1863, few people believed the war would end any time soon. General Order 105, issued on April 28, instituted a way for honorably discharged wounded warriors to continue serving in support capacities while freeing up able-bodied men for front line duties.

The order created the Invalid Corps which was to be made up of soldiers who were not fit for field service due to wounds or illness contracted in the line of duty. They could work as guards, nurses, hospital attendants, cooks, clerks or in other light duties instead of being discharged from the army.

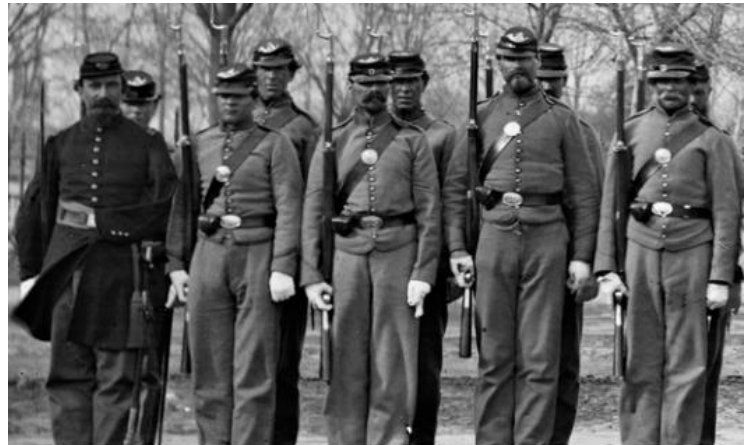
The Invalid Corps was given a distinctive uniform to set them apart from other units. Their jackets were of the pattern used by the cavalry except the color was sky blue with dark blue trim, the inverse of colors of the standard army uniform. The trousers were to be the regulation Army-issue light blues.

The IC soon began to suffer from reduced morale. The initials "IC" were also a military abbreviation for equipment that had been "inspected and condemned," and declared as no longer usable.

The idea of manhood in society at the time did not look kindly on men with physical disabilities. To those standards, the men of the Invalids were less of a man because they had suffered physical wounds no matter that they were received while serving the Union cause. It also did not help morale that a popular song had been written about the Invalid Corps poking fun at the various maladies suffered by its men.

On March 18, 1864, General Order 111 changed the name of the Invalid Corps to the Veterans Reserve Corps. The new name helped to break the stigma associated with the IC. The VRC opened service to those veterans of the war who had already finished their enlistment terms and were willing to continue their service regardless of whether they were wounded.

During the war, more than 60,000 men served in the Veterans Reserve Corps in various roles including garrisoning the fortifications surrounding Washington and Alexandria, serving as provost guards, escorting prisoners of war, conscripts and recruits, and working in military hospitals.





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

Men of the Veterans Reserve were on duty when Confederate General Jubal Early launched his attack on Washington, D.C. in July 1864 against Fort Stevens, and were among those who held off the enemy until reinforcements arrived to save the capital.

Most Veteran Reserve Corps members were mustered out of service in the summer and fall of 1865 to return to civilian life. They had served their country, were wounded in the line of duty and decided they had more to give. Despite the ridicule these wounded soldiers received during the war, they rendered valuable service to the Union war effort and even helped saved the nation's capital.

An original Veterans Reserve Corps jacket is in the Fort Ward Museum collection.

“Out of the Attic” is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as “Marking Time” and explored Alexandria’s history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into “Out of the Attic” and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria and invited guests.