

## Education

# Drum Beats of the Drummer Boys



All photos courtesy of the Library of Congress.

### Grade Level

- 4-8

### Timeframe

- 1-2 hours

### Materials

- Computer with internet access
- Paper and pencil

### Key Words

- Drummer Boy
- Civil War

### Activity Summary

- This lesson focuses on the job of drummer boys during the Civil War.

### Learning Objectives

To understand that during the Civil War, males of all ages went to war.

### National Standards:

History K-4: 1A, 4C, 6A, and  
8C History 5-12: 2B



### Background Information

Can you imagine yourself on a real battlefield? Many historians believe that as many as 420,000 Civil War soldiers were under the age of 18. Today, we could never even comprehend the idea of a young boy at the age of 10 going off to war. But during the Civil War, that's exactly what often happened. Many of these boys, because they were too young to fight, became drummer boys.

One such boy was Johnny Clem. Johnny was only nine years old when he ran away from home and joined the 22nd Michigan Infantry. At 11, he found himself in the Battle of Shiloh. During the battle, his drum was smashed and Johnny grabbed a musket. When an enemy officer charged him, he shot and killed the officer. Johnny's story inspired a popular play *The Drummer Boy of Shiloh* by Samuel Muscraft. Johnny served in the Army until 1915, obtained the rank of Brigadier General, and is buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

It is often thought that the only task of a drummer boy was to beat cadence for the soldiers marching. That was just a very small part of a drummer boy's day! He had many responsibilities and his main job was to be the communicator for his unit. He established communications and kept order among the units in the field. The drummer would use one of many drum calls for everything from assembling the troops to march, to gather officers for strategy meetings, to sounding retreat while under enemy fire.

## Background Continued

Drummers remained near a high-ranking officer to play the drum calls that would relay the officer's orders. The drummer was often awakened at all hours of the night to drum the call. Frequently, he would not be able to go back to sleep, because once the men were assembled and deployed, the drummers would lay down their drums and act as runners between outposts, carry stretchers or do whatever was necessary to help the unit.

Many tales of heroism have been told about these young drummer boys. Many of them lived a long and fruitful life and lived to tell generations their stories and about their contributions to the war efforts.

## Activity

1. Research types of drum calls used by drummer boys in the Army during the Civil War.
2. Create your own drum signals to lead fighting forces into and through a battle. Include signals for forward, halt, move to the left, move to the right, fire, cease-fire, retreat, and any other actions that might require a drum signal.
3. Share and compare your drum signals with your classmates.
4. Research Civil War drummer boys and tell one of their stories. Be creative. Create a play, a song, a short story, poem, a video, PowerPoint, blog, picture, or use other medium to tell his story.

## Discussion

1. Today, our society would never allow a child so young to go to war. Conduct research to discover the reasons why drummer boys went to war. Would you have allowed your child to go to war at the age of ten in 1861? Why or why not? Debate with your classmates.
2. What role did women and young girls play during the Civil War?
3. What role did African Americans have in the Civil War?



Johnny Clem, 1863, Civil War Drummer Boy. Photo: Library of Congress

## Vocabulary

**CADENCE** – Rhythmic sequence or flow of sounds; the measured beat or movement in marching

**CIVIL WAR** – A war between political factions or regions within the same country. The American Civil War was a war between U.S. northern states (known as the Union) and the southern states (known as the Confederacy).

**DRUMMER BOY** – A young boy recruited as a military drummer for use on the battlefield. He would play the drum calls as new orders were issued. The drummer boy also helped as needed.

**RETREAT** – Withdrawal of troops to a more favorable position to escape the enemy's superior forces or after a defeat

## Resources\*

### Books:

Chang, Ina: *A Separate Battle: Women and the Civil War*. Puffin Books, 1996, ISBN-13: 978-0140381061.

Massey, Mary Elizabeth: *Women in the Civil War*. University of Nebraska Press, April 1994, ISBN-13: 978-0803282131.

Murphy, Jim: *The Boys' War: Confederate and Union Soldiers Talk About the Civil War*. Sandpiper, March 1992, ISBN-13: 978-0395664124.

Noble, Trinka Hakes: *The Last Brother: A Civil War Tale (Tale of Young Americans)*. Sleeping Bear Press, May 1006, ISBN-13: 978-0140383041.

Turner, Ann: *Drummer Boy: Marching to the Civil War*. Harpers Collins, 1998, ISBN13: 9780060276966.

Ray, Delia: *Behind the Blue and Gray: The Soldier's Life in the Civil War (Young Readers' History of the Civil War)*. Puffin, September 1996, ISBN-13: 978-0140383041.

Reit, Seymour: *Behind Rebel Lines: The Incredible Story of Emma Edmonds, Civil War Spy*. Graphia, August 2001, ISBN-13: 978-0152164270.

*\*The inclusion of links in this guide does not imply endorsement or support of any of the linked information, services, products, or providers.*



Robert Hendershot, Drummer Boy of the Rappahannock. Photo: Library of Congress

## Web Sites:

### National Archives: Discovering the Civil War

Join researchers as they unlock secrets, solve mysteries, and uncover unexpected events in the Civil War records of the National Archives. Educator resources and curriculum are available.

<http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/civil-war/>

### HistoryNet.Com: America's Civil War: Drummer Boy of the Rappahannock

Read the story of Robert Henry Hendershot, a Jackson, Michigan drummer boy.

<https://www.historynet.com/americas-civil-war-drummer-boy-of-the-rappahannock.htm>

### History.Com: Women in the Civil War

Learn how the Civil War changed the domestic views of many women.

<http://www.history.com/topics/women-in-the-civil-war>

### YouTube Video: The Civil War's Child Soldiers

Collection of photos depicting the many young men who served during the Civil War.

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q52\\_MU4W\\_uE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q52_MU4W_uE)

### YouTube Video: Field Musicians of the Civil War

Collection of photos with drum, bugle, and fife music.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PMRYTaLXA4>

## Acknowledgement

This lesson was developed by NOAA's Monitor National Marine Sanctuary. This lesson is in the public domain and cannot be used for commercial purposes. Permission is hereby granted for the reproduction, without alteration, of this lesson on the condition its source is acknowledged. When reproducing this lesson, please cite NOAA's Monitor National Marine Sanctuary as the source, and provide the following URL for further information: <https://monitor.noaa.gov/education>. If you have any further questions or need additional information, email [monitor@noaa.gov](mailto:monitor@noaa.gov).