

Alexandria Times

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Alexandria and the Veterans Reserve Corps

When the Civil War began in the spring of 1861, men eagerly 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.

It is estimated that more than 70,000 soldiers from the combined armies lost their limbs during the Civil War. The massive increase in injuries led to innovations in the field of prosthetics. John H. Koeller submitted a patent application in 1864 for an improved prosthetic arm – seen here – which included “an artificial shoulder and shoulder-joint, arm, forearm and elbow-joint.”

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. These soldiers could work as guards, nurses, hospital attendants, cooks, clerks or in other light responsibilities instead of being discharged from the army.

The IC – or Invalid Corps – 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 unusable. The idea of manhood in



PHOTO/USPTO AND THE NATIONAL INVENTORS HALL OF FAME

The increase in injuries in the Civil War led to innovations in prosthetics.

society at the time did not look kindly on men with physical disabilities. To those standards, the men of the IC were seen as less masculine because they had suffered physical wounds, no matter that they were sustained serving the Union cause. A popular song written about the IC poking fun at the various injuries experienced by its men further damaged morale.

On March 18, 1864, less than a year after the IC’s creation, General Order 111 renamed the Invalid Corps to the Veterans Reserve Corps. The new name helped to break the stigma associated with the initials 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 VRC in various roles including garrisoning the fortifications surrounding Washington, D.C. and Alexandria, serving as provost guards, escorting prisoners of war, conscripts and recruits, and working in military hospitals.

Men of the Veterans Reserve were on duty when Confederate Gen. 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 capitol. Most VRC 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 still gave more. Despite the ridicule these wounded soldiers received during the war, they rendered valuable service to the Union war effort and even helped save the nation’s capital.

In honor of the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act in July 1990, we highlight a unique part of Alexandria’s Civil War History. An original Veterans Reserve Corps jacket is in the Fort Ward Museum collection.

Out of the Attic is provided by the Office of Historic Alexandria.